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Religion, Activism, & Social Change

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# *In Conversation*

Emily Suzanne Johnson, *Ball State University*.

**I**n *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2019), Emily Suzanne Johnson examines the lives of four nationally prominent women and how their work and leadership throughout the 1970s and 1980s were crucial in the development and success of the New Christian Right. Through her analysis of Marabel Morgan's massively successful *Total Woman*, Anti Bryant's anti-gay rights campaign, Beverly LaHaye's founding of Concerned Women for America, and Tammy Faye Bakker's televangelist ministry, Johnson exposes the significant role women leaders assumed in the movement. Johnson also traces their impact through an analysis of Sarah Palin and Michele Bachman's political careers. *This is Our Message* nuances common perceptions of religious leadership and examines how evangelical women were active contributors in national conversations about gender, sex, and the family.

*Participants: Emily Suzanne Johnson (Ball State University)*  
*Lindsey Jackson (Concordia University)*

*LJ: You profile 6 women in your book: Marabel Morgan, Anita Bryant, Beverley LaHaye, Tammy Faye Bakker, Sarah Palin, and Michele Bachmann. What can we learn about the evangelical movement and the Christian right by studying these women, their lives, and the leadership roles they assumed?*

*EJ: What I wanted to do with this book was point out that national women's leadership was an important part of this movement. The New Christian Right was centrally focused on gender and sexuality, but we can't understand the complexities of their approaches to those issues without understanding the ways in which the movement relied fundamentally on women leaders to help support and promote its message. Understanding the role evangelical women's culture and women leaders played in the movement is crucial to understanding*



the movement's approach and history surrounding those issues, which were and continue to be some of the most important things for conservative Christians today.

LJ: *Why haven't these women been viewed as leaders?*

EJ: One of the reasons is internal to the movement, which is that they don't present themselves as leaders in the same way that male leaders do. Because of the gender politics of the movement but also because of their traditional ambivalence about politics, they're much more reluctant to declare themselves as leaders. So it's easy to overlook them in that sense. With the exception of Beverly LaHaye, the women who were active in the 1970s did not assume leadership roles in the way we tend to look for. We see this problem in general with women's history. Women's leadership doesn't get spotted unless women are pastors, rabbis, denominational leaders, or in those traditional leadership roles we look for. We need to look outside these male defined positions and think about leadership in a more holistic way that captures the ways women are leaders in their communities as well.

LJ: *Throughout the book you highlight the tension between traditional gender roles, the "submission" doctrine, and the leadership roles these women assumed, even if they downplayed that leadership. First, can you explain what the submission doctrine is and how they navigated this tension?*

EJ: The idea with the submission doctrine is that the husband is submissive to God, and wives are submissive to their husbands in the same way. The authority of the universe comes down from God to men, and then from men to women. It's a universalizing belief that put men in this grand hierarchy above women. Through the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there's this re-negotiation that moves towards limiting it to the family, talking about it more as mutual submission in the sense that the couple is mutually submissive to God. If there's an argument, only then should the woman cede to her husband, but overall they're in an equal partnership. In fact, Marabel Morgan calls it "adaptation" because she knows people won't like the term submission.

In the 1970s there is this explosion of evangelical women's subculture in things like marriage manuals, inspirational conferences, tapes, books, all of these sorts of things. One of the things that's happening here is we see more of women's authorship, and especially on things related to the family. We see a lot of women writing about submission for the first time. Predominately it's been men who have been defining these theologies before this. On the surface these women are promoting submission, but they are also negotiating it, changing its emphases, changing its boundaries. They emphasize that submission is important but it is only within the family. Women don't have to be submissive everywhere, it's just a matter of your relationship with your husband. And actually, even with your husband, you should try compromise first and only resort to submission when things come to a head and you can't resolve them any other way. They also emphasize that submission has to be a voluntary choice. So there are all these pretty significant tweaks to what submission means that come as women start to be the ones defining it, which is important and paves the way for their leadership in certain ways.

Even as these modifications are taking hold among conservative evangelicals, they're not well understood by the broader community. Most of these women get treated as though they're simply advocating for women's oppression and taking the women's movement back to the Stone Age – you hear that a lot in media coverage of their books. We see that in the scholarly literature where these women are treated as “ironic.” For example, “Isn't it ironic that she is this national figure, but she's telling all these other women to just stay in the home,” which is not a nuanced reading of what they're doing. We see that on a larger scale with Michele Bachman's candidacy in 2012, when a video surfaced of her preaching submission. Many people responded with: “She's running to be president. How can we have a president who's submissive to her husband? Are we actually voting for her or are we voting for her husband?” Again, this response has to do with this misunderstanding of what submission means now within a conservative evangelical context versus what it would seem to mean in a more straightforward way.

