

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschooling
Episode: 9: Secularizing Religious Curricula
File Name: episode 9 – Secularizing Religious Curricula
File Length: 27:20
Transcription by Keffy

[00:00:00] [Sound of book pages being rapidly flipped.]

Courtney: [00:00:12] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curriculum. In today's show, we're not actually eviscerating anything. Instead, we're focusing on the idea of secularizing religious materials. AJ, why don't you clue us in? What is this mean, secularizing religious materials?

AJ: [00:00:32] Before we even get to that, I'd like to have like a little meta discussion here about what it is that we're doing with this podcast. And what I wanted to say, a bit to, perhaps to new listeners or other folks who are just tuning in. But why we're doing this podcast in the first place, because there are a lot of homeschooling podcasts out there and a lot that review curricula. So why do we even need another one?

[00:00:53] The reality is that many podcasts review materials that are sent to them by the publishers. It's a great way for the curriculum providers to get the word out about their products, and for homeschoolers to learn about new items on the market. No problem there.

[00:01:05] The difficulty, though, is that when reviewers get curriculum for free, they may feel obligated to gloss over any problems that they see. And sometimes they even review the materials before even using them with their kids. And things get even more complicated if the podcaster or blogger receives advertising income from the curriculum producer.

[00:01:24] We don't receive those kinds of things. Our goal here is to save listeners time and money by talking about the aspects of curricula that other podcasts might not mention. So we want to give you the good, the bad, and the ugly. The risk we're taking with that is that people will think we're being super negative or even nasty, when we admit that even some very popular curriculum may not work for everyone and may have some problems.

[00:01:47] At the same time, we really want to acknowledge that things that didn't work in our families, or in my classroom, or Courtney's

classroom, might be perfect for yours. And we hope that you all know that. We don't want people to stop using things that are working for them just because we have some criticisms. The best curriculum is the one that works for your family, and we hope you all know that, too.

[00:02:11] Our job is to help you find those curricula, to make you aware of any potential pitfalls that we have seen in our own personal experience and experience of others we know and hopefully to save you some time and money and stress in the process.

Courtney:

[00:02:24] Yeah, that's a really good set of points, AJ. One thing I think worth pointing out, is that you may have noticed that there are no ads on this podcast. We're not making any money. None of us are. And if we're reviewing a curriculum, I think all of us, when we talk about it, it's because we bought it. Like I went out and bought Torchlight to review it for that first episode.

[00:02:45] There are no conflicts of interest here really. Except possibly for the fact that I work for the Well Trained Mind Academy. But like I said, I recuse myself from any discussion of stuff there. I'm not going to talk about it, because I do have a conflict of interest.

[00:02:58] Speaking of the Well Trained Mind, a few years back, I read a post on the Well Trained Mind discussion boards that said that the best curriculum was the one that got done. And I still think that's true. We can be as aspirational as we want to be but if we use a curriculum that we think should work, and yet really is not working for our family, for whatever reason, then we're not getting a whole lot done.

[00:03:22] And in my opinion, it's better to use a curriculum that may force us to compromise our aspirations and our goals if it educates our children. That is, after all the final goal, is whether or not our kids have learned stuff.

[00:03:36] Religious curricula that we love, and how we secularize them. One thing that sets the secular inclusive classical teachers Facebook group apart from other secular support groups, is that we are open to using religious material if they get the job done. This, I think, Jen, was your major goal when starting that group. Right?

Jen:

[00:03:57] Exactly. There are secular groups, and they won't allow any mention of any curriculum. You can't say, well, this is put out by a religious publisher, but there's actually not really any religion in it. So you have your hands tied. You can't recommend something that you know may work for someone because a lot of times, there are great

curriculum, and they work for different families for different reasons. But if you're just going to discount anything by a religious publisher, you're really missing out. There was just no place on the internet to talk like that. So I thought we would start our own place.

Courtney: [00:04:38] I thought at first it would just be a couple hundred of us. And now it's up to what, 1300?

AJ: [00:04:42] Yep, last count. Yeah, I mean, I think all things being equal, we would prefer secular materials. But sometimes things aren't equal. And you might find a curriculum that is otherwise perfect, and just happens to have some religion in it. So the question is, how do you make that work?

[00:05:00] So Jen, you've got a lot of experience in this area since you've been homeschooling for such a long time. And particularly starting out when there really weren't a whole lot of secular curriculum options. You pretty much had religious stuff to work with and you just had to make it work somehow. So what what have you used and what has worked for you?

Jen: [00:05:17] Yeah, it sounds like I'm a big time curriculum jumper or something. But it's been, you know, 20 years. So I guess it's not such a long list when you put it like that.

