Why Homeschooling Happened

by Milton Gaither

Teaching children at home is nothing new. Parents, extended family, and tutors have been doing so for ages. What's new is that in recent decades increasing numbers of people have been teaching children at home as a self-conscious act of protest against mainstream society. Homeschooling is now a political movement. How did that happen? How did homeschooling go from being something that was done as a matter of course by thousands of Americans early in our history, to something that was hardly done at all as more and more Americans embraced formal schools, to something that has re-emerged in our time as a powerful educational alternative?

These were the questions I sought to answer in my book *Homeschool: An American History.** One aspect of the story that is particularly worthy of comment is the remarkable fact that in the late 1970s and 1980s many people on both the left and the right of the political spectrum began to advocate and practice homeschooling. Why?

Privacy and the Homeschooling Option

Since the 1980s commentators have been much exercised over the division of the country into warring camps on most social issues. But what such analysis can overlook is the underlying symmetry of vision both camps tend to possess. Since the 1960s Americans on both sides of the political spectrum have been more interested in local community and self-determination than in national identity. The historian David Farber has shown how "calls for a more direct democracy built on local control and community right to self-determination" came in the 1960s "from Black Power activists, Chicano militants, white southerners, and white urban ethnic blocs." Conservative and liberal Americans had radically different private visions of the good life, but they all shared a commitment to private vision: private health clubs and private schools; reduced funding for public libraries and parks; privatized snow removal

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and garbage collection; and an eightfold increase in the number of homeowners' associations making private rules for private communities.[1]

At the same time, virtually everyone—130 million viewers—watched *Roots*, a television miniseries symbolizing the rejection of melting-pot forgetfulness and celebrating particularity. Everyone went casual: blue jeans and T-shirts ceased being a badge of outsider status and symbolized instead an embrace of the informal, the authentic. "Conservative" churches became anything but conservative in their celebration of private, direct experience of God and their appropriation of countercultural music and hairstyles. By the 1980s young Americans on both the left and the right seemed to have largely given up on building a better America, hoping instead to "build alternative institutions and create alternative families—a separate, authentic, parallel universe."[2]

Given this pan-ideological commitment to local, authentic, private life and contempt for establishment liberalism, it is not surprising that members of both the countercultural right and the countercultural left reacted, for different reasons, against the twentieth-century expansion of public education into a near-universal experience. By 1970 80 percent of school-age Americans were graduating from high school, more than double the figure in 1930. During the course of the twentieth century the average number of days in the school year grew from 144 to 178. School districts themselves contracted (from 117,000 districts in 1939 to 41,000 in 1959), a move that made schools less accessible and accountable to their local communities. Homeschooling, like so many of the significant cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, was very largely a reaction against the mass culture of the modern liberal state, a culture realized perhaps most perfectly in the consolidated public school located on metropolitan outskirts amidst the rapidly expanding suburbs.[3]

The Countercultural Left

We could start the story perhaps with the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The nation watched in shock as their televisions displayed vivid images of police brutality and student revolt. Similar scenes played out at colleges and universities around the country, most notably at Kent State University, where four protestors were killed by National Guardsmen. Many a peace activist recoiled in horror from a revolution that had suddenly turned violent.[4]

By 1970 many leftist activists concluded that any real change must come instead from a compelling alternative society. Student protests of the late 1960s with their grand public visions gave way in the 1970s to what Marianne DeKoven has called "utopia limited," as radicals turned toward small-scale communities. Many went "back to the land," and many formed communes, committed like the Pilgrims of early America

to modeling a new society in hopes that the Old World somehow would be won over.[5]

By the early 1970s there were some two thousand rural communes in existence and perhaps as many as five thousand less-organized "collectives." Most were small—one or two dozen people. Some communes practiced open marriage, where all belonged to all, or group marriage, a more limited but still far from monogamous situation. But most colonies that lasted became more or less monogamous in practice even if open to innovation in theory.[6]

With coupling came childbirth. Natural childbirth, home births, midwifery, and breast-feeding underwent a renaissance that eventually spread into the wider society. But as the children got older, complications surfaced. Many of the adults in communes were deeply committed to personal autonomy and opposed to external rules and prohibitions.[7] Many communes believed group parenting would solve this problem. In practice, children learned not only folk art and music, gardening and husbandry, and food preparation, but also drug use, the organizational basis for quite a few communes. Nonetheless, researchers consistently noted positive outcomes from this "inadvertent" sort of education.[8]

