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ON FAITH — Character and Leadership

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The editors of *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* asked the On Faith panel to answer this question: *What does the Eliot Spitzer scandal say about our public and private morality? Should he have resigned?*

My column on this question was posted Friday. You can read the complete article here. In the article I argued that Americans may not have a complete or consistent sense of how this works, but there is no doubt that the public sees a connection between character and leadership — and we should be glad this is the case.”

More:

Americans know that leaders are human. The public elected President Grover Cleveland to office in 1884, even as he acknowledged that he was the likely father of a child born out of wedlock. Voters judged him by his long record of public service and moral recovery. Franklin Roosevelt’s place in the top rankings of most powerful U.S. presidents is secure — even with the knowledge of his affair with Lucy Mercer.

But the case of Eliot Spitzer reminds us all that the public does have a sense that personal morality is tied to public leadership — indeed that private morality and public morality cannot be on two completely different tracks. Eliot Spitzer, involved in a scandalous story of prostitution and related details, far exceeded the generous boundaries of the public’s tolerance for the failures of elected leaders.



Christians can never look at these issues as the merely political, however. In a biblical perspective, this is yet another grim and sobering reminder that all are sinners, and that sin will work its corrosive way into moral collapse, but for the restraining grace of God, and His saving grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As always, the responses to the column are interesting in themselves —but so are other columns.

For example:

N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham — *Public life, no less than private, is a matter of trust. If someone deceives their spouse, chances are they won’t have much compunction about deceiving the public.*

Martin E. Marty, Emeritus Professor, University of Chicago Divinity School — *Yes, Governor Spitzer should have resigned. New York government would have been paralyzed and the media would have remained paroxysmal in its obsession with the story of one person, while six billion others also have lives to live. . . .*

The question implies that this case might reveal something about the state of the present culture in contrast to that in other times. Optimists and moral progressives have little to cheer: we are not rising to new moral heights. But pessimists and crabby people who always think that earlier times offer no such cases need some history lessons.

Deepak Chopra, Founder, Alliance for a New Humanity [New Age] — *As to the specifics of the case, prostitution is a*

victimless crime as long as minors aren't involved, or sex trafficking of unwilling women, or physical abuse. In a decent moral setting, the federal investigators who accidentally came upon Spitzer's transgressions would have brought their discovery to him privately, informed him of the risk he was running, and then left the next move to him. He might have atoned; he might have sincerely changed. Turning his dalliance into a medieval morality play about the Devil grabbing a sinner by the tail follows a puritanical value system that we would all be better off leaving behind.

Hadia Mubarak, Muslim Feminist — *Our society's glorification of sex through the media, music and film industries has come to haunt us. Young girls as young as 11 and 12 years old are growing up in America believing that their value as human beings is based on their sexual appeal. Dressing beyond their age, young girls engage in hyper consumerism of skimpy clothing and cosmetics – not for their own gratification – but for the gratification of men. Young boys in middle school are growing up to believe that women were created for their own sexual pleasure. . . . As a Muslim feminist, I have a serious problem with our society's denial of this epidemic.*

Well, as always, it is an interesting public conversation. The diversity of responses documented here points to the confusion in our public life.

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