Whose children are they? Using Kymlicka on multiculturalism to evaluate rights and freedom in Christian home education

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the entitlement of parents to educate their children in their Christian beliefs and whether, where this is enacted, if children can simultaneously be accorded sufficient autonomy to make their own religious choices. We use the so far unresearched example of Christian home education in England and, specifically, the implications of the proposed English Schools Bill (2022). Drawing on the work of Will Kymlicka (1995) we appraise this minority religious group, in terms of both external protection needs and charges of internal restriction within the context of largely unregulated home education. Quantitative and qualitative survey data from 462 Christian home educators is analysed to elucidate the minority positioning of the group before considering whether, according to Kymlicka’s argument, sufficient opportunities exist within the proffered education to proselytise, question and reject the faith if desired. We conclude that Christian home educators in the UK do constitute a minority group in need of political recognition to continue in the educational aspects of their faith. We also conclude that whilst, in this data set, internal restrictions are not evident, Christian home education is not homogenous. We agree with Kymlicka that opportunities for heresy and apostasy need to be clearly open to children being educated at home for religious reasons but argue that further research and a theoretical framing of ongoing public debate, rather than recourse to law, constitutes a way forward more likely to protect pluralism and minority freedoms.

Keywords: Christian education; home education; Schools Bill 2022; Kymlicka

# Introduction

This paper explores issues raised by proposed legislation concerning the home education of children in England. The Schools Bill (House of Lords, 2022) recommended state rights, through changes to primary legislation, to oversee home education in unprecedented ways, including a compulsory register of children not in school, including home educated children, changes to the issuing of School Attendance Orders (including automatic triggering in certain circumstances) and wide ranging and unspecified data collection rights (House of Lords, 2022). Home educators widely perceived this as a ‘power grab’ over parental rights as exemplified in UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) and parental responsibilities as exemplified in the Education Act, 1996, with concerns raised at the implications for both education and family privacy (HE Bytes, 2022). The Schools Bill carried multiple objectives, of which home education was only part, and received widespread objections (Weale, 2022). However, opposition by home educators does not appear to have contributed to its demise and when it was announced that a third reading of the Bill would not be taking place, this was accompanied by a commitment to continue with elements of the proposed changes, including the register of children not in school (Belger, 2022). This has been carried forward as an intention of the new Labour government and was further reiterated in the King’s Speech 2024 (Prime Minister’s Office, 2024).

Many of the objections raised by home educators concerned the boundaries of parental and state decision making regarding content and style of education. These anxieties were expressed by Lord Wei, a Conservative peer, who voiced opposition to the Bill’s capacity to enable Local Authority (LA) officials

to inspect what is being taught and then, for the slightest, subjective reason, force parents to put their children back into school using an attendance order (Wei, 2022).

For those home educating for reasons of religion, this can be read with particular portent. Trans-generational faith education is protected under Article 2 Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights and all legislation must be compliant with this. However, as Hill (2019) points out, it is not simply a matter of legal wording but also of the implementation of policy and the interpretations and perceptions of those affected. Examples such as the objections of some Muslim parents to parts of the national curriculum contradicting their faith beliefs (Vincent,2022) indicate that parents may not feel their faith rights to be adequately protected in practice. Certainly, Christian home educators have expressed anxiety about views taken on their faith-based education and our data, as set out below, suggests that many Christian home educating parents are not inclined to see Article 2 as sufficient practical protection for their faith grounded education.

This paper considers the position of this minority group through the lens of Will Kymlicka’s thinking on multicultural citizenship, the rights of minority groups in terms of the education of their children and practice of their faith and the rights of children to an open world view in which they are free to follow, question or reject faith pathways (Kymlicka, 1995).

# What’s the problem?

Home education in the UK holds legal parity with, largely state provided, school education. It is an option growing in popularity (Charles-Warner, 2020), offering the chance for parents to tailor an education to children’s interests and talents (Thomas, 1998), as well as a way of promulgating parental values and beliefs (Kunzman, 2010). However, it has also caused public and political disquiet with concerns including educational inadequacy (Morton, 2010), safeguarding risk (Morgan cited in Rothermel, 2015) and radicalisation (Simpson, 2017). Since 2009, there have been regular calls from across the political spectrum to regulate its practice and to bring it more closely into line with school standards (Pattison, 2020). The Schools Bill 2022, drawn up by the Conservative government, is the latest iteration of this, proposing compulsory registration of home educated children along with far reaching data gathering powers. The Bill has been widely seen by home educators as a prelude to the restriction of practice and the curtailing of the freedoms outlined above.

