# Navigating Theological Dialects in a 3D Church

In the last little while I've had a couple of conversations with people who are trying to get their head around the amorphous complexity that is the Church of England. This is partly administrative ("What on earth is a Deanery for?") but mostly to do with what I call "theological languages" (or "dialects") and what we might have once called differences in "churchmanship."

It is not helpful to arbitrarily split people into factions and put them in boxes. Underlying it all there are some unifying commonalities (in the name of the law, if nothing else). **But understanding the diversity is necessary** for good relational reasons. This is particularly so if you're new to it all. If you're trying to understand, converse, or collaborate, you need to have some sense of the theological landmarks and boundaries, the buzzwords and shibboleths; you need to know how the same word might mean something slightly different depending on who is saying it. You need to know something of the stories, the varying priorities and values and why they exist. By this you can avoid needless scandal, and express "brotherly charity" (to quote the law again).

So none of this is by way of disparagement. Nor is it naive oversimplification. But just as maps simplify reality to that which helps with navigation, so it is sometimes helpful to try and locate oneself, and others, on a theological map that is described and shaped by some simple, relevant markers.

It has been common to describe ecclesial markers using words such as "high and low" and "left and right", forming something of a two-dimensional plane. So-called "liberalism" is on the left, and "conservatism" is on the right. Traditional formality is "high" and informal flexibility is "low."
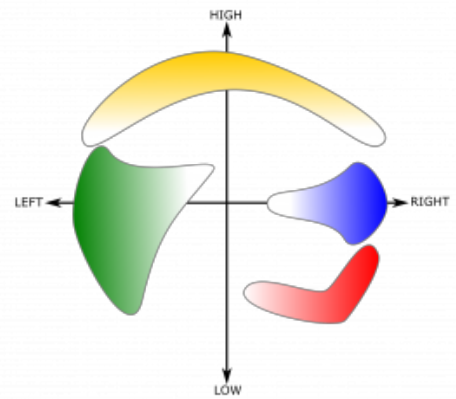

In reality, the church population is scattergraphed all over these spectra. But we can identify some communities within the community, different camps or theological dialects. And so, for instance, we can speak of "Anglo-Catholic" who are "high" and emphasise traditional forms of worship, symbolism, contemplation, mysticism, and organisational integrity. Within this camp the "left" wing might emphasise the symbols-in-themselves, and make use of them as means for social action or radical inclusion; the "right" wing might emphasise the referent of the symbols, and so emphasise the connection with apostolic roots.

Similarly, the "Charismatic" groups emphasise the spontaneous experience of the Holy Spirit in the everyday. They are therefore "low" in their formality and express "leftwards" tendencies as they desire freshness and renewal. The "conservative evangelical" group is closely related, but values theological precision (placing them slightly higher in terms of formality) and adherence to the revelation of Scripture, which is a conservative, rightward, trait. The "left" or "liberal" wing of the church is wide-ranging, but emphasises the general revelation of the social sciences, affirms the multiplicity of different journeys with God, and champions human capacity.

I'm sure that those who identify with any of these communities will find my precis unsatisfactory. That's OK. My point is simply to recognise a simple way of summing up the variances

that exist along the whole board of theological subdisciplines: espistemology, soteriology, eschatology, etc. etc. For better or for worse, while not a complete picture, a map like this reflects at least *something* of reality, and might help people to navigate their way through this broadest of landscapes.

Interestingly, though, in recent weeks, **I have found myself wanting to add a third axis.** We might call it an "inwards"/"attractional" and "outwards"/"missional" spectrum.
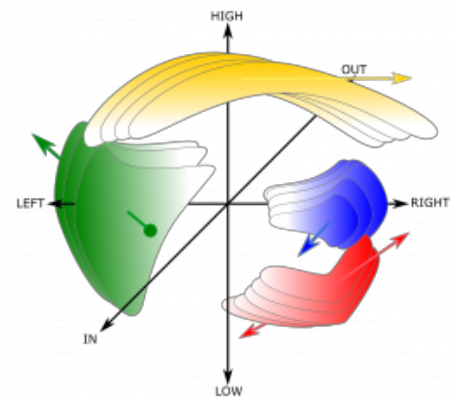
There are ecclesial movements such as "pioneering" or "fresh-expression" that emphasise getting out of the four walls of the church and focusing on "going" with the gospel into the world. Similarly, you can find elements of the church that have an inward emphasis on the Sunday-to-Sunday rhythm, and bringing people into the building and the organisation.

