

“Jesuit Education in Vegas: CaSINos and Other Educational Opportunities”

Andrew Gustafson

Associate Professor of Business Ethics and Society

Creighton University

andrewgustafson@creighton.edu andygustafson.net

Link to intro to the course:

<http://www.andygustafson.net/las%20vegas/LVpage2008.htm>

I teach business ethics at Creighton University. While it is important to help students identify and clearly understand the ethical obligations and responsibilities of upright business conduct, these issues, are, to my mind, often framed in a legal or at least Kantian duty-oriented manner. This approach has some severe limits. My approach is utilitarian, focused on the greater good of society, with special attention on virtue concerns of habituating good habits and character. As a Christian as well I believe the greater good to coincide with God’s will. And I came from the world of philosophy to teach in the Business School in large part because I saw business to be the greatest concentration of power to enact cultural transformation (including value transformation) in society. As I bring my Christian Socially-Concerned Utilitarianism with virtue overtones to bear on thinking about business, I see business as a vocation of cultural transformation in the world—Gods grace comes to earth through the business practices of thoughtful Christians who bring about good as they make a profit.

I started a unique summer travel course at Creighton University when I arrived there in 2005 in which we spend a week in Vegas and a week in LA (with a camping night at Joshua Tree National Park in between) to examine these two cities as case studies of the relationship between business and society—how does business transform culture and society for the better, and for the worse, and what are the consequential problems and blessings which business ultimately provides to a community and to society at large. There are water resource and congestion and crime issues. There are public goods and services through tax revenue from business. There are societal value shifts instigated by the fashion and movie industry. There are societal problems brought on by gaming. We talk to city planners about smart growth verses urban sprawl. We look at urban renewal through inner city parks and downtown redevelopment. We look at homelessness as an issue and compare and contrast that with the luxurious lifestyles of Beverly Hills and Malibu. The purpose of the course ultimately is to expose the students to these types of questions so that they will become more thoughtful business leaders who understand the consequences of business, and see the linked resulting societal issues connected to business practices.

I believe that most of the ethical failures by business in the last 10 years (forever for that matter) from Enron to Worldcom to the Wall Street Banking Crisis have to do with a lack of moral imagination and a basic lack of understanding the social consequences of business practice, as well as lacking a general conception of business as a potentially powerful tool for good in the world. In this class we try to see those connections—the effects of business practices in the world.

When I tell people that I do a class to Las Vegas and LA each summer, they often are either really intrigued, or they think it is some sort of boondoggle I worked out to go gambling

every year. I don't gamble, and find it boring, and its taken all of 5 years for LA to grow on me (I really hated it at first, having grown up on a farm in Nebraska)—so the recreation of these towns was lost on me. But what interested me in them was the very important ways in which the businesses which are in these two cities affect culture and society.

Vegas, for better or for worse, is very famous even internationally as an American iconic city of all the crazy possibilities that American Freedom can make a possibility. It is a city of liberty- even in the licentious sense of that word. But it is also an icon of the American ideal of possibility and risk taking—of someone with little having opportunity to make it big, not through hard work, but through sheer chance. The businesses of gaming, hospitality and entertainment dominate the business landscape in Vegas, and so the hotels and casinos are our main focus there, although we have also visited Zappos and Yesco sign company, local banks, the new mall downtown, condos, and of course the mayor of Las Vegas, who is a former mobster lawyer.

LA is also an American city in that it was created helter-skelter as a gradual amalgamation of 88 various cities connected by endless freeway—providing the individual driver opportunity to be by themselves in their car. LA is casual and radically individualistic. It is also the city where our fashion design and Hollywood movies come from. In this regard, LA provides us with many of our ideals and guides our imagination as to what is worthy of pursuit, admirable, and even normal. The businesses of fashion and media production which have their roots in LA play an important role in moral and aesthetic formation in America, particularly in our ideas of what is beautiful and what is acceptable.

Because this class studies two very dynamic cities which are constantly changing, the class itself varies each year. We came to Vegas and LA in 2010 two years after a real estate bubble burst and financial meltdown. Vegas has been particularly hard-hit, with over 10% of homes in default on their mortgage, a gigantic 8 Billion dollar casino-hotel-condo project in the center of the strip (City Center) which has neared bankruptcy on several occasions, dramatically affected its parent company MGM's stock and which currently has sold 100 of its 2500 condos. With its low income taxes it attracts many people, but this conversely has lead to a heavy dependence on tourism tax revenue which, when the economy is bad and people don't spend as much, impacts the civic revenue dramatically, not only for Las Vegas, but for all of Nevada. UNLV has had dramatic cuts in service, the City and Clark County (where the strip is) have also had dramatic cuts in a system already plagued by a poor school system.

Vegas is the city of escape and vice, of risktaking and of exorbitant living and spending behaviors. You see this in the over-the-top architecture, clubs, rooms, and malls. In this sense it represents few traditional Christian values. But there are certain things to consider through a Jesuit-value lense which helps us to thoughtfully consider Vegas and analyze it rather than merely experience it.

