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Bachmann, Steinem and feminism's uncertain future

Jamie Manson | Aug. 23, 2011 Grace on the Margins

Forty-eight hours after Michele Bachmann won the Iowa Straw Poll, a new documentary on Gloria Steinem aired on HBO.

The proximity of these two events juxtaposed the thriving political presence of conservative Christian women and the apparent waning of high-profile feminist leaders in our culture today.

Beginning with the 2010-midterm elections, much of the media attention has revolved around the candidacy of Tea Party hard-liners like Sharon Angle, Christine O?Donnell, and Kristi Noem. Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin, though she wasn't running for office, also seemed to grab the spotlight at every opportunity.

Angle brandished her .44 magnum, Noem bragged about bow hunting elk, and Bachmann accused gay people of targeting children. All of them fiercely defended their pro-life stance as well as the definition of marriage as between ?one man and one woman.?

And the media, in turn, dubbed 2010 the ?Year of the Woman.?

With all of this press coverage came a string of embarrassing gaffes. O?Donnell famously talked about ?dabbling in witchcraft? and insisted that scientists were putting human brains into mice. Michele Bachmann has been called ?the one to watch -- for inaccuracies.? And who can forget Palin?s claim that Alaska's proximity to Russia gave her foreign policy experience?

These women are the antithesis of the feminists documented in *Gloria: In Her Own Words*. Though the film centers on an interview with Steinem, profiles of leaders like Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Flo Kennedy, and Betty Friedan also emerge throughout the documentary.

Extensive footage is shown of the struggle to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, the fight for a women?s right to choose, and the founding of Ms. magazine. These women wrote persuasively and spoke intelligently. They were not flanked by an army of handlers who scripted every word they uttered and approved every outfit they donned.

Without the work of this second wave of feminists, the Title IX amendment of the Civil Rights bill would not have been passed and women might not have the same level of protection from discriminatory acts in the workplace. Women might still be bleeding to death from illegal abortions. Women?s representation at the both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions might not be as strong today if not for the advocacy of the National Women?s Political Caucus, a group co-founded by Steinem in 1971.

Ironically, it is because of the work of these feminists that women like Bachmann can claim sexism in situations like the one the congresswoman found herself in when Fox News anchor Chris Wallace asked her ?Are you a flake?? Or when her struggle with migraines was raised as reason that she could not perform as President of the United States.

But the Tea Party women seem to have given birth to a new kind of feminism, one that is closely linked with the Evangelical Christianity they espouse.

In a recent article in the Huffington Post [1], Marie Griffith, who serves as director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, explains that the new Evangelical feminism of women like Bachmann and Palin is grounded much more in faith than traditional feminism:

> What is "feminist" about them, for those who want to use that descriptive, is their belief that God calls women no less than men to fight His battles against Satan on earth. Women hold awesome power as spiritual warriors, in this worldview; they're not doormats, nor should their godly duties be confined to the domestic sphere. . . . Bachmann and Palin have both made much of their roles as wives, mothers, and churchgoers in a way meant to show that their political leadership will not upend the gender hierarchy so crucial in the conservative evangelical home and church sanctuary.

Griffith?s analysis was confirmed in a profile of Bachmann published last week in *The New Yorker* [2]. The piece deftly shows the influence of the Evangelical school of thought known as Dominionism over Bachmann. Dominionism is the belief that Christians must occupy all secular offices and that all systems should be built on biblical truth.

The article recounts Bachmann?s work as a research assistant to John Eidsmoe, a faculty member of the Coburn School of Law at Oral Roberts University. Eidsmoe and his colleagues taught that ?when Biblical law conflicted with American law, ?the first thing you should try to do is work through legal means and political means to get it changed.??

Bachmann considers Eidsmoe?s work as one of the strongest influences over her thinking.

At the height of her career, Steinem clashed with conservative Christian women like Phyllis Schlafly. But now, the Schlaflys of the world are running for the highest office in the land, while the heirs of the second wave of feminism seem at best over-shadowed and, at worst, non-existent.

Since the 2010 elections, I have been troubled that so many high profile women in politics are extreme Christian conservatives of mediocre intelligence. I?m not sure what disturbs me more: that these women are being seen as the new incarnation of female leadership or that these women are so closely linked with Christianity.

Christian fundamentalists and the Tea Party (if you can indeed distinguish the two) claim to see women like Palin and Bachmann as ?true feminists.? But, watching them, I believe that these women only reinforce the misogynist beliefs that women have a weaker intelligence and are prone to ?flaky? behavior.

Watching the Steinem documentary, I tried to think of the names of women that could be considered powerful, prominent feminists.

Hillary Clinton? Nancy Pelosi? Though both women have paved new roads for women in government, both seemed too immersed in the political machine to fit into the category of a Gloria Steinem or Bella Abzug.

Oprah? Tina Fey? Though both have broken miles of new ground for women in the media, ultimately they are more entertainers than they are political activists or social leaders.

Are there powerful women who are intelligent, polished, and authentic who are *not* pushing a right wing, theocratic agenda? I?m sure there are many, but none seems to be running for high profile, political office.

I find myself longing for a group of feminist rising stars to emerge that will balance the scales set so off-kilter

by the bizarre brand of female power touted by Tea Party women.

At the conclusion of the documentary, Gloria Steinem remarks that she does not want to give advice to the new generation of feminists. Instead, she wants them to listen to their own voices and define what the new wave of feminism will look like.

While we listen to our own voices, we must also keep our ears open to hear the voices of the women who, with each new political campaign, increase the potential to set the women?s movement back by decades.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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