My small realisation is that this inwards-outwards marker shouldn't simply correlate to positions on the normal axes; that is you can't say that Anglo-Catholics are more outwards focused, and charismatics are more inward focused. Rather the inwards-outwards dynamic variance can be found across the board.

For instance, Anglo-Catholicism can be expressed inwardly, inviting people into a sacred space of holy service. Conversely, Anglo-Catholicism can be expressed outwardly, taking service, symbols, and sacraments into the highways and byways, so to speak, and doing so by drawing upon monastic precedents. Charismatics can be inward, drawing upon seeker-sensitive models, managing the church with homogenous

units, and providing an appealing, attractive face. They can also easily operate outwards, in modes such as that of the evangelistic street healer, or through models such as missional commmunities. Liberalism can be expressed inwardly, shaped around intellectual treatise, or outwards in social action. Conservative evangelicals emphasise their pulpit ministry inwardly, but can just as easily commission apologists and planters of new churches.

Having said that, however, I have one concern: a gap in the map perhaps. Because there is a tendency to identify the provocative, edgy, and creative with those parts of the church that are low and left; the ones who are meant to be socially aware, and who give relatively less value to existing structures. But I don't think that's a necessary consequence: There's room on the map for "high and right" pioneering. There are many ways of taking that which is considered "ancient and true" outwards to the world — seeking the touchstones of the gospel in the local culture. The missiological frameworks and traditions exist. There is room for some more imagination on our theological map.

Eunuchs, Semantics, and the Theological Divide

Oxford academic Emma Percy, writing in the most recent edition of *Theology* poses the question "*Can a eunuch be baptized*?" and derives "*insights for gender inclusion from Acts 8.*" It's an interesting question to pose about an interesting text. I came to the article at the suggestion of a colleague and as observation
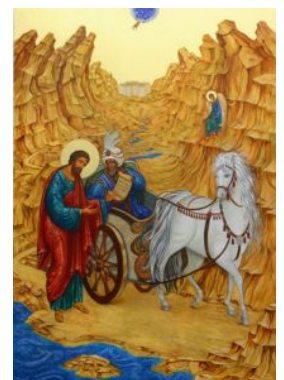
of how the thinking of the church engages (or
fails to engage) with the prevailing issues of sex, gender and
identity.

It's a fraught topic. We are talking about a fundamental
sense of "self" here. That's a simple, hard, question: *Who
are you?* We can inform (and hear) the answer in terms of
biology, psychology, sociology or a dozen other aspects. But
at the bottom of it all is one of those explorable-but-not-
fathomable theological *mysteries* where we can get to the end
of our language and risk talking at cross purposes.

Percy's article enters into this space. Her exegesis delivers
some often overlooked aspects of Philip's encounter *on the
road to Gaza* and her argument extends to some good pastoral
guidance. In the end, however, this essay, in itself, reveals
the semantic divide that besets these issues in particular,
and theological discourse in general.

There is much to affirm. In the account in Act 8, of course,
we have a *eunuch*. Percy emphasises the physicality of this
term: the word "eunuch" applies to a person who has been
castrated and it was a real phenomenon in the culture of the
time. And, of course, the answer to the titular question is
affirmative. In the eunuch's *own words*, "'Look, here is
water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?'"

This inclusion is kerygmatic in a profound way and Percy does
well to expound it. She highlights the gospel in it:
covenantal exclusion overcome, "dry branches" grafted in,
those with no physical legacy drawn into the eternal family of
God, etc. She is rightly incredulous: "I cannot count the
number of sermons I have heard about the Ethiopian eunuch
which have made no reference to the significance of his being
a eunuch!"

In applying the text to the contemporary debate Percy is
firstly ready to admit that "it is not appropriate simply to

map the term 'eunuch' on to those who are intersex or transgender." She is secondly ready to do exactly that, using the lens "of people who do not fit into neat binaries of male and female."

And so she brings us to consider intersex persons. The mapping is *not* direct: A eunuch is an emasculated male and so defined by the binary, and what has been lost; an intersex person has *indeterminate* sex, described by referencing variations of either end of the binary or neither. Nevertheless, for both the eunuch and the intersexed, their embodied selves don't fit "neatly" into the sexed categories, and the gospel inclusion of the eunuch *does* inform our response.

