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The Eclipse of Christian Memory

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Even as Californians await the decision of their state Supreme Court on the same-sex marriage issue, momentum toward the legalization of gay marriage has now shifted to New England, where several states are poised to approve some version of homosexual marriage in coming weeks.

Cathy Lynn Grossman and Jack Gillum of *USA Today* report that legislatures in New Hampshire and Vermont are on the verge of approving measures to legalize same-sex marriage. Close behind are efforts in Rhode Island and New York. Same-sex marriage has been legal in Massachusetts for some years now, but that action was taken by the state's highest court. Observers expect the New York state legislature to deal with the issue in coming months.

Grossman and Gillum offer a very insightful analysis of this new momentum toward same-sex marriage in New England and point to a most interesting pattern: New England has demonstrated this new momentum toward the legalization of same-sex marriage at the very time it has also overtaken the Pacific Northwest as the most secularized region of the nation.



As Grossman and Gillum observe, “A *USA TODAY* analysis finds that states where the percentage of ‘nones’ — people who say they have no religion — is at or above the national average of 15% are more likely to push expanding the scope of marriage, civil unions or same-sex partner rights.”

A look at the data from the recent American Religious Identification Survey [ARIS] supports this conclusion. As Grossman and Gillum write:

Today in New Hampshire, where nones are 29% of the population, nearly matching Catholics (32%) and Protestants (30%), the House of Representatives is expected to vote to legalize same-sex marriage, and “it has a good chance of passing the Senate this week,” says Marty Rouse of the Human Rights Campaign.

Friday in Vermont, a gay marriage bill that has passed the Senate goes to the House. Vermont has the highest rate of nones in the nation (34%), according to the newly released American Religious Identification Survey.

This pattern holds true in other New England states as well. Secularization and support for same-sex marriage appear to be part of a combined pattern. Conversely, those states reporting the highest church affiliation are also the states exhibiting the strongest opposition to same-sex marriage.

Proponents of same-sex marriage often claim that opposition to same-sex marriage is rooted in religious argumentation and belief. They seldom concede that support for same-sex marriage is equally grounded in a worldview and its cognitive commitments. But, of course, that worldview is generally secular in its commitments.

Christianity once formed the worldview of New England. While it was never true that all New Englanders were believing Christians, it is true that the worldview that gave birth to colonial America was explicitly Christian in substance

and, most specifically, in moral commitments. That first era of New England history was pervasively Christian and pervasively Protestant. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New England was reshaped by the arrival of millions of immigrants from Europe, and millions of these were Roman Catholics. Thus, by the arrival of the twentieth century, many New England neighborhoods and city centers were shaped, very noticeably, by Catholic moral teachings.

Now, as the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, the increasingly secularized character of New England helps to explain why the region is now ground zero for same-sex marriage.

The moral teachings of Christianity have exerted an incalculable influence on Western civilization. As those moral teachings fade into cultural memory, a secularized morality takes its place. Once Christianity is abandoned by a significant portion of the population, the moral landscape necessarily changes.

For the better part of the twentieth century, the nations of Western Europe led the way in the abandonment of Christian commitments. Christian moral reflexes and moral principles gave way to the loosening grip of a Christian memory. Now, even that Christian memory is absent from the lives of millions.

New England is following the same trajectory. In recent decades, the Pacific Northwest had the distinction of being the nation's most secular region. But the Pacific Northwest was never as highly evangelized as New England. In effect, New England is rejecting what the Pacific Northwest never even knew.

New England, like Europe, is fast becoming a post-Christian culture. And, as the late Lesslie Newbigin reminded us, evangelizing a post-Christian culture will be far more difficult than evangelizing a culture that never knew Christian commitments. As New England has followed Europe, will the rest of the nation follow New England?

Same-sex marriage may be the signaling issue in this pattern, but the most important issue is not sexuality, but the Gospel. New England certainly needs a corrective lesson on the issues at stake in sexual morality and marriage. But, far more than this, New England needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The moral issues are sufficient alarm — the deadly danger is the loss of Christian faith.

New England is losing the remnants of its Christian memory. We need a new generation of Christians who, like Jonathan Edwards, will bring the Gospel anew to New England. New England was the cradle of colonial America. Is it now the cradle of America's secular future?

