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Religious Opposition to the Massachusetts State Lottery

Susan E. Ponte

It would seem that religious opposition to state lotteries has remained consistent for over 150 years. While a biblically based, fundamentalist belief in the immorality of gambling, and by extension, lotteries, may have gone unchanged, the extent of church-related opposition has fluctuated throughout the lottery's history. During colonial times and after the Revolutionary War, the lottery in Massachusetts, providing an expedient method of raising money for civic needs, was used as a source of revenue "by any and all who desired to instigate one."¹

Legislation approving the use of the lottery for specific purposes continued to be passed in Massachusetts. The revenue was used to construct factories, bridges, and educational facilities. Between 1782 and 1789, alone fifteen lottery bills were approved for such purposes. Church opposition was virtually non-existent, since many of the funds were designated for the building of meetinghouses, churches, and colleges benefiting the various denominations.²

In the early 1800s, opposition to lotteries based on moral grounds increased, as many religious leaders believed that the

1. John Samuel Ezell, Fortune's Merry Wheel (Cambridge, 1960), p. 19.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 53 and 71.

lottery symbolized the erosion of the Protestant work ethic. Christians were warned that "It is in the very nature of lotteries, to unhinge the sober and industrious habits of the community, and to lead men to seek a livelihood, without industry, at the expense of each other."³ Fraud and abuse turned the lottery into a source of exploitation, especially during the depression of the 1830s, causing the public in general, and Christians in particular, to reassess the morality of state-sponsored gambling.⁴ Awakened sensibilities to biblical sanctions against the "wages of iniquity," the appearance of anti-lottery literature, and continuing corruption caused many states to question the advisability of the lottery as a source of revenue. The year 1833 marked the end of lotteries in Massachusetts.⁵

A state-sponsored lottery became an issue in Massachusetts in 1935. Faced with economic difficulties brought on by the Great Depression, Governor James Michael Curley supported the passage of a lottery bill that would have eliminated the need for new taxation. Proceeds from the lottery were slated to be used for public welfare and for old age assistance. A House vote on May 14, 1935, ended in a 110 to 110 tie.⁶

The introduction of the Massachusetts lottery bill of 1935 resulted in great opposition to gambling, with the press as well as the various religious groups expressing their opposition. The *Boston Herald* asked, "Has regard for civic righteousness become so weak that the most serious threat ever made here against state morality cannot arouse the people?"⁷ The secular newspapers described the lottery as "an act to debauch the young . . . [and] to defraud and pillage the people," while turning back the "clock of

 3. Candid Remarks Addressed to Christians on the Subject of Their Having Concern in Lotteries, (Boston, circa 1830), p.7.

4. Ezell, Fortune's Merry Wheel, p. 19.

5. By 1894, the legal lottery had been banned throughout the United States. See G. Robert Blakey, "State Conducted Lotteries: History, Problems, and Promises," Journal of Social Issues, XXXV (no. 3, 1979): 69 and 71.

6. "State Lottery Blocked by House Tie," Boston Herald, May 15, 1935, pp. 1-2.

7. "Beacon Hill's New Low?," The Boston Herald, May 17, 1935, p. 40.

morality a century."⁸ The morality of gambling and lotteries became the focus of most attacks. A *Herald* editorial stated the seriousness of the matter:

We refer to [the] assertion that the need of a state for revenue does not justify it in using any and all means at all to obtain it. It is the negation of civilization and morality that the end always justifies the means.⁹

Letters to the editor expressed alarm over a state lottery. One declared that "Many of the men at the State House appear utterly shameless in their advocacy of things that are thoroughly destructive and demoralizing." Another declared that "The damage to the moral tone and to the welfare of our state of such a legalized lottery would be appalling."¹⁰ A third letter expressed opposition to the proposal "To plant this corrupting poison in Massachusetts children by state action, as a state lottery is inoculating the young with a character disease"¹¹

Church response in 1935 is more difficult to document. The Protestant denominations had traditionally opposed gambling on moral grounds, calling it "potentially obsessive behavior that 'corrupts the mind and the spirit.'" They viewed gambling as "the redistribution of a people's wealth according to chance, rather than [by] the receiver's contribution to society," and therefore they insisted that gambling of any kind contradicted the Biblical adage that "God helps those who help themselves."¹²

Congregationalists believed that the attempt to "get something for nothing [was] detrimental to Christian character and ruinous to civilization whether it be gambling in the stock market

8. "Pillagers of the People," Boston Herald, March 22, 1934, p. 14.

9. "The Cardinal and Lotteries," editorial, Boston Herald, May 21, 1935, p. 14.

10. Letters to the Editor, The Boston Herald, May 20, 1935, p. 8.

11. *Ibid.*, May 17, 1935, p. 40.

