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Why Homeschooling Happened

Milton Gaither

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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 this 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*, to be published in the summer of 2008. I cannot here relate the entire story, but one aspect of the story that is particularly worthy of comment is the remarkable fact that in the late 1970s and 1980s homeschooling began to be advocated for and practiced by many people on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Why?

Privacy and the Homeschooling Option

Without question one of the most significant developments in recent American social life is the fragmentation of much of the population into two factions. Call it what you will: conservative and liberal, right and left, red and blue. Since the 1980s commentators have been much exercised over the division of the country into warring camps on most social issues. But what is often missed in such an analysis is the underlying symmetry of vision both camps tend to possess. The cultural left and right

may argue incessantly, but they speak the same language, share a similar set of background beliefs. 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. 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 emerged to replace public recreation and education among all sorts—civil rights activists and white segregationists alike. In the early 1980s California conservatives closed public restrooms and slashed funding for public libraries and parks. Massachusetts liberals privatized snow removal and garbage collection at the same time. In 1970 there were 7,000 homeowners’ associations making private rules for private communities. By 1980 there were 60,000. Entrepreneurial initiative was championed by Sunbelt conservatives and black power advocates. Everyone watched *Roots* (130 million viewers), a show 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 were anything but conservative in their celebration of private, direct experience of God and their appropriation of counter-cultural music and hairstyles. Everybody waxed apocalyptic, whether they were Christians discerning Antichrist’s imminent arrival in the latest headlines or hippies predicting an environmental holocaust. Both groups saw themselves as the small faithful remnant surrounded on all sides by the

forces of darkness. By the 1980s young Americans on both the left and the right had largely given up on building a better America, hoping instead to “build alternative institutions and create alternative families—a separate, authentic, parallel universe.”¹

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 began to practice and advocate for homeschooling. Both were reacting, for different reasons, against the twentieth century expansion of public education into a near universal experience. In 1930 just under half of children between ages fourteen and sixteen were in school. By 1970 eighty percent of school-age Americans were graduating from high school. During the course of the twentieth century the average number of days in the school year grew from 144 to 178. Even as enrollments soared and the school year was extended, 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 other 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.²

The Countercultural Left

We could start the story perhaps with the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Thousands of young radicals had flocked there to protest the Vietnam War, and Mayor Richard Daley had commissioned 25,000 law enforcement officers to control the crowds. For a week the two sides co-existed in a tense but stable situation. But on

Nomination Day, 15,000 protesters moved into downtown Grant Park for a rally sponsored by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. For some reason the police suddenly snapped and began indiscriminately beating, clubbing, gassing, and arresting protesters, many of whom fought back as the battle moved toward Michigan Avenue. The nation watched in shock as their televisions broadcast vivid images of police brutality and student revolt. Similar scenes were 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.³

By 1970 a sense of despair and powerlessness had gripped many leftist activists. Years of protest had failed to stop the Vietnam War. Many came to doubt the very possibility of a political solution, concluding 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 old, to modeling a new society in hopes that the old world somehow would be won over.⁴

In contrast to the synthetic fabrics, day glo colors, and plastic dreams of 1960s protest movements, the cultural left in the 1970s was earth-toned and organic. “We’re learning self-sufficiency and rediscovering old technologies that are not destructive to themselves and the land,” one communard explained. By the early 1970s there were some 2000 rural communes in existence and perhaps as many as 5000 less organized “collectives,” ranging from urban villages to more informal “crash pads” where anyone

was welcome to a couch or space on the floor. Some communes were located in abandoned towns, others out in the woods (sometimes on public land). Most were small—one or two dozen people. But there were enough of them to sponsor an underground economy mediated by the *Whole Earth* catalog, which taught readers how to build a house, raise animals, and grow crops even as it sold them the products they would need to do so. They were inspired and instructed as well by *Mother Earth News*, which enjoyed a circulation of 400,000 at its peak in 1978. Though the rhetoric was profoundly counter-cultural, the agrarian and do-it-yourself spirit pervading this movement was classic populist Americana.⁵

