

Raising ‘True Believers’: Anti-Abortion ‘Education’ for Primary Children in the UK

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Abstract

In the UK, the vast majority of people accept abortion, whether or not they are religious. Holding an absolutist anti-abortion view is out of line with the general population. The overwhelming majority of anti-abortion activists are motivated by conservative Christian religious beliefs, not necessarily shared by others in their faith communities. Their minority position, and ageing population, poses issues for the continuance of the anti-abortion movement, creating a need for specific anti-abortion religious socialisation that is unavailable elsewhere. Drawing on data from a longitudinal ethnographic study of anti-abortion activism, this article highlights the ways in which anti-abortion activists seek to develop anti-abortion values among primary-aged children. It illustrates their conflict between the need to develop a strong anti-abortion identity and involving children in potentially controversial discussions on abortion. We use the framework of lived religion to argue that, while much attention has been given to the concerns about children in minority religions, this has resulted in a lack of attention to the diversity of practices within mainstream religious communities, and how controversial forms of socialisation are managed.

Keywords

abortion education, anti-abortion activism, children, educational practices, lived religion, religious socialisation

Introduction

In the UK, most people accept abortion; holding an absolutist anti-abortion view, where abortion is rejected in all circumstances, is rare (Sheldon et al., 2022). Evidence from the British Social Attitudes survey shows that only 7% of the population holds an absolutist position and this is associated with older adults (Swales and Taylor, 2017). Those active in the anti-abortion movement are motivated by conservative Christian religious beliefs, and they are often critical of, or even deny, that those who accept abortion are ‘true’

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members of their faith community (Lowe and Page, 2022). However, they are unrepresentative of their broader faith communities who mostly believe abortion should be accessible (e.g. 61% of Catholics agree that abortion is acceptable if a woman does not wish to have a child – Swales and Taylor, 2017). This poses a significant problem for the anti-abortion movement.¹ Many traditional supporters are getting older or have died. While there has always been attempts to engage young people, renewed efforts to attract and retain young people are being made. It is within this wider picture of concerns about an ‘ageing’ social movement, and a faith position where being anti-abortion is a central part of their faith practice, that the children of anti-abortion activists are positioned.

Religious socialisation is a key mechanism through which certain religious ideas and practices are cemented. Although the agents of religious socialisation are varied, Sherkat (2003) argues that parents are primary sources of influence, with their impact potentially being lifelong. Parents determine the schedules for young children, enabling the embedding of regular and routinised religious practice, such as church attendance. Such processes enable the very embodiment of religious identity, as the body becomes moulded and shaped in relation to a faith tradition (Shepherd, 2010). Despite this, only half of those raised in a religion will continue an affinity (Shepherd, 2010; Woodhead, 2017). When religious views and practices are controversial, the stakes are high, given there are no guarantees that others can be converted to the cause. Utilising children as a resource for the endurance of particular beliefs can become a key strategy, with religious movements holding counternormative values investing heavily in socialization techniques (Holden, 2001).

This article draws from a longitudinal ethnography of UK anti-abortion activism. It focuses on anti-abortion education using data from workshops aimed at primary-aged children (under 12) and parental discussions around raising children to be anti-abortion. Almost all anti-abortion activists in the UK are Christian, with a clear majority being Catholic and the rest coming mainly from Evangelical churches (Lowe and Page, 2022). Hence the primary target audience of these sessions is mainly conservative Christian parents and children, (particularly Catholic). Alongside outlining anti-abortion socialisation, we will argue that their education mission itself is a form of lived religion that seeks to reinforce their understanding of themselves as righteous Christians. This provokes tension for two reasons: their views are counternormative (even within their religious communities) and educating children about abortion is potentially controversial.

The variability of religious practice highlights a need to recognise religion as complex and nuanced. We take a lived religion approach, where everyday experiences, learned practices and shared meanings are central to understanding belief (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2007). This bottom-up approach to social interaction focuses on the everyday activities of individuals, such as play — devised to encourage children to form an anti-abortion identity. Through examining ‘mundane’ practices, we can understand the role that religion plays in people’s lives. Material objects play a significant role in this analysis (Morgan, 2010) where adults deploy child-centred objects to facilitate a particular material world. For anti-abortion activists, these objects include brightly coloured picture books and activities that centralise the assumed interests of children, such as craft. These activities are typical of the kinds of child-focused tasks enacted in church spaces to form a Christian identity (Strhan, 2019). By using a lived religion approach, we seek to explain

how specific educational activities align with the broader context of an anti-abortion movement in which faith understandings motivate individual involvement. We focus on the nuanced and complex educational practices that attempt to raise ‘true believers’ within the conservative Christian anti-abortion movement, emphasising the explicit development of lived religious enclaves within broader communities of practice.