Some communes took a more deliberate approach to education. Many viewed schools as the primary means of assimilating children to "the establishment," their mortal foe. Larger communes often started their own schools on the premises, and many turned to homeschooling. As Herb Goldstein of the Downhill Farm in Pennsylvania noted, "Some wanted to homeschool because they wanted their kids to do better than they could if they went to public school."[9]

Though there are some standout exceptions, most hippie communes did not survive the 1980s, for a variety of reasons: drifters, lechers, opportunists, personality conflicts, and limited resources. Although most of the experiments failed, the hippie wing of the anti-mainstream movement continues to have a powerful impact on American culture: organic food, whole grains, aversion to processed and packaged products, concern for the environment, natural childbirth and home birthing, and drug use (despite vigorous government efforts to stop it), not to mention the left-wing critique of public education and preference for a freer, more-natural childhood centered in the home. Most profoundly, the counterculture's revulsion against conformity and longing for individual expression and authenticity have become basic tropes of modern life. We are swimming in advertising slogans such as "obey your thirst" and "have it your way." Individuality is a perennial favorite theme of pop hits from Madonna's "Express Yourself" to Natasha Bedingfield's "Unwritten," and it dominates the moral vision of the cult of self-esteem in educational programming. The countercultural quest for personal fulfillment and individual self-expression is now as mainstream as it gets.[10]

The Countercultural Right

The New Left "hippie" movement was at heart a religious one. LSD trips very often were experienced and described as religious visions of a society of peace and love. The hippies of the 1970s shared with other religious seekers a preference for ecstatic, direct encounters with God over staid liturgy and boring hymnody. In fact, a large number of the "Jesus people" of the late 1960s and 1970s were converts from the countercultural left.[11]

But as hippies became Jesus freaks, American Protestantism itself was transformed in the 1960s and 1970s. Churches that self-identified as conservative were usually quick to throw out traditional forms of worship in exchange for more casual and emotional styles. Nevertheless, conservative religion offered a real God who could be known personally and whose Book offered short, simple answers to everything. Dramatic growth in the conservative, separatist sector spawned a host of alternative cultural institutions that mimicked even as they condemned the cultural mainstream: Christian bookstores (1,400 new stores between 1971

and 1978), romance fiction, radio and television stations, rock concerts and festivals, music awards, theme parks, summer camps. A parallel Christian culture was emerging that allowed "kids to be normal, blue-jean-wearing, music-loving American teenagers without abandoning the faith, . . . to be devout without being nerdy."[12]

At the same time, moral conservatives, shocked and outraged by social change, adopted the techniques of the Left to forward their own agenda. The enemy had suddenly become their own government. For our purposes the most remarkable aspect of postwar right-wing movements is their manner of organizing. Many took the training in home-based activism they received during the Cold War into other venues, especially the Christian pro-family movement.[13]

Home-based organization meant that women participated in these groups on a massive scale. Homemakers and mothers did much of the grassroots organizing and not a little of the actual teaching at conservative meetings. These women were empowered, articulate, and unabashedly conventional. But though their rhetoric was stridently domestic and anti-feminist, their own lives were testimonies to the advances women had been making in education and public life for decades. They organized reading rooms, voter-registration drives, and women's clubs. Many became public speakers, and some ran for office. Rarely did they address these seeming contradictions between their domestic philosophy and public lives head-on, but when they did their words echoed those of first-wave feminists of the late nineteenth century.

In the 1950s the scene of "neatly dressed, well-mannered women" barging into school offices to demand the removal of books deemed too soft on Communism had already become familiar around the country. By the 1960s the crusade expanded to other issues. Conservatives began to rally in opposition to the new focus on social history that paid more attention to the experiences of everyday Americans and less to the Founders and presidents. They were particularly upset over discussions of race and sex that tended to make the United States look bad. They despised the "new math" and whole-language instruction, which they viewed as pedagogically foolish and potentially dangerous, not only because children trained by these methods couldn't read or figure, but especially because such approaches insinuated that reality is not a fixed given to be learned but an open possibility to be constructed by the individual. Conservatives increasingly worried about sex education, life-adjustment curricula, death-and-dying courses, and literature selections about non-Christian religions or occult themes.