 Elsewhere, particularly the USA, where Christian home education (generally known as home schooling) constitutes the largest subset of the home educating population (Kunzman, 2010b), this has received greater research attention and Christian home schooling has carved out an ongoing voice in educational legal and political decision making (Gaither, 2017; Stevens, 2009). Advocates include religious home schooling in the success more generally attributed to home schooling, that it leads to academic achievement, social engagement and adult outcomes generally favourable when compared to those of the schooled population (Ray, 2017). Critics of religious home schooling argue that it denies children exposure to the core democratic values of mainstream society (Ross, 2010), it reduces children’s tolerance to other religions and points of view (Ross, 2010), it indoctrinates rather than educates (Kuusisto, 2003), it restricts curricula (Bartholet, 2020) and undermines children’s access to a particular kind of childhood (Beck, 2015).

Religious motivation appears less salient in English home education; Mitchell does not mention it at all when exploring the home education motives of 132 parents in her survey (Mitchell, 2021); and Rothermel (2005) mentions it only in passing. However, concerns about religious home education have been raised politically in both chambers of parliament (Sheerman, 2014; Soley,2017). Following this and the implementation of the Prevent anti-radicalisation programme, a small amount of research on Muslim home education has been conducted (Pattison, 2020; Myers and Bhopal, 2018). Pattison (2020) uses the framework of Stan Cohen’s moral panic (Cohen, 2002) to show how, under pressure from media and political suspicion, Muslim home educators felt themselves to be marginalised and misunderstood. Similarly, Myers and Bhopal (2018) consider the families in their case studies to be managing the perceptions of ‘risk’ placed on them by wider society. Both studies find participants withdrawing into their own communities for protection and understanding, a strategy which Pattison (2020) argues increases the aura of isolation and risk associated with them.

Whilst there is no religious breakdown within rising home education numbers, Christian home education, may be increasing as the character of religious education in schools changes, impacting on the Biblical duty of Christian parents to personally bring their children to faith; an explicit motivating factor in US Christian home schooling (Vigilante et al, 2013). Religious education constitutes part of the basic, not national, curriculum, and must be taught in all state funded schools (Long et al, 2019), with due regard to the Christian traditions of Great Britain, as well as with account of the other major religions represented in the country (Education Act, 1996). The explicit balance of this in the curriculum is met differently by different schools (Long et al, 2019), however Jackson (2013) traces the general replacement of Christian faith instruction with a wider, and not necessarily faith based, programme of ‘learning about’ the major world religions. For Christian parents, there remain faith school choices, largely Church of England or Catholic, as well as long-standing rights for parents to withdraw their child from religious education or to make alternative arrangements (Fancourt, 2022). However, the quality of religious education in schools has raised concerns including lack of specialist teachers, marginalisation to other curriculum pressures and the wherewithal within faith schools to teach from their faith perspective (Long et al, 2019). This reflects long-standing disquiet amongst Christians that their faith is being marginalised to the values of secular liberalism (Cox, 2004) and that that whilst state funded Church of England schools appear to be thriving, “some of these schools are only nominally Christian” (Pike, 2004, p 150).

In home education, parents are currently free to design their own (faith based) curricula, however such action may be challenged on the liberal premise that children have a right to religious autonomy. Tillson (2023) for example, considers the childhood of the philosopher Paul Hirst in a fundamentalist Christian sect, the Glanton Brethren. Despite his attendance at a state school, Tillson argues that Hirst’s upbringing constituted a form of indoctrination, damaging his personality and life prospects. Whilst Tillson seeks a moral case against Hirst’s parents, English case law also offers a legal possibility. Education may be designated suitable if it “primarily equips a child for life within the community of which he is a member, rather than the way of life in the wider country as a whole” but it must “not foreclose the child’s options in later years to adopt some other form of life if he wishes to do so” (R v Secretary of State for Education and Science Ex parte Talmud Torah Machzikei Hadass School Trust, 1985). Arguably the long-term effects of Hirst’s religious upbringing did indeed create barriers to his life on leaving the sect by restricting his personal development and preventing him from leading the life ‘he had most reason to live’ (Tillson, 2023, p 306).