Family was a major concern of many communes. Several even had the term in their name: the California “Lynch Family,” the New Mexico “Chosen Family,” the New York “Family.” Given the commitments of so many of these groups to counter-cultural lifestyles, there was quite a bit of experimentation with family style. Some communes practiced open marriage, where all belonged to all, or group marriage, a more limited but still far from monogamous situation. Some tried alternating partners on a regular schedule. One commune had three males mate with a woman during her fertile time so that no sense of private ownership of a child would emerge. But very quickly close communal living and the hard work of staying housed and fed put a damper on sexual license and experimentation. Most colonies that lasted became more or less monogamous in practice even if they remained open to innovation in theory.⁶

With coupling came childbirth. Many communes saw natural childbirth as the quintessential statement of their philosophy of getting back to nature and dispensing with the military-industrial complex. Some developed elaborate rituals and celebrations

around the birth event. More than a few communes were landscaped with trees planted in honor of a new child, fertilized by the afterbirth. Communes became nurseries for a new wave of midwifery as necessity bred expertise. The modern day home birth movement owes a good deal of its success to the work of some of these communes, perhaps most notably The Farm in Tennessee. Once born, commune children were typically parented very permissively, according to a philosophy often called “attachment parenting.” One research team studying several communes noted that children “almost never leave their mother,” being breastfed as often and as long as they desired it. But as the children got older, complications surfaced. Many of the adults in communes were deeply committed to personal autonomy and against external rules and prohibitions. As one researcher noted, “many hippies, including communal mothers, tend to regard their lives as unsettled, their futures uncertain, and are generally unwilling to sacrifice their own personal questings (for meaning, identity, transcendence, etc.) to full-time devotion to child rearing.” One mother put the dilemma well, “What I wanted was a *baby*; but a *kid*, that’s something else.”⁷

Communes came up with varied approaches to this problem. Many of them believed in group parenting in theory. In practice, however, this often meant very little parenting at all. For many, children were merely accepted as miniature adults and given full entry into the life of the commune. Thus they learned by imitation, participating in folk art and music, gardening and husbandry, food preparation, and of course drugs. Drugs formed the organizational basis for quite a few communes. Marijuana was prized for its association with the “peaceful, easy feeling” and LSD for its promotion of powerful spiritual experiences that led many to a sense of clarity about life’s simplicity.

Researchers found that children “were exposed to drug experiences at an early age. The feeling was not that they should be deliberately given drugs but if they expressed interest or curiosity in having a drug experience then they were allowed to participate.” Though the license given children in many communes startled researchers, they consistently noted positive outcomes from this “inadvertent” sort of education. One group found that the teen-aged children they witnessed seemed not to experience anything like “adolescence.” Others noted the consistent maturity, self-confidence, ease around adults, and independent spirit of the youth they met. One research team, a married couple with children of their own, concluded after several months of studying many communes:

While we began the book with the suspicion that a hippie child is a wild child, we ended up believing that well-behaved children are the most radical alternative to American society. The farther away from regular families and cities and careers that we get, the less obnoxious and self-centered the kids get.”

Though the pair did not like the communes they visited, they were amazed at the positive change in their own children that resulted from the exposure to alternative living. “It is a little like seeing the miracle and then turning down the religion,” they said.⁸

Some communes were more deliberate in their approach to education. Many began with a philosophical antagonism to public education. One communitarian expressed it clearly, “suddenly I saw all the bulls__t in the whole educational and social system....The problem with our schools is that they are turning out robots to keep the social system going.” 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.” Stacia Dunham’s childhood illustrates what this better education might look like. Her father had sold his Southern California jewelry business in 1974 to take his family back to the land. They bought an old farmhouse near some like-minded souls and set out homesteading. Stacia shared a bedroom with her five sisters. The family spent most of its time staying warm and fed. “I remember one year we caught five hundred trout” she recalled, “We’d sit at this huge table, assembly-line fashion, cleaning and gutting fish.” The children also cared for goats, chickens, pigs, and a cow. They tended a large apple orchard, foraged for berries, hunted and dressed the kill, and even panned for gold. “We’d actually find little nuggets sometimes. My father had been a jeweler, so he would take them and sell them to his friends.” Evenings were spent reading together. Math was learned when necessity required it, project-method style.⁹

