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# PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

Liberalism and conservatism in relation to psychological type among Church of England clergy

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## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

### **Abstract**

Liberalism and conservatism have been important stances that have shaped doctrinal, moral and ecclesial beliefs and practices in Christianity. In the Church of England, Anglo-catholics are generally more liberal, and evangelicals more conservative, than those from broad-church congregations. This paper tests the idea that psychological preference may also partly explain liberalism or conservatism in the Church of England. Data from 1,389 clergy, collected as part of the 2013 Church Growth Research Programme, were used to categorise individuals by church tradition, whether or not they had an Epimethean psychological temperament, and whether or not they preferred thinking over feeling in their psychological judging process. Epimetheans and those who preferred thinking were more likely to rate themselves as conservative rather than liberal. Conservatism was associated with being Epimethean among those who were Anglo-catholic or broad-church, but with preference for thinking over feeling among evangelicals.

*Keywords:* Church of England, conservatism, liberalism, psychological type, temperament

### **Introduction**

The terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ in church contexts represent positions that carry substantial meaning related to doctrinal, moral and ecclesial beliefs or practices.

Understanding what lies behind liberalism and conservatism is an important and on-going task for churches because it can help to build solidarity that goes beyond doctrinal differences. The task of understanding is the responsibility of historians, systematic theologians, and practical theologians. The latter include empirical theologians, who explore attitudes, beliefs and practices through the lens of the social and psychological sciences in order to try and explain the diversity of religious expression we observe in everyday life (Francis, 2007; Francis & Village, 2015; van der Ven, 1998). This paper builds on a tradition of research that uses individual differences, and particularly psychological-type models, to explain patterns of liberal and conservative dispositions in the Church of England (Randall, 2005; Village, 2010, 2013, 2016). It outlines briefly the origins and nature of liberal and conservative belief within the Church of England, examines the evidence that suggests psychological-type preferences might be related to liberal or conservative beliefs, and then tests these ideas on a sample of Church of England clergy.

### *Liberal and Conservative Christianity*

Christian liberalism embraces a range of beliefs and practices that have influenced theology, politics, morality, and church practices. In theological terms it arose mainly in response to the rise of science, notably among Continental theologians in the nineteenth century, which in England led to thinking expressed in the edited collections such as *Essays and Reviews* (Parker, 1860), *Lux Mundi* (Gore, 1889), and *Essays Catholic & Critical* (Selwyn, 1926). Theological liberals tend to place reason above or alongside tradition and Scripture, and re-interpret orthodox beliefs in order to make them accessible to modern understandings of how

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

the world works (Sorenson, 2008). Theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann (1972), with his programme of ‘de-mythologizing’ Scripture, represent this sort of endeavour, with the non-realism of writers such as Don Cupitt (1980, 1997) being extreme examples of re-interpreting Christian faith to conform to the worldview of Modernity.

The rise of theological liberalism was resisted from the outset, both in England and elsewhere. In the United States reactions to liberal Christianity resulted in strong reaffirmations of traditional beliefs from both evangelical and more mainstream Protestants (Krapohl & Lippy, 1999; Machen, 2009 / 1923), and ultimately to the rise of Protestant Fundamentalism (Ammerman, 1991). Among English Protestants liberalism was attacked on several fronts: the Tractarian Movement, which spawned Anglo-catholicism, was an attempt to counter moves to create a secular liberal State (Hylson-Smith, 1993; Nockles, 1994; Pattison, 1991), while evangelicals strongly opposed the challenge to the authority of Scripture (Hylson-Smith, 1989; Wellings, 2003). Although theological liberalism is thought to have had its heyday in the mid to late twentieth century (Parsons, 1993), it is still strongly championed in many quarters (Adams, 2007; Chapman, 2014; Hobson, 2013; Percy & Markham, 2006) and continues to be resisted by those who reject its underlying assumptions.