*LJ: Many of the women you profile position themselves to varying degrees against feminism. This shifted with Sarah Palin, who embraces what she calls “conservative feminism.” Can you elaborate on the women’s relationships with the feminist movement and in Sarah Palin’s case, what it means to be a “conservative feminist”?*

EJ: In the 1970s, we see a resurgence of the feminist movement. It never fully went away but we see this broad national visibility and influence of the feminist movement building through the 1970s. For a lot of conservative women, feminism in the 1970s seems like something that is counter to the way of life that they prefer for themselves. Marabel Morgan never identifies herself as political; in fact she’s very careful to say that she doesn’t think she’s political. But she still talks about how she feels about the feminist movement at the time, which is focusing on women in the workplace and can tend to be a little dismissive about housewives, which can be alienating for women who want to be housewives. With Beverly LaHaye, who is much more explicitly political, you see that same kind of sentiment expressed in a different way where she says there is this broad-based movement claiming it speaks for all women but it doesn’t speak for her and the only way to oppose it is for conservative women to become politically active and speak up for themselves.

In the past decade or so, conservative women have realized that it’s a losing battle to call themselves anti-feminists; if they keep positioning themselves in opposition to the feminist movement they’ll keep being treated as these ironic or paradoxical figures. Instead, they’ve tried to reclaim the word “feminism.” They accept the idea that feminism is what defines women’s issues so they try to redefine feminism. They’ve especially tried to reclaim the legacies of first-wave feminists like Susan B. Anthony, who they claim were pro-life. They say that’s the real legacy of feminism. Or women being able to vote – that’s the real legacy of feminism. It was the feminists in the 1960s and 1970s that took things too far and Susan B. Anthony would be turning in her grave, according to this view.

When Sarah Palin talks about conservative feminism, she is drawing on the rhetoric of groups like “Feminists for Life.” They call themselves feminists, and what they mean by that is that they’re women, and they see themselves as primarily advocating on behalf of women’s interests, but the major issue for them is abortion. They believe it’s in women’s best interests not to have abortions. They believe that abortion is linked to breast cancer and long-term mental illness. They say the mainstream feminist movement is actually working against women’s interests and the real feminist thing to do is support women carrying their pregnancies to term. Sarah Palin sees herself as a feminist because she is a woman, because she is in a leadership position, because she believes in gender equality, maybe in a different way or in some cases a more limited way than most left-leaning feminists believe in, but she’s comfortable saying that since she thinks men and women should be equal, she’s a feminist.

*LJ: The women differed in their level of involvement in politics. As you mentioned, Marabel Morgan tried to remain politically neutral and others entered the political arena in full force. Why did some choose to remain outside of or engage with politics and how did this choice impact their message or influence?*

*EJ: Part of this is a function of time. Beverley LaHaye started her career a little bit later than Marabel Morgan, for instance. Marabel Morgan’s book *Total Woman* first comes out in 1973 and she isn’t very aware of the feminist movement at this time, according to her. And that’s pretty believable in 1973. Then her book gets taken up as this emblem of everything feminists are fighting against, because she preaches the submission doctrine. Morgan describes being shocked that her book is taken to be this political thing when, she says she just wanted to improve her own marriage and help other women to improve their marriages. If you look back at Marabel Morgan’s book from our perspective in 2019, it looks very political. She tells her readers that they have to have a good marriage to prevent their children from growing up to be gay. That seems very political. But that was a pretty mainstream thing for marriage manuals to say at the time, that one has to perform a particular kind of heterosexuality, otherwise their*

kids will grow up to be juvenile delinquents or homosexuals. This doesn't necessarily strike most heterosexual people as political until the gay rights movement starts to become more visible and more mainstream. Marabel Morgan is emblematic of the way some of the political ideas of the New Christian Right were already percolating in evangelical culture well before people within that culture were thinking of them as political statements. This is part of why we see this massive mobilization in the 1970s – people without seeking out politics started to become aware of these political ideas and these political concerns through things like marriage manuals and inspirational conferences as evangelical subculture grew during this decade.

