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Newsweek Celebrates Gay Rights Gains Worldwide

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This week's cover story for *Newsweek* magazine's international editions is an essay by writer Joseph Contreras celebrating gay rights gains worldwide. The article, "Legal in Unlikely Places," provides a glowing report on how homosexuality is becoming increasingly accepted around the world, "even in the land of machismo."

Contreras' article begins in Mexico City, but then moves to other locations around the globe. His argument is that the massive shifts in public opinion on homosexuality in the West are driving similar developments worldwide.

In his words:

The growing maturity of the gay-rights movement in the West is having a marked effect on the developing world. In the United States, the Republican Party is in trouble in part because it has made a fetish of its opposition to gay marriage. At least some gays in big cities like New York question why they are still holding "pride" parades, as if they were still a closeted minority and not part of the Manhattan mainstream. Since 2001, Western European countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain have gone even farther than the United States, placing gay and lesbian partners on the same legal footing as their heterosexual counterparts. And now, the major developing powers of Asia, Latin America and Africa are following the liberal road—sometimes imitating Western models, sometimes not—but in all cases setting precedents that could spread to the remaining outposts of official homophobia.

Note carefully that Contreras does not point to the Islamic world for similar evidence. He speaks of Asia, but not of Indonesia — the nation with the greatest number of Muslims. Similarly, a closer look at his analysis indicates that when he speaks of a liberalizing trend in Africa, he is really talking about South Africa, which is hardly representative of the nations to its north (not to mention North Africa, which is predominately Muslim).

As he admits:

Tolerance, however, by no means spans the globe. Homosexuality remains taboo throughout the greater Middle East. In most of the Far East, laws permitting gay and lesbian civil unions are many years if not decades away. In Latin America, universal acceptance of homosexuality is a long way off. Jamaica is a hotbed of homophobia. Even in Mexico, the first couple to take advantage of Coahuila's new civil-union statute were fired from their jobs as sales clerks after their boss realized they were lesbians. The new Mexico City law grants same-gender civil unions property and inheritance rights, but not the right to adopt children.

In other words, Contreras chooses his illustrations carefully, as he must in order to make his point. Still, there is something to his argument. Consider these two paragraphs:

In Mexico, the declining clout and prestige of the Roman Catholic Church have emboldened gay-rights activists and their allies in state legislatures and city councils to pass new laws legalizing same-sex civil unions, starting with Mexico City in November. The rising influence of tolerant Western pop culture has encouraged gay men and lesbians to proclaim their sexuality in gay-pride marches like the one in the Brazilian city of São Paulo in June, which drew 3 million



participants, according to the event's organizers. It was the largest ever in Brazil.

Western models also helped inspire South Africa to legalize civil unions in November 2006, thus becoming the first country in the developing world to do so. In China, the trend goes back to the climate of economic reform that took hold in the 1980s, ending the persecution of the era of Mao Zedong, who considered homosexuals products of the "moldering lifestyle of capitalism."

A liberalizing trend is evident in Mexico, though many observers argue that this is really limited to Mexico City and its environs. There, the acceptance of homosexuality has been accompanied by a liberalizing of abortion laws. In both cases, what Contreras calls the "declining clout and prestige of the Roman Catholic Church" is surely the main factor.

Brazil is a different story. Indeed, Brazil's sexual liberalism predates that of the United States. Brazilian television features explicitly pornographic programming and the acceptance of overt displays of homosexuality has been growing for decades, especially in the nation's largest cities. It hardly makes sense to argue that trends in the United States and Europe are fueling that movement. As Contreras notes, a Brazilian judge recently ordered the nation's health care program to include surgeries for sex-reassignment within its coverage.

The most important part of Contreras' argument is his conclusion, in which he predicts that change is inevitable, since young people around the world are adjusting to a new sexual liberalism. The data support that prediction, which holds true in the West and in much of the developing world.

Globalization began as a term related to economics and the development of a global market for goods and services. Contreras' article reminds us that where good and services go, moral and ideological assumptions hitch a ride. Today's world is a global marketplace of moralities and worldviews. As the Romans warned, *caveat emptor* — Let the buyer beware.

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