While local activism gained conservatives victories in some locales, they rightly discerned that they were losing the battle over control of the nation's public schools. The 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions

outlawing organized school prayer and school-sponsored Bible reading shocked and devastated many conservatives. Coming on the heels of the Court's desegregation decisions, the new rulings simply appalled many conservative Protestants. Alabama Rep. George Andrews spoke for many when he announced on national television that the Supreme Court had "put the Negroes in the schools—now they put God out of the schools."[14]

With minorities in and God out, many conservative Protestants left. But even at this stage homeschooling was not really considered. As the courts pushed to integrate public schools and to rein in the massive resistance to prayer and Bible-reading injunctions, conservatives created alternative schools. Sometimes the mix of religious and racial motives was obvious, as in the wholesale movement of whites into "private" segregation academies in such areas as Prince Edward County, Virginia, and the Mississippi Delta region, often financed by the government through voucher programs or more clandestine means. In the words of a Mississippi Citizens' Council staffer, such schools would preserve an "island of segregation" just as monasteries had "saved the Greek and Roman classics" during the "Dark Ages." By 1968 forty-two segregation academies were receiving tuition vouchers from the state of Mississippi. By 1973, after more-rigorous court enforcement of desegregation, there were 125 such schools, many with enrollments in the thousands.[15]

Other private schools founded during this time were less obviously race based and more clearly driven by religious concerns. Evolution, sex education, the somewhat-vague but alarming notion of "secular humanism," and other factors drove many families away from public education. Many conservatives gave up, at least for the time being, on the idea of transforming the public schools and sought instead "to restore power to local evangelical communities by creating a parallel educational culture." The schools they founded were typically sponsored not by denominational bodies but by local churches or even just a few individuals. Many of them joined a Christian school association that could provide accreditation, professional training, insurance packages, legal assistance in the event of conflict with state authorities, and entry into a network of like-minded schools. By 1973, the largest of these organizations, the Association of Christian Schools International (ASCI), had 308 schools; by 1983, 1,900; and by 2005, 3,957.[16]

Such rapid growth in the private sector is astounding, especially in light of the overall national decline in the number of children during this period and the concomitant decline in enrollment nationwide in all other types of schooling. But in fact the growth of private Christian day schools was even more profound than the figures of the leading umbrella organizations indicate. Many Christian schools founded during the 1970s and 1980s were intentionally unaffiliated with any group and

proudly unaccredited by the state. No one knows how many independent schools were actually formed. One scholar estimated that by 1984 approximately six thousand independent schools were in existence, while another thought the figure was closer to fifteen thousand. Movement advocates placed the number even higher, at perhaps twenty to twenty-five thousand. Whatever the precise figure, it is abundantly clear that a large-scale shift in how conservative Protestants thought about and practiced education took place in those decades. Although most kept their children in public schools, a growing and committed minority agreed with Christian educators such as Kenneth Gangel that "the children of God deserve something better than pagan public education. When we give our sons and daughters to the secular system we invite the values, standards, and errors of a godless culture to penetrate their spirits." By the 1990s some evangelicals argued that the schools were "doing more harm now to the country than any single thing except perhaps the popular media" and that Christians must get out immediately; others maintained that Christians needed to stay in the system to serve as "salt and light" to their non-Christian neighbors.[17]

For some conservative Christians, though, private schools were not the answer. While agreeing with the critique of public education that had led thousands of conservatives into Christian day schools, some parents could not accept that solution. The reasons for dissatisfaction with private schooling varied: some families couldn't afford the tuition; some disagreed with the theology their local school(s) espoused; some had personality conflicts with principals or teachers; some, especially those with special-needs children, felt that private schools couldn't adequately address their children's individual circumstances; some believed that the Bible gave educational responsibility to parents only; and some, especially mothers, simply wanted to spend more time with their children. For any combination of those reasons and doubtless others, some conservative Christian parents began to give homeschooling a try.

The circumstances were right. Many conservatives lived in comfortable suburban homes that could easily accommodate a homeschool. Many housewives were well educated and committed both to their children and to staying at home. Housewives had "formed the backbone" of most pro-family movements. If such women could protest, organize voters, conduct study groups, and lead Bible studies and women's clubs at their churches, could they not teach their own children how to read, write, and cipher? Many decided they could.[18] Furthermore, from the mid-1980s into the 1990s, many independent Christian schools founded "with more enthusiasm than resources and leadership" simply imploded, stranding the few families who patronized them. Homeschooling was a lifesaver for these families. In addition, many school closings were the

consequence, not the cause, of the shift to homeschooling among their clientele. By the mid-1980s homeschooling was increasingly popular among religious conservatives, and thousands of them pulled their children out of Christian day schools to do it.[19]

Many Christian families who experimented with homeschooling in the early 1980s encountered all manner of trouble. Their own churches (especially churches that ran their own schools) often frowned on the practice. Their extended family members often thought they were crazy. Media outlets and especially public school people feared for the safety and futures of homeschooled children. In many states extant laws made the practice either illegal or dubious. The conflicts between families and government were sometimes ugly. *Homeschool* examines in more detail how homeschooling emerged from the underground to win mainstream acceptance. But for now let me draw a few of the themes I've been discussing together to summarize why homeschooling happened.