[00:05:29] I started out using Seton Homeschool because that's what my friend who was homeschooling used, and it seemed like it was going to make the whole thing doable. I didn't know anything about homeschooling. They would send you a box. It had a daily schedule, they graded everything for you. It seemed like just the the easiest way to ease our way in as a family. It made my husband feel comfortable, because there were real teachers grading it. So it wasn't just me, you know, being a weirdo.

[00:06:05] I didn't stay with them very long, though. Because while we were basically armchair Catholics, Seton is very Catholic. And so there was really no way to take the religion out of it. You can ignore it, but you can't you can't delete religion out of Seton at all, because it's in every sentence on every page of every book. But it is a solid, you know, workbook school at home program.

[00:06:36] Then I read the Well Trained Mind and I really was attracted to the, I guess we're calling it neoclassical, movement. So then I found Kolbe homeschool. Kolbe is a small homeschool curriculum company out of Napa, California. They have an excellent program. Especially in the

lower grades, nearly everything is secular anyway. I think they bill themselves as being an Ignatius curriculum.

AJ: [00:07:01] Yeah. So it's Jesuit influenced, definitely.

Jen: [00:07:03] Right. But it's definitely the closest thing to the Well Trained Mind that you can get with lesson plans and tests made up. You can buy their stuff and use it on your own. Or you can register with them and mail everything back and forth. So I'm sure you can, you know, do it all through email or whatnot. They were very, very accommodating.

AJ: [00:07:28] And we used them, too. And same. Yeah, it was... for us that was a good bridge, because we lived in a state that has a fairly high level of oversight from the schools. And there was a brand new principal that really wasn't sure how she was going to handle what we were doing for homeschool or homeschooling, generally. So Kolbe was great, again, to have that sort of official looking stuff on letterhead from this company that was saying, yes what this person is doing in their living room is perfectly okay. So that was helpful. Yeah.

Jen: [00:08:01] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:08:01] And as a newer homeschooler, I really liked looking at Kolbe, I didn't actually sign up with them. But what I found really reassuring was that they put all their curricula texts online. And so I could go look and see what people were doing with a high quality, homeschool, Catholic Jesuit education.

AJ: [00:08:25] And they're very, very flexible with levels. That was the other thing that you know, coming in with my kid, I think we used them in first grade. But I knew that the science texts that they had for first grade would have bored my child to tears. So they let me use a fourth grade book because that was the reading level she was at at that point and they had no problem with that.

Jen: [00:08:44] They also, even for high school, you can present them with a class and say this is what I'm going to teach, these are the materials I'm going to use and as long as you send them one sample a month, they'll record that credit on your transcript. Which is really nice, especially in some states where you you have to sign up. Those states with what they call what, umbrella schools?

AJ: [00:09:06] Right and where they require a certain number of hours of instruction and you somehow have to prove that. One way of proving that is by having an outside organization validate that yes, this person is

doing something that is the equivalent of X number of credit hours in a public school.

Jen: [00:09:20] Also when I used Kolbe, Memoria Press didn't have anything for sale except for Latin.

AJ: [00:09:25] Right.

Jen: [00:09:25] So, it—

AJ: [00:09:27] When I started out it was the same. They just... they had Latina Christiana pretty much and a few things that went along with that but that was almost it.

Jen: [00:09:34] And I liked... so Kolbe was scheduling Memoria Press's Latin, which I liked because Memoria Press didn't have a schedule. They didn't have a DVD. They didn't, you know, they didn't have any of the extras that they have now. And Kolbe was basically my support system, because I couldn't figure out how much we should be doing a day.

[00:09:53] Rod and Staff, which I know you're going to talk about later, AJ, so I gloss over it and just say that every time the text would say Jesus, we would substitute Gandalf. And it made some hilarious you know, grammar sessions with diagramming these awesome sentences.

[00:10:12] I really like Rod and Staff for their grammar. Also, at that time, Well Trained Mind didn't have any grammar out. Oh, Voyages in English.

Courtney: [00:10:21] Oh yeah, Loyola Press, right?

Jen: [00:10:23] Loyola Press, right. So we [crosstalk] that. For some reason, I just wanted to try something new. And I just really liked Rod and Staff. I liked all the farming references. And I liked that the texts were cheap enough that I would let the kids just write in the book. So that made my life easier.

Courtney: [00:10:40] Especially when you have children with dysgraphia, or who are working above grade level and their handwriting skills haven't caught up with their academic skills. Super helpful to be able to let them write in the textbook.