The results of communal and back-to-the-land education were mixed. Most adults who grew up in communes look back with fond memories. Many children so raised went on to get advanced degrees and have successful careers. One mother who had raised her children in a commune described the results like this, “the kids turned out to be bright, creative, interesting and full of life. It’s almost as if being exposed to all the wildness back then de-mystified that way of life for them.” Her own daughter became a doctor and her son a carpenter. Very few chose to live in communes themselves. One long time communitarian explained why, saying that back-to-the-land kids “are the ones that have grown up and turned into Young Republicans. They weren’t about to do what their parents did.” Surveys of adults who were raised in communes have found that the only

regrets most have were the names given them. Many a young Vishnu or Ongo Ishi changed their names to Bill and Samantha as soon as they were able. Some also regretted having had so few peers to grow up with. But most seemed to survive the early exposure to drugs and sex with little trouble.¹⁰

Some “graduates” of communes, however, were not so sanguine about the experience. Some women especially look back with a profound sense of sadness at the chaos of their early lives. Moon Zappa recalled,

At my house there was no supervision, so there was no reason to sneak. At my house there were no rules, so there was nothing to rebel against. I hated it....I craved rituals and rules like my friends had. I prayed for curfews and strictly enforced dinner times. Uniforms and organized events and people with *goals* amazed me.

Elizabeth She’ describes a childhood brutalized by the ideology of free love, “If you ask me, free love ain’t either. It’s not love, and it’s not free. I’ve been paying the price for thirty years.” Girls seemed especially vulnerable to abuse by adult males in an environment where there were “no boundaries, no guidance, no protection. Nothing was sacred.” Some express deep regret over a childhood marred by broken relationships, fatherlessness, drugged out and distracted adults, grime and poverty. Others, like Rain Grimes, explain how a counter-cultural girlhood could lead to a different sort of rebellion, “My friends went to college and became vegetarians. I went to college and became a meat eater....I lust after processed sugar, red meat, full-fat dairy. It is the legacy of growing up vegetarian and sugar-free.”¹¹

Though there are some standout exceptions, most hippie communes did not survive the 1980s. Well-meaning idealists who sought to create a limited utopia free of the rules and regulations of mainstream society attracted to their experiments all sorts of drifters, lechers, and opportunists who took advantage of their naiveté and destroyed their communities. Many communes that did have rules still disbanded due to personality conflicts among members, a situation almost impossible to avoid given the close quarters and limited resources most communes possessed. Independent subsistence farmers fared no better. Eleanor Agnew generalizes the life course of many of them:

A person goes to the land to be self-sufficient and free, the freedom loses its luster when the poverty grinds, the person and his or her spouse divorce, and the person slides back into the mainstream, gets a professional job or entrepreneurial gig, and remarries.¹²

While most of their experiments failed, the hippie wing of the anti-mainstream movement continues to have a powerful impact on American culture. Since the 1970s organic food, whole grains, aversion to processed and packaged products, and concern for the environment have entered the mainstream. Natural childbirth and home birthing continue to grow in popularity. Drug use, despite vigorous government efforts to stop it, continues. The left-wing critique of public education and preference for a freer, more natural childhood centered in the home continues, as we shall see, to reverberate in the modern homeschooling movement. Most profoundly, the counterculture's revulsion against conformity and longing for individual expression and authenticity has become the most basic trope of modern life. We are swimming in advertising slogans like "obey your thirst" and "have it your way." It is a perennial favorite theme of pop hits from

Madonna's "Express Yourself" to Natasha Bedingfield's "Unwritten." It dominates the moral vision of the cult of self-esteem in educational programming. It is just as popular in religious circles, discernable in Sunday school sing-alongs like "Search all the world over, there's no one like me" or evangelist Bill Bright's first spiritual law, "God *loves* you and offers a wonderful *plan* for your life." The countercultural quest for personal fulfillment and individual self-expression is now as mainstream as it gets.¹³

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. Hippies shared with other religious seekers in the 1970s 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. In 1967 Berkeley evangelists with the Campus Crusade for Christ organization went native—long hair, tie-dye, hip jargon. They changed their name to the "Christian World Liberation Front," opened crash pads, and preached that Jesus was a better trip than LSD. Thousands of hippies took to the message and exchanged drugs for Jesus. Christian folk rocker Larry Norman, a poster boy of the movement, captured the sentiment with his memorable lyric:

