Post-Wobegon politics: Michele Bachmann and the moral recession

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the November 15, 2011 issue

Main Street, Anoka, Minnesota.

Anoka, Minnesota, straddles the tannin-brown Rum River just as it meets the Mississippi, 20 miles north of Minneapolis. Like any place that has traveled the long arc from lumber boomtown to bedroom community, the 17,000-person town exists in layers. It includes stately Victorian frame houses and stolid 19th-century brick storefronts, an abandoned civic amphitheater and a dreary postwar courthouse, downtown antique malls and sprawl-scale convenience stores.

In 1960, Anoka's most famous son graduated from the local high school. Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon is smaller and more isolated than his real-life hometown, but Anoka bears traces of the world of *A Prairie Home Companion.* The network of local institutions and unspoken compacts that Keillor once called "small-town socialism" is still at work, inspiring people to shop at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery rather than seeking out the lower prices, bigger selections and wider aisles of the stores in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

In *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest,* written in 2004, sociologists Philip Barlow and Mark Silk describe the region this way: "The raw profit motive, driven by capitalist efficiency and resting on cultural individualism, was seen by many to be as much of a threat to their chosen way of life as were the gender, racial, and cultural changes of the 1960s." In Anoka, signs from the local Chamber of Commerce

exhorting people to "Shop Anoka First" point to this community sensibility. It's reflected as well in the still-robust presence of the town's denominational churches.

"Common-good moralism," write Barlow and Silk, "emerged in large part from the communalist religious commitments of Lutherans, Catholics, Mennonites, and Amish," whose "emphasis on building a good community and supporting its institutions, rather than a more limited pietist focus on individual salvation," distinguishes "the traditional religious and social conservatism of the rural Midwest."

Fourteen years after Keillor departed for the University of Minnesota, Anoka High bid farewell to Michele Amble, now Congresswoman Michele Bachmann. A former tax lawyer and local education activist, Bachmann has astonished many observers with her political career. Earlier this year she had a brief moment as a frontrunner in the Republican presidential primary and a plausible alternative to Mitt Romney. Her outlandish claims—that the U.S. is becoming a "nation of slaves," that the Obama administration is characterized by open "gangsterism," that the "Hoot-Smalley Tariff" was signed into law by FDR and caused the Great Depression—and Christian-right views have made her easy to typecast as a religious purist driven by resentment and paranoia.

Despite her *Manchurian Candidate* trappings, Bachmann is in fact a politician of a classic midwestern type: an economic and cultural populist who reflects the distinctive hopes and fears of people with roots in a pious, egalitarian small-town past. Whatever else she accomplishes, Bachmann has shown how the modern Republican Party can win the votes of Lake Wobegon and its many expatriates throughout the swing states of the Midwest.

Bachmann represents Minnesota's sixth congressional district, which includes the eastern and northern suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul and a large rural swath to the northwest. Bachmann is originally from Waterloo, Iowa (a fact she has understandably emphasized when campaigning in that first-in-the-nation caucus state), but her family moved to Anoka when she was not yet a teenager. After her parents divorced, she lived in a crowded apartment with her mother, siblings and step-siblings.

Her method of coping with this upheaval seems to have been to participate in virtually every activity the high school offered. Her senior yearbook entry reads like a preemptive refutation of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. The young Amble took

part in student council, student congress, National Honor Society, prom committee, speech club, gymnastics, cheerleading, swimming and at least five plays. She also joined a student prayer circle, which she credits with introducing her to God. ("I came to know him when I was 16," she told a megachurch assembly in 2006, though she'd been a Lutheran all her life.) While this three-year tally is impressive, Anoka High appears to have been a school of joiners. Even the diffident Keillor volunteered for the newspaper, the film operators' club and the Young Republicans.

When I visited Anoka in August, its strong community fabric was on display. Lyric Arts, the town's ambitious theater company, was adding a mural to its building, and the activity was a community event: scores of young people spent part of their Saturday beautifying this local institution. Laura Tahja Johnson, the company's managing director, extolled Anoka's commitment to local theater, even though more commercial stages are easily accessible in the Twin Cities.

"The downtown businesses try to support each other," said Wes Davis, a deli owner who catered the event. "They could have gotten catering anywhere, and probably got it cheaper, but they called us."