Religious socialisation of children

As Bartkowski et al. (2019) has argued, the impact of children’s religious socialisation has attracted growing interest, especially whether or not it has a beneficial psychological impact. Such research typically focuses on ‘mainstream religions’.² Meanwhile research on ‘minority’ religious movements has often been rooted in concerns about risk to children (Frisk et al., 2018). As Klasson Sundin illustrates, when considering the religious freedom of children, the focus is often on the *freedom to* actively practise a parent’s religion where it is a mainstream religion, but *freedom from* a parent’s religion when it is seen as controversial (Klasson Sundin in Frisk et al., 2018). In this framing, ‘mainstream’ religions like Anglicanism and Catholicism are more likely to be considered ‘safe’, their schools deemed appropriate and valued environments for children’s educational journeys (Hanemann, 2016). Meanwhile, minority religions are considered more controversial and potentially problematic, particularly for children. This framework overlooks diversity both between and within ‘mainstream’ and controversial minority religions that shape individual experiences (Frisk et al., 2018). Indeed, religious traditions are not uniformly experienced. For example, Cuneo’s (1997) research on Catholicism in the United States found distinctly different enclaves, with the ‘fundamentalist’ Catholics advocating different arguments and courses of action than the broader Church community. Anti-abortion activists can be understood as their own enclave within mainstream traditions, with the borders of belonging enacted through lived practices and activities that demonstrate strict adherence to traditional Church teaching on abortion.

A central aim of religious socialisation is to try to ensure that children adopt the beliefs and values of their parents’ religion (Orsi, 2017). As Strhan (2019) argues, ‘children powerfully embody the future for adults, representing the possible futures or non-futures of a particular religious culture, and their involvement or non-involvement in religion can therefore provoke anxiety’ (p. 2). While parents play a central role in this endeavour (Boyatzis and Janicki, 2003), formal and informal instruction also takes place through religious schools, youth groups, and specific activities provided for children. British Sunday schools were of central importance in disseminating Christian doctrine and values to children (McCartney, 2019). Particularly for younger children, play was often adopted within Christianity as a child-centred approach to religious instruction (Hyde, 2011). Play and arts-based activities are also often practised as part of the religious education curriculum in schools (for examples see Benoit, 2021). As Benoit (2021) argues, while activities are often experienced as fun rather than indoctrination, even when they occur during visits to religious buildings, they nevertheless play a role in fostering a sense of identity that is shared with others. Strhan (2019) notes that play can be deployed as an effective way of engaging with serious existential questions.

While anti-abortion activists often understand their actions with the UK anti-abortion movement positively, the majority of the population disagree (Lowe and Page, 2022; Sheldon et al., 2022). For example, when positioned outside of abortion services, anti-abortion activists believe they are offering support, but their presence is frequently experienced as harassment (Lowe and Page, 2022). As well as the wider non-religious community, fellow churchgoers also denounce their activities (Lowe and Page, 2022; Turtle and Bloomer, 2022). Activists constitute an enclave within their religious communities – they are embedded as highly engaged members, but they are also separately defined through their participation in the anti-abortion movement. Consequently, despite the doctrinal position against abortion taken by some mainstream Christian denominations, within Britain, anti-abortion socialisation practices for primary-aged children are likely to be considered controversial.

In general terms, childhood radicalisation has become a policy concern (Stanley and Guru, 2015). The government defines extremism as vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including tolerance of individual liberty, and different faiths and beliefs (HM Government, 2015). Hence, at face value, actively campaigning against abortion could be seen to fall within this definition given the lack of tolerance for the beliefs of others and its clear reduction of autonomy for women. However, the privileged position given to mainstream Christianity within the UK, including its institutionalisation within non-faith schools (Benoit, 2021), means that controversial beliefs within mainstream Christianity, and their transmission to children, are less likely to be questioned.