Gonorrhea on Valentine's Day,
And you're still looking for the perfect lay.
You think rock and roll will set you free,
You'll be dead before you're thirty-three.
Shooting junk till you're half insane,

Broken needle in your purple vein,

Why don't you look into Jesus, he's got the answer.¹⁴

But as hippies became Jesus Freaks it was not just their own lives that were changed. American Protestantism itself was transformed in the 1960s and 1970s. Two basic shifts occurred. First, the old denominational distinctions (Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, etc.) began to fade, replaced by a sharp binary between “conservative” and “liberal” churches. I put the terms in scare quotes because churches that self identified as conservative were usually quick to throw out traditional forms of worship in exchange for more casual and emotional styles, and those deemed liberal often held on to these forms. But “liberal” churches, even if they still worshipped in a manner consonant with earlier centuries, tended to shy away from the more miraculous and exclusive claims of Christianity—Virgin births, miraculous healings, resurrections—such things were seen as the embarrassing relics of an unenlightened age. In contrast, “conservative” churches celebrated such things, completely embracing the supernatural elements of the Bible. While liberals preached a gospel of ambiguity and unanswerable questions, conservative religion offered a real God who could be known personally and whose Book offered short, simple answers to everything: “Jesus is the answer for the world today,” sang Andrae Crouch. American Protestants realigned themselves according to this divide, and the results were good news for conservatives and bad news for liberals. Between 1965 and 1975 alone, the Episcopal Church lost 17 percent of its members, the United Presbyterians 12 percent, the United Churches of Christ 12 percent, and the United Methodists 10 percent. In contrast, Southern Baptists increased by 18 percent during the same span. Independent Bible-based churches and especially

Pentecostal groups flourished, joining a fierce Biblical literalism to a modern, emotional worship style. The Assemblies of God, for example, grew by 95 percent between 1973 and 1987. 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 (1400 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.”¹⁵

The second shift came in terms of political engagement. Early in the 1960s studies of voting patterns consistently found that religiously conservative people were the least likely Americans to be involved in politics. Back in the 1960s Jerry Falwell was still preaching that “we need to get off the streets and into the pulpits and prayer rooms.” As late as 1971 sociologist Robert Wuthnow explained that conservative Protestants had a “miraculous view of social reform: that if all men are brought to Christ, social evils will disappear....Evangelical protestant groups largely ignore social and political efforts for reform.” It was the liberals at first who were the activists, especially in campaigns for civil rights and women’s liberation. But by the mid 1970s Falwell was organizing “I Love America” rallies in State capitals across the country, calling for a national moral rebirth. His “Moral Majority” shifted focus from the imminent rapture to “the nuts and bolts of voter registration.” Why the change?¹⁶

What happened was an infusion of countercultural sensibility into the most conservative segment of the population. Moral conservatives, shocked and outraged by

social change, adopted the techniques of the Left to forward their own agenda. Similar dynamics had been present in moral reform efforts of earlier years, of course, but in all of these cases, from prohibition to the Anti-Communist crusade of the 1950s, government had been on the side of the conservatives. But now conservatives suddenly found themselves fighting not just immigrant vice, urban decadence, smut peddlers, or communist traitors. The enemy had suddenly become their own government.

Conservatives had been growing increasingly alarmed by government expansion since the 1950s. Anti-communism led naturally to a distrust of government generally. Groups like the John Birch Society and the Minutemen popularized conspiratorial ideas about the extent to which communists had infiltrated the federal government (Birch's founder Robert Welch, Jr. even claimed that President Eisenhower was a closet communist.) The popularity of such sentiments and organizations is remarkable. Public opinion polls in the late 1950s suggested that 5 percent of Americans truly believed that communists had direct control of "the U. S. Government, public education, and the National Council of Churches." By 1964 the John Birch Society had an annual budget of \$7 million and a membership of at least 50,000. Australian speaker Dr. Fred Schwarz hosted "Christian Anti-Communist Crusade" youth rallies across the country, attended by tens of thousands of young people inspired by his aggressive advocacy for turning leftist tactics to right wing goals. The Minutemen, an organization sponsoring anti-communist terrorism by training small cells of activists to use firearms, make bombs, and plan attacks, had about 2,400 cells placed around the country and a membership of ten to fifteen thousand dues-paying members.¹⁷