When I went to the Saturday evening mass at St. Stephen's Catholic Church, I did not expect to find myself in a large, multigenerational crowd. The 155-year-old parish serves all of Catholic Anoka with a modern campus, a parochial school and, in the bulletin, an extensive directory of sponsoring local businesses. The collect appealed, "Father, help us to seek out those values that will bring us lasting joy in this changing world." I have little doubt that the young priest petitioned in earnest. He preached on the confession of Peter and the giving of the keys. Acknowledging the many faults of the hierarchy over the millennia, he yet reminded the faithful that "God has given absolute authority over spiritual things" to it. I think it was the first time I heard a Catholic priest preach primarily to himself.

There is of course nothing new in searching for certainty amid never-ending change. And there is nothing inherently conservative, in any modern political sense, about building local institutions and practicing economic solidarity with one's neighbors. Some people might hear in small-government politics not the praise of rugged individualism but a belief that the local bonds of reciprocity can and should answer the hazards of economic fortune.

Bachmann left Anoka for college, marriage and eventually the O. W. Coburn School of Law, part of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa. The Coburn Law School (which closed in 1986) aimed to reform U.S. jurisprudence along the lines of Christian nationalism.

In an essay on Bachmann in the *New Yorker,* Ryan Lizza credits the law school with sparking Bachmann's involvement in the homeschooling movement. Education issues were the focus of her first decade in public life. Settling in Stillwater, she became a big fish in the rather small pond of Minnesota evangelical education activism. In her first run for office, in 1999, Bachmann was part of an unsuccessful Christian-right slate for the Stillwater school board. She was back on the ballot the next year and defeated a veteran Republican state senator by arguing that state graduation standards were intrusive and statist.

Her legislative record in the Minnesota Senate is littered with the sorts of enthusiasms that would remain marginal until the emergence of the Tea Party. (Her proposal to require all students to learn about "the principles, character, and world view of America's founders; including . . . our free-market economic system, and patriotism" died repeatedly in committee.) But Bachmann did not spend her six years in the state senate tilting at windmills. Democratic Minnesota House member Mindy Greiling, who worked on education issues with Bachmann, described her as "the most informed person in the room." "She's always been a zealot," Greiling told me, "but she was fun to work with." The graduation standards Bachmann ran against were, in the end, repealed.

Stillwater is not the most obvious place for a Christian-right firebrand to launch a political career. Etched into the hills of the St. Croix River valley northeast of St. Paul, Stillwater is a prosperous and well-tended town of high-end boutiques and lumber-baron houses. Despite being Bachmann's hometown for years, it went heavily for her opponent in the congressional race of 2010.

When the Bachmanns moved to Stillwater, they joined Salem Lutheran Church, which is affiliated with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. When I visited the church, no one seemed interested in talking about Bachmann (who was by then an ex-member) or about the WELS's stated view that the Catholic papacy is the "Antichrist"—a view that, in light of Bachmann's presidential bid, won the WELS a moment of nationwide attention.

Pastor Marcus Birkholtz was genial and eager to tell me about the congregation. He said that like many other congregations, Salem has tried to maintain a liturgical heritage while being flexible about generational differences. WELS is a conservative denomination—as Birkholtz readily acknowledged—but in a way that looks very midwestern and Lutheran.

At worship I was initially seated virtually alone with the senior ladies of the church, but by the time the prelude ended, the sanctuary was full. (The Stillwater churchgoing truce appears to be that the teenage daughters will attend, but only if they are permitted to wear tank tops.) The WELS liturgy takes its doctrine of human depravity without ice or water. "We have disobeyed him and deserve only his wrath and punishment," said the pastor; "I am altogether sinful from birth," we responded. But only a close observer could tell Salem apart from any number of more moderate parishes in the area that belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Even Birkholtz's sermon—on anxiety—left me feeling right at home.

Matt Taibbi, in a memorably aggressive profile in *Rolling Stone,* imagines Bachmann's supporters as religious fanatics. But I did not get the sense that the faithful of Salem Lutheran Church were waiting, as Taibbi put it, for God to tell them which condiments to put on their sandwich.

When the sixth congressional seat opened up in 2006, Bachmann beat two well-established Republican rivals to win the seat and then retained the competitive seat two years later amid the party's worst year in decades.