12. Raymond Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling Promulgated by Major American Religious Bodies," Gambling in America: Staff and Consultant Papers, (1977), appendix 1, pp. 168-169.

or gambling on races."¹³ During the 1930s, the Massachusetts Congregational Church issued statements opposing any form of state-sponsored gambling. At their 1934 annual meeting, the Congregationalists adopted a resolution to condemn House Bill 1378, the bill to legalize a state lottery. They urged their members to express opposition to the bill by contacting their legislators in person or by letter.¹⁴

There is little evidence of any organized political action by the Congregationalists in 1935. Reliance on individual opposition is evident in an appeal for members to:

organize local committees of Social Action to face the questions of gambling . . . and, above all, the problem of how to take effective action by word or deed when, as a group of Christians, our Congregational Christian Church members feel they must act together or drift into modern moral chaos which leads us all to catastrophe.¹⁵

In May of 1935, the Massachusetts House of Representatives debated the bill that would authorize a state lottery. Opposing legislators denounced it as "a resort to the methods of criminals to raise money." Some representatives believed that voting for a lottery would "put Massachusetts in the business of running a perpetual swindle," one that would entice the poor to waste their money. Proponents of the bill noted that the majority of the public supported illegal lotteries and spent money on them, money that should be kept "in the hands of the commonwealth instead of the hands of racketeers and foreigners." Representative Martin Hays, the lottery's staunchest supporter, criticized what he perceived to be his colleagues' hypocrisy, by stating that "if all the House members would wave their [lottery] tickets, the House

13. Massachusetts Congregational Conference and Missionary Society, Minutes of the Meeting, (Boston, 1938), p. 4.

14. Massachusetts Congregational Conference and Missionary Society Minutes of the Meeting (Boston, 1934), p. 30.

15. Massachusetts Congregational Conference and Missionary Society, Minutes of the Meeting (Boston, 1938), p. 69.

would look like a forest." The tie on May 14th forced the scheduling of another vote, on May 21.¹⁶

The most influential opponent of the Massachusetts state lottery in 1935 was the Catholic Church in the person of Archbishop William O'Connell. The Archbishop apparently requested an opinion from Attorney General Arthur Reading, but all he received was a sarcastic response. Reading informed the archbishop "that many organizations, including churches . . . have been resorting to lotteries in order to raise funds. I am confident that such violations of the law do not take place with your knowledge or consent."¹⁷ It is impossible to know if the attorney general's assumption was correct, but it is clear that O'Connell believed the lottery to be "out and out gambling." He justified his attack on the House bill by denying that it was a purely political question. Instead, he insisted that "It is a very serious moral problem which they are discussing at the present time in the House" O'Connell hoped that the legislators would not be lured away from decent Christian principles in order to raise money for the state.¹⁸

Archbishop O'Connell may have lacked the power to deal with his church's need to gamble, but his authority over secular politics became evident after he voiced opposition to the lottery. The House defeated the lottery bill under consideration, as well as an amendment that would have placed the lottery question on the ballot in 1936. Representative Hays reversed his vote, stating "I am not so vain that I will presume to place my opinion over both the press and the church." Representative Michael Ward withdrew his support for the lottery, because of the "opinion of an individual far better qualified than we to pass upon a moral issue. We bow to his superior judgement."¹⁹

Some members of the House regretted that "a prince of a certain denomination had waited [until a day before the vote] to

16. "State Lottery Blocked by House Vote," Boston Herald, May 15, 1935, pp. 1-2.

17. Attorney General Arthur Reading to Archbishop William O'Connell, March 26, 1927, ms. in Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston.

18. "State Lottery Termed Menace to the Community," The Pilot, May 25, 1935, p. 24.

19. "Lottery Measure Killed," Boston Globe, May 21, 1935, p. 1.

express himself on the subject." Many felt that by speaking earlier O'Connell could have spared the Representatives the embarrassment of changing their votes. Resentment was evident in one Representative's response:

I will carry the [lottery] fight to the people by placing the question on the ballot next fall. In the meantime, I expect that religious societies will ban beano . . . that [has] been so helpful to them . . . and that the clergy set an example for the laity by keeping out of race tracks.²⁰

The vote in the House of Representatives was 187 against the lottery bill, and 40 in support. The 1935 proposal for a Massachusetts state lottery had been defeated, and it was many years before another lottery bill was proposed.