**Kymlicka on minority rights**

We use the work of Will Kymlicka on the rights of both individuals and minority groups to explore the perspectives of Christian home educators, considering how the freedom to practise faith (specifically the education of children within that faith) can be made compatible with commonly expressed doubts about the effect of the practice on children.  According to Kymlicka (1995), minorities within liberal democracies are entitled to practise their traditions and beliefs but, in order to do so, may require protection from being overrun, undermined, compromised or marginalised by their minority position. Whilst calling for their protection, Kymlicka also argues that minority group members should not suffer from the imposition of internal restrictions through that group membership. Minority individuals should be free to embrace or leave their heritage groups and should not be constrained by, or forced into, practices inherent to the group, nor should they be blocked from enjoying the freedoms and protections of the mainstream society of which they are also part.  Although Kymlicka’s arguments are based on cultural, rather than religious minorities, a position later critiqued (Kymlicka, 2016; Newman, 2003), the case of Paul Hirst, as discussed by Tillson, exemplifies Kymlicka’s argument. The Glanton Brethren should be free to practice their religion but the children of its members should equally be free to leave that community, by their own autonomous decision, and should not be restricted from the choice to join mainstream society.

***External Protection***

External protection is concerned with the preservation of a distinctive existence for minority groups, ‘by limiting the impact of the decisions of the larger society’ (Kymlicka, 1995, p36).  Such protection promotes fairness between pluralistic groups, protects minorities from subsummation into the mainstream and furthers the general liberal aims of society.

Imposing a certain (secular) form of education on a citizenry is religious discrimination if parents (and children) feel that this practice and its consequences denies or undermines the faith they wish to uphold. This is not withstanding the family capacity to practice faith in private as the secular education may contradict, undermine or be inimical to the full exercising of this private capacity. It is an infringement of liberal democracy and of UNCRC (Article 14) to restrict not just the practice of religion but also the recognised role of parents in raising their children within their faith as a fundamental act of meaning within their own lives (Callan, 2000 p52).

In such situations, Kymlicka proposes three types of external protection for minority groups which delineate the relationship between the group in question and the wider society in which it is located. These are special group representation rights within political institutions, rights of self-governance on particular issues of central importance and rights that protect specific practices which might not be supported through existing markets or structures.   This third option, of protecting practices not supported through existing structures, would ensure a right to faith-based home education within a secularly schooled wider society.

***Internal Restriction***

Internal restriction is concerned with protecting individuals within the minority group from the power of the collective to impose restrictive behaviours, practices and traditions upon individuals without their consent.  Examples given by Kymlicka include sanctioned gender violence and arranged marriage.  The arguments of Tillson (2023) condemning the religious upbringing of Paul Hirst and the charges levelled at home education by, for example, Ross (2010), focus on internal restrictions, such as the limiting of contact with wider society, which enables the inculcation of views rejected by wider society (such as creationism rather than evolution), the intolerance of practices accepted by wider society, (such as homosexuality) and the loss of normative childhood experiences (such as certain types of play and discipline). Ross (2010) is concerned with the social damage that may be caused through separate educations leading to a splintered society.  Tillson (2023) focuses on the effect on the individual, including the legacy of internal restrictions in later life.

Education which is specifically aimed at passing on, rather than offering opportunities to explore faith (Callan, 2000), can be seen as constituting an internal restriction. Kymlicka (1995) cites the example of the Amish who use legalised internal restriction rights to limit their children’s mainstream schooling for fear that, once exposed to wider society, children may choose to reject their home faith. Home education can be similarly interpreted where parents opt out of school in the belief that it is school that poses the threat to religious integrity. Such action can be seen as an internal restriction given that it aims to limit the opportunity for minority group members to autonomously exit the group.

However, Lewin’s (2022) exploration of the boundaries between indoctrination and education highlight the difficulties of defining and separating these; as Kymlicka points out internal restriction may be very difficult for outsiders to pin point. There are also particular philosophical arguments about the relationships between Christian theology and the philosophy of education (Hull, 1976). These lie beyond the scope of this paper but suffice to say that Christian education is conceived by many to inherently require critical reflection and active choice (Spiecker, 1991) rather than the encouragement of diminished rationality (Snook, 1972). Holmes (2017) argues that the chance to question and interrogate ideas is integral to a wholesome and holistic approach to Christian education and Kuusisto (2003) found that intergenerational sharing of belief is promoted through democratic styles of parenting and the exercising of child choice.  Thus, the question of internal restriction in Christian education remains an open one.