Why Homeschooling Happened

First, homeschooling happened because the countercultural sensibility became the mainstream American sensibility. As one historian, Bruce Schulman, has put it: "During the Seventies, the forces of God and the forces of Mammon refused to show deference to established leaders and institutions." Having rejected the mainstream, denizens of both left and right looked for personal fulfillment within small, alternative communities. The social and political changes of the second half of the twentieth century made bedfellows of both radical leftists who wanted nothing to do with conventional America and conventional Americans who wanted nothing to do with a country that in their view had sold out to the radical left. This anti-institutionalism led some on the right to reject not only public schools but Christian schools as well. Some even rejected organized churches altogether, claiming a New Testament mandate for establishing informal "house churches." As one teen baldly put it, "I love God . . . but hate the church."[20]

Second, homeschooling happened because of suburbanization. The suburbs' deracinated and media-saturated environs incubated the alienation that led so many young people to challenge the system by leaving it, founding communes, and pioneering homeschooling. Suburbanization facilitated segregation by race, income level, age, number of children, and cultural style, thus feeding the American hunger for privacy. Though built and sustained largely by government, suburbia was a breeding ground for libertarian sentiment and anti-government activism. It gave homemaking women a set of causes to champion and a base from which to operate their campaigns. And not least, it provided some of these women with the physical space they would need to teach their kids.[21]

Third, homeschooling happened because of the American cult of the child. The progressive left had long harbored romantic ideals of child nature, born of Rousseau and cultivated in the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century. Countercultural leftists inherited this outlook, and when they had children their instinct was to liberate the kids from what they took to be the deadening effects of institutionalization by keeping them at home. The countercultural right, despite ostensibly conservative and biblical theological commitments, shared basically the same view. American Protestantism has long had difficulty preaching and maintaining the doctrine of original sin. Successive waves of revival have bequeathed a deeply ingrained belief in the freedom of each person to choose whether to follow Christ instead of the fatalistic notion of the will in bondage to sin. If asked, many conservative Christians will say they believe in original sin, but at the deepest level they tend to think of their children as precious gifts of God, full of potential, not as vipers. Just as conservatives have adapted to the culture's commercialism, its backbeat rhythms and glossy self-help style, so they have embraced the romantic cult of the child. Mitchell Stevens, a sociologist, concluded after years of careful study of conservative homeschoolers that their core belief about children is that "deep inside each of us is an essential, inviolable self, a little person distinctive from all others." The words of a well-loved Christian song perfectly capture this very mainstream idea:

> I am a promise, I am a possibility,
> I am a promise with a capital "P"
> I am a great big bundle of potentiality.
> And I am learnin' to hear God's voice
> And I am tryin' to make the right choices
> I'm a promise to be
> Anything God wants me to be.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the "decade of nightmares" about prowling sexual predators, child-molesting teachers, debauched youth culture, and occult brain-washing, many parents sought shelter in the safety of the home to nourish the promise of their children.[22]

Finally, to end where we began, homeschooling happened because of changes both in public schooling and in families during the second half of the twentieth century. As public schools grew larger, more bureaucratic and impersonal, less responsive to parents and less adaptable to individual or local cultural variations, many families felt increasingly alienated. The loss of a discernibly Christian school culture; courses on subjects some parents found offensive; curricula that undermined home values; exposure to children of other races, religions, and family

structures; and many other factors only added to this alienation. Many parents began to connect changes in school culture with broader changes in American families such as the dramatic increase in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, abortion, single-parent homes, and calls for gay rights. Fearing for their own children's futures, parents pulled out. For some of them, ostensibly Christian schools presented similar problems—carousing students, inflexible administration, and objectionable curriculum, not to mention the cost.[23]

Given the context sketched above, the emergence of the homeschooling movement in the late 1970s and 1980s begins to make sense. But context alone did not create the movement. It was born in the dedicated work of thousands of activists, most of them women. While we cannot include their stories in this brief article, it must be noted in closing that apart from the efforts of such individuals and the organizations they created and sustained, homeschooling would not have happened.

Notes

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13. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 105–117; Jonathan M. Schoenwald, "We Are an Action Group: The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement in the 1960s," in *Conservative Sixties*, ed. Farber and Roche, 31–36.

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