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God and Woman at Wasilla

Remember when religious populism walked hand-in-hand with economic populism? Neither does Sarah Palin.

GOING ROGUE: AN AMERICAN LIFE BY SARAH PALIN • HARPERCOLLINS
2009 • 413 PAGES • \$28.99

THE PERSECUTION OF SARAH PALIN: HOW THE ELITE MEDIA TRIED TO BRING DOWN A RISING STAR BY MATTHEW CONTINETTI • SENTINEL • 2009
226 PAGES • \$25.95

I will never forget the first picture I saw of Sarah Palin. There she was on the cover of *Vogue*, in early 2008—the “Governor Issue,” no less. Her long, thick hair streamed wildly around her head, her well-toned body pressed against her sleeveless dress. That beauty-queen smile lit up her face. It turned out the cover was a fake, an Internet hoax; the hair, the body, and the dress were all photo-shopped by an anti-Palin website that wanted to make her look as un-gubernatorial as possible.

But that smile was certainly real. It is the smile of a woman who *knows* she has been saved and hopes you are, or soon will be, too. “I thanked our Lord for every single thing we’d been through,” she writes in *Going Rogue* about the year that began when John McCain chose her to run for vice president. “I believed

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there was purpose in it all.” The most important thing to know about the most popular conservative in America may be that, as a teenager, she vowed “to put my life in my Creator’s hands” and has never doubted that he is guiding her down “my life’s path.”

Surprisingly, Palin’s religious convictions were mostly ignored by the reviewers and pundits who rushed to dissect her life after *Going Rogue* came out last fall and quickly sold at a pace J.K. Rowling might envy. In *The New York Times*, Frank Rich viewed her as the populist totem of the tea-party moment—“at the red-hot center of age-old American resentments that have boiled up both from the ascent of our first black president and from the intractability of the Great Recession for those Americans who haven’t benefited from bailouts.” In *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt saw a woman who was more celebrity than crusader: “For her fans she may be a goddess of vitality and truth, but for everyone else she’s the first political female train wreck, the Paris Hilton or Lindsay Lohan of the Republican Party.” The columnist Cal Thomas, a fellow conservative and evangelical, restricted himself to doling out campaign strategy: Palin ought to stop talking like an “angry and disenfranchised outsider,” he wrote, and begin to “sharpen her intellect” to attract independents and become a credible threat to Barack Obama in 2012. Other writers praised her as a super-mom and a “regular person” or noted how similar her attacks on “liberal elites” sound to those once leveled by the likes of Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace.

Occasionally, a newly minted Palinologist did quote the ex-governor’s goofy remark that God “intended for us to eat animals” because “He made them out of meat.” The cloying letter she wrote to Trig, her Down syndrome baby, in the voice of the Almighty also got some play. Earlier this year, John Heilemann and Mark Halperin reported in their book, *Game Change*, that Palin believed her nomination for vice president was part of “God’s plan.” But the throng of professional chatterers quickly moved on to speculate about how her new job on Fox News might aid or hamper a run for the White House.

And yet her religion is the subject that, in her autobiography, she refers to more frequently, and with more fervency, than she does anything else. How can Palin’s faith be understood? And how might that faith influence her political future?

Going Rogue is both a testament of Christian “witness” and a cleverly crafted work of political propaganda. Each aspect of the book serves the other, and some attention should be paid to why the meld has attracted so many readers. The Christian right’s agenda of “family values” has remained constant for the past three decades—as has the firmness of its loyalty to the Republican Party. But like any political or religious movement, it has to adapt to the times or die. Jerry

Falwell is gone, James Dobson is retired, and Pat Robertson makes the news only when he utters some hateful nonsense. However, the success of Palin's book demonstrates that the Christian right is able to cultivate new leaders—or perhaps that new leaders know how to find it. And they no longer have to be men of the cloth.

During the 2008 campaign, it was easy to get the impression that Palin was a theological wacko. Reporters from outside Alaska discovered that she and her family had long been members of a Pentecostal church, the Wasilla Assembly of God. A 2005 video surfaced showing Palin kneeling on the church dais in prayer, while a visiting Kenyan pastor, Thomas Muthee, blessed her “in the name of Jesus” and added: “Every form of witchcraft is what you rebuke.” Pentecostals were already notorious, outside their own circle, for speaking in tongues and charming poisonous snakes (although the latter is largely a myth). Now, a casual TV viewer could also imagine that McCain's running mate thought it might be a good idea to revive the Salem witch trials.