Anti-abortion activism as lived religion

As we have shown elsewhere (Lowe and Page, 2022), ultra-sacrificial motherhood is central to the beliefs of UK anti-abortion activists. This understanding, stemming from their religious beliefs, includes having a divinely endorsed essentialised understanding that all women are mothers. Vocational mothering identity is considered a core part of traditional two-parent married heterosexual families, with men as breadwinners. Abortion is always considered harmful, arising from direct or indirect pressure, and it is this pressure that explains why so many women seemingly reject their natural inclination to continue pregnancy, regardless of the circumstances or consequences for their lives (Lowe and Page, 2022). Ultra-sacrificial motherhood is foetal-centric, prioritising the needs and priorities of the foetus, with little emphasis on children after birth, because their care is assumed through the sacrifice that mothers will ‘naturally’ perform. In addition:

for the anti-abortion activists, abortion is a foundational issue, the cause of other problems in society. For them, ‘abortion culture’, with its alignment with the ‘culture of death’, is a pivotal part of their complaints about ‘gender ideology’, a collection of progressive changes which include secularization, challenges to traditional gender roles, and rights accorded sexual minorities. The harm introduced by ‘abortion culture’, through its individualised and consumer-orientated emphasis on making choices rather than accepting the divine plan, is thus wider than abortion itself. Therefore, ending abortion becomes the first step to deal with all other social issues, from poverty to immigration (Lowe and Page, 2022: 190)

These preoccupations forge the lived religion of anti-abortion activists. Distinct practices, rituals, and beliefs are reproduced through activists' minds, bodies, and behaviours. While the activists themselves have constructed a subjectivity premised on being actively opposed to abortion, the challenge is to impart this 'moral aspiration' (Strhan, 2019: 4) to their children, through model behaviour (e.g. opposing abortion at clinic sites) and conveying their views about when life begins. Thus, understanding the pedagogical actions of the anti-abortion movement becomes an important area for investigation. Belief goes beyond a way of thinking and includes states of the body that have been shaped through childhood learning into the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). As Orsi (2007) notes, religious worlds are made real through 'the corporalization of the sacred' (p. 74), where the sacred is embedded and expressed through the body. This is achieved through everyday religious practices that consolidate this meaning-making so that this identity is realised and identifiable. This results in a particularly engaged practice of lived religion, endorsed within the movement, yet repudiated by those within the broader faith tradition, who disavow the explicit and vocal nature of the activists' opposition to abortion (Lowe and Page, 2022).

Due to this complex positioning, where even those of the same faith do not adopt the same lived approach, parents aim for children to be formed explicitly in an identity where an anti-abortion stance is normalised and self-evident. This identity is cultivated through embodied subjectivities that forge connections between the individual and broader communities of practice to articulate an anti-abortion viewpoint. This engages 'techniques of formation' whereby 'adults seek to form children as religious subjects through the habituation of specific practices' (Strhan, 2019: 49-50), that the children will interpret for themselves. Moreover, as staging collective events are a key part of the reproduction of dispositions of bodies and language (Bourdieu, 1990), the examples that we use give an insight into their lived religious practices regarding anti-abortion socialisation. However, we also recognise that socialisation, whether within families or through instructional activities, is part of a broader environment in which children co-construct their childhoods (Brady et al., 2015). Thus, while the cultures that surround children form an important part of their habitus, following Corsaro (2011), we agree that children have agency within socialisation processes. As Strhan (2019) observes, children can adopt the behaviour expected of them, but they can also resist these techniques of formation. Consequently, while this article outlines specific pedagogical actions taken by the anti-abortion movement, it does not seek to determine the impact on child recipients.

Method

This article arises from longitudinal ethnographic research studying UK anti-abortion and pro-choice activism in public places which began in 2015 and is ongoing. Overall, a variety of methods have been used for data collection, including extensive observations at public gatherings (e.g. marches, demonstrations, and actions outside abortion clinics), collection and analysis of leaflets and other publicly available materials, formal and informal interviews with activists from different organisations, and other relevant public materials (such as press releases and court documents). The materials analysed in this article stem from three events organised by *March for Life UK (MfL)*.

While best known for organising an annual march, MfL also organises other public anti-abortion events. It has a broader mission to raise awareness of the ‘hurt and damage’ of abortion, to ‘foster’ a community, through bringing together different UK anti-abortion organisations into ‘one united voice’ and to ‘enthuse, educate and inspire’ people to oppose abortion (March for Life UK, 2022). Usually on the day of their annual march, *MfL* organise a morning of workshops and stalls, before they assemble for the main afternoon event, a march through central London, finishing with a rally in Parliament Square. For a number of years, the workshops have included children’s activities. In most years, we have observed the public march and rally, but only observe indoor events when we have appropriate permissions. Practically speaking, ensuring parental consent to observe during drop-in sessions, where children are arriving and leaving at different times, would have been difficult to achieve.