Percy outlines the pastoral implications. To give just a few of her words:

> *The Acts 8 story itself offers an important reminder to make inclusion a priority. Baptism becomes for the Church the mark of a Christian and, unlike circumcision, it does not require a particularly gendered body. Women can be baptized and so too can those whose bodies do not conform to gender norms…*
>
> *Clergy need to be aware of the pastoral needs of families with intersex babies who may want baptism before they feel they can assign a gender to their child. Registers ask for the child's sex, but surely this is not a necessary requirement of baptism. In a culture where children are often identified as male or female by scans, even before they are born, the families of those who cannot be so neatly categorized need compassionate pastoral support.*

It is when she turns next to consider transgenderism that we begin to run into the semantic issues that complicate dialogue on these sorts of issues. To explain what I mean, I need to give my take on how language works in our search for meaning:

All language is ultimately self-referential, but it begins with a simple *referent*. An example helps: when communicating the physical reality of a tree we use a word, such as "wood." It's a simple syllable that refers to the physical reality of what trees are made. A simple word, a simple physical referent, a simple meaning.

In the joy that is human creativity, semantics get expanded. The fact that wooden objects are hard and rigid extends the meaning of "wood" to include a sense of hardness or immovability. By this I can describe someone's facial expression as "wooden." The simple word now means something additional, that is more complex and abstract.

This expansion is not a logical necessity, the expanding meaning only partially derives from the characteristics of the physical tree. In a large part, the meaning comes from convention, common usage, and social norms; the semantics of the word are at least partly socially constructed. And that construction can shift and expand even more: I could also use "wooden" to mean "rustic" or "natural." And now a word that is objectively derived from the physical stuff of a tree can mean anything from "emotionally repressed" to "undisturbed by the advancement of modernity"!

The linguistic complexity can come full circle. The original word, applied back to the initial referent, brings its expanded meaning with it. And this is what leads to contradictions, the limitations of language, and talking at cross purposes.
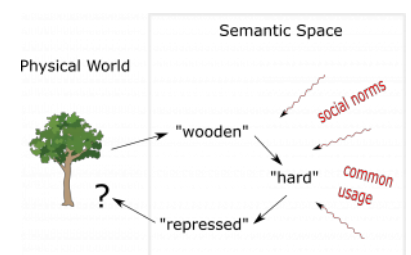
To finish with my example: I might have in my garden a beautiful tree, that is full of life and character; the way it sways in the wind and the flowers that form on it speak of joy and vitality. In attempting to describe this I might reach for an antonym. To communicate the verve and vitality of my

tree, I could say "*my tree is not wooden*." Linguistically, it is a contradiction, effectively nonsense. It only communicates *meaning* if there is a shared understanding of semantics, agreed upon social norms that construct the sense of what that means. If two interlocutors did not share or agree on the semantic space they would be talking at cross-purposes.

It's a simplistic illustration. It is manifoldly more complicated when we engage not with trees but with the meaning of self, our sense of identity.

In Percy's engagement with intersex the semantic ground is relatively safe. She emphasises the *physicality* of the eunuch and intersex, using physical words, even anatomical ones such as "micro penis." These words are closely connected to the simple referents of physical bodies. Her meaning, and therefore, her *exhortation*, is thoroughly graspable. And it should be grasped even by the most conservative reader. In the politics of it all, conservatives who throw the whole "LGBQTI" alphabet soup into the one anathematised pot, should get a bit more bothered about doing the hard yards of seeking to understand the meaning of those letters and, at the very least, take a lead from Percy's wisdom on how to care for those who are intersex.

But as the consideration moves from intersex to transgender, the semantic complexity escalates; the mystery of self is manifest in the various constructions and reflections that come in the search for meaning. It can never be fully mapped out, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. To that end, I find an important linguistic distinction between *sex* (as in intersex) and *gender* (as in transgender):

The concept of *sex* has a clear referent. We use words such as "man" and "woman", "male" and "female" and they closely encapsulate physical characteristics. It's why we use "male" and "female" to describe plugs and sockets!

