

Fortuna's rule

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It seems quixotic these days to oppose gambling. Games of chance have become embedded in our culture, and there are many legal ways to wager one's money. The casino industry, which two decades ago was restricted to places like Las Vegas and Atlantic City, now has outposts in most parts of the country. Many states and municipalities have embraced riverboat casinos or other versions of the "gaming industry" because they promise to provide jobs and a steady flow of tax revenue. And as Gerald Forshey reports in this issue, it's hard to marshal forces even within the churches to oppose such establishments.

As casinos have become a mainstream industry, state governments have also directly joined the gaming business by sponsoring lotteries. The reasoning is straightforward: People like games of chance, so why shouldn't the state profit from this strictly voluntary activity? Lottery advocates invariably propose devoting the resulting revenue to education--a cause that's hard to argue with, even though studies have shown that states with lotteries aren't any more generous in funding education than states without lotteries.

Lotteries are a legislator's dream. They offer something (seemingly) for nothing: a revenue stream that doesn't require raising anybody's taxes. In that respect, the proliferation of lotteries is a symptom of a larger crisis in democratic governance: people want government services, but not the tax burdens they entail.

The debate about casinos and lotteries usually turns on a question of tangible benefits. Do the jobs and the increased tax revenue really offset the increase in crime and other social and psychological problems associated with gambling? Even if the gaming industry could persuade us that gambling is not an accessory to ruined lives and family breakups, the fact remains that lotteries, insofar as they are touted as a source of tax revenue, represent a regressive form of taxation--they take a disproportionate bite out of low-income citizens.

A further argument against lotteries and casinos can be made on communitarian grounds: By bestowing public legitimacy on gambling and allowing it to become a

fixture of social life, we undermine the deeper purposes and values of the community.

This can be a complicated argument to make in a capitalist society filled with people who work in high-risk commodities and stocks and thereby earn their living by a kind of gambling--betting on whether the value of the yen will rise or fall, for example, or what the price of wheat will be in the future. With the market drop of recent weeks, however, and the collapse of speculative ventures like the Long-Term Capital Management hedge fund, which threatened to bring the rest of the market with it, it's a bit easier to see that this kind of gambling also carries hazards that threaten communities around the globe. In any case, there can be little doubt that the proliferation of state-run lotteries supports the view that life is a series of gambits that can always be overturned by the next roll of the dice--a view that weakens our sense that the world that matters is the world of our daily investments in work, family and community. And when our commitment to that world lessens, so too does our energy for opposing the structures of injustice that deform work, family and community.

While pointing to the social harm caused by gambling, Christians have also lodged a theological objection: lotteries and gambling trivialize and attempt to manipulate God's providence--God's order and care of creation. The Reformed tradition, with its strong sense of God's guidance of the world, has been particularly critical of activities that make God an accomplice, as it were, in idle games of chance.

Several years ago, veteran pastoral counselor Wayne Oates suggested that luck has replaced providence as the ruling theme of life. Rather than believe that we are part of God's unfolding story, and that it is God whom we confront in, with and under the world, many people now believe that we deal simply with the roll of the cosmic dice, which can always be negated by the next toss. "Good luck," we say on parting with a friend, not "God be with you." While Christians may oppose gambling on various ethical grounds, they must remain deeply alienated from this reemergence of the goddess Fortuna.