***Synthesising external protection and internal restrictions***

Kymlicka (1995) argues that individuals must be free, and able, to consider different versions of the good life. Key to this is education, including access to information and the freedom to reject or embrace different choices; conditions which rely on internal openness, rather than restriction.  Also required is the reflective capacity to assess and consider the meaning of different choices.  Jackson (2013) demonstrates how religious education in state funded schools has moved from instruction in Christianity to learning about different religions, ostensibly offering the opportunity for children to consider different faiths and to choose, or not, between them. According to Kymlicka, a prerequisite to such a meaningful choice is access to the cultural import that will inform rejection or acceptance.  In other words, a faith and life choice, such as Christianity, can only be taken from an informed position that includes a profound understanding of the cultural and religious narratives which give it meaning. Jackson and Everington (2017) argue that skilled and reflective classroom teachers can accomplish this without influencing students towards their own point of view. However, the Christian fathers in Vigilante et al’s research (2013, p 213) argue that ‘You cannot rely on somebody else to teach them something they don’t believe’, implying that authentic religious teaching cannot be achieved through transmission of an ‘impartial’ nature, but needs to be heartfelt, from within the faith. Whatever the actual possibilities of professional teaching, it may still remain parents’ conviction that believers should educate children into faith in order for that teaching to be authentic.

This leads to two further questions - what is the relationship between teaching from within the faith and the internal restriction of indoctrination (Lewin, 2022), and how is Kymlicka’s criterion of access to information and opportunity for reflection incorporated within a Christian education?

It is often difficult, Kymlicka (1995) points out, for outsiders to ascertain if self-government of a group will lead to individual oppressions and therefore to decide what should count as an internal restriction in presenting a world view to children. Numerous protective practices surround the education of children in terms of when, how and whether they should come in contact with information and ideas that may in some way threaten their ‘innocence’ (Garlen, 2019).  Vigilante et al (2013) describe the Christian fathers in their study creating a ‘protective cocoon’ (a concept borrowed from Gidden, 1991) by eliminating unwanted secular influences (including school and social contact that might promulgate undesirable ideas and behaviours) from their children’s lives. Whilst the actions of the Christian parents may appear to be particular, given their grounding in religious belief, they mirror the value transmitting practices used to protect children from other perceived harmful contact (violence, commercialisation, sexualisation, consumerism) and are as applicable to a secular perspective as a religious one (Garlen, 2019).  An obvious danger here for the liberal democratic project is that, as Carper (2000, p 17) expresses, the ‘edicts of conformity’ may come to dominate over the ‘edicts of toleration’.

Recognising internal restriction is further obfuscated by the heterogeneity of Christian practice, beliefs and educational approaches. For the fathers in Vigilante et al’s research (2013), teaching Christianity makes no sense without faith, however this does not necessarily mean that theology is never questioned or interrogated. Pazimo (1992) calls Christian education a ‘preparadigmatic’ discipline that lacks a dominant framework and instead cites the creativity and freedom needed in addressing the challenges of Christian learning and teaching.  Holmes (2017) asserts the need for healthy questioning and personalisation of beliefs as integral to holistic Christian education, aligning with the emphasis on exegesis, hermeneutics and contextualisation in the responsible sharing, rather than mechanical transmission, of Christian knowledge (Pazmino, 1992).  Indeed, the latter may be more akin to the ‘knowledge about’, rather than ‘education in’ model (Jackson, 2013) which characterises secular religious education and in which teacher and curriculum are viewed as neutral agents rather than purveyors of values and life views.  Jackson (2021) argues that any rationalisation of belief must be informed by further belief, faith and hope, throwing into doubt the very notion of an unbiased education.  Critical approaches within Christian home education are certainly not guaranteed, as with any other form of education, but they are possible and, where practised, could contribute to the reflective space to which Kymlicka (1995) points.

We now take the data from Christian home-educators to explore their needs in terms of external protections in an increasingly secular educational environment and the extent to which their faith-based home education imposes internal restriction on their children’s upbringing.

**Methodology**

This research was conducted in response to a request from a Christian home education organisation concerned over the then impending Schools Bill. From this initial contact a focus group, consisting of five members from a selection of Christian home education groups and the research team, was held. Building on this, a comprehensive 17 question survey (with 20 sub questions) consisting of open and closed questions was drawn up and piloted. Participants were fully informed on the research process and withdrawal procedures and anonymity and confidentiality carefully protected. The aim was to conduct a descriptive survey (Mukherhji and Albon, 2018) designed to highlight the priorities of Christian home educators and, in particular, issues raised by the potential legislative changes. Questions were both cognitive and cumulative in nature (Gronmo, 2020) relating to both circumstances and values. Four questions, each with qualitative and quantitative sections have been analysed for this paper.