In spring 2020, *MfL* announced that due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was moving activities online. The first *Lifestream* was broadcast live (June 2020) over Facebook and Vimeo social media channels,³ with different sessions over a weekend. One of the sessions, entitled ‘Pro Life Kids’, was approximately 2½ hours long and specifically aimed at primary-aged children, as confirmed by one of the presenters (teenagers had different sessions). The session consisted of various segments such as speakers, art and craft demonstrations, songs, and stories. It was compered by two anti-abortion activists who appeared to be modelling children’s television presenters. In 2021, they repeated a smaller *Lifestream* having one broadcast channel rather than two, but still included a children’s session, with similar activities to the previous year. Furthermore, there was an adult-focused roundtable discussion entitled ‘Raising a pro-life family’. This article arises from observations and analysis of these three sessions, the two online children’s workshops and the parents’ roundtable. Our window on this world is an artefact, given that this is crafted for a particular purpose – to be broadcast into people’s homes. We can make no assumptions regarding how these sessions are read or understood by their intended audience (the children themselves).

We observed the sessions, taking field notes as they were being broadcast live, supplemented by transcriptions of sessions that were later uploaded to their website. While watching, we used screenshots to capture some of the visual data, such as the pictures in the story books being read out. The focus in this article arise from thematic analysis which involved close reading, inductive coding, and comparison (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data were inductively coded, with codes being combined into themes, and then checked against the whole dataset. The themes covered in this paper are underlying values, educational dilemmas, and minority positioning.

Ethical approval for the study was given by Aston University. There is an ongoing debate about the use of Internet materials in research, and the extent to which these are public data, including the need to consider the context to determine this (Tiidenberg, 2018). In this case, the sessions were designed as a form of public education and were kept online after the events took place. This to us means they are public data. Nevertheless, while the sessions used participants’ actual names, we mainly use pseudonyms, so people are not identifiable if the videos are removed from *MfL* platforms. The exception to this is where we refer to authors who need to be referenced.

Researching those you fundamentally disagree with is challenging. Both of us support abortion, and while in the field, we have always been open about this. Nevertheless, we have always strived to be clear about how anti-abortion activists understand themselves and their work, and where our analysis has led us to different conclusions. We constantly discuss and reflect on how we present our findings to address this dilemma. We have ongoing conversations with some anti-abortion activists, whereas others have never wanted to talk, or no longer wish to engage with us. For some, our lack of religious belief is a more challenging concern than our views on abortion. We have published a more detailed account of the complex issues of positionality that arose during the research elsewhere (Lowe and Page, 2022).

Transmitting values

The children's sessions appeared to utilise a significant number of resources in their planning and delivery. While it is good practice to have child-centred activities at in-person events to enable parents to participate, this was unlikely to be necessary during online events when children would most likely be at home. Moreover, during the 2020 *MfL*, the children's event was running concurrently with the adult workshops, potentially decreasing parents' participation. At the beginning, the presenters emphasised to the children that parents will not be concerned about watching a screen all morning. In general terms, limiting the amount of screentime is often seen as good parenting, with mothers in particular often held responsible for this (Clark and Dumas, 2020). In this particular case, 'breaking rules' was justified because of the important messages conveyed. Taken together, these factors highlight the importance to the movement of having child-centred anti-abortion education.

The 2020 overall aim was made clear to the audience at the beginning, with the first segment featuring a Catholic bishop who was described as 'sharing a very special message about looking after unborn babies'. The bishop's talk was framed around the general theme for this *MfL* 'Equal from Day One'. He stated it would be wrong if a teacher discriminated in a classroom, preventing a child from joining in just because he was younger than some of the others, or needed help to catch up. This focus on age and development is an implicit reference to the anti-abortion 'SLED' argument. SLED stands for size, length of development, environment (womb), and degree of dependency. This argument seeks to point out that the foetus is a name for a stage of childhood, like baby and teenager. Babies and teenagers are different sizes, differ in their levels of independence, and the care needed to flourish. As these differences do not lead to their personhood being questioned, they argue that the size or development of a foetus cannot be used to justify abortion. The reduction of women's bodies to an 'environment' rather than being a person is in line with their understanding of women as mothers (Lowe and Page, 2019a).

The bishop called on the children's sense of fairness stating that it would make them sad and uncomfortable if children who were younger or needed help were not supported. He linked this to the need to give Parliament a message because:



Figure 1. Craft activity.

Sadly they have made up wrong laws to say you can't be included in our country if you are a baby. Just because you still have to spend a bit of time in your mummy's tummy before you are born. They have also made some really sad laws, and those laws say, if you need some special care, if you need some special love, you can be left out of our country's life and joy, we are not going to include you.