Liberalism as a broader political movement arose in the mid seventeenth century through the work of philosophers such as Milton, Hobbes and Locke, and has resulted in a diffuse set of ideas related to ways of understanding human beings and their interactions with one another. Although this might be seen as the liberation of society from religion, there is a long standing and continuing argument that closely associates religion generally, and Christianity in particular, to ideals associated with the liberal state (Hobson, 2013). Song (2006: 9-10) suggests that liberalism can be defined as a set of family resemblances:

...a voluntarist conception of the human subject; a constructivist meta-ethics; an abstract, universalist, and individualist mode of thought; and a broadly progressivist philosophy of history. Around these are found other features—characteristic liberal understandings of power and authority, the state, property, democracy, and the supreme values of liberty and equality.

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

Political liberalism has exposed traditional morality to rational critique and championed the idea of individual freedoms in relation to areas such as sexuality, marriage and family life. This resulted in legislation that reflects changes in attitudes among the general population in many western societies, including the UK (Mercer et al., 2013; Park & Rhead, 2013). Christian conservatives have resisted these changes, perhaps most notably over abortion in the United States (Hoffmann & Johnson, 2005), but also more generally in areas related to marriage and sexuality (Crockett & Voas, 2003; Edger, 2012; Sherkat et al., 2011). In the Church of England the battleground has often been expressed in terms of the requirements put on those who wish to be ordained, where rules about divorcees or those in same-sex partnership have led to a number of internal reports and well-publicised divisions (Bates, 2004; Church of England, 1988; House of Bishops, 2013; Woods, 2006).

Conservatism can also mean a general resistance to change, and in particular to the loss of cherished religious traditions. Anglican tradition goes back to the period when the English Church broke from Rome and began to create its own identity around the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), the King James Version of the Bible, and doctrine expressed implicitly in liturgy and explicitly in the 39 articles. Conservatism has to some extent meant resisting changes to liturgical practice or the doctrines that underpin it. In the Church of England the BCP has been largely replaced with contemporary liturgies associated with Common Worship (Church of England, 2006; Papadopoulos, 2011; Perham, 2001), though even these have traditional language versions, showing that liturgical conservatism still retains a place in the Church of England. Such conservatism may extend to traditions in the liturgical and pastoral roles of clergy versus laity and men versus women.

In all these three areas of theology, morality and ecclesial practice there continues to be a wide spectrum of views among Christians. Some writers have tried to move the debate

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

beyond what they see as the sterile liberal-conservative debate in religion (McLaren, 2004; Murphy, 2007), but liberal and conservative Christians are found in many denominations with varying degrees of accommodation (Wellman, 2008). Understanding what factors predict and explain liberal or conservative Christianity remains an important issue for both academy and church.

### *Liberalism, conservatism and traditions the Church of England*

The liberal-conservative divide in the Church of England has partly been associated with the emergence of the Anglo-catholic and evangelical wings. Although the Oxford Movement, which gave rise to Anglo-catholicism, initially sought to return the nation to traditional beliefs and practices, key figures in the second half of the nineteenth century such as Charles Gore embraced what became known as ‘liberal catholicism’ (Ward, 1964). The result has been a complex mix of liberal and conservative views among Anglo-catholics in the Church of England. Evangelicals, on the other hand, have upheld the centrality of biblical authority, and have generally maintained conservative views in matters of doctrine and morality (Hylson-Smith, 1989; Steer, 1998; Wellings, 2003). The middle ground, or broad church, tends to promote varying degrees of conservatism and liberalism depending on the context and issue.