The survey was advertised amongst Christian home education groups, through gatekeeper contacts, with the majority of responses coming from two main UK wide groups representing 94.3% of respondents (many respondents belonged to multiple groups). Survey returns were mostly fully completed with prolific use being made of open-ended questions. However, there is no claim to representativeness of either home education in general or Christian home education in particular. Although Braun et al (2021) refer to the ‘wide angled lens’ of survey research, we caution that this may have been tempered by group membership and the cultivation of thinking, such as the dissemination of updates on the Bill’s progress, within the groups. Nevertheless, the response rate has allowed us to consider a richness and range from a rarely heard from minority group.

A quantitative stance was taken to the cognitive questions, giving an opportunity to build an overall picture of identity and reaction to the Schools Bill. Qualitative answers then allowed for a greater understanding of the Christian home educators’ perspective, values and goals to be mapped against the cognitive answers. In designing the survey in this way, we followed the arguments of Braun et al (2021) that surveys can provide rich, qualitative data on par with interviews. As these authors maintain, respondents in this survey took advantage of the open-ended questions to speak on a topic clearly of great interest and importance to them allowing a thematic analysis across the data set.

Kymlicka’s work on minority rights was chosen a posteriori as a suitable theoretical framework on the grounds of its focus on rights of group-differentiation for those coercively incorporated into the wider machinations of the state (Kymlicka, 1995; Song, 2020). This accords with emergent data themes as well as the initial impetus for groups seeking out research assistance. The conceptual grounding of the research project, both in the discourse of participants and instigators, as well as the wider terms of debate around home education, sets a meta-cognitive framework into which Kymlicka’s theoretical frame may be set (Kivunja, 2018).

Kymlicka’s concepts of external protection and internal restriction were used as a deductive template (Fereday, 2006) forming first order themes for the qualitative data. These were then connected to second order themes arising from the particularities of Christian home education as expressed in the focus group. Sub themes were then identified as inductive codes arising from the data through thematic analysis. These themes were then related back to first and second order themes as shown in table one.

(Table 1 here)

The interaction of these three layers of analysis was worked on individually and collaboratively by the authors as an iterative and reflexive process (Fereday, 2006) with the aim of understanding the subjective and lived experience of the Christian home educators within a political (and practical) framework.

**Analysis**

***Christian Home Educators as a minority group in need of external protection***

The initial approach by representatives of a Christian home educating group and the subsequent focus group, foregrounded group identity; itself a pre-condition of Kymlica’s theory of external protection. To further ascertain the strength of identity as Christian home educators, the survey asked about the role which faith had played in the choice to home educate.  Figure 1 shows it to be a major driver, and therefore an indication of specific identity as Christian home educators (as opposed to those who might be home educating for other reasons and happen to be Christian).

(Figure 1 here)

When asked about public perceptions of Christian home educators by wider society (Figure 2), over half (52%) felt this to be negative.   A substantial number felt perceptions to be neutral or were unsure but only 5% judged that Christian home educators were positively viewed.

(Figure 2 here)

Strong group identity combined with a perception of negativity from wider society indicates a minority group which may be in danger of social pressure (Kymlicka, 1995).

Thematic analysis of qualitative responses has been organised under the inductive codes of marginalisation, politicisation, misunderstanding and the perceived impact of Schools Bill as show in Table 1.

*Marginalisation*

Many respondents conveyed feelings of being insignificant or peripheral to wider society,

I'm not sure a lot of society even knows we exist.

Most people are unaware of the issues

Wider society deems home education to be second rate and Christianity to be irrelevant.

Some felt that they were being forced into a mainstream mould which denied their right to autonomy of faith:

There seems to be this insane focus on trying to lump diverse faiths together in a blender and forcing people to consume the result. We need to respect each other as people, but be absolutely free to be different.

Whilst respondents felt the effects of marginalisation as individuals, they attributed such experiences to group membership, with some expressing that personal contact could mitigate negative public understanding:

[Views] usually based on ignorance. Most people who hold such views have never met one Christian home educator.

I think people who know us like us and admire what we are doing (although they do not understand it).

Lack of recognition and views that faith is not an important educational consideration are both factors that indicate marginalisation as exemplified by Kymlicka (1995).