He continued that it would be better if every 'living human being' was included, and it would be a 'wonderful world' if this happened and is what Jesus would want, stating that all of the children already knew this and that everyone is 'precious' from day 1. This introduction made authoritative claims about abortion that were presented as uncontested facts. Jesus is fundamentally endorsed as holding an anti-abortion position, a point disputed by other Christians (Peters, 2018). Furthermore, a baby and a foetus are equated, aligning full personhood with a born child. The authoritative weight given to this introduction is achieved through the positionality of the speaker – a church leader identified through his clerical collar. The bishop directly addressed his audience, conveying the message didactically with no opportunity to disrupt or debate it.

In a later craft activity, the children were encouraged to make a 'mirror', which consisted of a picture drawn of their face then glued onto card, with words reflecting the message that they are unique (the example used is 'I am special'). When this demonstration was completed, the presenter showed a display on a door in her home (Figure 1) with a poem that stated that they are special because 'God made me'. This is later sung to the tune of *Frère Jacques* with hand actions.

Despite the message of inclusion of all, and that being unique made them special, it was suggested that they ask an adult to help them draw a circle as it looks better if it is 'nice and neat'. A similar suggestion is made for seeking help with making a template for

'Equal from Day One' bunting. The implicit suggestion here, that it is better to ensure a certain standard, seems to contradict the overall message that uniqueness is special.

There were similar messages in 2021, although these were centred around the overall *MfL* theme that abortion is 'the number one issue', defined in the kids session as the 'gift of life' rather than being explicitly called abortion. In the craft session, children were encouraged to make a firework as a symbol celebrating the 'gift of life'. The story session featured a book about children caring for a baby bird that fell out of a nest. Within the story, one of the children questioned if the fledgling was really a bird as it did not look pretty, and was then shown an ultrasound picture. She asks if this is a monster and the father explains that it is a picture of her during pregnancy, before comparing a bird's development to a foetus saying 'No matter what stage of life you are at (. . .) you are always a real person' (Williamson, 2020 pages not numbered). The family's gendered roles are reinforced in the story with the father being the wildlife expert and the mother serving the family with snacks.

These sessions indicate the various modes of transmission of the anti-abortion message. Key themes are embedded in the speeches, crafting, song and story sessions that illustrate the pedagogical intentions of the sessions. The first is the centrality of religion. This was clear in the explicitly religious messages, but also in their core messages of equality (2020) and the importance of the 'gift of life' (2021). While the workshops were not situated directly in, or explicitly endorsed by the church, the inclusion of the Catholic bishop gave tacit support to the event by those in religious authority, emphasising the validity of the views of a particular church enclave consisting of those actively opposing abortion. Interestingly, while clergy were involved in the 2020 sessions, there were none in 2021, however, this did not lead to any notable reduction in religious messaging. At one level this seems unextraordinary, given the level of religiosity in the anti-abortion movement, yet, as we have shown elsewhere, anti-abortion activists often claim that they are not motivated by religion, and they would hold the same anti-abortion position even if they were not religious (Lowe and Page, 2019b). Most of the messages around abortion are implicit rather than explicit, and the focus is mainly on general (religiously endorsed) values. The second theme is that the play-based activities deployed are similar to those other researchers have observed in everyday church settings. For example, Strhan (2019) observed an activity encouraging children to recognise all people as important, from a list featuring a nurse, a homeless person, and a painter, among others. However, the clear difference is that those subjectivities represent born individuals. An embryo is not featured on the list. Therefore, the anti-abortion activists engage in an extension of the kinds of activities encountered elsewhere, but their significant departure is their focus on the unborn. A third issue is the explicit referencing and alignment of a foetus with a baby. This equivocal positioning further reinforces the SLED argument underpinning their campaign of 'equal from day 1' and implicitly supports particular gendered understandings, such as the idealisation of ultra-sacrificial motherhood.

Difficult messages?

There was not necessarily consensus on the extent to which abortion should be directly discussed with children. This was illustrated in a warning appearing on screen before a particular video clip (2020), stating that because of the use of the phrase, 'abortion takes

a life away', parents should 'use their discretion'. The presenter alludes to the warning but does not read it out directly. The way that the message is conveyed suggests that he thinks his audience would not necessarily be able to digest the words, but we would think that a significant proportion of the older children would be able to read it. In 2021, there was a disclaimer given to say that 'all the content is age-appropriate', and there was a notable absence of direct references to abortion. It is a reasonable speculation that this could be due to concerns being raised about some content in 2020.