The complex historical development of traditions in the Church of England means that although it is possible to talk of ‘liberal Anglo-catholics’ and ‘conservative evangelicals’, the two polarities of theological and ecclesial stance are not entirely the same. Randall (2005) developed three different scales to locate identities in the Church of England, one measuring theological orientation (liberalism versus conservatism), one measuring church tradition (Anglo-catholicism versus evangelicalism), and one measuring the degree of charismaticism. The attitudes and beliefs associated with the church tradition scale have been

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

examined in a large sample from the 2001 *Church Times* survey (Village, 2012), and a similar exercise has more recently been carried out on the theological orientation scale using data from the 2001 and 2013 *Church Times* surveys (Village, 2018). Both scales predict many of the sorts of beliefs and attitudes that have been described by church historians and theologians and are useful empirical measures of the liberal–conservative and Anglo-catholic–evangelical spectra respectively. The liberal–conservative (LIBCON) scale is related to liberal versus conservative stances on doctrine and morality in all three main church traditions. It is also related to conservative views on worship and church practice, but mainly among Anglo-catholic or broad-church traditions rather than among evangelicals (Village, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate some of the personal or ecclesiological factors that predict where Church of England clergy locate themselves on the LIBCON scale. Is the degree of conservatism among clergy predicted solely by the church tradition with which they identify, or might it also be related to matters related to personal factors such as age, sex or personality? Oliver Goldsmith and Martin Wharton (1993) speculated that many of the theological issues that divide religious people might ultimately be a matter of different psychological preferences for ways of understanding and expressing faith. The main research question posed here is whether psychological factors can predict theological liberalism versus conservatism after allowing for different ecclesiological orientations of Church of England clergy.

### *Psychological type and faith expression*

Details of the psychological type model as proposed by Carl Jung and developed by Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers can be found elsewhere (Francis, 2005; Goldsmith & Wharton, 1993; Myers et al., 1998; Myers & Myers, 1980). It proposes that different aspects of psychological functioning are related to four independent dimensions, each expressed as

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

binary preferences. The extraversion versus introversion preference is related to whether psychological functions operate in the external world, through interactions with others, or in the internal world through contemplation. The sensing versus intuition preference is related to the perceiving process and whether information is acquired through the senses or through the imagination. The thinking versus feeling preference is related to the judging process and whether decisions are made through the application of rational principles and logic or through reference to shared values and common understandings. The judging versus perceiving preference is related to which of these two processes, operates in the outer world. Type theory assumes that in each of the four dimensions one or other function will be preferred and that these preferences, and their interactive dynamics, will shape individual personalities.

The four dimensions of this model have been shown to relate to religious orientations in numerous studies that have examined the psychological profiles of clergy and congregations (Francis, Craig, et al., 2007; Francis et al., 2011; Francis et al., 2010; Francis & Village, 2015; Village, 2013), or individual beliefs, attitudes, and religious experiences (Francis & Village, 2017; Francis, Village, et al., 2007; Village, 2005, 2010, 2016). For the purposes of this paper it is relevant to point out studies that have shown connections between psychological preferences and preferences for traditional or conservative expressions of faith.

The first group of studies are those that have drawn on temperament theory (Keirsey, 1998; Keirsey & Bates, 1978), which develops type theory by combining preferences among three of the dimensions (perceiving, judging, and attitude to the outer world) to suggest four different temperaments that describe basic dispositions. Of these, the SJ or Epimethean temperament refers to a preference for sensing (S) over intuition (N) and a preference for judging (J) over perceiving (P). Among other things, the Epimethean (SJ) temperament is associated with a tendency to preserve and maintain the status quo and tradition: 'Tradition becomes more and more important as the SJ gets older. Look for the SJ member of the

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

family, club, church or company to observe traditions.’ (Keirsey & Bates, 1978: 42). Several studies have shown a preponderance of Epimetheans among Anglican congregations other religious groups (Francis et al., 2016; Francis & Village, 2012; Muskett & Village, 2015). Epimetheans have been described as ‘guardians’, and the attraction to traditional religious organisations may be because such people feel comfortable in an organisation that maintains traditions and has well-recognised rules and procedures. On this basis, we would expect conservatism to be associated with the Epimethean temperament more than any other.