While her earlier record is hardly short on colorful gestures, Bachmann stepped into her political prime in 2006 with a series of campaign speeches delivered at megachurches. She described her religious awakening, her vision of marrying her husband, her calls to study tax law and get into politics—all in a very un-Lutheran idiom.

"For 34 years, I've been hot!" Bachmann told a crowd at Living Word Christian Center in Minneapolis. "When you are fellowshiping with white-hot believers, [God] turns your life around. . . . He changes the world through hot people!"

These speeches luxuriated in expressions of submission and obedience. She spoke of putting aside her own plans and impulses in favor of God's minutely tailored design. "He who humbles himself wishes to be exalted," Nietzsche wrote, and you can't argue with success. Surrender sells.

Taibbi views Bachmann's 2006 campaign speeches as a window into her soul, and writers of various stripes have sounded the alarm over Bachmann's suggestions of dominionism and theocracy. Her religious rhetoric is surely a canny appeal to a small but important segment of her electoral coalition. As Elwyn Tinklenberg, Bachmann's 2008 opponent, noted, she's been very effective at organizing her evangelical base. But this base is a minority of the district. Most people vote for her "not necessarily because of attachment to her conservative perspectives," Tinklenberg said, but "because she comes off as a maverick."

The maverick style was front and center as Bachmann made the transition to a nationwide candidacy. Her attacks on what she calls unaccountable and unconstrained government have carried over smartly from homeschooling issues to the national financial crises. Bachmann blames the housing bubble and ensuing financial crisis on the Community Reinvestment Act and the loans made to black and Latino home owners under its auspices. She touts her votes against the government bailout of banks and against debt-ceiling increases. She calls for Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's resignation, for the budget to be balanced in one year while taxes are drastically cut, and for Ben Bernanke to be replaced as chairman of the Federal Reserve. Far from being fixated on the parochial issues of the Christian right, Bachmann says that "this election will be fought over economics. And Republicans have a great story to tell."

As Bachmann tells it, that story is a moral one: it's about virtue and vice. Monetary policy is not a matter of setting the money supply so as to maximize employment while maintaining stable prices. Instead, it's a question of whether we will "debase" our currency through Bernanke's fitful attempts at monetary expansion. When it comes to the debt, "we need tough love," as Bachmann said at an August GOP debate. But not all of us. In attacking Obama's health-care reform, she is careful to take the side of Medicare recipients over the needs of younger people.

"The president took a half trillion dollars out of Medicare and shifted it to Obamacare to pay for younger people," she alleged at the first debate. According to a *Wall Street Journal* interviewer, "She talks with almost religious fervor about the virtues of living frugally, working hard and long hours, and avoiding debt. When she was growing up, she recalls admiringly, Iowa dairy farmers worked from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m." These people are not asked to share any of the pain of Bachmann's immense proposed retrenchment.

It is easy enough to object that Bachmann's positions are incoherent—she wants big government for the old, small government for the young, and she favors tax cuts and balanced budgets that impose no cost on any favored groups. At the heart of her personal story is an even stranger inconsistency. From 1992 to 2000, Bachmann and her husband were foster parents to 23 children, a feat that even her most ardent critics grudgingly admire. Foster parenting is where evangelical fervor meets Lutheran do-goodism, where private virtue meets public need. Lizza quotes Bachmann explaining that "God put something in me toward young people that I wanted to make sure the gospel would go out to young people."

Yet even as she touts her role as a foster mother, Bachmann defends her efforts to cut every governmental resource available to children in foster care, from Medicaid to early interventions to food stamps. Bachmann's approach to foster parenting is emblematic of her general appeal: she asserts that individuals and communities can care for their own needs without aid or interference from a faceless and malevolent government. The idiosyncratic version of Christian nationalism that she learned at the O. W. Coburn School of Law doesn't have enough enthusiasts to carry a single Minnesota congressional district. But when Bachmann turns small-government rhetoric into a populist battle for the certitude and solidarity of America's small-town past, people listen.

In 2008, the Bachmanns decamped Stillwater for a big house on a golf course in the sprawl country directly east of St. Paul. Bachmann's residence is finally aligned with her electoral fortunes: her current precinct went for her in a big way in 2010. This southeastern corner of the sixth district, on the boundary between cul-de-sacs and cornfields, was my last stop. I attended the late service at New Life Church in Woodbury.