For our purposes what is most remarkable about these movements is their manner of organizing. “Organization is our bag,” noted conservative strategist Paul Weyrich, “We preach and teach nothing but organization.” All of the right-wing groups were based very largely in the nation’s suburbs, especially in the Sunbelt region where thousands of “faux Bubbas” worked steady jobs but flocked to NASCAR events, drove pick-ups, and listened to country music. Here the term “redneck” was worn “as a badge of honor, a fashion statement, a gesture of resistance against high taxes, liberals, racial integration, women’s liberation, and hippies.” The homes of this “Southronized” white middle class became the front line of anti-communist attack. As one directive from the central office of the John Birch Society put it, “The battle for saving our Republic could well be won or lost in our living rooms.” Tens of thousands of middle class Americans met regularly in their homes to listen to audio tapes by Robert Welch, swap conspiracy theories, and strategize about how to defeat the Communists through local activism. Though many had left the JBS by the 1970s, they took the training in home-based activism they received as Birchers into other venues, especially the Christian pro-family movement.¹⁸

Home-based organization meant that women participated in these groups on a massive scale. The new right of the 1950s and 1960s was very largely a women’s crusade. As one Pasadena housewife and member of both the John Birch Society and the Republican Women’s Club recalled, “women were the core of the conservative movement.” Homemakers and mothers did much of the grassroots organizing and not a little of the actual teaching at conservative meetings. These were not Betty Friedan’s etiolated domestics. They were empowered, articulate, and unabashedly conventional.

As Colleen McDannell has shown, they were the spiritual descendents of nineteenth century Victorians, trying to preserve a place for domestic Christianity in contemporary society. 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. In the name of the home these women were coming out of the living room into the public square. They organized reading rooms, voter registration drives, and women's clubs. Many became public speakers, and some ran for office. One activist described herself as "housewife, researcher, lecturer." Rarely did they address this seeming contradiction 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. The President of California's Federation of Republican Women, for example, justified her group's activism like this, "No longer is it possible for [us] to stay home keeping aloof from all outside....Are we through apathy and ignorance going to allow this great dynamic idea we call the U.S.A. to go down the drain of governmental controls and dominance under Socialism?"¹⁹

At first homeschooling was not on the agenda of conservative women. In the 1960s Conservatives for the most part tried to keep public school values consistent with their own. Conservatives had been scrutinizing school textbooks to root out subversively communistic literature since the 1920s. By the 1950s the scene of "neatly dressed, well-mannered women" barging into a school official's office to demand the removal of books deemed too soft on communism had become familiar around the country. In the 1960s the crusade expanded to other issues as well. 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 curriculum, death and dying courses, and readers including stories about non-Christian religions or occultic themes. But while local activism gained them 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, many conservative Protestants were simply appalled. Alabama Representative George Andrews spoke for many when he said on national television that the Supreme Court had “put the Negroes in the schools—now they put God out of the schools.”²⁰

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 reign in the massive resistance to prayer and Bible reading injunctions, conservatives created alternative schools. Sometimes the mix of religious and racial motives were obvious, as in the wholesale movement by 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 Mississippi Citizen' Council staffer Medford Evans, such schools would preserve an "island of segregation" just as "monasteries 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.²¹

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 powerful 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 school and sought instead "to restore power to local evangelical communities by creating a parallel educational culture." The schools they founded were not typically sponsored 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 the State, and entry into a network of like-minded schools. The largest of these organizations, the Association of Christian Schools International (ASCI), was formed in 1978 as a merger of three regional organizations. In 1967 the three parent organizations had a combined membership of 102 schools enrolling 14, 659 students. By 1973 they had 308 schools. Over the next three decades enrollment skyrocketed:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of ASCI schools</u>	<u>total enrollment</u>
1983	1900	270,000
1989	2347	340,626

1993	2801	463,868
2000	3849	707,928
2005	3957	746,681

The second largest organization, the more aggressively separatist American Association of Christian Schools (AACCS), was founded in 1972 with 80 schools enrolling 16,000 students. It experienced similar growth in the 1970s but by the mid 1980s had stagnated and in more recent years has even declined a bit:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of AACCS schools</u>	<u>total enrollment</u>
1983	1100	160,000
1991	1200	187,000
2004	1050	175,000

