

Burbank Leader

Personal and private lives

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Question:

A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute has revealed that religious Americans think a financial scandal is worse than a sexual one.

The poll was conducted in the wake of several high-profile cases of politicians making headlines for their sexual behavior, including U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y., who resigned after he lied about sexually explicit texts he sent to women he met online. More than 90% of respondents say that a public official taking a bribe is an “extremely” or “very serious” moral problem; more than 80% say the same for a politician who cheats on taxes. But fewer than 70% of Americans polled say it’s a serious moral problem for a public official to have sex with a prostitute. The poll also discovered that people were bothered more about a politician lying to cover up a sex scandal than about the transgression itself.

Daniel Cox, PRRI’s research director, said of the findings, “There’s a dramatic difference when people are evaluating public officials’ financial versus sexual misbehavior. A significant number of folks think they can separate public officials’ personal and public lives.” He believes that people tend to think of sexual misbehavior as personal, and therefore private.

Should religious Americans differentiate between misconduct in this way? And why do you think scandals involving sex are not believed to be as serious as financial ones?

Answer:

I was not totally shocked to learn that Americans polled by the Public Religion Research Institute made a distinction between the practice of morality by politicians in relation to sexual and financial transgressions. As the pollsters suggested, the distinction made by respondents seemed to be in the difference between the public and private lives of these politicians, not about the relative importance of sexual or financial misconduct.

Politicians are elected by voters to act in the best interests of their constituents, and their actions can affect large numbers of people either positively or negatively. Consequently, they are expected to hold themselves to a higher standard as representatives of those who elected them and the general population. In fact, misconduct by politicians in the financial arena can bring about the collapse of a country. In their private lives, their actions affect a much smaller number of people and may cause damage on a more limited scale.

I was also not surprised that the same respondents saw lying about a sexual indiscretion as more serious than the act itself. When politicians are elected, they pledge that they will uphold the trust that people have placed in them. Consequently, a breach of trust is a serious matter. Trust is a value that spans the distance between both our public and private lives and needs to be expected in both venues. To lie about one’s actions to save face in either public or private life is reprehensible.

What I am not saying in this response is that sexual misconduct is to be condoned in either public or private life. But I believe that a politician can behave ethically in his or her role as a representative of constituents while living in a different way as a sexual human being. As a person of faith, my hope is that we will all act in the most ethical ways we can. But as Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church said, “We are guilty by reason of humanity.”

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Americans are amazingly tolerant of sexual indiscretions. Going all the way back to when Grover Cleveland was president in the 19th century, he was accused (rightfully so, I think) of fathering an illegitimate child. But he still was elected to a second term. (Interestingly, he is the only president who served two terms non consecutively. After his first term, someone else was elected for four years. Then Cleveland was re-elected to his second term.)

Should “religious Americans” be more critical of those who wander sexually? I don't think so. First of all, to quote Jesus when the woman was caught in adultery, “Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone” (John 8:7).

And in another context, Jesus says that whoever even looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. Now I won't want to sound like Jimmy Carter, who admitted to having lustful feelings for someone not Rosalyn; but who hasn't admired the physique of someone to whom he/she is not married?

In my book, sexual infidelity is still a bad thing and shouldn't happen, but in a strange way, I think the American public has a mature outlook on those who wander from the marriage bed. Again, they shouldn't wander; but happily, we've come a long way since the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne's “The Scarlet Letter.” And there are much worse things, I believe, for which elected officials should be held accountable.

There is a comparison I have seen that seems to make the point that personal morality in the sexual realm is not necessarily indicative of that person's ability to be a good leader. There are three men. One drinks a quart of liquor every day, one cheats on his wife regularly, and one is a vegetarian. Which man would you choose as your leader? The drinker was Winston Churchill, the man who cheated on his wife was Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the vegetarian was Adolf Hitler.

Happy moralizing!