A State lottery bill was introduced in 1958. Former Lieutenant-Governor Francis Kelley proposed an annual lottery, with the revenue being equally divided between the state and the prize-winner. In November of that year, sixty districts in the Bay State were given the opportunity to vote in a referendum on the lottery.²¹

Religious opposition to the 1958 lottery bill appears to have been better organized and more united than was the case in 1935. The Massachusetts Council of Churches, representing 1,800 Protestant churches, along with the Citizens Committee to Oppose State Sponsored Gambling, cooperated in an antilottery drive. The campaign included the printing and distribution of 30,000 posters, 300,000 church bulletin inserts, and paid newspaper advertisements. One million fliers were handed out and pastors were urged to deliver sermons against the lottery.²²

In the referendum, in November of 1958, voters approved of a state lottery, with the greatest support coming from Boston and from Suffolk County. Calling the public opinion vote "merely advisory, not mandatory," and noting that similar votes had been

20. Ibid.

21. "State Lottery on the Ballot," Christian Science Monitor, October 4, 1958, p. 2.

22. "Antilottery Drive Geared to Churches," in *ibid.*, October 17, 1958, p. 2.

ignored in the past, opponents of the lottery continued their efforts.²³ The Massachusetts Council of Churches urged clergy and lay leaders to cooperate in the battle against the bill before it went to the House in January of 1959.²⁴

On December 4, 1958, Richard Cardinal Cushing issued a statement opposing the state lottery. It was his conviction that while "gambling itself is not a sin anymore than to take a glass of beer is a sin," the lottery "as a form of large scale gambling, is economically unsound, socially disintegrating and morally dangerous."²⁵ Cardinal Cushing admitted that a lottery was the easiest way to raise money, but he pointed to its latent corruption. Cushing made it clear that he was not organizing a crusade against gambling; he spoke only against its abuses and against its potential for corruption.²⁶

The Cardinal's public denouncement gave rise to charges of hypocrisy. In a letter to the editor of the *Pilot*, one reader asked "where his eminence draws the line of demarcation which makes a state lottery morally wrong but which leaves in the right the recourse to games of chance, raffles, and other methods of gambling . . . raising untold hundreds of thousands of untaxed dollars for the local church he so enigmatically heads."²⁷

Nevertheless, the Cardinal's statements, "likely to be persuasive with many citizens who had been regarded as friendly to a lottery,"²⁸ was said by political experts "to have effectively killed legislation to introduce a lottery in Massachusetts."²⁹ In

23. "Powers Sights Lottery Defeat," in *ibid.*, November 7, 1958, p. 1.

24. "Clergy Help Sought in Fight on Lottery," in *ibid.*, December 4, 1958, p. 2.

25. Lycurgus M. Starkey, Money, Mania, and Morals, (New York, 1964), p. 92.

26. Richard Cardinal Cushing's statement against the lottery included in Letter to Reverend Francis Lally, December 1, 1958. ms. in Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston.

27. Cae Johnston to Rev. Francis Lally, December 6, 1958, ms. in Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston.

28. "Setback for Gambling," editorial, Christian Science Monitor, December 30, 1958, p. 14.

29. "Cardinal Opposes State Lottery Plan," Boston Herald, December 5, 1958, p. 1.

1958, the Catholic Church in Massachusetts still possessed the power to "save the state" from the "evils of gambling," while continuing to enjoy its benefits, through church-run raffles and other games of chance.

In 1970, for the first time in thirty-three attempts, the Massachusetts state lottery bill passed the House of Representatives and came within one vote of passage in the State Senate. This would usher in a banner year for gambling interests. Within six months in 1971, beano was legalized and dog-racing and pari-mutual horse racing dates were extended.³⁰ Using the traditional promises of reduced taxation along with innovative plans to use lottery revenues for parochial schools (a proposal that proponent Senator Kelly questioned as to its constitutionality) and for the rehabilitation of alcoholics, supporters of the lottery convinced the voters and legislators that it would be in the best interests of the state to pass the bill.³¹ The 1971 bill met with organized religious opposition, but that organized opposition focused more on the corruption that may accompany a lottery, and less on the morality of gambling.

The major opposition to the Massachusetts state lottery in 1971 came from the Massachusetts Council of Churches and the Churchmen's League for Civic Welfare. These two groups united in a concerted effort to prevent the passage of any government-sponsored gambling, believing that "States which have become dependent on revenue of various forms of gambling find themselves bound to promote the very evil they seek to control."³²

Concerned not only with the corruption that may occur within a government that sponsors gambling, the Massachusetts Council of Churches and the Churchmen's League also stressed the

30. "Beano Backers Plan Blitz of Bay State Legislators," Christian Science Monitor, February 18, 1971, p. 4; and "Beano, Dogs, Horses, Lucre, Lottery . . ." Christian Science Monitor, September 29, 1971, p. 1.