A third organization, Christian Schools International (CSI), was historically a Dutch Reformed group, but it expanded in the 1980s to include many of the new pan-denominational Christian schools. By 1987 it had 400 member schools and 1,200 nonmember schools that used some of CSI's services but could not officially join due to the Reformed theological stance CSI required.²²

Such rapid growth in the private sector is astounding, especially in light of the decline in number of children overall in the nation 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. As pastor Rodell Bledsoe of the Bible Baptist School in Bismark, ND explained,

We don't want approval, because we feel it's a matter of state control. Jesus said in Matthew, Chapter 16, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." We believe the head of the Church is Jesus Christ, and if I let the State become the head of the church, then I will be removing the Lord from His position, and this Church is definitely built on the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Given this antipathy toward registration or accreditation, no one knows how many independent schools were actually formed. One scholar estimated that by 1984 approximately 6,000 independent schools were in existence, while another thought the figure was closer to 15,000. Movement advocates placed the number even higher, at perhaps 20 to 25 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 these decades. While most remained in public schools, a growing and committed minority agreed with Christian educators like 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." Indeed, in some congregations parents who kept their children in public schools were seen as operating outside of God's will. By the 1990s the whole issue had become quite divisive in some Evangelical circles, with some arguing 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, while others claimed that Christians needed to stay in the system to serve as "salt and light" to their non-Christian neighbors.²³

But for some conservative Christians 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 this solution. 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 the private school couldn't adequately address their child's individual circumstances; some believed that the Bible gave responsibility for education to parents only; and some, especially mothers, simply wanted to spend more time with their children. For any combination of these reasons and doubtless others besides, some conservative Christian parents began to give homeschooling a try. The circumstances were right. By the late 1970s 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. A Gallup poll in the mid 1970s showed that 60 percent of housewives did not want to work outside the home. Most listed "my children" as their biggest source of pride. These were empowered women, politically astute and activist. Housewives, as we have seen, "formed the backbone" of most pro-family movements. If such women as these 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.²⁴

Some critics have suggested another reason some conservative Protestants may have turned to homeschooling over private schools in the early 1980s. Beginning in 1970

the Internal Revenue Service, responding to a Mississippi court's decision in *Green v. Connally*, changed its longstanding policy of granting tax-exempt status to private schools that discriminated against minorities. The Supreme Court upheld this shift of policy in *Coit v. Green* (1971), *Runyon v. McCrary* (1976), *Prince Edward School Foundation v. United States* (1981), and, most famously, *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983). Many conservative Christians who had formerly avoided politics for the most part became enraged, especially when the IRS issued more stringent guidelines in 1978 that would have looked not only at formal admissions policies but at actual enrollment. Paul Weyrich went so far as to claim that "what galvanized the Christian community was not abortion, school prayer, or the ERA....What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter's intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation." For the first time a pan-denominational coalition of Christian conservatives united in vocal opposition to the Federal Government's attempt to regulate them. Tens of thousands, many of whom had never done so before, wrote letters to congress protesting the IRS initiative. The response was so overwhelming that Congress gutted the new measures, easily passing an amendment authored by Jesse Helms forbidding the use of any federal funds to challenge the tax-exempt status of any private school.²⁵

Nevertheless, a handful of schools were prosecuted, and two cases at least made it to the Supreme Court, the most famous of which is *Bob Jones v. U. S.* (1983), where the Supreme Court in dramatic fashion upheld the IRS' lifting of the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University and the Goldsboro Christian School in North Carolina. Given the shrill rhetoric and extensive coverage of this issue in the press, it is understandable that

some commentators have seen herein a broader shift with implications for homeschooling. Linda Dobson, for example, has argued:

In the 1980s, changes in the tax regulations for Christian schools forced the smaller among them to close down by the hundreds. Suddenly, the parents of the students attending these schools were faced with a choice between government school attendance and homeschooling. For many, this really wasn't a choice at all, and these Christian families became part of a large second wave of homeschooling, joining earlier homeschoolers and boosting the numbers to record highs. Christian curriculum providers, already well-established businesses that had just lost a large chunk of their original market, followed the money and easily courted the new market of homeschooling parents.