The session displaying a content warning contained a 30-minute video produced by the US organisation *Radiance Foundation*.⁴ It had a *Sesame Street* vibe with a presenter in a living room with lots of children of different ethnicities, all wearing t-shirts sold by the organisation with messages such as 'Protecting Life is my Superpower'. A central feature of the video was the promotion of the book *Pro-Life Kids!* (Bomberger, 2019), copies of which were among the prizes for some activities. After a couple of participatory activities with the children (aged approximately 4–10), the book is read aloud to them. It starts by using elements of the SLED argument mentioned previously – that their size and development does not change the fact that God made them, and they are special and unique, using fingerprints and drawings of children and adults at different life stages as examples. For the environment element, it includes drawings of children in different countries; featuring a picture of a foetus in a late stage of pregnancy, with the words 'Where you live won't determine your *worth*, you're a *person*. It's true! Even before your birth' (Bomberger, 2019 pages not numbered, italicised wording signals large-sized words).

The book then shows illustrations of slavery and the Holocaust as examples when people did not understand that life has a purpose and is precious (Figure 2). It features a grey building with the words 'Abortion Centre' written on it. The text for this section of the book includes:

Throughout history many believed a lie. "“You're not a person”" "No way!" They cried. Today many think that lie is still true, that babies in wombs aren't people too. Abortion is when some say it is ok, to take that baby's precious life away'.

After the story is finished, the presenter returns to certain pages to emphasise the message, including the images of slavery and the Holocaust, saying that historically there was discrimination based on skin colour and religious belief; likewise, some people believe that unborn babies are not real people. It is then emphasised that 'it is a lie', and abortion is against 'God's heart'.

The rest of the story is about children becoming active in the 'pro-life' movement to help to save babies, including asking children to sign a pledge in the back of the book to declare themselves a 'pro-life kid' to be a 'voice for the unborn' (Bomberger, 2019). They all stand up and take the pledge, their right hands in the air formalising it. In a later segment for parents, they are told to 'model a culture of life' and show children actions taken against abortion, including praying outside clinics. This is said to foster a 'natural pro-life view'. This example illustrates how, at least in some cases, the religious socialisation of children goes beyond values that align with the movement, but encourages an anti-abortion habitus in which the minds, bodies, and behaviours of children are shaped



Figure 2. Slavery and Holocaust comparisons.

into movement actors. However, not all parents in the anti-abortion movement seem to be comfortable with this level of involvement of younger children.

The parents' discussion in 2021 illustrated this tension. While some of the parents spoke about taking their children with them, others mentioned trying to keep their abortion activism separate:

At the beginning I kept [. . .] my kinds of pro-life work and my fulltime activism quite separate because it's like, this is me going out to do my work, whether I'm speaking somewhere, it was wasn't always appropriate for her as a young child. [. . .] whereas other members of the team maybe have come out with their babies and things like that. So yeah, on reflection maybe I could have got her more involved (Hannah, mother of one, works for an anti-abortion organisation)

we might have taken an unconventional approach. We've been quite straight to the point that what's happening there, in these clinics and surgeries, we've not been beating around the bush. We're telling them that these parents or these mums and dads-to-be are going there because they don't want their babies. It's a tough concept for kids of that age to take in and my oldest who is seven now, my wife has been taking him to the vigils from the age of four (Benedict, father of three).

While parents had differences in approach, they all agreed on 'laying the foundations' for children through some level of education and involvement, even if this was implicit rather than explicit. For example, asking children to pray for babies before birth. Some spoke about determining when more involvement was appropriate, such as attending rallies, especially if they could meet other children whose families held similar views. In

our observations, we occasionally witnessed children at public events opposing abortion, but it is deemed highly controversial and often results in public condemnation. We observed a ‘pro-life chain’ run by SPUC, where activists space out along a roadside prominently displaying their anti-abortion messages. A child – who looked 8-10 years old – occupied a spot on their own, holding a sign saying ‘Abortion Kills: Choose Life’. A passer-by asked the researcher ‘Whose kid is this?’, adding that it is wrong for the child to be there.