The expansion of these words in a shared semantic space is an engagement with a sense of *gender*. Gender is more socially or self-constructed, a *sense* or even a "feeling" of what it *means* to be be male or female. We use words such as "masculine" or "feminine" to explore this meaning.
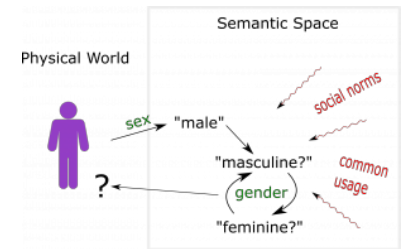
Part of this meaning derives from the physicality of the referent sex. e.g. "masculine" might adhere to a sense of muscular dominance, or assertive impositional (some might even say "penetrative") engagement; "feminine" might adhere to softer embrace, or fierce motherly protectiveness. But in this semantic expansion, the meaning also derives significantly from social expectation, poetic legacy, various forms of prejudice, and all the other things that you find in the shared language of a human community.

And, of course, as the semantics come full circle, those constructed meanings are applied back to the physical referent. Our language reaches its end point: We end up talking about "manly men" or "boyish girls" — linguistic tautologies and contradictions that only make sense if the social inputs into the semantic process are shared and agreed upon.

This is not just some academic exercise. The subject at hand here is a sense of *self*. It is how how we conceive of and find meaning in our own bodies, and locate ourselves within the millieu of meaning. Human history is full of people fighting over *words* (consider current controversies about the use of pronouns) and this is why: the social constructions have semantic force and so influence, even impose, on our sense of self. The cost and pain of these fights, particularly as they relate to gender, is something that I can really only observe and seek to understand:

Take for instance, the feminist movement. A certain socially

normative sense of "feminine" which encapsulated notions of weakness, passivity, or intellectual inferiority, was rightly rejected. A strong contingent of unashamed women refused to agree that such semantics should inevitably, invariably, or ever at all refer to them. Through various forms of persuasion and social action the social norms were shifted (and could still shift some more) and this in turn has shifted our understanding of femininity, demolishing gender distinctions where those distinctions were meaningless or unjust, and delivering a larger degree of freedom to those who are physically female. In simplistic terms, **in order to reflect a sense of self**, the referent *biological sex* differences were strengthened ("I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman!") and the *semantic gender* differences were redefined, minimised, even eliminated.

The complexity of transgenderism is that it approaches self-meaning from the *other direction,* beginning not with biological sex, but locating primary meaning in the sense of gender — as masculine or feminine or of neither or both senses. Semantics that derive from the physical sex are *de*-constructed, leaving the self-and-socially-constructed semantics as the primary source of meaning.

As this meaning is applied back into the physical world, the meaning of gender collides with its physical referent, manifesting as a disconnect between meaning and reality, and reflected in our language. The linguistic progression is this: a reference to "a man who feels like a woman" (a description) becomes semantically equivalent to "a man who is a woman" (a contradiction) becomes semantically equivalent to simply "a woman" (as a disconnected label, an arbitrary nomenclature). At this point it is entirely logical, albeit ethically perplexing, to make physicality conform to the semantic construct. In simplistic terms, **in order to reflect a sense of self,** the referent biological sex differences are redefined, minimised, even eliminated, and *semantic*

gender differences are constructed and absolutised.

Much more could be said about the complexities, inconsistencies, and contradictions that this creates within a human community. Suffice it to say that I find myself exhorting for the importance of physicality. The irreversible modification of one's body to conform with a self-and-socially-defined semantic of gender seems to me to be a fraught and ultimately unfruitful quest for meaning. It would seem to me wiser and more compassionate to affirm the complexity of the sex-gender dynamic, and embrace and include whatever we might mean by the "feminine male" or the "masculine woman" or the interwoven complexity of gender expressed constructively and joyfully in male and female bodies. I think the Scriptures have some beautiful light to shine on and guide such an exploration.

What has intrigued me, however, in engaging with Emma Percy's article, is how the semantics of her discourse correlate closely with the semantic direction (and ultimate disconnect) of transgenderism itself. As she broadens her application of Acts 8 from intersex to transgender she buys into the semantics. Her rhetoric moves from her earlier, grounded, positive kerygma and becomes that of unanswered questions and provocative exhortations that are built upon her own theological constructs.