For Beverley LaHaye, who founded Concerned Women for America in 1979, it made a lot more sense to claim a political identity. But even she started out writing marriage manuals and other books she saw as apolitical. In her case, I think that is more of a strategy. She wants to reach women who are not seeking out politics, who think of themselves as “normal” Americans but feel encroached upon by feminism and by the New Left. She knows that she'll be more successful in reaching them by speaking at women's conferences and through the marriage manuals and nonfiction books they're already consuming. Pretty early on in her career she starts publishing “twinned” books. One book would be very much of the genre of an evangelical women's manual. It would have a soft picture of a woman on the cover and would promise to help you improve your marriage but inside would have very clear political prompts. In the very same year she would publish a book that had a political title and urged women to get involved to stop whatever cultural or social threat is out there. The two books would be almost identical in content and just different in tone. She knew that most women and most evangelicals in the mid- to late 1970s were really reluctant to think about themselves as political. So she knows that she'll be able to reach them through claiming not to be political.

*LJ: Tammy Faye Bakker stands out from the pack in several ways, one major difference being her allyship with the gay community. Would you be able to elaborate on her life and ministry?*

EJ: The seeds of her gay allyship are planted very early on in her life. She grew up in a Pentecostal church that emphasized a personal relationship with God and direct guidance from God. During her childhood, Tammy Faye Bakker was part of a strict Pentecostal church that didn't allow wearing make-up, roller skates, playing cards, jewelry, and a whole list of other things, including divorce. Her mom was divorced and the church treated her really poorly. That's really formative for Tammy Faye Bakker. She says later that she wants a church that emphasizes love and acceptance, and the Bakkers do that in their ministry. They place this emphasis on forgiveness and acceptance and that is really the fundamental center of their ministry. Bakker felt that God had called her to love people, that God had called Christians in general to love people, and even if someone is doing something that you're not so sure about, God will let them know directly if they need to stop and your job as a Christian is to love them. An interesting thing about her is she did one of the first interviews on television--not just on Christian television, but on television in general--with an HIV-positive gay minister in which she admonishes her audience to be more loving and accepting of gay people and of people with AIDS. This is what set the stage for her to have this relationship with the gay community, especially after her husband's sexual and financial misdeeds destroy their ministry. She just didn't see it as her main job to condemn sin, which makes her really different from most of the other leading figures in the New Christian Right and does make her an outlier.

*LJ: I noticed you interviewed Marabel Morgan for the book. What insight did you get from interviewing her that was different from reading her books?*

EJ: Interviewing Marabel Morgan was amazing. Maybe I'm too cynical, but when reading self-help books, I never assume that people are actually living the life they are advocating. She met me at her home wearing a polyester blue pantsuit that perfectly matched the shade of blue in her foyer. She lives in this home that is exactly the home you expect the "Total Woman" to live in. She has floral couches and everything is perfect and immaculate. It was like walking into

the book in a way that I didn't expect at all. Halfway through the interview she stopped and went to the kitchen and got premade fruit salads in chilled glasses that she had made for us. I'm in her home, she's doing me a favor by granting me this interview, and she's done all of these things that are straight out of the book. Interviewing her was helpful in a couple of ways. In one way it made her more of a real person. Even if you spend a really long time with a person's work and getting to know them through historical records, they're still a person on a page. In meeting someone, you get to see something about who a person is in a way that you can't without meeting them. I thought it was really interesting to see the extent to which she really was living out the vision she had set out for herself. Seeing how that was achievable and possible for her made me think about the book in a different way. I think some people who have read *Total Woman* have thought about it as a cynical effort to sell this advice that is impossible and harmful, but for her it really did seem reasonable. It was something she could achieve and so everyone should be able to achieve it and be happy. I'm not less cynical about how achievable that is for everyone but it helped me to better understand her perspective.

LJ: *To end on a broader note, what are you working on now?*

EJ: I'm working on a couple of things now. This year I'm working on an archival project related to the queer history of Muncie, Indiana, which is where I currently live. I'm really excited about it because we're just starting to get into the history of small cities within queer history. There's something really unique about queer communities in small cities so I'm going to be training some students to take oral histories and collect histories of Muncie, which I'm really excited about. My next book is going to be a cultural history of Satanism from the 1920s to the 1980s, thinking about the ways in which Americans think about and evoke Satanism as a way of delimiting what is acceptable and unacceptable and what is and is not religion.