Jen: [00:10:51] Then I'll bounce to Memoria Press, which I used completely their grade level package for a couple of years with my youngest child, and I didn't actually have to tweak too much. Pretty much I'm just out with them.

AJ: [00:11:04] You know, if you go and you look at their mission statement for their company, it's very, very clear that they're a religious publisher. That's what they're about.

Courtney: [00:11:12] Which isn't to say that the materials aren't good. I mean, I found some of them to be very helpful. And if you're like me, and you're a busy, busy mama, and you need a day by day layout with a day by day checklist, they have that. And I found it incredibly helpful, although I've never actually managed to make it work because I kept trying to Frankenstein it too much.

AJ: [00:11:38] It's very, very solid curriculum. And it is very doable, because everything is laid out for you. And that is one of the things that they have tried to do all along is make sure that whatever they put out is something that a person basically with no prior experience teaching or teaching that subject can pick up the book, read what it says, say the thing to their kid, and their kid will be able to do it.

[00:12:00] That is the reality of many, many homeschoolers, particularly people coming into classical education who may not have had one themselves. So if you've never had Latin, you can use their books and teach your kid Latin. That's great.

Courtney: [00:12:11] And of course, I know no Latin. I have no experience with it. But we could make that work.

Jen: [00:12:16] My final three are lit-based curriculums. I used Sonlight / Bookshark, Winter Promise, and Guest Hollow. The reason that I lean towards lit-based curriculums is not only that I am a bookaholic. But it's also because I can delete entire books easily. I can add my own math and science. I can basically Frankenstein their book lists, use their schedules, get the poor man's neoclassical curriculum for a lot less. There's no way I would pay that much. You can get all those books used. You can use your library. There's many, many ways. Plus, I also cut all those book lists down because there's no way we're going to study 50 books in one school year.

Courtney: [00:13:01] So you just got the teacher's manual?

Jen: [00:13:03] Yeah, they're very nicely laid out. And lately, they've added color, which is even fancier. So it looks really pretty, which I appreciate. You get it as a loose leaf. It's three hole punched. The reason I like Sonlight over Bookshark, Bookshark is their secular version. But they've laid out their manual differently. There's one page at the front, that is your weekly view, when you turn the page. It's got the notes for the

spines for that week. And then in a separate section, they've got the notes for the different books that you read. So you can easily just go and pull whatever books that you're going to use and then put those pages wherever you want them.

[00:13:45] I can like rearrange the whole instructors guide. I can take out the pages for the books that we're not using. I end up getting a very open and go version of a planner. The upper level instructor's guides are around \$100 a year and I will say that you don't need the student version unless you're going to hand it off to your kid, which I don't.

Courtney: [00:14:09] Memoria Press also has individual subject plans and you can buy those individual subject plans separately, which is super nice. I do that sometimes. Took me a little while to figure out. Those teacher's manuals that they sell are just the individual subject lesson plans put together. So if you buy the teacher's manual and paper you don't need to buy the digital plans, unless you want to do what I do, which is tediously copy the day's lesson out of the digital plan from Memoria Press and I paste it into Scholaric, which is a digital planner that I use. It doesn't take very long. It takes me about 45 minutes per subject for the year.

[00:14:52] I have Frankensteined myself a custom all-in-one planner for the subjects that we're using, which is really nice. I printed those out this fall and had them bound. So I have my own paper planner for the subjects that we're using.

AJ: [00:15:06] Nice.

Courtney: [00:15:08] It was like \$4.50 to get it bound at Office Depot.

Jen: [00:15:12] Well, that's not bad. Memoria Press also offers a digital planner that you can download, but there's no way to transfer the digital plans you buy from them into that planner, you still have to copy and paste. But if you like the layout of their planner, it's an option.

Courtney: [00:15:29] And they're cheap.

Jen: [00:15:29] They are cheap.

Courtney: [00:15:30] They're like \$2 or \$5, or \$7 for an entire year's worth of day by day plans.

AJ: [00:15:36] Yeah, their digital materials are very, very reasonable.

Courtney: [00:15:39] Didn't they create those for their Highlands Latin School?

AJ: [00:15:43] Yes. Most of their materials, actually, at least as I understand it, have been developed for use and developed in the context of Highlands Latin School. And then they're kind of test run there and edited based on the feedback that they get from the teachers and the parents and that sort of thing. And then they are released for the homeschooling market.

Courtney: [00:16:03] Which, by the way, it makes them one of the higher quality homeschool materials that you can get, because they have been through that process.

AJ: [00:16:11] Exactly. What they've got there actually works for the average child of that grade level.

[00:16:19] Yeah, it is high quality stuff.