*Politicisation*

Respondents indicated that they felt politically positioned as Christian home educators, stating that wider society viewed them as ‘bigoted fundamentalists’, ‘radical’, ‘extreme right wing’, ‘intolerant’ and ‘narrow minded’.  As with the above, these pejoratives seem to be applied to the collective of Christian home educators, rather than specific individuals. The perception of group political difference can be used to imply that the collective is disjointed from wider society and is therefore unsafe, posing a risk to others:

I think Christians are viewed as intolerant and with dangerous viewpoints.

Some blamed negative stereotypes and the media for the portrayal of Christians in this way:

The press likes to accuse Christians of hating people if they disagree with their lifestyle choices.

The idea of risk, both in terms of a risk to society and at risk from society (Myers and Bhopal, 2018) is recognisable.

There's an assumption from the general public that extremism and isolation are our aims.

I think we are possibly viewed as radical and that we want to teach our children at home to indoctrinate them into our beliefs.

This echoes the work of Pattison (2020) who found Muslim home educators felt politicised and viewed as unsafe by wider society causing them to retreat; rather than the arguments of Tillson (2023) and Ross (2010) that such groups deliberately eschew contact in acts of self-isolation.

*Misunderstanding*

Participants reported being incorrectly represented, misunderstood or ‘portrayed badly.’  Media and politicians were often blamed for this and were seen as contributing substantially to more general disapproval.

We are portrayed badly and inaccurately in media

Christianity has been attacked relentlessly in the arts and media for some time now.

Some comments extended these negative portrayals into rationales which could be used against the raising of children in the Christian faith

The faith issues can be seen by some as indoctrination and therefore all are labelled.

I sense that people are quick to label you as a Christian home educator because they can then make assumptions that you are some kind of extremist seeking to teach un-PC ideas to your children.

The suspicion over Christian home education even extended into faith communities:

From our experience even at our own church it feels like people think we’re judging them by our decision. They rarely ask how we are, there is no support from them because they don’t ask what we do and don’t want to know.

However, many spoke about increased understanding of home education since Covid lockdowns. Others pointed to the power of personal contact to confront stereotypes. Nevertheless, the combination of ‘Christian’ and ‘home educator’ gave reason for double discrimination.

Much of society believes Christian home educators are brainwashing their children into believing in God.

*Impact of Schools Bill*

Figure 3 shows that close to eighty six percent of respondents felt that the Schools Bill would be poor in upholding Christian values.

(Figure 3 here)

Some argued that it does ‘not even recognise Biblical Christian values’ whilst others felt that it explicitly did not permit such values:

There is nothing at all in the bill about Christian values. Indeed, much of the bill is intended to give more authority to government and take authority from the parents - this is contrary to Christian values in and of itself.

 The power of the Bill to undermine parental educational choice was expressly seen as being in opposition to Christian values, indicating firstly that this group feel that Christian values are distinct and secondly, are vulnerable to being overrun by secular legislation. In arguing this point, many participants made Biblical references to Christian parental responsibility, such as ‘parents should be the ones to train our children up in the ways of the Lord (Proverbs 22:6)’, others spoke of the ‘Christian worldview’ as placing the responsibility for children within the family.  That parents saw the Schools Bill compromising the practice of direct Biblical instruction is the clearest indication of potential religious discrimination.

(Figure 4 here)

Parents saw the Schools Bill as shifting the locus of decision making from parent to state, thus opening up a pathway to the prioritisation of secular values and the repression of faith. Whilst this move would affect all families and society in general, the explicit departure from Biblical visions of the family would be particularly detrimental to the Christian way of life. Educationally, many felt that the Schools Bill would prevent them teaching Biblical perspectives to their child, and curtail their choice of educational content. Particular issues, perceived to be counter to their understanding of Biblical teaching, were those surrounding LGBTQ+ and more broadly family, identity, and marriage.  As outlined above, Ross (2010) has expressed concern that intolerance and prejudice may be passed on within religious home education.  Here however, respondents expressed the other side of that argument, in that they felt threatened in their freedom to teach their Christian worldview to their children.

There was further concern that matters of interpretation would run against the Christian perspective where authority was unlikely to be informed by, or about, this perspective:

It leaves you extremely vulnerable to local authority’s opinion that may not match with your own sincerely held beliefs … we will be considered ‘vulnerable’ just because we teach from a faith perspective.

