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How Did this Happen? Why Same-Sex Marriage Makes Sense to So Many

Same-sex marriage is not an idea that emerged from a vacuum. The project of normalizing homosexuality has deep roots and ideological momentum.

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Why does same-sex marriage make sense to so many people? The momentum toward the full legalization of same-sex marriage seems to intensify with every passing month — or even faster. The moral divide in this nation is now seen most clearly in the distance between those for whom marriage is exclusively heterosexual and thus a settled issue and, on the other hand, those who honestly see the legalization of same-sex marriage as a moral mandate required by justice.

Given the venerable status of marriage and its universally established heterosexual character — at least until very recently — the burden of argument falls on the need to explain how such a movement for a moral revolution gained credibility, cultural mass, and momentum. How did this happen?

A culture does not consist only of ideas and ideologies, but no culture exists without them. Given the complexity of any culture, a comprehensive map of these ideas, moral intuitions, and philosophies is impossible to create. Nevertheless, some patterns are clear enough. We can trace the acceptance of same-sex marriage to at least three major ideas that have been shaping the modern mind for some time — and are held to some extent by both social liberals and conservatives.

A Progressivist Understanding of History

One of the ideological engines of our social revolution is the idea that history reveals a progressive liberation of peoples who have suffered oppression. In this view of history, one prejudice after another has fallen as we have come to terms with the demands of justice. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

In other words, history reveals an inevitable, though tortuously long, arc toward justice and fairness. Over the course of history, innumerable superstitions and prejudices have been discarded. Slavery, once considered a social and economic necessity on both sides of the Atlantic, was overcome in Western democracies. Women demanded and were granted the right to vote. The world of Jim Crow gave way to the world of racial integration and civil rights. The mentally disabled are no longer put away in asylums. The Irish and Italians, once oppressed as the unwashed and unwanted immigrants of the Gilded Age, have risen to prominence in every arena of American life. America has elected its first African-American President. History marches on.

For obvious reasons, the movement to normalize homosexuality attached itself to this idea of historical progress. This was a natural and inevitable development, and those who formed the strategy for this movement used the most powerful tools at their disposal. The progressivist vision of history was there for the taking, and the gay rights movement took it up



with enthusiasm.

Americans are naturally drawn to this understanding of history. It plays to our belief that our generation is in some way morally superior to the generations who preceded us. Liberals feast on this understanding of history and make it their main argument in any number of debates. But conservatives are shaped by this narrative as well. Conservatives accept the undeniable fact that history, both long and short, tells a story that we should celebrate at countless turns.

But the problem with the progressivist understanding of history is that it cannot stand alone. It cannot be the only narrative. There has to be some means of identifying what is truly a manifestation of oppression and what is a structure necessary for human flourishing. If the only story we have is the narrative of liberation from oppression, then, as Karl Marx understood, all that remains is an unstoppable revolution that dissolves all bonds of relationship, kinship, tradition, and moral order. Should children be liberated from the authority of their parents? Should all prisoners be liberated from their cells? Should human beings be liberated from the obligations of family and kinship?

The progressivist understanding of history must be checked by a recognition that liberation from oppression is not the only true and compelling narrative. The affirmation and preservation of moral obligations and commitments must be the companion narrative. But, in order to understand why so many among us see something as morally revolutionary and socially subversive as same-sex marriage to be something to demand and champion, consider the fact that many of our friends and neighbors see same-sex marriage as only the next logical step in overcoming prejudice and discrimination. It is the only story they know, and it is powerful.

A Radical Individualism

Paired with the progressivist understanding of history is a vision of individualism that is virtually unprecedented in human experience. An affirmation of the importance of the individual is written into the fabric of modern thought. Our understanding of human rights, of individual liberty, and of personal responsibility are central to the American self-consciousness. Add to this the fact that the rise of the therapeutic worldview has recast human experience as a continuous project of individual self-discovery and self-definition.

But, if individualism was central to the American experience from the beginning, the current form of this idea is far more radical than previous generations could imagine. The current form of individualism includes the claim that we can define ourselves even in terms of gender and sex. This individualism is titanic in its reach, producing what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton once described as the “Protean Man.” We demand the total right to define ourselves.

Once again, we must recognize that the opponents of same-sex marriage have also been drinking heavily at the springs that feed this powerful idea. Many conservatives have bought into their own form of expressive individualism, taking refuge in the structures of social order only when convenient, bending moral codes to our own individualistic demands, forfeiting moral obligations when they conflict with our favorite project — ourselves.

The control on the destructive force of expressive individualism is the reality of moral obligation and the goodness of true self-knowledge. As Christians know — and must always remember — we are known before we ever emerge to know. Our Creator knew us before we even came to be, and he established our identity before we came to know ourselves. True happiness can come only by embracing with gratitude the identity we are given by the Creator. This idea — now reaching even to sex and gender — is anathema to the modern mind.

The Claim of Moral Autonomy

Throughout most of human history, moral principles were considered to be objectively true and inviolate. The universe was understood to be ruled by a moral law established by a divine Lawgiver and Judge. That understanding has given way to the belief that most, if not all, moral principles are the products of social construction — we make them up as we go along.

While most criticisms of moral relativism are directed at individual conduct, on the larger scale, the entire society is increasingly convinced that moral principles must give way to new understandings, findings, and insights. When this idea is added to the progressivist understanding of history and the radical form of modern individualism, we have a recipe for moral revolution.

And, as with the other ideological factors we have considered, this one is also affirmed, to some degree, by both liberals and conservatives. There can be no doubt that some understandings of moral principle were indeed shaped by prejudice and ignorance, leading to great human suffering. Laws against interracial marriage were prime examples of this prejudice, and there are many others. Fear of minorities, including homosexuals, has led to scapegoating and hatred, cloaked in the language of moral rectitude. These things must give way to moral progress and be denounced with moral fervor.

But, once again, not all moral principles are examples of oppression. To the contrary, human life is only possible within the context of enduring moral laws and principles that liberate all human beings to their true humanity. This is where those who support same-sex marriage and those who oppose it face each other across a huge gulf of understanding. One side sees a moral mandate to liberate marriage from its heterosexual limitation. The other side sees natural marriage as a liberating, God-given institution for human flourishing. There is precious little shared ground in this debate.

Same-sex marriage is not an idea that emerged from a vacuum. The project of normalizing homosexuality has deep roots and ideological momentum. The elites, the entertainment culture, the news media, and the educational establishment celebrate all three of these ideas as central to the modern experience and as ideological propulsion into a better future.

So, when we wonder how it came to be that so many among us now favor same-sex marriage, we must remember that, to some extent or another, virtually all of us have embraced the ideas that make such a moral revolution thinkable. And ideas, as Richard Weaver famously reminded us, have consequences.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

There is no way to say everything that needs to be said about an issue such as this in a single essay of any length. For more on this subject, please use the search feature at this website. I have written more than 200 articles on the issue of homosexuality. Most are available here.

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