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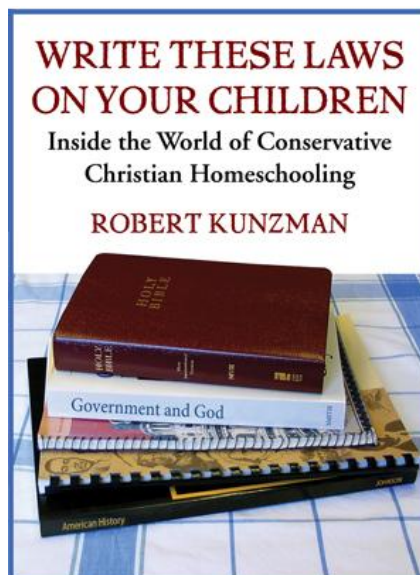
Kunzman, Robert (2009) *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling*.
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This book opens with a dramatic scene of two men, both homeschooled K-12, then roommates at Patrick Henry College, the nation's first college founded specifically for homeschooled students, and current headquarters of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA)—a conservative Christian “nonprofit advocacy organization established to defend and advance the constitutional right of parents to direct the education of their children and to protect family freedoms” (Home School Legal Defense Association, n.d.). One man has just won the Academy Award for best picture; the other is President of the United States. This scene, reportedly a dream of HSLDA director Michael Farris, captures the political and social agenda of the HSLDA, of which many conservative Christian



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homeschool families are members. The theme of influencing America's social and political scene toward conservative Christian principles is loudly acclaimed by this organization, but embraced with different levels of ardor among the six homeschool families who were participants in this research.

The major focus of the book is on these families, their practices and beliefs. Geographically spread across the United States, varied in ethnicity and socioeconomic status, these families homeschooled from one to seven children. Parents believed that God gave them responsibility for educating the minds and hearts of their children and believed that this could be better accomplished in their own homes than in public school environments. The author, through repeated visits, extensive interviews and observations, finds common themes and notable variations in the homeschooling practices of these six families, then raises issues that are worthy of consideration by all constituents of American education.

The homeschooling approaches of each family are presented with a depth of understanding and compassion that makes each family come alive. In conducting the research, the author not only observed homeschools in action and interviewed parents. He also accompanied the families to church and to homeschool association events in order to see the broader contexts in which homeschooling occurs. He has also taken care to communicate with and listen to each family member – to ensure that varied perspectives within the family are presented honestly, and to push the thinking of those who may not have fully considered the implications of their homeschooling practices. He interviewed not only mothers, who tend to conduct the schooling, but also fathers, who tend to have a less direct role. He also talked with the students – making a special point to interview teenage students, to whom he posed questions about independent thinking and diverse viewpoints, allowing their adolescent voices to enrich the narrative. This research addressed four central questions, each yielding complex answers, as summarized below.

Robert Kunzman holds a PhD in Philosophy of Education from Stanford University. As Associate Professor in the Indiana University School of Education, he teaches courses related to secondary education curriculum and instruction. He studies the intersection of education, religion and citizenship in the United States, and is author of *Grappling with the good: Talking about religion and morality in public schools*, published by SUNY Press. He is also a former public high school English, teacher, administrator and coach.



What Kind of Teaching and Learning Goes on at the Kitchen Table, and Beyond?

One of the greatest benefits of homeschooling cited by parents is the flexibility to choose the curriculum, the instructional approaches, the daily schedule and the pace of learning for their own children. Flexibility, however, can easily become haphazardness, as demonstrated in the Rivera family, where housecleaning and grocery shopping were counted as health class and math class, respectively. Alternatively, flexibility can be used to engage children in meaningful real-life activities, as demonstrated by the Palmers rearranging their school schedule to include the children in providing end-of-life care for their grandmother.

Curriculum options abound, as many publishers have developed products aimed at the Christian homeschool market, leading more than one parent to note the overwhelming and potentially expensive task of choosing curriculum. Guidance about what to teach was available through homeschool cooperative organizations, which also provided enrichment courses. The Wallis family reported enrolling in coop-sponsored activities for approximately one-fourth of their homeschooling. All families taught reading and mathematics, and some form of social studies and science. In all families, the Bible was a central part of the curriculum, whether through daily devotions, or structured Bible lessons. Inclusion of subjects such as arts or world languages depended on the interests and resources of the family. For example, in the Branson family the father was a skilled musician and music lessons were a major curricular component.