The second group of studies have linked conservatism to a preference for thinking over feeling, but here the relationship may be more indirect. Thinking types are more likely than feeling types to resist social pressure to change, and will maintain beliefs and attitudes on principled grounds, even if this risks them becoming unpopular. Village (2013) studied conservatism in relation to psychological type among 1,047 Anglican clergy. For Anglo-catholic and broad-church clergy, conservatism was predicted by higher sensing scores, but not by thinking scores, whereas the opposite was true for evangelical clergy. This led to the suggestion that there may be two distinct roles for the perceiving and judging processes in maintaining conservatism in the Church of England. The preference for sensing over intuition in the perceiving process might be linked to ways of expressing faith in worship (Village et al., 2009), with sensing types preferring worship that draws on familiar routines that have stood the test of time. The preference for thinking over feeling in the judging process might be linked to conservatism because of the greater ability of thinking types to resist the pressure to conform to the growing liberal moral consensus within and beyond the Church. A study of specifically biblical conservatism among 3,243 clergy and lay readers of the *Church Times* found that, across all church traditions, biblical conservatism was related to preference for sensing over intuition, but not to preference for thinking over feeling (Village, 2016). However, within traditions, preference for thinking predicted more liberal bible beliefs

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

among Anglo-catholics and more conservative bible beliefs among evangelicals. This is in line with the idea that the association between thinking and religious conservatism may relate to the tough-minded ability of thinking types to resist pressure to conform to the norms of the majority.

These two sets of findings suggest that testing for an association between the LIBCON scale and psychological type preferences is best done by combining temperament and type theory. Temperament theory suggests that SJs are likely to align with the conservative rather than liberal end of the scale because of their predilection for maintaining traditional patterns of belief, behaviour and worship. Psychological type theory suggests the judging process may relate to the LIBCON scale because thinking types are more likely than feeling types to maintain a conservative stance where there is pressure to liberalise. The SJ temperament and F–T preference should be independent of one another in psychological terms because they draw on separate dimensions of the type model. It is possible, therefore, to include both measures in the same analysis that seeks to explain variance in the LIBCON scale.

### **Method**

#### *Dataset*

The data used in this study were collected as part of Church of England's Church Growth Research Programme in 2013. Invitations to participate in the online survey were emailed to clergy (mostly with incumbent status) within a large sample of parishes (Voas & Watt, 2014). The present analysis is based on 1,389 clergy who provided full data on sex, age, psychological type, and church orientation.

#### *Measures*

The *LIBCON scale*, the dependent variable, was assessed by a single item widely used to measure the extent of theological conservatism among Anglicans (Randall, 2005; Village,

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

2018). Respondents were asked to rate their faith position on a seven-point semantic differential scale anchored by ‘liberal’ at one end and ‘conservative’ at the other. The responses were approximately normally distributed, with a mean of 3.7 ( $SD = 1.8$ ).

*Psychological type* was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS: Francis, 2005b). This is a 40-item instrument comprising four sets of 10 forced-choice items relating to each of the four components of psychological type: the two orientations (extraversion and introversion), the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), the two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and the two attitudes toward the outer world (judging and perceiving). The instrument has been widely used in studies of clergy and the component scales demonstrate good internal reliabilities (Francis, 2005; Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007; Francis, Robbins, & Craig, 2011; Village, 2011, 2013). In this study, Cronbach’s reliabilities were: orientation (E/I) .83; perceiving (S/N) .72; judging (F/T) .68; Attitude to outer world (J/P) .79. For the purposes of analysis two dummy variables were created based on type preferences: Epimethean (those with an SJ temperament) and Thinking (those who preferred thinking over feeling in the judging process).

*Church orientation* was assessed by a seven-point semantic differential scale, anchored by the poles: ‘catholic’ and ‘evangelical’. Following earlier practice (Village & Francis, 2009) those scoring 1-2 were classed as Anglo-catholic; 3-5 as broad church, and 6-7 as evangelical. For analysis, categories were dummy-coded into two variables, Anglo-catholic and evangelical.

*Control variables* were sex (0 = male, 1 = female) and age (in years).

### *Data analysis*

The main analysis consisted of fitting a series of hierarchical linear regression models. Predictors were added successively in groups: controls (model 1), psychological variables

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

(model 2), and church orientation (model 3). Model 2 was then run separately for each church orientation.