Yet, there is no evidence that Palin either believes in witchcraft or had anything to do with inviting Muthee. At the time, in fact, she was no longer even a member of that church, having left in 2002 to join a different, non-denominational congregation. Pentecostalism does happen to be one of the fastest-growing Christian groups, with more adherents in the developing world than in the United States itself. Their core beliefs include a faith in divine healing and premillennialism—the conviction that Jesus can come “at any moment” to render final judgment on a sinful world. But Palin refers to neither precept in *Going Rogue*.

In his strident defense of Palin's character and ideology—more a pamphlet or super-extended blog post than an actual book—Matthew Continetti, an editor at *The Weekly Standard*, accuses that all-purpose villain, the “liberal media,” of tarring Palin as a theocratic bigot. He maintains his heroine is a tolerant believer who always “separate[s] personal opinion from public practice.” Why, he asks, did reporters not grill Joe Biden, a Catholic, about the Virgin Birth or transubstantiation? But Biden, like most liberal Catholics, has never worn his faith on his well-tailored sleeve. If a politician claims that God stands behind every major decision she makes, and some minor ones as well, it is logical to inquire what her “opinions” (to use Continetti's mundane term) are and how they shape her politics.

Palin indicated how little she cares about quarantining the sacred from the secular when she chose Lynn Vincent to ghost-write her memoir. Vincent is a longtime staff writer for *World*, the evangelical magazine edited by Marvin Olasky, who helped popularize the term “compassionate conservatism.” Vincent

earlier co-authored a memoir with William Boykin, the former Army general and deputy undersecretary of defense who infamously boasted in 2003, about a Muslim Somali warlord he had fought, “I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.” (Vincent also crafted a redemptive tale about the friendship between a homeless black man and a wealthy white art dealer, *Same Kind of Different as Me*, which spent dozens of weeks on best-seller lists.)

With Vincent’s aid, Palin expresses, again and again, a romantic evangelicalism that has deep roots in the nation’s Christian past. Her God is a kind, omniscient father who wants only the best for his children, as long as they acknowledge his control over every aspect of their lives. She praises “His majestic creation called Alaska...His touch on America, which has given us all so

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many opportunities” and “His grace,” which has made her “American life” an “extraordinary” one. She defends her belief in intelligent design against Steve Schmidt, McCain’s campaign manager and the only real heavy in her narrative. Before the vice-presidential debate, her anxieties lift as soon as Joe Lieberman assures her, “God is going to see you

through this. Just put your faith in Him and let Him take care of it.” (Alas, the erstwhile Democrat hasn’t revealed why that same God failed to take care of him and Al Gore during the long count in Florida that followed the election of 2000.)

Palin’s is a broadly ecumenical faith, one that appeals to a broad section of Christians and one that might even be acceptable to conservative members of other monotheistic religions—like that Jewish Senator from Connecticut. In her book, Palin seldom mentions Jesus or cites a verse from the Bible. The presence of God, it seems, matters far more than do his words. When she does quote Scripture, it tends to be a passage beaming with paternal bliss, such as Jeremiah 29:11-13: “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Plans for peace and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope. When you call upon Me I will hear you, when you search for Me you will find Me; if you seek Me with all your heart.’”

On occasion, her simple and quite un-roguish theology collapses into bathos. Palin jauntily reports that, on Election Day 2008, she and husband Todd voted in the same building where she had once attended elementary school and later presided over Wasilla’s city business. “I was even wearing the same wardrobe I had often worn back then—jeans, a Carhartt jacket, and a relieved smile... Oth-

ers may call such events ‘coincidences’; I believe they are miracles.” Who knew the Almighty had a fondness for sturdy outdoor apparel?

Palin’s mode of Christianity can be traced back, ironically, to the arch-liberal revolt against Calvinist orthodoxy in the nineteenth century. Ministers like Henry Ward Beecher preached a buoyant Protestantism that banished the concept of hell and made the process of redemption seem as simple as asking for it. No longer was salvation available only to a mysteriously chosen elect. Beecher and his like-minded brethren considered sinfulness a temporary malady, which the love of God could burn away as a fierce noonday sun dries up a noxious mold. This new, welcoming gospel inspired many believers to throw themselves into political causes that every conservative of their day abhorred. Beecher earned a reputation as a militant abolitionist who at one point publicly shipped guns to antislavery settlers in Kansas, while his sister Harriet was the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the most influential attack on slavery ever written.

Following the Civil War, exponents of the Social Gospel applied their romantic faith to other burning issues. Self-taught economist Henry George predicted, in his best-selling treatise *Progress and Poverty*, that a confiscatory tax on private land ownership would bring about “the City of God on earth, with its walls of jasper and its gates of pearl!” Populists—the original species—vowed, in the words of one populist newspaper, that “God has promised to hear the cry of the oppressed” and claimed that “no man in this nation can live a consistent Christian life” unless he joined the agrarian insurgency. Frances Willard, the radical evangelical who headed the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, urged her many followers to “hear the cry of the world and help to hush it into peace, as a mother soothes the baby on her breast.” And when Socialist leader Eugene Debs was jailed for speaking out against World War I, many of his supporters compared him to Christ. Like “the Nazarene Carpenter,” wrote one lawyer from Oklahoma, “Debs had taught us continually... to Love one another and not to shoot one another.”