Even the meaning of the eunuch shifts, from the historical physicality of the Acts narrative into her own semantics of gender. The progression is clear: The eunuch's physical referent is initially explored and

carefully correlated to other physicalities, but then subsumed into a mere metaphor of "liminal gender." Once captured into Percy's theological world, the historical figure is is not actually needed and could quite literally (and ironically) be "cut off" from the argument.
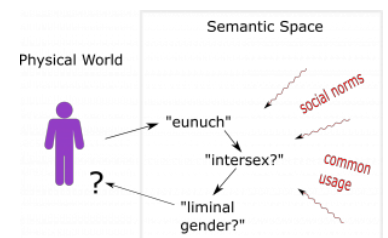
The correlation between positions taken in the gender identity debate and theological process shouldn't surprise. It's not for no reason that such issues have become the touchstone of theological divides!
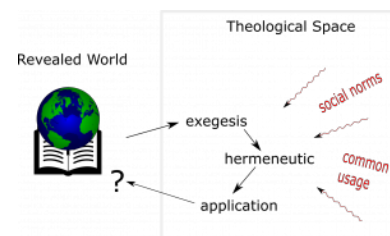
Like all quests for meaning, theological method will find itself engaging with the revealed world of Scripture and the general truths of science and common sense. Semantics and interpretation will play their part as social assumptions and hermeneutical lenses are applied. Some methods emphasise the biblical referent as the primary source of meaning. And others will look to the socially-and-self-constructed semantics. It seems to me that Percy's framework is doing the latter, following the same semantic course as transgenderism: deconstructing the referent, and locating meaning in that which is socially-and-self-constructed. She juxtaposes ecclesial norms (marriage, baptism, the gender of Jesus) with the semantic force of gender fluidity. The hanging question and the wondering implication embraces the deconstruction.

That is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Genuine inquiry uses the semantic space to explore mystery. There's a lot to like in Percy's essay and it has helped my own exploration. But it does bring to bear the issues of theological language, and whether I am understanding what Percy is meaning. Consider a word like "inclusion", which is important enough to be in Percy's sub-title, and which I affirm as a gospel imperative. Does Percy mean it the way I mean it? Or is it empty language which can only be inhabited with meaning if I share and agree with her constructed semantic? Perhaps the answer is simply more dialogue, but the risk of cross-purposes remains significant. The fact that I need to ask these semantic questions reveals my fear: that we are more and more a church with a shared language, but a disparate sense of meaning, with separate methods of exploring the mysteries of this world that cannot easily be shared.

Review: 'I Find That Offensive'

Here's an example of constructive polemic that goes where angels fear to tread. Left-wing libertarian, Claire Fox, critiques "Generation Snowflake" – the millenial generation, now in their young adulthood, who are readily caricatured by their insistence on things like safe-spaces and trigger-warnings, who have a propensity to take offence and call for silencing, de-platforming, and any number of other sanctions against those with whom they disagree. Throughout this book, aptly named 'I Find That Offensive', Fox recounts various occurrences of such intolerance-in-the-name-of-tolerance that have embroiled and disparaged even champions of progressivism such as Germaine Greer.
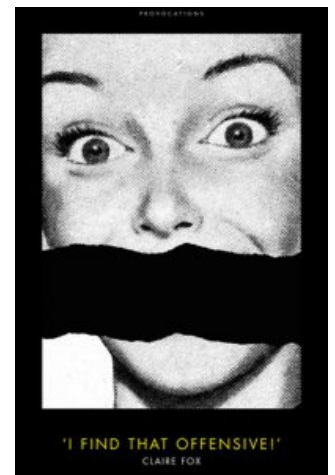
Fox's perilous journey through these issues walks a fine line. Despite her leftward and presumably progressive leanings, she sometimes feels only half a step away from derisive Trumpism. For the sake of fairness, then, it's worth noting that she also has a message for the "anti-Snowflakes", exhorting them to respond without just being "the un-PC rebel lashing out" or turning things into a "joking matter" (page 165). And despite her pessimism, she does provide some thoughts on possible responses that are positive and at least somewhat remedial even if fundamentally lacking.

The value of Fox's book is her main point of enquiry. This comes after her first part where she describes the phenomenon at hand, recounting episode after episode in which free speech

has been curtailed by official sanction, the fear of the politically correct landmine (page 9), the arrogant epistemology in which the offended person alone can "determine what your words really mean" (page 9), and the perplexing apparatus of "unconscious microaggressions" (page 20). She then begins to examine generational psychology, particularly of victimhood as the currency of rhetorical authority (page 24), that can be appropriated by overzealous empathy (page 30) or claims of self-identity (page 37), and which frames mere disagreement as abusive violence. It's at this point she asks the key question: Why?