Jen: [00:16:20] There's the Winter Promise and the Guest Hollow. They are both veteran homeschool families who have created their own curriculum. So they've been test run through their own family at home. They are very cheap. They don't even sell the books, they just sell their guides. And then you can get your books from wherever you would like.

[00:16:40] Winter Promise has a really cool program where the kids study animals for a whole year. I think it's like a first through fourth grade core and my kids loved that. We still did all of our regular subjects. But it basically was like a whole year where we just learned everything possible about every kind of animal and read just a ton of books that I wouldn't have found on my own.

[00:17:06] Well, okay, I will warn you against their dinosaur year because they're Creationists. So anybody out there would like to create a whole year of dinosaurs from real science.

Courtney: [00:17:15] Jen, I did that. I used a CK-12 flex book and the syllabus of a paleontology course from West Virginia University. And I correlated the material in a middle school textbook. So I Frankensteined a semester of paleontology for the dinosaur mad child, and it worked really well. So if you want that, hit me up, and I will send it to you.

Jen: [00:17:41] The other Winter Promise year that we used was called adventures in sea and sky. They market it to a second grade to ninth grade level. And I would say no. But it is a year of the world history of adventuring. It starts out with sailing and you learn all about how they made the ships and then how they would navigate. Then it goes into flight and you learn all about aeronautics and airplanes and then finally

into space travel. You know, there's a lot of links to NASA. We read a lot of books anyway. And so having a theme pulled together with a schedule for me is perfect.

Courtney: [00:18:17] That sounds really cool. Did you ever use Beautiful Feet? Because I have and I kind of liked it even though it was super religious.

Jen: [00:18:24] I used Beautiful Feet when they only had a couple programs and the one I used was Holling. Is it Holling? C. Holling, is that the author's name?

AJ: [00:18:31] Mm-hmm. Yep.

Jen: [00:18:34] Yeah, you read three of his books. And it you all through studying like the Great Lakes region.

Courtney: [00:18:40] Yeah, they still sell that. It's the Geography Through Literature, they call it now.

Jen: [00:18:44] Okay. Yeah, I did that, I think, three times, in total to make sure that everybody got through that.

AJ: [00:18:50] we use the books, but I never use their specific program for them.

Jen: [00:18:55] I'm just a sucker for a map, you know.

AJ: [00:18:56] Yeah, yeah, well.

Jen: [00:18:58] You can mark things on a map? I'm in!

AJ: [00:19:02] Cool, cool.

Courtney: [00:19:01] They also have one that's the history of the horse. So if you have a horse mad child, and you don't mind wading through some deeply religious content, they have that as well. I used the History of Science, and I blended it with BFSU because one of the things that I thought BFSU was missing was the history that intertwined like biographies of scientists.

[00:19:26] There are Bible verses in every lesson. So you're gonna have to work around that.

AJ: [00:19:32] Well, I have two very different curricula to discuss under this heading of secularizing religious materials. And the first one is Classical Academic Press's, logic and rhetoric books for high school. And I used a

few of these as is when I was teaching in a religious classical school, and then more recently, I have used them in my secular online tutorials. And these aren't the kind of books that have Bible quotes on every page, but they're definitely written for Christian classical schools and it shows.

[00:20:03] So for my tutorials, I've used the books more as an outline for structuring my class. And I create short lectures based on the materials, but I rarely use anything verbatim from the teachers manuals or the student workbooks beyond some basic definitions, just terms that you need to know for logic and rhetoric.

[00:20:19] In both cases, I ended up supplementing quite heavily either from college level textbooks or from the internet. So for example, with a student that I've been working with, most recently, when we went through the Art of Argument book, which covers logical fallacies, I brought in examples from Facebook and from letters to the editor, and memes, and Reddit and YouTube and all that sort of thing.

[00:20:39] And I also asked my student to find samples of the fallacy of the week, which we basically did on her own. And this was great fun for her because she got to she got to basically listen to her family members and point out every time they used a fallacy, which drove them nuts. But really, it got the point across. She really learned her fallacies very, very well doing that.

[00:20:57] And then with the Rhetoric Alive book, it's a very well laid out book, I think. They cover everything very carefully. And there is a focus there on making sure that students understand the difference between rhetoric and sophistry, and making sure that if you learn to be persuasive, that you basically that you use your superpowers for good, not evil. And that's really kind of the the theme of that.

[00:21:21] But one of the things that I did not love about that book is that the writing models, they're very classical in the sense that they these are very kind of old school, forgive me, dead white men kind of texts. A lot of them are drawn from the World War II era. So if your student is not that excited about that material, they're not ideal.