The boundary between the exercising of personal faith and the education of children within that faith was also questioned by parents:

The part on seizing unsuitable materials is particularly worrying. We have a lot of Christian books …. Will they take my personal books because I might use them to teach?

The perceptions of belonging to a marginalised and misunderstood group alongside the threat to the continuing practice of faith in accordance with religious texts, places the Christian home educators in the position outlined by Kymlicka (1995) as a group in need of external protection in order to be able to continue a way of life and religious practice without being coercively assimilated into the mainstream.

***Internal restriction through imposition of religious belief and loss of individual autonomy***

Kymlicka (1995) describes internal restrictions as being placed on ‘basic civil and political liberties’ (p36) through the imposition of cultural tradition or religious orthodoxy. In this case, Christian parents might raise children in narrow views or orthodox doctrines, restricting their world experience, exposure to alternative views and alienating them from mainstream society.   A widely perceived narrative on Christian home education is that it imposes non-mainstream views on children and may indoctrinate them with intolerances or other objectionable beliefs.  Whilst Ross (2010) is concerned with the effects this may have on wider society, Kymlicka (1995) focuses on the right of the individual to question and change their beliefs in the light of new information or changes in value.  His argues that liberal autonomy means that life should be lived ‘from the inside’, in accordance with an individual's beliefs and values, rather than according to criteria imposed from the outside.  It is the capacity of individuals to reflect on, question and make decisions about their lives that counteracts the potential internal restrictions imposed by the group.   Specifically, with reference to religion, Kymlicka (1995) argues that liberal society must uphold rights to proselytise, to question (heresy) and to reject faith (apostasy); an argument which places the autonomy of the individual above the socio-political toleration of the group (Newman 2003).  These three criteria are now taken as categories of analysis of the Christian parents’ descriptions of their home education.

***Proselytising***

Figure 1 shows that Christian parents were highly motivated to take up home education, both as a fulfilment of their own faith and also as a means and opportunity to bring children into that faith.  Kymlicka (1995) describes the opportunity to advocate faith as a fundamental aspect of liberal democracy, one espoused by the parents in many of their comments.

 Felt we must bring up children knowing God's truth and with Biblical Worldview

As a mother who is saved by Christ for eternal life, my primary responsibility is to raise my child to teach the gospel and live out together to build a sure foundation in the truth.

I just wanted to honour the Lord. I wanted to be a good steward of the children He had given me, and raise them for His Kingdom.

***Questioning***

Kymlicka stresses the liberal principle of individual capacity to question doctrine and, whilst bringing children up in faith is clearly extremely important, parents also talked about including views other than their own:

We make sure there is a width of worldview represented and that at least part of it reflects our Christian beliefs.

I don't think a curriculum with lots of Bible texts is the answer, as I have found that the children need to be challenged with what other children are being taught, so they can critically appraise other viewpoints.

Many parents acknowledged implicitly or explicitly that following a faith is not necessarily easy or straightforward and that many theological or lifestyle implications need to be worked through, echoing the views of Pazimo (1992) that there are questions of interpretation (exegesis) and the need to establish principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) rather than a simplistic handing over of articles of faith.

We loved being able to have deep conversations about our faith

Through the years, we've been able to use our time together …  and many conversations around faith.

These parents expressed the thought that children need to question and learn about other perspectives:

I think it's [Christianity] part of our family culture and part of who we are, so I don't think it could not be a part of our education. But I do want them to learn from others in the home education community, of all faiths and none, to treat each person they encounter with respect.

I aim to choose resources that reflect our faith, whilst balancing that with making sure our children are aware of other faiths.

We encourage our children to ask questions as well: don't just follow a road because someone told you. You need to know why you believe it is the right way.

***Rejecting***

Liberal society, argues Kymlicka, must allow for the freedom of apostasy, the revision of values and the rejection of faith. Some parents also highlighted the importance of personal conviction:

You cannot inherit being a Christian as it is a personal choice.

More exceptionally, some parents explicitly described the religious freedom they sought for their children apart from, and even away, from their own faith:

I am Christian. I wish for my daughter to be whoever she wants to be. She has not been christened. Occasionally we discuss all religions, including atheist beliefs.

We want to share a Christian worldview with our children when they are young (as well as explaining other worldviews so later they can choose).

For some it was not about forcing a decision but making the space to allow for the enactment of free choice:

Christianity is part of our life and we wanted our children to be free to be Christians if they chose without ridicule or being taught about the faith by those with no faith.

