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Tradition on the Ropes

AT CERTAIN TIMES IN HISTORY, society seems to move in a different direction, as values and mores change. While the social aspects of alteration often are important, the psychology of the day—the actual thinking of what is happening—takes on a life of its own. In the case of the same sex marriage debate, we seem to have one of the best examples of a true social and psychological sea change.

There appears to be a number of reasons why same sex marriage has become such a hot button issue, and why its acceptance is gaining traction in many parts of the U.S. What comes to mind first—from a sociological point of view—is that young people are more open and progressive, which does not mean they necessarily are “liberals,” but that they are looking dynamically at what is happening around them. Younger citizens consider “what makes sense,” how a particular issue relates to them and affects their lives. In many ways, the views of those under 40 drive society forward.

The thinking of young Americans, moderates, progressives, independents, and even some with more conservative views goes like this: society needs to be inclusive and the psychology of the issue needs a different line of thought. With same sex marriage, many of us now understand it essentially has no effect on traditional marriage. Americans ask, “How is it possible to discriminate against a certain segment of our society?” Also strengthening the movement is the realization that thousands of gay Americans serve in the military and risk their lives to defend our freedom. The thought process then often moves on and questions how it is possible in a free country to have these same veterans come home and not be allowed to marry whomever they want. From a conservative point of view, where less government often is preferred, why would anyone want to have the government be involved in marriage? This would, in effect, create more government.

What seems to be obvious to many in this country is that, when someone or one type of organization or religious group has its own definition of what is right for all citizens, there is push-back. The last election demonstrated that Pres. Barack Obama’s direct appeal to those representing where society is going is what mattered. Same sex marriage certainly is one issue that presents almost impossible challenges for those who are opposed. Perhaps those who oppose same sex marriage want to retain their power (religious or otherwise), or simply are afraid

of any change that modifies traditional beliefs. However, when this viewpoint is challenged carefully by pointing to past “traditions” that have fallen by the wayside—everything from not allowing women to vote to Jim Crow laws—the argument falls apart.

Some may wonder why same sex marriage or immigration reform or gun laws mean so much. The answer may be found in how society has changed over the last few decades. It appears that, with the electronic age, technology has moved more swiftly than our collective “thinking.” Today, everything is exposed immediately and what someone says or

does is visible to all. However, as we have seen in the political arena recently, politicians, organizations, and many individuals have a pronounced desire simply to say anything. Bizarre comments on rape, women, and homosexuality, as well as inaccurate statements about our history, dates and times of events, flip-flops on issues, and appeals to dismiss or discard segments of our society show a real disconnect.

On one hand it would seem that those with very strident points of view want to make their case, but on the other it appears they are being exposed for what they actually are. If the message is not making good sense and is not moving in line with social considerations, one immediately is defined in a manner that is hard to change. Those who are opposed to same sex marriage are not seeing their message resonate. Such a rigid stance certainly is not acceptable to the younger generation and, at times, makes older Americans with narrow points of view look weak and ineffectual.

The new tech-dependent American lifestyle is an influential factor, and certainly can change the debate about any social issue. You can see it already.

Statements that do not make good sense are going to be difficult to square for politicians, organizations, and our future leaders. Those speaking to a hardened base of supporters, and refusing to move with the times, will have limited success.

As same sex marriage moves forward and becomes part of the fabric of the U.S., we will become stronger. Our country will have succeeded in bringing about a development that will make us more inclusive—and thus smarter and more productive. For those who want to cling to the traditional view of marriage, it will be an interesting time.

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