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Top marks for sect schools that shun the modern world
By Tony Halpin, Education Editor

A SECRETIVE religious sect that bans children from using computers or reading fiction has won praise from Ofsted for the quality of education provided by its schools.

The Exclusive Brethren, which also believes that members should not go to university because it is too “worldly”, runs 43 private schools educating 1,400 children.

The group, an offshoot of the Evangelical Protestant Plymouth Brethren, cuts itself off from the outside world, which it regards as evil. Members are not allowed to have friends from outside the Brethren. They work only in Brethren-owned businesses, and their meeting halls have no windows. They must follow a rigid code of behaviour set down by their leader, known as the “Elect Vessel”.

Television, radio, mobile telephones, newspapers and going to places of entertainment are all banned. Computers and the internet are regarded as tools of the Devil.

All private schools are now required to register either with Ofsted or the Independent Schools Council to show that they satisfy minimum criteria for education, although they are not required to follow the national curriculum. Ofsted has already accredited six of the Brethren’s schools through the Focus Learning Trust, an educational group established by the church.

A spokesman for the trust said it hoped to have all of them registered by the summer. He said that the schools observed the same rules as the Brethren on the use of computers and modern technology.

“We don’t have such things in our homes, we don’t have them in our businesses and we would not have them in our schools,” he said. “Children were educated extremely well, some would say better, before such things were dreamt up. There is a general perception in the educational world that the teacher who needs to employ such gimmicks to get their message across is clearly not the most committed teacher.”

David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools in England, praised the Exclusive Brethren in his annual report last month, in which he also criticised Islamic schools for teaching a narrow curriculum that posed a potential threat to Britain’s sense of national identity.

The sect, which adheres to a strict interpretation of biblical teaching, has most of its schools in the South of England. They were set up to keep children “away from damaging influences” in the state system.

Mr Bell said in his report that teaching in the Focus Learning schools visited so far by inspectors was generally good. He went on: “Focus Learning provides good support to its schools and has developed a number of common policy documents that are of very good quality . . . The quality of teaching, most of which is done by experienced practitioners, is generally good.”

Most of the schools, which cater for pupils aged 11 to 17, had operated previously as tuition centres for children who were otherwise taught at home. They rely on fees from parents or donations from the Exclusive Brethren. Pupils are entered for GCSE and vocational qualifications.

The Exclusive Brethren was founded in the mid 19th century. It believes the world is the domain of the Devil, and members spend most of their time in “safe places” such as meeting rooms and their own homes.

Ofsted’s praise of education standards at its schools has drawn criticism. Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: “Denying children access to knowledge that would help them to cope in the modern world is tantamount to abuse.

“It will leave them ill-equipped to cope if they later decide that life inside the Brethren is not for them. It is alarming that Ofsted, in its keenness to accommodate religion, appears to have suspended its critical faculties.”

Doug Harris, director of the Reachout Trust charity, which provides support for former members of religious sects, said: “The basis of Exclusive Brethren belief is separation from the rest of the world. It can be distressing for them if they try to leave.”

SEPARATE LIVES

- Members believe that the world is full of wickedness
- Main group of Exclusive Brethren are called “Taylorites” after James Taylor Sr and Jr, who led the sect for much of the last century
- There are up to 15,000 Exclusive Brethren in Britain, with congregations in 98 towns
- Until recently, Brethren who left the sect, or “leavers”, were ostracised
- Members must keep away from others who do not follow the teaching
- Members must marry young and have big families
- Men must be clean-shaven, keep hair short and not wear ties, while women should keep hair uncut and wear blue or white headscarves
- Worship is very simple with no ritual