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada Flintridge

The problem with these distinctions is that they are not particularly helpful, even though the poll pretends to separate transgressions into “bad” and “not so bad as all that.” We all have in us the potential to live into the best or the worst of who we are, genetically, physically, intellectually and emotionally. Some of the same qualities that drive us to succeed (however you define that for yourself) make us vulnerable to the bad decisions that take us down that slippery slope to ignominy.

For example, the type of person who becomes a politician is often someone people would like to look up to as capable of making a difference and doing great things. We want to believe their promises. We write them letters appealing to their morality. We encourage our politicians to be the best persons they can be in difficult situations. The world needs great role models; but alas, our politicians are an inconsistent source of greatness and moral fortitude.

It takes a very self-aware politician (preferably surrounded by truth-telling friends and family) to take the admiration and affirmation s/he receives with balance. It is easy for the non-self-aware politician to become

addicted to admiration and affirmation, and to begin to seek it out in unhealthy venues. The slide into lust or greed is probably dependent on personality type, which is why the poll is useless.

Rather than judging the people we have elected to public office, we would do well to turn this analysis on ourselves: Have I ever needed something to the point of hurting/manipulating/guiling others into getting it? Have I ever felt like I have broken my own moral code so badly that I am hiding and keeping secrets?

If the answer is sometimes/mostly/often “yes”, then the Holy Spirit may be trying to get your attention. Remember that God wants us to live fully, with health and wholeness. Jesus never said that when you find yourself at the bottom of the slippery slope, you have to stay there. He’ll put you back at the top. Your spiritually healthy, truth-telling faith family can help you keep your balance.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

Montrose

I’m not really surprised by the results of this poll, since I believe I understand why financial misdeeds among politicians are generally perceived to be worse than sex scandals. We elect our public officials to represent us in various levels of government and serve our interests; we give these officials significant responsibilities, and trust that as recipients of our tax dollars, they will work on our behalf in an honest and effective manner.

Violating this trust through corruption in their public lives — by taking bribes that influence their votes, or by cheating on the taxes that we all must pay as citizens — in essence breaks the sacred agreement that was made when elected. While we would certainly like our politicians to be morally upstanding individuals in all areas, we often understand — and often forgive — if they fail in their personal lives. What is unforgivable is taking advantage of the public trust in the performance of their official duties. That is a sin the American people will not overlook.

In my opinion, the most interesting revelation of this poll is that the people surveyed were more bothered by a politician’s lying to cover up a sex scandal than by the wrongdoing itself. This speaks volumes about the character of the American people. As a whole, we are a very forgiving nation. We understand that our politicians are not angels, but imperfect human beings who can fail and commit moral sins. What most of us cannot understand or forgive is when an elected official tries to cover up inexcusable behavior by shamelessly lying to us, assuming that we are a bunch of fools who will actually believe outlandish stories.

The Bible relates that King David took Bathsheba as his wife by commanding her husband’s death via abandonment during a heated battle. David was subsequently confronted by Nathan the prophet, who rebuked him for his inexcusable behavior. Instead of justifying his actions, King David accepted full responsibility and repented for his misdeeds for the rest of his life. I would suggest that politicians heed the example set by King David. Never betray the public trust. Stay true to your moral bearings — and if you fail, come clean by admitting your failure and sincerely asking for forgiveness. Doing otherwise is a recipe for political suicide.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale

So a recent poll concludes that scandals involving sex are not as serious as financial ones. I do agree — if illegal behavior is not involved. But not from my own spiritual values.

Illegal behavior overall can affect professional integrity. One can be a sexual being and have a certain way they conduct their sexuality in various forms. But when one displays misconduct in their profession by lying, cheating, or stealing, this demonstrates a lack of professional trustworthiness. The personal lives of those who are not devout do not always have much to do with their professional position, unless they do something illegal, or break the legal and ethical codes of their profession.

