

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus

Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska

16 November 2013

## *Postmodern Autonomy, Gambling and Marijuana*

At the center of the Postmodern worldview is the doctrine of personal autonomy; the idea that as free humans we are a law unto ourselves. In Postmodernism, the self defines reality. There are virtually no boundaries for behavior and there are few authority figures that matter anymore. Autonomy impacts all aspects of culture—entertainment, business, law, leisure and religion. The autonomous self defines reality because there is nothing transcendent to do so. If there is a god, he is a deistic god, who is more therapeutic than sovereign, and who serves at the behest of the human. Such a claim has a haunting ring of familiarity to it, for the book of Judges has as its refrain, “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” When individual autonomy is mixed with America’s deep-seated commitment to rights and liberties, one sees how lethal this becomes in areas of sexuality, ethics and morality. There are no boundaries or absolutes. It is only the right of the individual that is absolute. This frames the discussion on the key cultural issues of our day—abortion, homosexuality, cohabitation before marriage, genetic and reproductive technologies and their use, and the right to die with dignity. When “every man does what is right in his own eyes,” the limits to freedom and rights are boundless. The result of Postmodern pluralism and autonomous relativism is tolerance; tolerance of all beliefs and all behaviors. Hence, Postmodernism has replaced the ethic of truth with the ethic of tolerance. Toleration extends to lifestyle questions and practices. No wonder criticizing the homosexual lifestyle is labeled as bigoted and hate-filled. No wonder condemning abortion is labeled as threatening a woman’s rights. No wonder challenging doctor-assisted suicide as dangerous is labeled naïve. But the Bible will have none of this. There are transcultural absolutes sourced in God’s character. It is always wrong to murder, to lie, to commit adultery.

Two additional examples of Postmodern autonomy are radically changing the cultural landscape of America. Where Postmodern autonomy has altered the way American culture thinks about sex and reproduction, it is now impacting the way we think about gambling and marijuana.

- First, let’s think about the changing landscape of gambling. In 1990, casino gambling was still centered primarily in Nevada and Atlantic City. Then, Indian reservation gambling exploded across the nation. Today, 23 states have commercial casinos, with the result, as columnist Ross Douthat observes, that “the old model of casino-going as a what-happens-in-Vegas excursion has given way to casino-going as routine entertainment.” A recent report from the Institute for American Values noted that “nearly every adult now lives within a short drive of a casino.”
  - How significant is this explosion of gambling? How can we as Christians be good citizens and expose the pernicious nature of this growing pastime for Americans? First of all, a few thoughts on gambling as a goal of public policy. It seems to me that immoral means have never led to moral ends. We are no longer skimming the profits from a

criminal activity—we are putting the full force of government into the promotion of moral corruption. Quite frankly, gambling promotion has become a key to states balancing their respective budgets. But it is wrong for the state to exploit the weakness of its citizens just to balance the budget. It is the most unfair and sorrowful form of “painless” taxation. The money is not coming from a few big bookies but from the pockets of millions of its citizens. The states have become as hooked on gambling as a source of revenue as any compulsive gambler betting the milk money. Gambling feeds a get-rich-quick illusion that debilitates society, and thereby causes individual ruin, despair and suicide. Therefore, gambling corrupts the state and its citizens that both seek “a piece of the action.”

➤ How does state-approved gambling impact people’s lives?

1. Legalized gambling sidetracks a great deal of money. The amounts that people spend on gambling equals or exceeds the total amount given to religious organizations and/or the total amount spent on elementary and secondary education.
2. Legalized gambling handicaps a lot of people. The number of compulsive gamblers in the US is about 5 to 7 % of the population. Gambling behavior is usually associated with poverty, marital strife, job loss, homelessness and hunger.
3. Legalized gambling victimizes vulnerable members of society—women, youth and ethnic minorities.
4. State-sponsored gambling also seems to break down the resistance of people who would not otherwise gamble. Gambling addiction has risen precipitously since legalized gambling began several decades ago.
5. State-sponsored gambling has promoted materialism and the fantasy of a life of luxury without labor.

➤ It is difficult to fit gambling into a Christian worldview. There are several reasons:

1. Gambling encourages the sin of greed and covetousness.
2. Gambling promotes the mismanagement of possessions entrusted to us by God.
3. Gambling undermines absolute dependence on God for His provision.
4. Gambling works at cross purposes with a commitment to productive work.
5. Gambling is a potentially addictive behavior.
6. Gambling threatens the welfare of our neighbor.

- Second, there is a concomitant revolution occurring in the use of marijuana. Only two states, Washington and Colorado, are experimenting with legalizing marijuana. Meanwhile, medicinal marijuana is available in 20 states. Further, public opinion has also shifted from 32% supporting legalization of marijuana in 2002 to 58% today.

Douthat argues that the spread of casinos has been driven by a top-down phenomenon, largely by states seeking revenue, while marijuana has been driven by a grass-roots movement—often driven by activists, artists and Hollywood. But both have been energized by “the same trend in American attitudes: the rise of a live-and-let-live social libertinism, the weakening influence of both religious conservatism and liberal communitarianism, [and] the

growing suspicion of moralism in public policy.” Such attitudes merely reflect the cultural addiction to Postmodern autonomy, so rampant in America today. The tragedy of this attitude when it comes to casinos is that they extract money from distressed communities rather than spur economic development. Further, they are a disaster for the reckless and the addiction-prone. The end result of both casinos and marijuana is that (in the words of Douthat) they “grease the skids for exploitation, with a revenue-hungry state partnering with the private sector to profiteer off human weakness. This is one reason previous societies made distinctions between liberty and license that we have become loath to draw—because what seems like a harmless pleasure to the comfortable can devastate the poor and weak. Or else, with pot and slots no less than bread and circuses, it can simply distract their minds, dull their senses and make them easier to rule.” America is embracing a damaging level of permissiveness all in the name of autonomous freedom and rights. For the intellectually honest, this is a disaster—and our children and grandchildren will live with the consequences. Decadence in the name of freedom will destroy the American experiment.

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (3 and 5 November 2013), *Issues in Perspective* (12 January 2012), and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 7-16.