LA (which is in reality a conglomeration of 88 smaller towns and cities attached to an LA downtown) sits in a state with a fantastically huge budget deficit, serious immigration issues, and a significant exiting of US citizens to other states. Yet Vegas continues to be an icon for American hope and adventurous living, and LA continues to be a dynamic center of American creativity and ingenuity.

Coming at these cities from a Jesuit perspective gives us some unique entering points and vantage points to consider Vegas and LA. As we know, the Characteristics of a Jesuit education are:

Magis: to strive for excellence.

I hope that this class challenges students to think about how business transforms culture and society for the better—or in some cases—for the worse. The gaming industry is a particularly acute example of business providing some value and good for society via jobs, social capital goods, and beauty and entertainment. But at the same time it clearly brings potential harm to society.

Women & Men for and with Others: Sharing gifts, pursuing justice, and having concern for the poor and marginalized.

This class highlights this value insofar as we visit the Catholic Worker house in Vegas or Homeboy Industry in LA, or discuss homelessness with the city manager of Ventura or others. But it also highlights the lack of concern for the poor and homeless by way of contrast with the opulent luxurious hedonism of Vegas and the over-the-top high-end living seen in parts of LA including Malibu and Beverly Hills.

Cura Personalis: “Care for the individual person.” Respecting each person as a child of God and all of God’s creations.

This value arises when we discuss treatment of employees at the casinos, as well as at the other businesses we visit such as Zapos, Patagonia, and American Apparel. The treatment of immigrant laborers is especially highlighted at American Apparel and when we discuss migrant workers with the Blueberry Farmer.

Unity of Heart, Mind, & Soul: Developing the whole person. Integrating all aspects of our lives.

My hope is that this class helps students to have a better wholistic understanding of the relationship between business and society and culture, so as not to live lives which are bifurcated between their ‘business self’ and their ‘authentic self’. Seeing that wholistic integration at Patagonia and Zappos also helps this. I think that this class also often highlights the lack of wholeness of persons in Vegas and LA, particularly when we discuss the poor educational system as well as the general congestion and radical individualism which one finds in Vegas and LA. But we also see the balance of persons who are more in touch with nature at the Ocean, or when we visit Joshua Tree National Park.

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam (AMDG): “For the Greater Glory of God.”

I personally see business to be a means to worship God. I believe this course can help students to see how that business can be done in such a way that it is improving society. It can be seen more clearly as a vocation of transformational action in the world, leveraging ones power and position, as well as resources, to fundamentally alter business, and so, society.

Forming & Educating Agents of Change: Teaching behaviors that reflect critical thought and responsible action on moral and ethical issues.

This is in summation what I want the students to become—as they begin to see their power, position, and financial resources at their disposal as a means of enacting cultural transformation while also making a profit. One hopes that their exposure to the difficult negative externalities which business practices can create—water shortages, traffic congestion, homelessness, financial meltdowns, and other social problems—that they will be more aware of how they may contribute to or alternatively, solve those problems.

Schedule for the Course 2010:

<http://www.andygustafson.net/net/las%20vegas/lasvegascourse.htm>

May 16th Arrive in Vegas by air. Gustafson picks you up at airport, or you take shuttle to [South Point Casino](#). (We will be at the South Point Sunday-Thursday)

mMay 17 10am Ron Smith Dean of Graduate School UNLV
230 Harrahs—meet with Corporate

tMay 18 Las Vegas
930 AM Mayor Oscar Goodman
11am Venetian—3 hour tour
3pm World Market Building C Andrew Maiden 888 416 8600
(wholesale furniture center for the nation)

wMay 19 Las Vegas
Bank in Suburbs 9am
Redrock Casino 11am (very new locals casino in suburbs)
John Obrien (Creighton Alum—Lawyer in Vegas since 1969) 7pm

thMay 20 Las Vegas 9am Zappos
Wynn and Encore Tour Chris/Evan 12-2

fMay 21 Hoover
Boulder City Mayor of Boulder City

Solar 1
Joshua Tree Park (camping)

sMay 22 Los Angeles (Anaheim/downtown)
Palm Desert Bank
Disneyland
Stay At Anaheim Plaza Hotel by Disneyland

sMay 23 Los Angeles
Downtown Cathedral/Homeboy
Travel to coast, go via Malibu to Ventura
(Stay in Ventura in Beach Hotel—visit blueberry farm)

mMay 24 Ventura-LA
845 am Patagonia, Elissa Loughman
10am Rick Cole City Manager, Ventura
1pm Kent Smith, Fashion District downtown LA
2pm Los Angeles—American Apparel
Stay at Motel 6 in Hollywood. (Check out Hollywood Strip that night)

tMay 25 Los Angeles (Hollywood)
11am Visit: The Outfit Visual Effects 1612 W. Olive Ave. Suite 302 Burbank
office phone: 818-237-5052 cell: 818-644-0783
3-4 Downtown L.A. w/Hal 626 Wilshire Blvd Suite 200 (hope/Wilshire)
4:30 Chamber of Commerce
Stay Downtown LA hotel.

wMay 26
LA Live
Guess?
Go to Las Vegas

Th May 27 Las Vegas
Friday May 28 Las Vegas
Sat Go home!