### Results

The clergy in the sample were predominantly male (80%); average age was 53.3 ( $SD = 8.1$ ) years. The type preferences were for introversion (56%) over extraversion (44%), intuition (55%) over sensing (45%), feeling (59%) over thinking (41%), and judging (75%) over perceiving (25%), which is in line with other studies of Church of England stipendiary clergy (Francis, Craig, et al., 2007). In terms of temperaments, 39% were Epimethean (SJ), 6% were Dionysian (SP), 23% Promethean (NT) and 33% Apollonian (NF). In terms of church orientation, there was a roughly even distribution across the three traditions (broad church 39%, evangelical 33%, Anglo-catholic 28%).

Bivariate correlations (Table 1) indicated some correlations among the predictor variables arose from the profile of this cross-sectional sample. There was a lower proportion of women among Anglo-catholic and evangelical clergy compared with others, reflecting the long-standing opposition to the ordination of women in these traditions. Evangelical clergy were slightly younger, on average, than those from the other two traditions. Correlations with psychological type reflected the lower proportion of thinking types among women compared to men found among the general population (Kendall, 1998). These bivariate correlations suggested multiple regression was necessary to isolate the independent effects of the predictor variables.

After controlling for sex and age (model 1, Table 2), conservatism was significantly positively correlated with both Epimethean temperament and preference for thinking, as predicted from theory (model 2). Adding church orientation dummy variables (model 3) showed evangelicals were more conservative, and Anglo-catholics more liberal, compared

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

with the rest of the sample. The addition of church orientation reduced the age effect, which probably reflected the younger profile of evangelical clergy, who tended to be more conservative. The association of evangelicalism with both conservatism and preference for thinking reduced the thinking effect, but it remained statistically significant, suggesting there may be direct and indirect effects between thinking and conservatism. The final model suggested that in this sample theological conservatism was associated with being male, with being younger, with Epimethean temperament, with preference for thinking over feeling, and with being evangelical rather than Anglo-catholic.

Repeating the analysis within church traditions showed a difference in the effects of psychological variables on the LIBCON scale (Table 3). Among Anglo-catholic and broad-church clergy conservatism was predicted by Epimethean temperament, but not preference for thinking, while the reverse was true for evangelicals.

### **Discussion**

The results were in line with expectations derived from theory, and showed that liberal – conservative belief among Church of England clergy is related to a number of different factors. Women tended to be more liberal than men, and the greater inclusivity of women clergy has been noted elsewhere (Robbins, 2007). Given that ordained women are, by definition, likely to be in favour of at least one major move away from tradition church practice (i.e. the ordination of women), it is likely that there is some selection of liberal women into the priesthood. The greater conservatism of younger clergy was partly, but not wholly, explained by the greater proportion of evangelicals among younger clergy. When church traditions were treated separately, the age effect was apparent mainly among Anglo-catholics, where younger clergy were more conservative than their older counterparts. Whether this is a cohort or ageing effect could not be decided from these data.

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

The chief factor predicting liberal versus conservative stance was self-affiliated church tradition, which explained almost a third of the variation in LIBCON scale scores. Compared with broad church clergy, evangelicals were more conservative and Anglo-catholics were more liberal. This is in line with the way the two wings of the Church of England have evolved historically. Anglo-catholics have tended to be doctrinally liberal under the influence of Gore's 'liberal catholicism', but have been more resistant to changes in church practice, especially the ordination of women. Evangelicals have tended to be more open to changes in church practice, but there is widespread doctrinal and moral conservatism, along with resistance to the ordination of women among the most conservative evangelicals. Those who associate with the 'broad-church' or 'middle of the road' Anglicanism have tended to embrace the ordination of women, but have been more reticent about doctrinal or liturgical change.