Why does this Generation exist like this? What has brought about these symptoms? From what root do these deeply-held assumptions about society, community, and humanity come from? From my own perspective as a cultural observer, these are the gems to reveal. And Fox is clear:

> *…why do the young — historically associated with risk-taking, experimentation, rule-breaking and pushing boundaries — now see safety as a trump-all virtue, so much so that concerns about safety are regularly deployed to censor, ban and retreat from argument?… why do so many teenagers and young adults , who as a generation have always been those who aspired to freedom from adult supervision and who regularly rebelled against authority diktat, now demand to live in a hermetically sealed, risk-free cocoon, protected from harm by authority figures who they complain do not police their 'homes' stringently enough?*

> *The short answer is: we socialised them that way. They have been reared on stories about how vulnerable and in need of protection they are. Adult society has fed them a diet of anxieties and provided the language of safety and risk aversion that now threatens liberal values of tolerance and resilience. We are reaping what we have sown — and the young Snowflake Generation, so quick to shout offence, are merely ventriloquising our own fears imposed on them as children.*

We are to blame! That's worth unpacking.

At this point Fox appears to step across the line into simplistic tirade. She blames our focus on "health and safety madness" (page 67), public health scares (page 78), child protection systems (page 83), and the "anti-bullying bandwagon" (page 91). Her points are mostly well-made — particularly with regard to helicopter parenting and the consequent diminishment of a generation's resilience. And her critiques of more sacred cows, such as anti-bullying and safeguarding are not without their validity. Nevertheless, her analysis comes across as dismissal with only a cursory glance at the *necessary* place of some of these cultural developments. Speaking from experience of necessary safeguarding in the church, there's an obligation for commentators to be an apologist as well as a critic of measures that are proper defenses against the harming of children.

Her analysis retains its value though. She begins with the symptoms, attempting to reveal the layers on which they rest. She uncovers two hallmarks of Western Society that I have discovered in my own area of a Christian engagement with contemporary society.   These hallmarks are **<u>fear</u>** and **<u>consumerism</u>**.

For Fox the **fear** derives from parental anxiety and the "catastrophising of life's challenges" (page 70). A generation has interiorised an attitude in which "children are portrayed as vulnerable and helpless victims, rather than in any way resilient or competent — or indeed happy" (Page 74, quoting David Buckingham). This is certainly apparent in church culture, in which parents' fears about the world or their own perceived incompetence motivates both an outsourcing of their children's spiritual care, and an infatuation

with that which is passive and safe. A very recent article in the Telegraph, *"Parents fear that their religion will make their children outcasts"* illustrates exactly this.

The **consumerism** factor leads to a sense of entitlement. The culture of protectionism and super-vigilance by authority figures has led to a passivity.

> *However, a lack of awareness of this passivity can mean that young people themselves are flattered at such third-party interest. They seem to enjoy being mollycoddled, gaining an artificial sense of empowerment from their various victim roles as well as feeling legitimised as objects of institutional concern and interventions. Hence we have two seemingly contradictory phenomena: generational fragility combined with narcissistic self-belief in one's own importance. (Page 116)*

This also is prevalent in church culture, which has been forced like other institutions into a "service-consumer" dynamic (page 123). Ministry is expected to merely entertain and stimulate, and key aspects of discipleship — self-examination, self-sacrifice, the cost of moral living, etc. — are anathema.

I end up sympathising, then, with Fox's final exhortation to this current younger generation to not given into the "condescension" of mouthing "the identity-laden values that PC Baby Boomers and academic cultural relativists have been pushing at you for years" (page 150) and so "toughen up" (age 162) and grasp a more "vibrant sense of autonomy" (page 175) that can transcend the prevailing zeitgeist. And her appeal to embrace a "new model of personhood, a new philosophy of freedom" (page 173) that seeks an "aspirational future" that "replaces safety as the end goal" (page 174) is almost on the money.

What I think is missing is something that can be encapsulated

by the Christian sense of *hope.* Such hope is realistic about the threats of the world, yet a source of great assurance. It encapsulates an objective sense of value that places opposition outside of oneself (and therefore able to be not taken personally). It also provides a sense of purpose that places other-centred doing of gospel good, rather than self-centred safety, as an aspiration and a goal.

Such hope is abstract, but relevant, applicable to all generations, and not least this current one that is rising up.