Karl Marx called religion the heart of a heartless world—and he hadn't even visited Woodbury. Just south and east of the freeway noose encircling Minneapolis-St. Paul, Woodbury is an unfocused grid of arterial roads connecting chain stores, parking lots and crepuscular housing developments. A little over half the seats in New Life's worship space were full. It was the most ethnically diverse church I visited in the sixth district, drawing from the area's South Asian and African immigrant populations. The service featured excellent musical execution and a highly approachable worship format.

The sermon was on a very Lutheran topic: "How do you know if your faith is real?" Yet the answer proved to be anything but Lutheran. Our faith is genuine, the preacher told us, if it bears enough fruit and if we experience joy in it. Lacking any sacrament or words of pardon, the service left an impression of unrelieved striving toward a benevolently disposed but standoffish God. It was as if the cohesion and discipline of the old farm town could be regained through sheer spiritual exertion.

Judging from the sermons and prayers I heard throughout the sixth district, Christians there are not enamored with their own righteousness but rather very conscious of themselves as sinners. They are not blinded by certitude; they are anxious about its absence.

"Faith used to be about thought," Woodbury resident and former ELCA pastor Ralph Olsen told me. He planted a new church in the area 30 years ago, when the town, which now numbers 62,000 people, had only 6,000. "Now the attitude seems to be, 'Just tell me.'"

Karen Allard, a nurse with the University of Minnesota, pointed out that there are BMWs in the high school parking lot these days and a burgeoning drug problem among the city's well-heeled youth. "They have too much money," she says of the kids, "and their parents are working all the time." Perhaps the sixth district's Christian schools—all three churches I visited have schools that dwarf their worship centers—offer worried parents the assurance that the right values will keep their children safe in a dangerous world.

Woodbury's government has tried to create a sense of community by introducing an athletic association and some local festivals. But this city of transplants has not necessarily become a city of neighbors. In fact, said Olsen, in an age of polarized politics and polarized churches, "we're drawing apart. We need both the traditionalist side and the progressive side," he says, "but the edges don't meet."

I asked Tinklenberg, Bachmann's 2008 opponent, about his hometown of Pease, Minnesota, where he served on the student council and performed in the high school production of *Our Town.* It was a generous community, he said, but "within a small border." When his family's house burned down, "the community took care of us. People at school the next year would tell me, 'I used to have that shirt.'" Tinklenberg laments that today people feel "such a disconnect between their lives and a government that feels so big and so impersonal."

Bachmann's moralistic account of the recession may end up as her most enduring contribution to the 2012 campaign. Florida senator Marco Rubio, whom many expect to be the GOP vice presidential nominee, gave a major speech in August lamenting the ways in which social programs have "weakened us as a people." In the old days, Rubio said, "if a neighbor met misfortune, you took care of them." It wasn't the state but "our communities, our families, our homes, and our churches and synagogues" that provided a safety net. In a similar vein, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks scolds Americans for thinking that "government has the power to protect them from the consequences of their sins."

Rubio is voicing an unhistorical nostalgia, and Brooks's comment is at best badly flawed. (What sins, exactly, did first-year teachers who lost their jobs to budget cuts commit?) But these sentiments are appealing, especially in what's left of Lake Wobegon.

In the Midwest, liberals and conservatives have essentially ripped the "small-town socialism" of Lake Wobegon in half. Conservatives champion private virtue, while liberals tout economic solidarity. Politicians thrive by persuading people, most of whom are a generation removed from the small-town qualities they remember or imagine, that the half they hold is, in fact, the whole thing. Once small-town community is weakened or dissolved, voters haunted by its memory are invited to embrace those politicians whose rhetoric mirrors the world they remember. We are invited to vote for those better versions of ourselves who worked all day long, borrowed little, lived frugally and generously, put on no airs, were indifferent to luxury and cared for widows and orphans.

Today, neither Keillor nor Bachmann lives in Anoka. In fact, everyone I interviewed lives somewhere other than where they were born. Small-town Minnesota is a restless place, and so it is susceptible to the promise that despite all the upheavals and transitions, the most valuable things can be rescued and carried along to the new town, the new subdivision, even the new church.

It seems unlikely that voters will propel Michele Bachmann to the White House. But whoever does win is likely to share her ability to speak to midwesterners about what was valuable in the small-town life that they remember.