31. "Lottery: Meal Ticket for Everyone?" editorial, Boston Herald Traveler, August 4, 1971, p. 8, asks the question if the lottery promised to support every need, why not add an amendment to the bill that would provide for the study and rehabilitation of compulsive gamblers?; in "Lottery for Church Schools?" Boston Herald, July 21, 1971, p. 3, reported that Senator Kelly proposed that funds from the lottery be used to aid parochial schools, but he admitted that he was not sure of the constitutionality of his plan.

32. Raymond Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling," p. 195.

long-standing argument that lotteries take money from the poor and promote obsessive behavior. It was their belief that lotteries invariably receive their support from the poor, "creating poverty and depravation in their wake. The economies of lotteries are counterproductive, the sociological effects on a culture are disastrous, and the moral breakdown of individuals is sickening."³³ The Massachusetts Council of Churches and the Churchmen's League viewed their purpose as keeping churchmen informed on social conditions within the Commonwealth that involved moral values. They sought to "span the gap between churches and State House by communicating the moral interests and concerns of the churches to our government representatives in a non-political and non-partisan way"³⁴ The Churchmen's League published a monthly newsletter, sending it to all the churches, and to numerous educators and civic leaders. The Council of Churches urged its supporters to write and call their state senators and representatives and to attend committee meetings, in order to articulate the churches' concerns about gambling.³⁵

This organized opposition would not stop the passage of the Lottery bill in 1971. It is often noted that during the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, society had become less religiously-oriented, which very likely explains why the religious opposition to the lottery succeeded in earlier years, but not in 1971. Dr. James Nash of the Massachusetts Council of Churches lamented in 1969 that

In reality this is a pretty secular society. Religious orientation is rapidly dying. People don't identify closely with this issue [gambling] anymore. [People] are concerned with financial security and would jump at the opportunity . . . to lower taxes. The

33. Myron Fowell and John Fassett, "Lotteries? No!," undated ms., in Mass. Council of Churches, News Article Folder: Gambling.

34. Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling," pp. 194-195.

35. "Legalizing Gambling," Massachusetts Council of Churches, Social Relations Newsletter, (Boston, February, 1969), p. 4; Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling," p. 195.

people that oppose [the lottery] would have to prove its corrosive effects.³⁶

By the 1970s the belief that gambling should be opposed as a moral evil was generally abandoned.³⁷ The director of the Churchmen's League, John Fassett, admitted that further opposition to the lottery would be futile apart from "some scandalous evidence of gambling corruption to provide a climate for swaying the attitudes of the public."³⁸ The efforts of opponents of the lottery in 1971 were similar to those of 1958; but the most influential opposition to the state lottery was noticeably absent in 1971. The silence on the part of the Catholic Church may have been the best support the advocates of the Lottery could have hoped for.

Catholic opposition to the 1971 lottery bill appeared to be virtually non-existent. The diocesan newspaper, *The Pilot*, published few articles about the lottery bill, all affirming its passage. While admitting that some corruption may occur in government-sponsored gambling, *The Pilot* concluded that "ultimate good could come out of such a scheme," and that "the state could administer and supervise betting with as much impunity as the pastor backs a raffle or the nuns offer chances on an Easter ham. If one must object, . . . let him do so on grounds of taste or preference, certainly not [on the grounds of] morality."³⁹

The political issues activating Catholics of the late 1960s and early 1970s included the Vietnamese War and the question of legalized abortion. The Massachusetts Catholic Conference took no position on any gambling issue in the state, and no public statement concerning the lottery was found to have been issued by

36. "Someday Soon, Churches Must Face Up To Legalized Gambling," *Boston Globe*, July 1, 1969, p. 2.

37. Charles T. Clotfelter, *Selling Hope: State Lotteries in the U. S.* (1988), pp. 19-20, unpublished draft, in the Massachusetts Council of Churches, Lotteries Folder.

38. Raymond Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling," p. 196.

39. George Ryan, "Of Gambling and the Bay State," *The Pilot*, February 27, 1971, p. 4.

Archbishop Humberto Medeiros.⁴⁰ The lack of any organized Catholic opposition and the silence of the hierarchy seems to have facilitated the passage of the bill establishing the Massachusetts lottery. Lacking the impact of traditional Catholic opposition, Protestant efforts to stop passage of the lottery bill proved futile. In September of 1971, despite the governor's veto, legislators voted "to make the once-puritanical Bay State the fifth state to enter the lottery business."⁴¹

40. Bell, "Moral Views on Gambling," p. 215. No statement by Medeiros was found at the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, or in any 1970 or 1971 issue of The Pilot.

41. "Beano, Dogs, Horses, Lucre, Lottery . . .," Christian Science Monitor, September 29, 1971, p. 1.