In terms of psychological type, the results support the idea that conservatism is more prevalent among those of Epimethean temperament, and among those with a preference for thinking over feeling. Epimetheans prefer sensing over intuition, and therefore may value the familiar and routine over the innovative and imaginative. Familiar patterns of worship and faith expression may be more highly prized than those that must be accessed by making new and strange associations of ideas. Epimetheans also tend to project their judging process (thinking or feeling) into their outer worlds, and this tends to want to organise and regulate that world, rather than simply experience it. This again promotes the familiar and well-worked routines of worship, and perhaps also the recognised patterns of doctrine and moral values which have been part of the Anglican tradition. Epimetheans are common among lay people in organisations such as Friends of Cathedrals (Muskett & Village, 2015), which promote the maintenance of historic buildings, and among congregations that use traditional patterns of

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

worship. They may be less likely to be found among those who attend innovative forms of worship such as Fresh Expressions (Francis et al., 2014; Village, 2015).

Preference for thinking over feeling was also associated with conservatism in the overall data. This might seem the opposite of what we would expect because liberalism is often said to be the application of reason or rationality to religion, something which should come most easily to thinking types. The explanation offered here is that it is the ability of thinking types to withstand pressure to conform to social norms at the expense of core principles that may mean they are more willing to own a conservative persona in a church or society that seems to be gradually liberalising. The analysis reported in Table 3, where the three church traditions were treated separately, is in line with this idea because it was among evangelicals, the group that tends to be conservative in matters of doctrine and personal morality, that the effect of thinking was most apparent. In the other two traditions, where conservatism is also about church practices, thinking did not predict conservatism but Epimethean temperament did. A prediction from this study is that Epimethean temperament tends to be associated with conservatism linked to church practice whereas thinking preference tends to be associated with conservatism linked to personal morality. Unfortunately this idea could not be tested with this particular dataset.

### **Conclusions**

Three conclusions emerge from this study:

First, individual differences in psychological functioning do seem account for some of the variations in the LIBCON scale, supporting Goldsmith and Wharton's contention that at least some of the forces that plague the unity of the Church may have their roots in individual differences rather than being solely a matter of doctrinal or doxological debate.

Second, the effects of psychological type on liberalism or conservatism seem to vary between those in different church traditions. This may be because different dimensions of the

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

type model operate in shaping different sorts of liberalism or conservatism, and these are more important in some traditions than others. More work is needed to test this idea, perhaps using datasets that have scales measuring different components of liberalism and conservatism.

Third, it would be useful to develop simple but more nuanced scales for measuring liberal – conservative stance in the Church of England. The LIBCON scale seems to be influenced by three types of conservatism: doctrinal, moral and ecclesial, and these might be assessed by using similar semantic differential scales, but introduced by questions that ask separately about these domains. This would add some overhead to questionnaires used in these sorts of studies, but the results suggest this may be worthwhile.

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Table 1. Bivariate correlations among predictor variables

	EV	AC	T	SJ	Age	Sex
Sex (female)	-.15 ***	-.05 *	-.06 *	.01	.01	
Age	-.08 **	.05	-.06 *	.06 *		
Epimethean (SJ)	.03	.05	.04			
Thinking (T)	.16 ***	-.01				
Anglo-Catholic (AC)	-.44 ***					
Evangelical (EV)						

Table 2 Hierarchical linear regression of conservatism

	Model		
	1	2	3
Sex (female)	-.22***	-.21***	-.14***
Age	-.09**	-.09***	-.05*
Epimethean SJ		.10***	.09***
Thinking		.14***	.08**
Anglo-Catholic			-.06*
Evangelical			.53***
Adjusted $R^2$	.06***	.08***	.38***
$\Delta R^2$		.03***	.29***

Note.  $N = 1389$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## PREDICTING CONSERVATISM

Table 3 Linear regressions of conservatism within each church tradition

		Tradition		
		AC	BC	EV
	<i>N</i> =	395	537	457
Sex (female)		-.27***	-.11*	-.13**
Age		-.13**	.01	-.03
Epimethean SJ		.14**	.08**	.09
Thinking		.00	.05	.15***
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.12***	.07***	.04***

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .