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Homeschooling and religious fundamentalism

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Abstract

This article considers the relationship between homeschooling and religious fundamentalism by focusing on their intersection in the philosophies and practices of conservative Christian homeschoolers in the United States. Homeschooling provides an ideal educational setting to support several core fundamentalist principles: resistance to contemporary culture; suspicion of institutional authority and professional expertise; parental control and centrality of the family; and interweaving of faith and academics. It is important to recognize, however, that fundamentalism exists on a continuum; conservative religious homeschoolers resist liberal democratic values to varying degrees, and efforts to foster dialogue and accommodation with religious homeschoolers can ultimately help strengthen the broader civic fabric.

Keywords: home education, homeschooling, Christian fundamentalism.

Introduction

Seventy years before the rise of modern homeschooling, British poet and critic Edmund Gosse published a memoir titled *Father and Son*, in which he reflected on the stifling isolation of his childhood, educated at home by his religiously conservative Plymouth Brethren father. Gosse described himself as "a bird fluttering in the net-work of my Father's will, and incapable of the smallest independent action" (1907, p. 232). Images of religiously-inspired oppression such as this have dominated public perceptions of homeschooling until only recently, when it became apparent that homeschoolers are an

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increasingly diverse group, running the gamut of pedagogical philosophy and methods.

Nevertheless, religious conservatives likely remain the largest subset of homeschoolers, at least in the United States. The relative freedom and flexibility of homeschooling allows parents to craft an educational environment that reflects their values and priorities, and religious conservatives find such an option particularly appealing. This essay explores the relationship between homeschooling and religious fundamentalism, and suggests four ways in which homeschooling provides an educational setting especially conducive to reinforcing core fundamentalist principles.

The point of such a comparison, however, is not to imply that homeschooling inherently fosters religious fundamentalism. The structural flexibility of homeschooling, and the space it provides both literally and ideologically, lends itself to countercultural movements of all kinds. For instance, it also supports a socially progressive critique, which is where the modern homeschooling movement gained early inspiration, in the writings of John Holt (Gaither, 2008).

Nor do I mean to imply that all religious conservative homeschooling echoes these four themes in full. In fact, as my research suggests, the internal diversity of religious conservative homeschoolers may provide important opportunities for civic conversation across ideological differences (Kunzman, 2009). Understanding—and appreciating, even while perhaps disagreeing with—the motivations and perspectives of homeschoolers is a vital step in respectful civic engagement in a pluralistic society.

The origins and nature of fundamentalism

While fundamentalism holds a variety of meanings today, it has a very specific historical origin. The term fundamentalist first emerged from early twentieth century America, when conservative Christians published a 12-volume series of books entitled *The Fundamentals*, which sought to provide a wide-ranging assertion of orthodox Christian belief against liberal Protestantism and an increasingly modernist culture. One particular target of the fundamentalists was Darwinian evolution and its teaching in public schools. This struggle peaked in 1925, with the Scopes "Monkey" trial dealing a powerful public relations blow to anti-evolutionists. Fundamentalists became marginalized outsiders, retreating to their own local communities and largely beyond the national consciousness (Marsden, 1980; Smith, 1998).

Until the 1940s, the terms evangelical and fundamentalist were largely synonymous in American society. Disagreements began to arise among conservative Christians, however, over what kind of relationship they should have with the broader culture. As Nancy Ammerman (1991) explains, fundamentalists emphasized separation over engagement and issued a "resounding condemnation of compromise," asserting that "getting

along was no virtue and that active opposition to liberalism, secularism, and communism was to be pursued" (pp. 14, 4).

Fundamentalists had become cultural outsiders, but the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s sparked the beginnings of a new movement, a growing disenchantment and sense of activism that culminated in the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979. Fundamentalists had made effective use of popular media since the days of the printing press and the advent of radio, and now turned enthusiastically to television as well, both to attract followers and communicate their sociopolitical agenda to the outside world (Almond, Sivan, & Appleby, 1991; Ammerman, 1991).

Conservative Christians, as the original fundamentalists, have certainly made their presence felt in American culture, but fundamentalism obviously exists and thrives in many religions today across the globe.[1] At its core, religious fundamentalism pushes back against what it perceives as an increasingly secular culture, striving to remain separate from that culture while seeking to restore religion to its rightful, central place in society.

Intersections of homeschooling and fundamentalism

Quantitative research on homeschooling offers a patchwork of estimates and small-scale studies. In the United States, data collection is limited by widely varying state regulations; nearly a quarter of states don't even know how many homeschoolers there are within their borders. Because of these uncertainties about total numbers, details about demographics subsets, including religion, are largely guesswork. The best estimates we have about homeschoolers across the United States come from the National Center for Education Statistics, which conducts a survey every four years on American households.[2] In the 2007 NCES survey, respondents who homeschooled their children were asked about their reasons for doing so, and 83% pointed to providing "religious or moral instruction" (Planty et al., 2008, p. 135). Certainly not all of these respondents were Christians, much less fundamentalist in orientation, but it helps lend credence to the generally accepted notion that conservative Christians comprise the largest subset of homeschoolers in the United States.

What is beyond dispute, however, is the disproportionate influence that conservative Christians have had on public policy and public perceptions of homeschooling. This is due in large part to the activity and influence of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), which

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[1] Nor is fundamentalism limited to religious perspectives. As Almond, Sivan, & Appleby (1991) point out, "Religion is not the only matrix out of which fundamentalism like movements emerge. Race, language, and culture may also serve as the bases of revivalism and militance" (p. 404).

[2] Given their general reluctance to provide information to government agencies, it seems likely that homeschoolers are underrepresented in this study (see, for example, Kaseman & Kaseman, 1991).

identifies itself as a Christian organization and whose 85,000 members (and a quarter of a million children) form the largest homeschool advocacy group in the world. HSLDA has been particularly effective at monitoring the regulatory climate surrounding homeschooling (both in the United States and abroad) and advocating for reduced requirements and state oversight.

While still dwarfed by conservative Christians in absolute numbers, Muslim-Americans claim to be among the fastest growing subsets of homeschoolers in the United States. Other religious homeschoolers include Mormons, Jews, Catholics, and Seventh Day Adventists, to name just a few.

Most of the research on religious homeschooling, including my own, doesn't attempt to distinguish fundamentalists from the broader category of religious conservatives, in part because such distinctions are imprecise, even within single Christian denominations. It seems more useful to conceive of fundamentalism as existing on a continuum of sorts, with varying levels of rejection, resistance, compromise, and accommodation toward the broader culture, depending upon the particular issue. With this "family resemblance" approach to description in mind, I suggest four ways in which the uniqueness of the homeschooling educational context can offer support for core commitments of religious fundamentalism. Some of these intersections, such as parental authority over education, are core commitments of homeschooling as well. Other aspects, such as the interweaving of academics and religion, are simply options that homeschooling's flexibility allows.

Resistance to Contemporary Culture

Religious fundamentalists, write Marty and Appleby (1991), "no longer perceive themselves as reeling under the corrosive effects of secular life. On the contrary, they perceive themselves as fighting back, and doing so rather successfully" (p. ix). Homeschooling their children is a potent way that fundamentalists can resist secular culture; the philosophical and pedagogical flexibility of homeschooling provides the opportunity to instill values and beliefs while reducing the power and presence of the broader culture around them.

In his study of American evangelical culture, sociologist Christian Smith (1998) suggests that, rather than being weakened by modern pluralistic society, religious conservatives actually gain strength through their ongoing conflicts with this wide diversity of ethical values. Homeschooling not only provides a private realm for parents to instill their vision of the good life, but the very act of homeschooling serves as an assertion of a conservative religious identity (Liao, 2006).

One element of cultural resistance common to religious fundamentalists is their endorsement of stratified gender roles. On the surface, at least, conservative Christian homeschooling promotes traditional gender roles as well (Kunzman, 2009; Stevens, 2001), prompting criticism and concern from many observers (Joyce, 2009; Nemer, 2004; Yuracko,

2008). But other scholars have suggested that, in practice, women as homeschool mothers wield significant influence. While these mothers would certainly point to the tremendous influence they have on the growth of their children as their most important contribution, women have also been prime movers in political organizing and advocacy in regards to homeschooling (Gaither, 2009; Stevens, 2001).

The issue of homeschoolers' political and civic engagement remains a central concern of some observers (Balmer, 2007; Reich, 2002; Lubienski, 2000). Contrary to the typical view of homeschoolers as isolated from the public square, however, research suggests that religious school and homeschool families (at least in the United States) are consistently *more* involved in civic activities than families with children in public schools (Smith & Sikkink, 1999).[3] Significantly, many citizens learn the skills and practices of engaged citizenship through their religious institutions and affiliations (Weithman, 2006).

But the heart of the argument isn't simply about civic participation, but rather what *kind* of participation. I spent several years following a civic education program run by HSLDA, called Generation Joshua. With its mission to "take back America for God," GenJ offers a rich array of educational opportunities for Christian adolescent youth, ranging from online discussions and formal curricula to spearheading voter registration drives and direct campaigning for politically conservative candidates. Based on my ten years of teaching public high school English and social studies, it was clear that these students were far more informed and involved in the civic realm than the average public school student. But the adversarial nature of their approach, and the way it seemed to inhibit respectful engagement with opposing perspectives, raises challenging questions about what it means to educate for civic *virtue*—and who gets to decide what qualifies as virtuous (Kunzman, 2009).

Suspicion of Institutional Authority and Professional Expertise

As part of their resistance to the broader surrounding culture, religious fundamentalists are especially wary of government institutions and the notion of professional expertise. Conservative Christians in early twentieth century America saw themselves as cultural insiders and the state as a means by which to bring transgressors against cultural norms back into line. But when these norms began to shift in the 1960s, religious conservatives began to see the government, its courts, and its schools as the enemy, one committed to the evils of secular humanism (Ammerman, 1991; Gaither, 2008).[4]

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[3] This held true even controlling for differences in education, income, age, race, family structure, region, and the number of hours per week that parents work.

[4] Homeschoolers' view toward government appears to be more varied in Europe. Beck (2006), for example, suggests the religious homeschoolers in Norway generally do not share this inherent suspicion of government and its institutions. Certainly the general populace

This negative attitude toward authority and expertise resonates with most homeschoolers as well, liberal or conservative (Apple, 2005; Moss, 1995). Public schools are frequently portrayed as sites of indoctrination, somewhere between an inadvertent fostering of unreflective consumerism and a full-blown Satanic conspiracy. Many homeschoolers use the term "government schools" rather than "public schools," to emphasize control by the state instead of we-the-public.

Another form of fundamentalist and homeschooler resistance to authority is directed toward "experts," particularly those who work with children: teachers, administrators, health care providers, and social workers especially. This isn't necessarily an outright rejection of expertise; most of the homeschoolers I speak with, for example, recognize the daunting task that institutional schoolteachers face in classrooms of twenty or more students. But they are unwilling to concede that someone else would be better qualified to teach their own children. "I'm not a teacher in the sense of being prepared to teach large groups of strangers," one homeschool mother told me. "But there is *nobody* who teach my kids better than I can" (Kunzman, 2009, p. 210).

Fundamentalist suspicion of centralized human authority has a theological side to it as well, with fundamentalists often claiming that "the only biblical form of church organization is the local body" (Ammerman, 1991, p. 30). The growth of "house churches" (small groups of families meeting in someone's home) among both fundamentalists and homeschoolers serves as a parallel to their commitment to bringing formal schooling back to the home as well (Gaither, 2008; McDannell, 1995).

Parental Control and Centrality of the Family

While both homeschoolers and fundamentalists cast a suspicious eye toward experts and their institutions, the ultimate site of resistance to contemporary culture is the family. At the heart of the Christian fundamentalist surge into American politics in the late 1970s was the idea that the "traditional" family, the most basic unit of society, must be protected against the onslaught of modern culture.

This emphasis resonates with *the* central conviction of most homeschoolers as well—that parents should have authority over the education of their children, with little or no state regulation (Carper & Ray, 2002; Kunzman, 2009; Martinez, 2009; Moss, 1995; Van Galen, 1987). Interestingly, this core homeschooling conviction appears to be one of the

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in Europe holds less of a libertarian, anti-state perspective than is evident in the United States. In the Swedish context, for instance, Villalba (2009) describes the widely affirmed concept of *insyn*, whereby the state ensures that all citizens receive a roughly similar education. The recent case of a German homeschool family who sought and received political asylum in the United States provides a comparative example; the U.S. immigration judge who granted their request reportedly described the German prohibition on homeschooling as "repellent to everything we believe as Americans" (Robertson, p. A12).

few instances—in American politics, at least—where the far Left and far Right find common ground. It's an uncomfortable alliance, to be sure, with the broader political activity of HSLDA frequently infuriating liberal homeschoolers, but they are willing to join forces when they perceive the state is attempting to usurp their educational authority as parents.[5]

For conservative Christian homeschoolers, the education of their children is a God-given right and responsibility, and one they can delegate only at great moral and spiritual peril. Homeschooling is a shaping not only of intellect but—even more crucially—of character. This means more than just moral choices of right and wrong; character is developed through the inculcation of an overarching Christian worldview that guides those moral choices.