William Jennings Bryan’s theology was fundamentalist, but his politics were liberal, and he campaigned tirelessly for such causes as progressive taxation, trust-busting, and anti-imperialism. His charismatic oratory, like Palin’s, won him a following among millions of devout evangelicals. “God has brought you forth, and ordaind [sic] you, to lead the people out of this state of oppression and despondency into the Canaan of peace and prosperity,” a furniture salesman wrote to Bryan from Pittsburgh in 1896. Today, liberal evangelicals like Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo try to emulate the Great Commoner (his creationism aside), though they are more popular among Democratic office-holders than with the masses of their coreligionists.

There is a faint echo of altruism in Palin's book, or a pretense of it. Like other savvy foes of abortion, she mixes her opposition with disarming phrases about building "a culture of life in which we help women in difficult situations"—which primarily means putting their babies up for adoption. She and Todd resolved to bring Trig to term, she writes rather movingly, because to do otherwise would have given in to un-Christian feelings of selfishness and fear: "I asked if [Todd] had the same question I had: 'Why us?' He looked genuinely surprised by my question and responded calmly, 'Why not us?'"

But Palin draws the line at any hint that the country might benefit from stricter regulation of corporate America or a health system that provided coverage to all. White evangelicals have long been divided between advocates of a moral commonwealth and those who preached moral self-control and self-reliance. The latter have dominated since the 1960s, due largely to the twin shocks of gay rights and legalized abortion and their vigorous advocacy by secular spokespeople; the identification of liberals more with anti-authoritarian values than with economic grievances played a role as well.

Thus, Palin can confidently assert that both big businesses and small ones "are built by regular people," and so should be left to innovate and prosper. And she contends that the only way to help the poor, besides encouraging them to work, is to have a charitable soul. Her in-laws, Palin writes, are "willing to give the shirts off their backs for those in need. Todd's mother, Blanche Kallstrom, ran her businesses that way and has been materially blessed for being so generous to others."

Such personal anecdotes—and 24 pages of family photos, most in color—help freshen a politics that otherwise just parrots the secular right-wing gospel as handed down by Reagan and Gingrich. Blithely ignorant of the historical record, Palin believes the New Deal made the Great Depression worse and is happy to reduce her current agenda to the size of predictable bumper-stickers: "Encourage the free market. Lower taxes. Get government out of the way... Respect honest work. Strengthen families." But to the many followers of this attractive Christian mother with a tough, insurgent image, it clearly has a fresh, moral edge. "This woman has the guts to tell it like it is," gushes "James M." from Dallas, one of the many fans who've reviewed the book on Amazon.com. "America needs Sarah Palin today... as much as we needed Reagan after Jimmy Carter. This woman is the true/real AMERICAN'S voice and savior. GOD BLESS AMERICA and Sarah Palin."

All the hoopla will keep Palin smiling—and probably convince her to run for the GOP nomination in 2012. In *Going Rogue*, she compares herself to Ronald Reagan in 1976, who was able "to turn things around" for conservatives four years

later. But it is hard to imagine how she could win. No candidate so polarizing, so tightly strung, and so inflexible in her positions has ever been elected president. What's more, her base of white evangelicals—just a quarter of all voters in 2008—is a dwindling part of the population. Mexican-American moms with white-collar jobs who are sincere Christians but have little time for church are the future of the American electorate.

Yet demography is not always destiny. If it were, a bi-racial man with a Muslim middle name would not be sitting in the White House today. The tea-party movement may lose strength by the time candidates start criss-crossing Iowa. But for now, that movement gives Palin a larger base than Barack Obama had when he started his run in 2007. Of all the aspects of her biography, it is her sentimental faith, voiced with such casual resolve, that marks her as the anti-Obama for millions of Americans. If you sincerely trust in the goodness of the Lord, Palin implies, then you cannot believe he will long allow this smooth elitist who thinks ordinary people “cling” to their religion to rule the country you love.

So liberals should not comfort themselves in assuming that *Going Rogue* is, in Jonathan Raban's words, “a four-hundred page paeon to virtuous ignorance.” It is instead a tribute to Palin's ability to draw a sizeable gathering of people who long for a politician who is, at the same time, a pious Christian, a stalwart conservative, and an aggressively modern woman. While that combination may not be virtuous, there is nothing ignorant about it. ▀