One of the concerns from parents was an acknowledgement that their abortion beliefs placed them in a minority, which could be an issue for their children in mainstream schools. Mathew (father of five) gave such an example. He stated that one of his sons was the only pupil against abortion during a discussion at a Catholic school, and as a parent, he was shocked because the school phoned him about this. The reason given by Mathew is the unacceptability that his son was ‘pro-life’. This reasoning seems unlikely at a Catholic school, given this is in line with Church teaching, and the ongoing discussion revealed that the teenager stood up for his views, so it is possible that it was the way that he presented his position rather than the position itself that was the issue. National guidelines state that all pupils should be taught that there are choices when it comes to pregnancy, but faith schools are allowed to be faith sensitive when presenting material. Catholic Schools guidance specifically states that Catholic values, including the sanctity of life, is included when covering abortion (Catholic Education Service, 2019). However, even within Catholic schools, tensions can emerge regarding the kinds of liberal-conservative Catholic identities that are forged, especially how this is interpreted in relation to the law (Hanemann, 2016).

The conversation revealed that parents expected that their children would be a lone voice against abortion within their peer groups. The parents felt it is important to give older children the confidence and tools to push back against mainstream acceptance of abortion, and this builds from earlier exposure in childhood to anti-abortion values. They positioned the acceptance of abortion as cultural ‘brainwashing’, with themselves, and their children needing to do God’s work and challenge the abortion culture, despite what might seem like overwhelming odds:

How can we arm them [. . .] because they can get sucked into that culture [. . .] all their friends are doing this [. . .] and then they have to stand back and say actually no [. . .] ‘I can’t agree with this’ (Priscilla, mother of five)

You might be the only one as well [. . .] but from single people massive changes can happen [. . .] I think we get bad press that we are just these mean Christians who are against everything. But no, it’s the civil rights issue for these people [*points at pregnancy bump*] (Esther, mother of eight)

As these quotations show, although there are a range of views about exactly what children need to know, and when they should be included in different anti-abortion activities, there is broad agreement that their children need to be prepared to be members of the active anti-abortion community. While there was no reference to children making pledges, it was clear that some UK parents expected their children to participate from an

early age. For example, Benedict reported that his children wore “tiny feet”⁵ anti-abortion badges and said that his children could answer questions about this. This aligns with the *Radiance Foundation* video that argues children need to be ‘equipped’ to stand against the idea that abortion is healthcare and be able to ‘defend human life’. They argue that parents need to stop having concerns about abortion education for young children, as it will ensure good decisions in later life, and enable influence with friends and acquaintances throughout their lives. In other words, by instilling the habitus of an anti-abortion identity through everyday lived religious practices of prayers and participation in the anti-abortion movement, supported by material object such as badges and books, they seek to build the movement.

Conclusion

This article has examined two important elements of anti-abortion activists and their socialisation techniques. First, religious messaging is crucial to the educational endeavour of raising children to be ‘true believers’ – retaining anti-abortion views is a central part of their faith values. Second, parents must manage this despite abortion being a contentious topic. This article has utilised the concept of lived religion to emphasise particular dilemmas for how anti-abortion activists include their children in their activism. Instructing children on the topic of abortion may be controversial, even within their faith tradition, yet ensuring that children adopt an anti-abortion stance is vitally important to activists. Activists forge a distinct lived religious identity premised on opposing abortion that is typically at odds with their broader religious community. To gain validity, anti-abortion activists position themselves as representing an authentic Christian identity that is endorsed by God. Religious leaders aligned with their views are utilised to give further credibility to a movement that exists as a subsidiary movement, or enclave, within the broader church community. Anti-abortion activists fundamentally see abortion as a societal ill and a manifestation of sin. Abortion is understood as undermining traditional family values, especially essentialised ideas about ultra-sacrificial motherhood, and by stopping abortion, societal denigration will be halted. The sincerity and deeply held nature of these beliefs means that parents feel it is their duty to impart these understandings to their children. Indeed, their very identity as a Christian is forged through conservative understandings and meanings around sexuality, gender roles and the correct upbringing of children. They therefore deploy specific socialisation strategies to attempt to cultivate an anti-abortion position in their children, existing within a particular religious enclave, rather than embedded in mainstream approaches within their faith.

This leaves anti-abortion activists in a bind. On the one hand, they want to strongly encourage an anti-abortion stance in their children, but abortion itself is deemed a difficult topic. They cannot rely on their churches for an anti-abortion education given the reluctance of mainstream churches to explicitly focus on abortion, and even Catholic schools are understood as places that take too liberal an approach to the issue. Anti-abortion activists must look to the resources available within the anti-abortion community for educational approaches and materials. Yet certain elements of that material may be resisted by parents, with concerns about its suitability for particular age groups. Examining the lived religious practices deployed by anti-abortion activities enables the

capturing of their meaning-making, identity generations and tensions embedded in their socialisation practices.