While all good parents strive to protect their children in a variety of ways, conservative Christians see much of contemporary culture as an assault on the values they seek to impart to their children (Apple, 2005; McDannell, 1995; Stevens, 2001). Mothers, in particular, strive to be deeply engaged in the day-to-day lives of their children (Lois, 2009). These parents share a fierce determination to instill Christian character in their children, a process that entails protecting them from the corrupting influences of broader society. As one homeschool mother remarked, "Why would you want to send your child away for the majority of the day and let someone else's ideas and personality be placed in your child every day? *I'm* her parent. God gave her to *me* to form and to raise, so I feel that's my responsibility" (Kunzman, 2009, p.180). The family serves as the defensive bulwark and sanctuary wherein children are prepared for eventual engagement with the world (Valle, 1998; Van Galen, 1987).

Interweaving of Academic and Religious

One obvious way in which religious parents use homeschooling to shape their children's character is by using curricula infused with their faith convictions. For religious conservatives, the intellectual life only finds meaning when it aligns with religious truth. In the eyes of fundamentalists, the sanctity of sacred scriptures trumps all human sources of knowledge and understanding. For conservative Christian homeschoolers, this means that "if it doesn't line up with the Word, throw it out" (Cizek, 1994; Kunzman, 2009; McDannell 1995; Valle, 1998).

The curricula that are generally most popular with conservative Christian homeschoolers—Bob Jones, A Beka, Sonlight, Alpha Omega, Classical Christian, to name a few—seek to integrate faith and intellect, whether by detailing the congruence between scientific research and

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[5] Ironically, HSLDA's focus on protecting parents' rights also generates perhaps the greatest friction between liberal and conservative homeschoolers. HSLDA believes that anything threatening to the "traditional family"—gay marriage, for instance—ultimately endangers the parents' traditional right to control the education of their children, and thus actively oppose legislation legalizing gay marriage.

religious doctrine, using literature to illustrate scriptural truths, or simply providing illustrations and examples with religious content. As A Beka notes on its website, "The most original source is always the Word of God, the only foundation for true scholarship in any area of human endeavor." One of its history textbooks affirms, "Students will learn to recognize the hand of God in history and to appreciate the influence of Christianity in government, economics, and society." Another publishing company's science textbook includes "Evolution Stumpers," which question evidence such as the fossil record and examples of random mutation. For most of these conservative Christian homeschooling texts, it is not a simple case of adding or subtracting information from what a public school student might encounter. Instead, it is a reframing of the entire subject; given this radical departure from mainstream publishers, it is perhaps not surprising that estimates put the homeschool curriculum market as approaching one billion dollars a year in sales in the United States alone.

At the heart of religious fundamentalists' desire to select and direct curricular experiences is the conviction that absolute moral and religious truths do exist, and are accessible to the faithful. This is not to say, however, that fundamentalists are of one accord about the content of those truths. The diversity of belief even among religious fundamentalists of the same tradition, and the resulting arguments and church splits, populate the historical record (Stevens, 2001). The more stridently beliefs are held, it seems, the more likely that internal divisions will arise as both sides are certain they are correct.[6]

Sustaining the civic conversation

Homeschooling offers religious fundamentalists a potent means to resist the encroachment of secular culture on their families. The philosophical and pedagogical flexibility of homeschooling provides an educational environment especially suitable for parents to cultivate a particular set of values and commitments in their children. In writing about the American fundamentalist context, Ammerman (1991) underscores what is at stake: "Fundamentalists are convinced that America must have a pro-religion culture, one in which they have a stronger voice in shaping the values and images that guide society. Theirs is an ideological battle for control of the way America will view its past and its future" (p. 47). Education is a primary site of this struggle to determine *who* passes on *what* messages about what should matter to us and why.

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[6] In her thoughtful exploration of the Quiverfull movement (populated by Christian fundamentalist homeschoolers), Kathryn Joyce (2009) expresses alarm at Reconstructionist theology, which advocates a return to Old Testament law, including stoning to death of homosexuals and habitually disobedient children. Not surprisingly, she is not alone in her dismay. But Reconstructionists have already suffered numerous splits and dissolutions, and there is little reason to think this pattern won't continue.