Other parents describe the wherewithal to consider and reflect as an integral part of their educational aims.  Like the Muslim parents in Pattison (2020), this parent describes a rich and varied world opened up by religious home education:

Sometimes I think the idea of a faith-based education is seen as one-sided whereas it can in reality give children the chance to learn from a more varied breadth of perspectives. I'm keen for the children to understand the classics and see how western philosophy today is shaped by the past, and to learn how to weigh arguments for themselves. These aren't necessarily taught in state schools. Grappling with the big ideas, learning about the power of rhetoric, and the need to thoughtfully consider opposing views is a central part of what we do. I want to raise children able to think for themselves and not be afraid of difference, to respect other people and be confident in standing on their own beliefs.

**Conclusion**

This paper has considered the minority practice of Christian home education in England in the first research of its kind.  We have used the arguments of Will Kymlicka to consider the position of Christian home educators as a minority group in need of external protection as well as considering the question of internal restrictions potentially imposed through a religious education.

Our survey data of 462 English home educators showed that many feel marginalised and misunderstood.  An overwhelming majority feel threatened by the Schools Bill and particularly state capacity to overrule their autonomy to raise their children in the convictions of their faith.  We therefore conclude that external protections of the kind outlined by Kymlicka (1995) should be considered in future policy which might affect religious home education and certainly that this group should be more widely recognised and considered in policy on both national and local levels.

Turning to Kymlicka’s concerns with internal restriction; this data showed a strong awareness amongst parents of perceived negative perceptions of their faith and educational choices. Whilst the potential restrictions of faith education were recognised, many parents explicitly rejected that their education involved this with many referring to child autonomy and the need for ‘ownership’ of beliefs. Other parents saw their faith perspectives as liberating rather than oppressive and this begs the question as to how an internal restriction can actually be defined and recognised.  More specific reflection and investigation is needed on this subject.

In matters of questioning and religious autonomy, a number of parents demonstrated this to be possible within their brand of Christian education, and considered it to be an integral part of faith education.  The possibility of the criteria proposed by Kymlicka (1995) therefore seems assured.  However, this is a long way from guaranteeing that they will be part of all examples of Christian home education.  It equally does not address that even where education is open to apostasy, this may come at immense personal cost (Tillson, 2023).  Apostatic freedom is complicated by its enmeshment in wider human and spiritual network of values, relationships and beliefs that make up faith and family communities and individual lives (Kuusisto, 2003).

Twenty years ago, Pike (2004) asked “should the values of the Christian family really be marginalized in favor of values the state happens to choose?” (Pike, 2004, p154) The turn of schooling and the ideology of the Schools Bill, might suggest that the answer to this question is moving towards the affirmative. However, the case raised by Christian home education is not unique, rather illustrative of the dilemmas posed for liberal societies in accommodating diversity in national policy (Vincent, 2022). What is perhaps different about it is that it confronts the cultural default to Christianity within a Christian country (Strhan et al, 2024), posing dilemmas of pluralism which cannot be simply answered by recourse to demands of adherence to supposedly British criteria of ‘national belonging’ as has been used to address other problematics of pluralism (Vincent, 2022). Instead, Vincent (2022) argues against resorting to law to solve the problems of co-existence, calling rather for a more robust public dialogue that harnesses agonism to encourage sustained debate and response; she simultaneously acknowledges how difficult this is in practice. Framing such as Kymlicka’s, may help to rationalise and tame the debate for all involved. Certainly, before the return to legislation of the edicts of the Schools Bill there are hard questions to address if we are not to accept the diminishment of democratic representation for minority voices in policy.   This paper makes a small start on a much bigger project of understanding and reflection which we hope will be taken up by others in the near future.

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*Table 1: Identification of themes through conceptual framework to inductive codes*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| First order theme | Second order theme | Sub themes  |
| Deductive | Inductive |
| Conceptual framework | Focus group code | Survey data codes |
| External Protection  | Identity as a minority group in need of external protection | MarginalisationPoliticisation MisunderstandingImpact of Schools Bill  |
| Internal Restriction | Internal restriction through imposition of religious belief and loss of individual autonomy  | ProselytisingQuestioningRejecting |

**Figure 1: Responses to the question How much part did faith play in choosing to home educate?**



**Figure 2: Responses to question: How do you think Christian home educators are viewed by wider society?**



**Figure 3: Responses to question: To what extent do you think the Schools Bill upholds Christian values?**



**Figure 4: Responses to question: How do you think the Schools Bill will effect Christian Home education?**