[00:21:40] So what I ended up doing was looking for examples that were relevant to current events, because the the family that this student belongs to, they hired me specifically to help this kid get excited about these subjects by linking into her current interests. So for example, this spring, we listened to two speeches about the whole COVID-19 pandemic, one of them from Queen Elizabeth and the other one from

Angela Merkel. And we used those to talk about the establishment of ethos. How do they establish their authority to speak on this topic?

[00:22:12] And then after the killing of George Floyd, we came to the agreement that we were going to study rhetoric through the lens of the Black Lives Matter movement. So my student analyzed Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail. So that was sample text for pathos. And then we looked at Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is Fourth of July?" We did that actually the week of Fourth of July and used that to talk about the traditional classical form of a speech. So where you start out with your exordium and narratio, and all that sort of thing.

[00:22:47] And then we also looked at a speech by a rapper named Killer Mike, who's from Atlanta, and he's also an activist and a well known person in that community. So then my student used the classical format that she learned in Douglass and some of the ideas that she got from Killer Mike and from other reading she'd been doing to write an essay about defunding the police.

[00:23:04] And in the process of this, I also helped her with some other speeches that she was doing for a service at her UU church and a few other things that came up in her life. I took the, again, I took the format, or the structure of the Rhetoric Alive book, but completely changed the writing models that we were using just to be more relevant to the student.

[00:23:23] And then the second curriculum that I wanted to talk about is one that I use my daughter and this is one that Jen mentioned, Rod and Staff. And specifically, we use Rod and Staff English and we also use math. So the Rod and Staff is... their English program is a very traditional grammar program, and they are a conservative Mennonite publisher from Kentucky. So this is one of those books that really does have Bible quotes on every page. And as Jen said, there are a lot of farm life references and church events mentioned and things like that. It's very, very old fashioned. They've got these black and white illustrations, and the kids and adults are wearing plain dress.

[00:23:57] And and these are folks who don't teach any secular literature in their schools at all. So only Bible, basically, and Anabaptist devotional literature. So it's a really quite sectarian program. But all that said, I absolutely love it. It's clear. It's thorough. It gets the job done. It's a lot less expensive than the comparable secular programs, something like like Hake, for example.

[00:24:19] Now my kid is completely non religious, like even even at age nine, she thought that a textbook called Building with Diligence was an absolute hoot. So we just... I just let her change sentences. It's kind of like substituting Gandalf for Jesus in. In our case, instead of Sister Miller baking cherry pies, it was Rainbow Dash saving Pinkie Pie. I would photocopy pages and let her color things in, draw pictures, all of that kind of stuff.

[00:24:43] And the same thing with the math program. It's procedural math, very old fashioned. We had to skip some problems that involved biblical weights and measures. I figured if she needs to build an ark, she can sort out cubits on her own, right? And what's kind of interesting for me comparing and contrasting these two programs is that secularizing Classical Academic Press was actually a lot more work for me even though the religious elements aren't as obvious.

[00:25:08] Honestly, I think many people could probably use those books pretty much as is, you just gloss over a few paragraphs where they you know, they have a reference to the Bible or something, something vaguely Christian in there. But I also wanted to make the content more modern and more relevant to my students. So I needed to do a lot of legwork to do that.

[00:25:26] By contrast, changing Rod and Staff was really easy because the subjects were more about form than content. I figured as long as my kid came away from their English course understanding verb tenses and direct objects and all that I didn't really care what the sentences were about. And that's even more true with the math. The content of the word problems really wasn't the point. How many bushels of wheat or whatever. The point was to learn how to solve those problems. So what I'd give our listeners as a takeaway is that it's actually pretty simple to secularize programs that are skills based, it's the content based ones that are a challenge, and particularly if you're trying not only to tweak the religious aspects, but also either the cultural relevance ones or where there's some politics in there as well.

Courtney:

[00:26:13] Unlike Jen, and unlike AJ, I live in rural West Virginia. I grew up here, and it's a different culture. For example, when I worked at a local public school, the principal brought in a pastor to lead in a prayer at the employee Christmas dinner and nobody blinked. So in that culture, a passing reference to a Bible verse or the inclusion of Bible stories in a history text are not even a big deal. I don't even blink.

[00:26:43] One of the first things I taught my children was to be respectful of other people's religion, to not argue with them about it.

That is something that we bring in to using homeschool curricula. It's a different perspective, I suppose.

[00:26:57] I also feel that I use a lot of those same working around it skills when working with some extremely progressive curricula.

[00:27:09] Thanks for listening to good enough homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your favorite podcasts by leaving us a review and then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for another curriculum.