

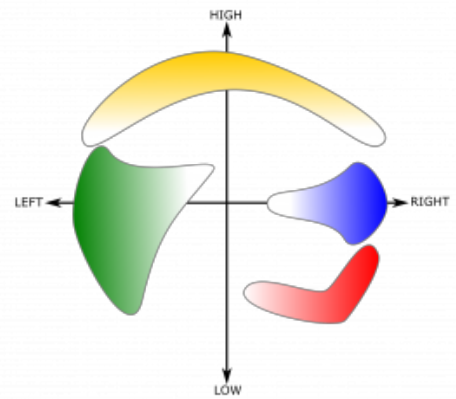
# Navigating Theological Dialects in a 3D Church

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.”



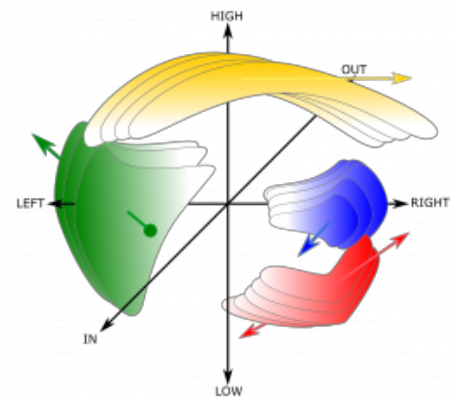
In reality, the church population is scattergraphed all over these spectra. But we can identify some communities within the community, different camps or theological dialects. And so, for instance, we can speak of “Anglo-Catholic” who are “high” and emphasise traditional forms of worship, symbolism, 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: epistemology, 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 communities. 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.