To many of those outside such religious traditions, however, such a dynamic appears problematic, even threatening. On one hand, if the Ammerman quote were instead about liberal progressives striving for a stronger voice in shaping the values and images that guide society, it might be seen as just part of the agonistic democratic political process. On the other hand, when citizens—religious fundamentalists or anyone else—approach the political process with a self-righteous zeal that abides neither compromise nor accommodation, then it's easy to see why others view them as a threat to liberal democracy. When fundamentalist resistance includes an unwillingness to distinguish between the infallible certainty of their religious world and the ethical pluralism of the public square, when their ultimate goal is to transform that public square into a mirror image of their belief system, then conversation may be next to impossible.

But this hardly describes all religious conservatives, or even all fundamentalists. The label of religious fundamentalist—like most labels—often obscures more than it reveals. Fundamentalism exists on a continuum, and conservative religious homeschoolers resist liberal democratic values to varying degrees. With this in mind, then, liberal democratic states should avoid viewing conservative religious homeschooling as simply an enemy to be resisted or silenced. Seeking possibilities for compromise and accommodation, providing space and opportunity for religious conservatives to enter into dialogue without demanding they leave behind their deeply held identities—these are the difficult steps that may help strengthen the broader civic fabric.

Furthermore, when we raise concerns about the lack of ethical pluralism in the fundamentalist homeschooling context, it's worth considering how much ethical diversity our public schools provide. Do they encourage the questioning of received wisdom, interrogation of popular culture, and room for diversity of beliefs—even those of religious conservatives? Granted, there are limits to what ideas and expression are tolerable in a liberal democracy (Blacker, 1998), but if religious conservatives perceive public schools as so inhospitable toward their values, priorities, and beliefs as to push them into homeschooling, we have missed a key opportunity for dialogue across difference.

Even encouraging homeschool students to enroll part time in selected classes can get them involved in the life of the school and broader community in important ways. Some fundamentalist homeschoolers charge that such an approach is an attempt to defuse their resistance and liberalize their children. I would see it instead as an attempt to include religious conservatives in a civic conversation about how to live together despite our ethical differences.[7]

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[7] Much of this concluding discussion has focused on what is best for liberal democracy as a whole. But it's also worth considering that for some children of religious fundamentalists, having the option to homeschool might even be better than the alternative. In 2008, *The*

Homeschooling is typically conceived of as a distinct educational practice that takes place in the home or private associations. But as we move into a new decade, the increasing hybridization of schooling and the blurring of lines between public and private are becoming prominent themes (Gaither, 2009). What exactly is public—beyond the funding source—when a student spends her days at home in front of the computer, but enrolled in a public virtual high school? The role of technology and distance education will almost surely re-shape the nature of schooling, and indeed the process is already underway. One possible civic benefit, for homeschoolers and everyone else, may be the opportunity for increased communication between members of society with diverse perspectives and beliefs.

But distance learning and online communication can also foster greater connection between like-minded citizens as well, for better or worse. The example of the Generation Joshua described earlier illustrates this. As one participant remarked, "I've found a place where people agree with my political views, and they are willing to stand up for them! It's great!" But there's an inevitable tension between cultivating a powerful group identity while still preserving room for ideological diversity, or at least the room to question dogma and consider alternative perspectives. On the whole, Generation Joshua seems a good example of what political theorist Cass Sunstein (2007) describes as 'ideological amplification'': like-minded group members pushing one another toward more extreme versions of their already-held beliefs.

Stereotypes of religious homeschooling often involve parents creating brainwashed automatons, unable to think for themselves and either sequestered from society or determined to impose their worldview on others. But consider what it means to homeschool, whether religiously motivated or not, in a society where at least 95 percent of the population does otherwise (and far more in Europe). By virtue of their freedom to shape their child's education in almost any way they choose, homeschoolers are pushed to grapple with several vital and profound questions: What are the central purposes of education? What kind of person do I want my child to become? How can I make their learning experience the best it can be? One might argue that the rest of us, and the schools we support and send our children to, neglect such fundamental questions far too much. A persistent conversation about the values that inform such schooling, and an ongoing consideration of how it can invite and involve as much of the public as possible, remains a vital civic task.

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New York Times profiled the growing Muslim homeschooler population in a rural California town. Certainly, the girls of these South Asian immigrant families experience significant social isolation while being homeschooled. But before homeschooling became a legitimate option for them, the girls were instead shipped back to their South Asian villages to be married when they reached adolescence (MacFarquhar).

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