It's a plausible claim, with deliciously scandalous implications: segregation academies were hunted down by the IRS and forced to close, leading to a mass movement of racist Christians into homeschooling where they brought their segregationist curriculum (mostly Bob Jones and Abeka, the two most popular curriculum packages among conservative Christian homeschoolers) with them. It explains the striking correlation between the *Bob Jones* court decision, the slow-down in AACS school growth in the mid-1980s, and the explosion of homeschooling at precisely the same time. But it is simply not true. Of the hundreds of fundamentalist schools that closed in the mid 1980s and 1990s, some of whom no doubt were segregation academies, only a small handful did so due to pressure from the IRS. By the 1980s the IRS had no money and the Reagan administration no will to go after discriminatory schools. Most of the schools that closed

did so because they were founded “with more enthusiasm than resources and leadership.” By 1983 many of these schools were simply imploding, stranding the few families who patronized them. Homeschooling was a lifesaver for these families. Furthermore, many school closings were the consequence, not the cause, of the shift to homeschooling among their clientele. By the mid 1980s homeschooling was becoming increasingly popular among religious conservatives, and thousands of them pulled their children out of Christian day schools to do it.²⁶

Many Christian families who experimented with homeschooling in the early 1980s ran into all sorts of trouble. Their own churches often frowned on the practice (especially if the church ran its own school). 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 of dubious status. Conflict between families and government were sometimes ugly. In my book I examine in more detail how homeschooling emerged from the surreptitious 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 American sensibility. As historian Bruce Schulman 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 a small, alternative community. Social and political changes of the second half of the twentieth century made bedfellows both of 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 the establishment of informal “house churches.” As one teen baldly put it, “I love God...but hate the church.”²⁷

Secondly, 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 the segregation of the population 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 fight for 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.²⁸

Thirdly, 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 come of age 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. And the countercultural right, despite ostensibly conservative and Biblical theological commitments, had 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 or not 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. Sociologist Mitchell Stevens 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 one of the best loved children's songs of Christian music power couple Bill and Gloria Gaither perfectly captures 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.²⁹

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 discernably 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 the dots between changes in school culture and 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, they pulled out. For some of them, ostensibly Christian schools presented similar problems—carousing students, inflexible administration, objectionable curriculum, not to mention the cost.³⁰

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 out of 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.

¹ Not all scholars have agreed that the United States is divided. For a contrarian view see Morris P. Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Longman, 2005). Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 77, 16-17. David Farber, “Democratic Subjects in the American Sixties: National Politics, Cultural Authenticity, and Community Interest” in David Farber and Jeff Roche, eds., *The Conservative Sixties* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 8-9. Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21. David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), 277.

² Judith Sealander, *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America’s Young in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 187. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 214. Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience*, 544-551. Kaestle Carl F. Kaestle, *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 283.

³ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 12-14

⁴ Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 88-91.

⁶ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Communes” in Michael Gordon, ed., *The Nuclear Family in Crisis: The Search for an Alternative* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 174. Timothy Miller, *The Sixties Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 202-205. David E. Smith and James L. Sternfield, “Natural Child Birth and Cooperative Child Rearing in Psychadelic Communes” in Gordon, ed., *The Nuclear Family in Crisis*, 201.

⁷ Miller, *Sixties Communes*, 187-188. Bennett M. Berger, et al., “Child Rearing in Communes” in Louise Kapp Howe, ed., *The Future of the Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 163.

⁸ Smith and Sternfield, "Natural Child Birth and Cooperative Child Rearing," 200-201. Berger, "Child Rearing in Communes," 169. John Rothchild and Susan Wolf, *Children of the Counterculture* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 9, 191, quoted in Miller, *Sixties Communes*, 185.

⁹ Kenneth Cmiel, "The Politics of Civility" in David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 271. Miller, *Sixties Communes*, 188-189. Eleanor Agnew, *Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004), 43.

¹⁰ Miller, *Sixties Communes*, 239, 185.

¹¹ Chelsea Cain, ed., *Wild Child: Girlhoods in the Counterculture* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1999), xvii, 56, 57, 99-100.

¹² Cmiel, "Politics of Civility", 272-273. Agnew, *Back from the Land*, ix.

¹³ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, CounterCulture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 29-31. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 81-148. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 247.

¹⁴ Tom Wolfe, "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening" in *The Purple Decades: A Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 265-296. Larry Norman, *Only Visiting This Planet* © 1972 by Solid Rock Records.