Despite occasional pronouncements from the minority of vocal anti-abortion MPs and religious leaders, the culture in the UK supports legal access to abortion. In the broader context, taking an absolutist stance on abortion and likening it to the holocaust is usually considered an extreme opinion. But this is not necessarily the type of religious extremism that generates state intervention, and the status of Christianity as a benign religious tradition and embedded in the British culture and landscape offers forms of protection from scrutiny. Given the majority acceptance of abortion, even if this exists in an environment where abortion continues to be stigmatised (Purcell et al., 2020), this leads to tensions when socialisation practices are engaged that contradict majority values.

Legally, much latitude is given to parents to raise children in their beliefs and values, however controversial they may be. As Taylor (2017) observes regarding European Court of Human Rights rulings, 'parents are protected in the transmission of their beliefs to their children, provided that they do not cause harm, even if that transmission is carried out in an insistent and overbearing manner that caused the child unease, discomfort or embarrassment' (p. 357). In this framework of religious rights, rather than focusing on children's agency and any resistance, the focus is instead on potential discrimination through denying a child access to the religious affiliations and culture of their parents (Klasson Sundin in Frisk et al., 2018). This would apply to children developing their parents' anti-abortion religious practices.

The data suggests that there is awareness among activists that abortion education for younger children may be controversial. Indeed, anti-abortion activists have also been vocal in their opposition to sex education, with age appropriateness featuring as a key argument in these contestations (Venegas, 2022). In the main, the activities presented were framed around general value messages, often with embedded references to Christianity. Given such hesitations, it is questionable to what extent younger children would associate the stories, crafts and prayers explicitly with abortion, unless they already understood strategic arguments, such as SLED, within the anti-abortion movement. Nevertheless, as the parents' discussion revealed, this type of activity was seen as laying the foundations from which children could develop an anti-abortion positioning. Thus, while much of the children's sessions are similar to the ones found in other religious education, such as Benoit's (2021) and Strhan (2019) observations, we suggest they are an element in establishing a specific form of Christian anti-abortion identity. Moreover, the emphasis on active play helps to establish the habitus through both the bodies and minds of the children, as a technique of formation (Strhan, 2019).

Direct interventions encouraging children to take a pledge or accompanying parents to abortion clinics appeared not to be a widespread practice. Indeed, the disclaimer given in 2020 about the direct references to abortion indicates that it was expected that many UK parents would have some reservations. The parents' discussion revealed that thinking through the right way or right time to introduce the concept of abortion was important to them. Parents expect secondary school to be the time when their children might need to 'come out' as anti-abortion, potentially as a lone voice. While parents could give a grounding, this still left young people in a difficult position. As Esther described 'it's the loneliness that you can't prepare them for'. This recognition, that they hold a

minority religious belief, even though they are, for the most part, members of mainstream religion, seems a crucial part of understanding their educational practices.

This also challenges the idea that minority religions are exceptions regarding conservative and controversial forms of religious socialisation and lived religious practices. In our data, parents described the kinds of experiences scholars have documented with regards to those raised in minority religions, in terms of holding values that are in tension with those of broader society (Frisk et al., 2018). Some may interpret these practices and values as forms of ‘irrational socialization’ that limit the opportunities for children ‘to make good choices’ to ‘enjoy self-determination’ (Frisk et al., 2018: 58), raising concerns regarding promoting beliefs that undermine tolerance and gender equality. Yet, a key factor we have not been able to consider is the interpretations given by the children themselves (due to lack of access). As Strhan (2019), Benoit (2021) and others have observed, children absorb and resist, reflect on and achieve their subjectivities on their own terms through their learning practices. As Guest and Aune (2017) argue, for young people, faith becomes a ‘personal decision’ (p. 7.1) rooted in concepts of individualisation and choice. Although adults attempt to influence the process, imparting knowledge is not a linear endeavour, and the desired outcome is never guaranteed.

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Notes

1. Fieldnotes (taken at anti-abortion events) reveal that recruitment is a challenge for activists, a difficulty they explicitly seek to address.
2. Categorising religions is always imperfect. Here by ‘mainstream’ we mean denominations that are generally publicly accepted. For example, within Christianity, Catholicism would be ‘mainstream’ and subject to less questioning about their practices than new religious movements such as the Jesus Army and Scientology.
3. At the time of writing, some of the sessions are still available to watch through their website <https://www.marchforlife.co.uk/>
4. The video is currently available on You Tube <https://youtu.be/bNYOjrdqEcg> (accessed 08/06/22).
5. While the image is used widely now, the original Precious Feet badges were gold-coloured and sold with the description that they were the exact size and shape of the feet of a 10-week foetus.

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