

Homeschooling's role in Christian nationalism examined

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Jessie Johnson, teaching pastor at Immanuel Bible Church in Springfield, Va., rejects the idea of a Christian nation.



Jesse Johnson takes his three daughters on a field trip to Ellis Island in New York. The family studied how the founders of America saw the nation as a “city on a hill” and a “light to the world,” from Matthew 5:14. (Photo courtesy of Johnson)

“The government doesn’t establish churches nor should it,” he said.

But Johnson also believes the Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth, Mass., in

1620 were on the right track when they made a covenant with God to establish a Christian society.

“There has to be a moral compass for society,” he added.

Because Johnson and his wife believe American public schools lack that compass, they homeschool their three children.

A movement that originated among educators on the left in the 1970s, homeschooling was increasingly adopted through the 1980s and 1990s by conservative Christian families seeking to instill traditional values in their children and protect them from an increasingly secularized public school system.

The homeschooling population consistently hovered at around 2 million students since then—a little more than 3 percent of the national student body—until the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered in-person school and forced children into Zoom classrooms.

In September 2020, six months into the pandemic, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the share of homeschooled children had shot up to 11 percent of households. With the escalated numbers has come increased attention to homeschooling.

Debates, meanwhile, have arisen over what children are being taught about American history, partly in response to the 1619 Project, a recounting of U.S. history that stresses the story of Black America, beginning with the arrival of the first slaves.

Culture war led to politically charged

curriculum

The surrounding culture war picked up on the controversy, resulting in book bans and accusations that teachers are instructing elementary students using a legal and academic framework known as critical race theory.

These controversies have prompted the release of new, politically charged homeschool curricula such as Turning Point Academy, a product engineered by pro-Trump talk show host Charlie Kirk that promises to deliver an “America-first education.”

Another, the Christendom Curriculum, touts itself as “America’s only Christian Nationalist homeschool curriculum” and includes “battle papers” that tell children how to argue with the liberals who supposedly hate white Christians.

Some of these programs have tiny reach—Christendom Curriculum only had 100 current subscribers as of September. But critics of religious homeschooling say the same Christian nationalist messages, if not the same partisan divisions, have been present in the most popular and long-established curriculums used by Christian parents.



Doug Pagitt (Courtesy photo)

“The ideology has been taking root for at least a generation,” said Doug Pagitt, an evangelical pastor in Minnesota and executive director of Vote the Common Good, a progressive voting-rights organization. Christian nationalist ideas are “all over the place” in Christian education companies’ materials, Pagitt said.

“It’s in there in theology. It’s in there in history. It’s in there in current events,” he said.

Some of the most popular homeschool curriculum textbooks, produced by publishing giants Abeka, Accelerated Christian Education and Bob Jones University Press, teach that the first Europeans to arrive in Virginia and Massachusetts made a covenant with God to Christianize the land.

The History of the United States in Christian Perspective, a textbook from Abeka, promises students: “You will learn how God blessed America because of the principles (truths) for which America stands.”

Those truths made America “the greatest nation on the face of the earth,” the book says, before issuing a warning: “No nation can remain great without God’s blessing.”

Homeschooling texts stress American exceptionalism

These companies’ books offer students an “unproblematic and unquestionably exceptional America,” said Kathleen Wellman, professor of history at Southern Methodist University and author of *Hijacking History: How the Christian Right Teaches History and Why It Matters*, in a column for RNS.

Abeka’s history injects conservative values into more recent history as well, noting that, “since the 1960s, decisions of the Supreme Court and other

judges have contributed to the moral decline of our country.”

Abeka, ACE and BJU Press declined to comment to RNS.

The Abeka curriculum was born at Pensacola Christian Academy, a K-12 school on Florida’s panhandle founded in 1954. Working initially from outdated public school textbooks, the school’s Southern Baptist founders, Arlin and Rebekah Horton, began publishing their textbooks in 1972 to supply the Christian schools that had proliferated after Supreme Court rulings ended segregation in public education and banned religious expression in the classroom.

Today, Pensacola Christian Academy’s website boasts every class is taught from a biblical perspective, and science instructors are explicit about “God’s wonderful design,” but students also learn the basic principles of chemistry and dissect frogs, much as secular students do.

‘Nationalist propaganda’

It is in the humanities, especially history, that former PCA students say they were indoctrinated into a form of Christian triumphalism, in which American society was at its best when it hewed to Christian faith.



Tyler Burns (Photo by Hawa Images)

“It was just pure propaganda—nationalist propaganda,” said Tyler Burns, a graduate of Pensacola Christian Academy. Former Republican President Ronald Reagan was treated as practically the “fourth member of the Godhead,” Burns recalled.

An African American, Burns remembers feeling disoriented while being taught slavery was a “blessing in disguise” for introducing enslaved Africans to Christianity. Burns, now president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, has spoken extensively about the ways Christian education affected his ability to embrace his Black identity.

The white supremacist ideas that dismayed Burns can be found in Abeka’s home history curriculum as well. It implies that Southern land owners had little choice but to buy slaves to keep up with the demand of raising cotton and tobacco.

“The Southern planter could never hire enough people to get his work done,” it reads, noting at the same time that “only one out of 10 Southerners owned slaves.”