A variety of instructional approaches was observed, but the most common approaches were reading and answering questions, and rote memorization. These are not the best ways to learn (National Research Council, 2000), and do not take advantage of the potentially rich environment of homeschooling. However, as the author points out, there are plenty of public school classrooms in which in-class reading, rote memorization and lecture are the dominant instructional strategies. Parents are similar to public school teachers in that some are more highly skilled teachers than others, and they tend to favor some subjects

and dislike other subjects. For example, in the Carroll family, the mother had a degree in animal science and the family lived on an elk farm. Science lessons were very hands-on, from identifying organs while butchering an elk to dissecting elk eyeballs. In contrast, in the Willis family the mother had a general dislike for science, and science lessons tended to consist of reading the book and answering questions. As in public schooling, it is difficult to determine whether a student's attitude toward a particular subject is related to the teacher's enthusiasm for the subject, or to the instructional methods used to teach that subject.

In the intimate setting of homeschooling, it is easier to address individual learning needs than in a classroom of 25 students. Teaching can be tailored to individual student learning styles, but as one mother points out, there is some likelihood that parent will just teach in their own learning style. This also happens in public schools, but there each student has multiple teachers. When parent is the only teacher, the quality of the child's overall learning is much more dependent on the quality of a single teacher. Many of these families used technology, from videos to online learning, either to teach complex subjects that are beyond the parents' knowledge base, or to help them manage the multiple ages of children they are dealing with. In some cases this appears to be a good thing, as in second language learning using audio products to promote proper pronunciation. Other times it seems less appropriate, as when a "Little House on the Prairie" movie was used as the sole content of a history lesson.

The older the students, the more likely it seemed that their schoolwork was completed independently, through readings, workbooks or computer exercises. Whether this was seen as socially isolating by the students varied. Most of the families were involved in a homeschool cooperative, providing enrichment activities and social outlets for students. All of the families were heavily involved in church activities; teenage students cited their church youth group as a major source of friends. Yet some teens expressed a desire to either have more friends, or to have more contact with friends.

Assessment strategies varied widely. One family chose to give standardized tests, even though they were not

required to do so, to have some form of external audit of their children's learning. Another family assessed their children's learning verbally, requiring the children to explain what they had learned to their mother's satisfaction. For most, any tests given were included with the curriculum, and given in a "read the chapter, then take the test" format.

If Christian Homeschool Parents are Determined to Shape Their Children's Character to Reflect Their Own Cherished Beliefs and Values, What Room Does this Leave for Children to Learn to Think for Themselves?

Parents saw their role not only as providing for their children's academic learning, but also for their children's character, and clearly hoped their children would, as adults, embrace the same conservative Christian beliefs. This sentiment is captured in the title of the book, quoted from the 6th chapter of the biblical book of Deuteronomy. It is also related to a scripture reference often cited by parents that says Christians are to be "in the world but not of the world". Parents expressed a desire to protect their children from being schooled in an environment that is hostile to Christianity, and by extension, potentially hostile to the children. Stated by Carrie Shaw "I think Christians in some schools are put in positions of hostility or ridicule, whether it's from a teacher, whether it's from classmates: 'How could you think such a stupid thing, nobody thinks that, don't you know that science says this?'" (Kunzman, 2009 p. 205).

Does this result in what James Marcia referred to as identify foreclosure (Marcia, 2002), the adoption of parental beliefs and values without examination? Or are these children encouraged, at some point, to question parental beliefs and think for themselves?

Answers to this question were largely dependent on the age of the children. All families expressed a desire for their children to become responsible adults who could think for themselves, but they generally agreed that children need to be trained in the ways of God before they are subjected to the ways of the world. As part of this training, the Bible was seen as the primary authority for

learning, and beliefs and values were attributed to coming from God, more than from the parents. In the views of these families, adults should obey God, just as young children should their parents.

Independent thinking was valued, but seen as part of a process of the general process of letting go that all parents experience. When and how to loosen parental reins depended on the individual child and how his/her parents perceived the situation. In the Palmer family, daughter Carly was allowed to spend her junior year in the public high school. In the Carroll family, the two oldest children were enrolled part-time in the local community college. Both families saw these decisions as major stepping stones in the transition to adulthood. Several parents noted that giving teenagers too little freedom could be counter-productive. A few of the teenagers expressed a desire for greater independence, but most were happy with their homeschool situation, and had comfortable relationships with their parents.