¹⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 132-172. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 92-95. Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 241-245. Kaestle, *Literacy in the United States*, 287.

¹⁶ Scott Flipse, "Below-the-Belt Politics: Protestant Evangelicals, Abortion, and the Foundation of the New Religious Right, 1960-1975" in Farber and Roche, eds., *The Conservative Sixties*, 136-137. David Farber, "The Torch had Fallen" in Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *American in the Seventies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 23-25.

¹⁷ Evelyn A. Schlatter, "'Extremism in the Defense of Liberty': The Minutemen and the Radical Right" in Farber and Roche, eds., *The Conservative Sixties*, 37-50. Michelle Nickerson, "Moral Mothers and

Goldwater Girls” in Farber and Roche, eds., *The Conservative Sixties*, 53. Jonathan M. Schoenwald, “We Are an Action Group: The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement in the 1960s” in Farber and Roche, eds., *The Conservative Sixties*, 21-36.

¹⁸ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 105-117. Schoenwald, “We Are an Action Group,” 31-36.

¹⁹ Colleen McDannell, “Creating the Christian Home: Home Schooling in Contemporary America” in David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1005), 187-219. Nickerson, “Moral Mothers and Goldwater Girls,” 51-60.

²⁰ Nickerson, “Moral Mothers and Goldwater Girls,” 57. Joan DelFattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts Over Religion in America's Public Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 79.

²¹ Evans cited in Michael W. Fuquay, “Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1971” in *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 159-180, Evans cited on p.164.

²² Jason Bivins, *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge to American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 81. James C. Carper, “The Christian Day School” in James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, eds., *Religious Schooling in America* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1984), 114-115. Susan D. Rose, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan: Evangelical Schooling in America* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 35-38. E. Vance Randall, “Religious Schools in America: Worldviews and Education” in Thomas C. Hunt and James C. Carper, eds., *Religion and Schooling in Contemporary America: Confronting our Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Garland, 1997), 96-98. James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 203-204.

²³ *State v. Shaver*, 294 N.W.2d 883 (N.D. 1980). Kenneth Gangel, “How Did Christian School Education Begin?” in H. Wayne House, ed., *Schooling Choices* (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), 106, 75. Deborah Kovach Caldwell, “Conservative Christians Urge Parents to Help Bring Down Public School System,” *Dallas Morning News*, 3 February, 1999, *Newspaper Source Publications*, EBSCOhost, (17 November, 2006). House, ed., *Schooling Choices*, 19-167.

²⁴ Filene, *Him/Her/self*, 223. Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: the Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of President Nixon* (New York: Oxford, 2006), 282. Michael S. Shepherd, “Home Schooling: A

Legal View” in Anne Pedersen and Peggy O’Mara, eds., *Schooling at Home: Parents, Kids, and Learning* (Santa Fe: John Muir, 1990): 57.

²⁵ “The Judicial Role in Attacking Racial Discrimination in Tax-Exempt Private Schools” in *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 2 (December 1979): 378-384. William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 168-173.

²⁶ Linda Dobson, *Homeschoolers' Success Stories: 15 Adults and 12 Young People Share the Impact that Homeschooling Has Made on their Lives* (Roseville, CA: Prima, 2000), 6. Dobson’s authority for the claim was Mark Hegener, who concluded this as a result of hours of phone conversations with support group leaders around the country who didn’t know what to do with the massive influx of fundamentalist Christians into their midst in the early 1980s. He later admitted that the tax code issue had been an inference on his part. Mark Hegener, telephone conversation with author, 12 July 2007. James C. Carper and Jack Layman, “Independent Christian Day Schools: The Maturing of a Movement” in *Catholic Education* 5, no. 4 (June 2002): 505. Carper and Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education*, 233.

²⁷ Schulman, *The Seventies*, xvi. Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, 244.

²⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1985). Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

²⁹ Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8. The Bill Gaither Trio, “I am a Promise,” *Especially For Children: Classic Moments from the Bill Gaither Trio*, Benson Records, 1994. Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 134-151.

³⁰ James C. Carper, “Pluralism to Establishment to Dissent: The Religious and Educational Context of Home Schooling” in *Peabody Journal of Education* 75 (2000): 8-19.