

Gambling opponents say moral arguments fall flat: Economically grounded arguments may be more effective

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The moral opposition to gambling may be gasping for its last breaths.

As more and more states turn to casinos and gambling to fill shrinking coffers, the voices of the religious opposition are struggling to convince people that gambling is morally wrong.

It's an uphill fight: A recent study by Ellison Research showed that 70 percent of Americans do not consider gambling to be a sin.

"It's not acceptable in today's society to present arguments based solely on religion or morals," said I. Nelson Rose, who teaches gambling law at the Whittier Law School in California.

Thirty years ago, gamblers had to try their luck with scratch-off tickets or at casinos in Atlantic City or Las Vegas. Today, only two states—Utah and Hawaii —do not have some form of legalized gambling, according to the American Gaming Association. The other 48 have anteed up for tribal casinos, commercial casinos, racetracks, jai alai or lotteries.

Forty-three states have lotteries, mostly marketed as voluntary taxes for education, and 12 states have commercial casinos.

Gambling contributes around 5 percent to state budgets—double what it did five years ago, said Richard McGowan, a Boston College professor and author of *The Gambling Debate*, published in January.

In some states, it contributes much more, McGowan said—11 percent in Louisiana and 18 percent in South Dakota. Experts say growth in the gambling industry shows no signs of stopping anytime soon.

“The church’s opposition to gambling has not been widely effective,” said Tom Grey, a spokesperson for the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, “because [the church is] not relevant in an irreverent age.”

Grey, who fought gambling for years from the pulpit as a United Methodist pastor, said the moral argument that gambling is a sin is too easily swept aside as impeding the personal freedom of others.

As a result, Grey’s antigambling coalition avoids explicit mentions of religion and presents more economically grounded arguments that center on addiction, bankruptcy and crime, Grey said. “There’s a cost when people lose—they chase the loss,” Grey said. “It’s the government’s dirty little secret. The house always wins.”

Some states, such as Kansas, Maryland, Kentucky and Massachusetts, are in various stages of trying to expand the gambling options they already have.

“Legislators and governors have hard decisions to make,” said Frank Fahrenkopf, executive director of the American Gaming Association, which represents commercial casinos. “And gaming is capital-intensive and produces jobs.”

In a 2007 Gallup survey, 63 percent of Americans said they had no moral qualms about gambling. Earlier this year, Gallup found that 65 percent of Americans participated in some form of gambling, 46 percent played the lottery and 24 percent had been to a casino.

“Problem gamblers”—those who become addicted, go broke or turn to criminal activity—make up only 1 percent of those who gamble, Fahrenkopf declared.

Still, Fahrenkopf noted, gambling is not “a panacea” for income-seeking politicians. He pointed to Detroit as an example of a gambling city that has struggled to turn around. The problem there was a lack of viable businesses around the casinos, he said.

Many states that are expanding gambling are just trying to keep up with their neighbors. Kansas recently enacted legislation to become the first state to have state-owned casinos. The state lottery commission is considering developers who

would build and operate four state-run casinos—in part to keep money from flowing to casinos in neighboring Oklahoma and Missouri. *-Religion News Service*