I understand why people separate personal lives (i.e. sexual behavior) from professional life (i.e. illegal conduct). Putting my own morality aside, it makes sense to me. Lying absolutely does affect a professional position. What one does personally, as long as it is not illegal and does not affect their job and duty to the public and/or those they serve, is completely separate to me. I think religious people are beginning to put their own spiritual judgment aside and are looking frankly at this as a professional issue. The statistics demonstrate the ability of those who deem themselves religious to look objectively at situations such as these. I don't think Americans are putting their own spiritual values into this poll; they answered with an unbiased analysis. Using the example of U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y, was he engaging with a prostitute? In New York, sex with a prostitute is a misdemeanor, punishable by one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. That would be a professional problem.

So my stance? Financial misconduct and dishonesty are more serious than sexual misconduct — unless that sexual transgression breaks the law.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian

Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy

Montrose

I don't see it as a matter of sex vs. finances; I think it's a matter of whether or not an offense is related to a politician's official function.

Taking a bribe is a directly job-related sin; cheating on taxes, since politicians are government employees, is also job-related; cheating on a spouse is not related to their work performance at all. If they were using public funds to go on boondoggles with their lover, that would be bad. A legislator having sex with a lobbyist would be bad; the same person having sex with their next-door neighbor wouldn't bother me at all.

If I were the sexually wayward politician's confessor, we'd be having serious talks about sin, repentance, amendment of life and absolution. If I were their therapist, we'd be having serious talks about root causes of their behavior. If I were their friend, I'd probably be smacking them upside the head and asking, "What were you thinking?" And if I were their wife, I'd call my lawyer and head for the door.

But I'm not any of those things; all I am is a member of the general public who may or may not have voted this person into office. As such, all I care about is whether they're doing the job they were elected to do, and doing it well and right. Their personal foibles outside the scope of their office are none of my concern.

No employer giving a job performance review would look into whether or not their employee recycles at home, cheats at cards, kicks the dog or volunteers at the soup kitchen. Whatever good or ill you thought about whatever personal morality you knew about, it would not enter into your evaluation of their job performance.

The public is the 'employer' of politicians; so the scope of what we should be judging them for is limited to whether or not they do their job well — period.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada Flintridge

Let's see.

A family-values Republican is caught in a "wide stance." A Democratic man of the people who has recently pledged his body and soul exclusively to another Democrat who is carrying his child is caught displaying his body to everyone in the online universe. A politician who tells the poor to bootstrap it and belt-tighten robs the taxpayers.

Which is more repellent to me? Too close to call.

But gay sex (not sexual behavior in public toilets, of course) is legal. Promiscuous, unfaithful, tacky sexual behavior is legal.

Cheating on your taxes and violating campaign finance laws are illegal.

So I'm not surprised people are less concerned about sex than finances — the gap should be greater.

Yes, your sex life should be private, but you should be smart enough, and psychologically healthy enough, not to conduct it in public — and especially not on the Internet. It is in this arena that people, religious or not, need to demand better of their politicians.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

Each kind of misconduct (the biblical word is “sin”) produces its own unique consequences. It affects both culprit and the people around him in different ways. And I believe that’s why people, including people of faith, differentiate between the kinds of misconduct that have been committed. The thinking goes like this: If an elected official is involved in a sexual scandal, maybe he’ll destroy his marriage or his credibility, but it doesn’t directly affect his constituency that much. It’s his personal problem. But if he misuses the tax money taken out of my paycheck, then we have a problem. If he has an affair, that’s his problem, but if he lies to me, then it’s personal. In essence, we differentiate on the basis of how it directly affects us.

I’m not saying we should think this way. So how does Scripture say we should approach the sin of others? First, we need to realize that we all struggle with different kinds of sin. We all need the grace and forgiveness that God offers through faith in the work Jesus did for us on the cross. Certainly we should take the logs out of our own eyes. God instructs us to confront others’ sin in love, allowing the opportunity for their repentance. This having been accomplished, reconciliation and restoration should follow. In situations where the public trust has been grossly violated, and when reputation has been damaged to the point that the person no longer has the credibility to be effective, a time of removal may be necessary. But short of that, public exercises of grace and forgiveness would make life a lot nicer for all of us.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

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