How do These Homeschool Parents Understand the Rights and Responsibilities of Religiously Informed Citizenship?

This question explored parents' understanding of how their Christian faith influences their role as citizens. How parents' view this relationship influences their teaching of social studies topics such as civics, American history and current events. It also influences how they engage their children in service learning and their expectations regarding political action.

When asked about their responsibilities as citizens, most families began from the perspective of Christian service, describing ways they are involved in their neighborhoods, communities and churches. Carrie Shaw described her view of dual citizenship "I have a responsibility to God first and foremost.... I have a right to act as his citizen on Earth...my responsibility to God also is very much to love my neighbor...so if I were to do that in a hateful, irresponsible, violent way, I would be likewise sinning against God" (Kunzman, 2009, p. 207-208) This is somewhat different attitude from that of Gary Branson, who viewed the public schools as "assaulted by Satan" (p. 75), and expressed a desire to "kick Muslims out of our

country” (p. 92). But the Branson family is also involved in Christian service, most notably by visiting with residents the local nursing home on a weekly basis, providing conversation and musical entertainment.

Many parent and teenage students saw legislating behaviors and legislating beliefs as separate, supporting the concept of freedom of religion, while advocating the outlawing of behaviors considered antithetical to Christianity, such as gay marriage and abortion. But these families were not political activists. Although many were members of the HSLDA, there was little sense of strong buy-in for the HSLDA’s political/social agenda, and no evidence of engagement in political activities beyond voting. The families were mostly concerned with being responsible citizens, exercising their right to vote, and raising their children well.

Should the State Regulate Homeschooling, and if so, to What Extent?

There is great variation across the states in the level of regulation of homeschooling. Some states do not even require homeschools to register, others require homeschooled students to take standardized tests, and some require them to operate under the supervision of certified teacher. The most common response to the question of state regulation was countering with the point that the government is not successfully managing public schools. Although most families acknowledged the possibility that unregulated homeschooling allows for children being denied their right to education, they believed this to be a rare occurrence that does not warrant government intervention into all homeschools. In contrast, the author clearly believes that parents do not represent the sole interest in the education of children. The interests of the children themselves, and the interests of society at large, would be best served, he argues, if all states required homeschool students to be tested for basic literacy and numeracy. However, his attempts to convince the homeschool families had limited success.

Regulation of homeschools is not the only legal question. In some states homeschooled students may participate in public school classes and/or extra-curricular activities. The author reports that “... 14 states have laws mandating that

homeschoolers be allowed to enroll part-time, and seven states explicitly prohibit it; the rest leave it up to district discretion” (p. 161). Some homeschool families see part-time enrollment as a great advantage; other see it as a threat to their freedom, fearing that any alignment with the public school will result in some form of government interference. Others gladly take advantage of the opportunity to enroll their children in elective courses or extra-curricular activities – towards which their tax dollars have already contributed.

Tucked into the six chapters that present the stories of each family are descriptions of the author’s visits to homeschool conventions, and mini-chapters on three issues common to homeschooling generally: academic achievement and socialization, civic engagement, and racial diversity (or lack thereof). There is also a full-length chapter on the Generation Joshua civics program of the HSLDA. This is a program that is as much about conservative politics as it is about education. In addition to online curriculum options, the program includes a reading list of historical and partisan texts, online discussions forums, and Student Action Teams – best described as political action committees in training, focused on a conservative right-wing political agenda. Although none of the six families of this book are using the Generation Joshua program, most of them are implicitly supporting it through their HSLDA membership. This is where the intersections of religion, politics and education become most obvious, as questions are raised about how youth can be trained to be politically engaged while simultaneously encouraged to think independently and value diverse points of view.

Through these six families, and the contextual information surrounding them, one gets a surprisingly comprehensive look at the nature of conservative Christian homeschooling as one component of the larger homeschool movement. Both benefits and areas of concern are thoughtfully considered in terms of implications for the homeschooled students, and for society at large. Anyone who has an interest in the homeschool movement, in conservative Christians’ ideas about education or the purposes of education in general would benefit from reading this thought-provoking, engaging and readable book.

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