Some parents design personalized reading lists

In practice many homeschooling parents fashion their own reading lists to suit their views or their children’s abilities. Stephanie Rotramel, who has homeschooled her three children off and on since her oldest, now 17, was in preschool, said homeschooling allows her flexibility to meet specific educational needs.



Stephanie and Mark Rotramel with their children Becca (left), Nathan (rear) and Nicholas (front). (Photo courtesy of Stephanie Rotramel)

This year, as her kids head back to school at home, she’s using mostly Christian curricula, though none of the ones mentioned in this article. She wants to expose her kids to diverse perspectives, though, and plans to supplement the curricula with YouTube videos from Trevor Noah and with a “year of nontraditional lit”—books such as *Everything Sad Is Untrue* by Daniel Nayeri and *I Am Malala* by the Pakistani education activist.

She doesn’t see giving a warts-and-all account of the country’s history while sharing a Christian worldview with her children as contradictory.

Rotramel said, as a Christian, she sees America as a place “full of sinners who need Jesus.” That includes the Founding Fathers. It includes Ronald Reagan, too.

“I feel like that’s the message of the Bible,” she said. “We’re all messed up. We need Jesus.”

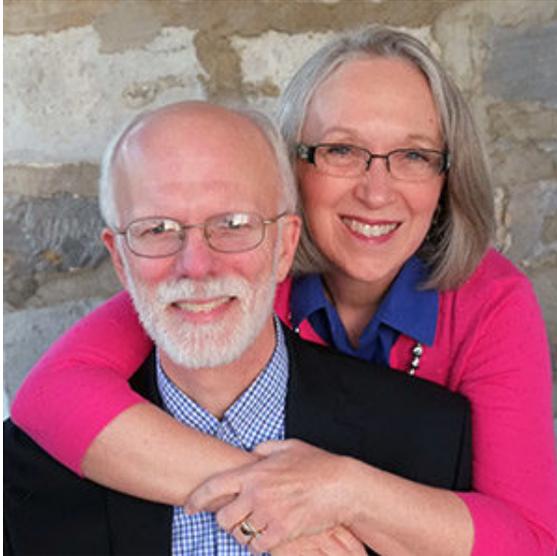
Jessie Johnson agrees. He said he and his wife try to teach their children about the ways the United States has fallen short of the values of Christianity, in particular when it comes to race.

So, while the Johnsons have their children read the Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims’ charter for their new society that would honor the glory of God and the “advancement of the Christian faith,” the family has traveled to Charleston, S.C., to study the history of slavery and have made repeated trips to the Manassas National Battlefield Park, not far from where they now make their home, where two major Civil War battles were fought.

“We know whose side we are on,” said Johnson, adding that slavery violated the Christian ideal that all people are made in God’s image—a founding American principle, he said.

Some curriculum providers revise materials

The drumbeat of white supremacy and Christian nationalism in the past few years has also convinced some conservative Christian curriculum writers that they should revise their materials.



Ray and Charlene Notgrass (Photo courtesy of Notgrass History)

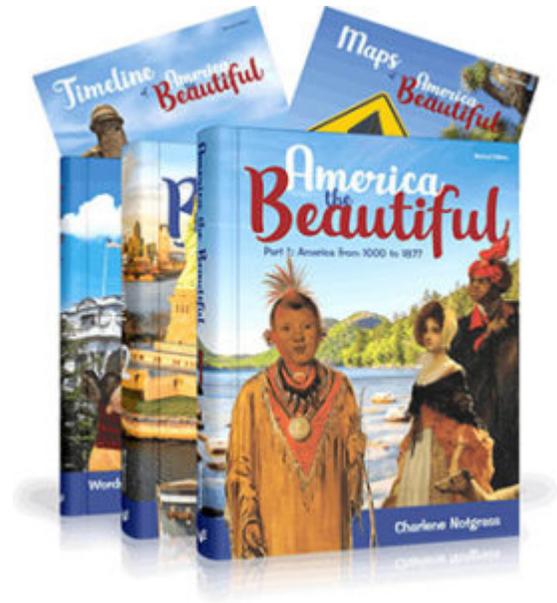
Charlene Notgrass, who runs Notgrass History with her husband, Ray, a retired pastor, from their home in Tennessee, has been writing U.S. history and civics lessons for Christian homeschool families since the early 1990s.

At the time, most homeschoolers were either “conservative Christians or hippies,” said Charlene, 68. Most of the early homeschool textbooks reflected that.

Today, they say, homeschooling is more diverse—both politically and ethnically. The couple said they’ve had to keep learning about overlooked parts of history and to reflect that new knowledge in their products.

In 2020, amid the George Floyd protests and a contested election, Charlene Notgrass finished a new revision of *America the Beautiful*, their high school history text.

“Too often,” it reads, “people have not believed that we are all equally valuable creations of God. Therefore, sometimes people treat people who are different from themselves—in skin color, in nationality, in political party, in the amount of money they have—as less valuable.



“No two Americans are likely ever to think exactly alike about everything,” it concludes, “but we still must respect each other.”

The Notgrasses describe themselves as “patriotic Americans” and want students who read their lessons to love their country, but they also want them to know the truth.

“We don’t think Americans are God’s chosen people, the way the Israelites are God’s chosen people,” said Charlene Notgrass. “The Bible tells us point-blank that God chose the Israelites. It does not tell us point-blank that God chose America.”