
V. A. Demant and the Recovery of the Pre-political

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A problem with borders

Athens in Pericles' day had a problem with borders. In one of the most memorable of the speeches in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, a deputation from Corinth, on the cusp of the outbreak of hostilities, implores Sparta to heed the threat to liberty posed by Athenian expansion: "The Athenians," say the men from Corinth, "are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution . . . To describe their character in a word, one might truly say that they were born into the world to take no rest themselves and give none to others."¹ If the acquisition of an imperial spirit posed problems for democratic Athens' oligarchic competitors, it also challenged Athens as a polis and eventually reduced her to the contracted boundaries of civil strife and tyranny. It was as if, as Cicero wrote in his *De re publica*, "[s]uch excess of liberty either in nations or in individuals turns into an excess of servitude."²

One of the most striking impressions given by contemporary liberal democracies such as the United States of America is the confusion that appears to have infected them when faced with issues about boundar-

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¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, I. 70. The translation is taken from Robert B. Strassler ed. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 40.

² Cicero, *De Re Publica* I. 44. The translation is by Clinton W. Keyes and can be found in the Loeb Classical Library edition, *Cicero XVI, On the Republic and On the Laws*, p. 103.

ies—not so much of empires, but of the competence and responsibilities of their governments in our secular world. This may be seen, for example, with the *physical* boundaries of democratic states, as they relate to migration and its effects on culture; and with the more *abstract* boundary between “private” and “public” which has been bent hither and thither by governments’ desire to safeguard publicly the plethora of personal rights they have legislated into existence. Such operations may resemble the attraction of a kind of political “black hole,” a central point of focus which once spanned out and nourished diverse social and economic bodies and into which those same bodies are eventually, ineluctably drawn, enveloped, and annihilated.

The argument I wish to make in this article is threefold: that such a confusion over boundaries, with its concomitant process of gradual annihilation, arises in large part from a mistaken but deeply rooted historical perception concerning the progress of liberal democracy over the past century; that this mistaken perception obviates any serious attempt by democratic societies to understand the true nature of the issues that affect them today, leaving them, instead, wrestling with striking contradictions such as greater surveillance in the cause of greater freedom, and tighter censorship in the cause of broader political inclusion; that a possible corrective to this situation may be found in a robustly anti-ideological mindset that gives fresh articulation to the “pre-political” dimension of the human person. The substance of my argument will rest upon a further claim: that such a “fresh articulation” may be found in the writings of the twentieth-century proponent of “Christian Sociology” and Anglo-Catholic moral theologian Vigo August Demant (1893-1983), whose exploration of the concept of the “pre-political realm” deserves much wider recognition than it has received to date.

The concept of a “pre-political” condition of man is, at its simplest, a statement about the intensifying secularization of society, and the argument presented below will revisit and, to a significant extent, transpose central aspects of the mid-twentieth-century movement of Christian Sociology in Great Britain, through which the term gained real purchase. Christian Sociology emerged in the wake of the Great War (1914–18), responding to a succession of economic crises and the emergence of totalitarian systems from the rubble of that cataclysmic event. Its adherents argued that the extraordinary material, technical, and scientific progress historically associated with the emergence of popular democracy—the humanitarian legacy of the “Enlightenment”—had outstripped the spiritual resources required to preserve a civilized and sustainable balance

between humans and the material world increasingly at their disposal. The analysis may be broadly familiar from the works of more prominent midcentury intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic; but a renewed focus upon Demant's neglected writings may cast new light upon our modern problem with boundaries. To facilitate that bridge to the present, I shall relate Demant's work briefly to the contribution of contemporaries with whom he collaborated: T. S. Eliot and, more substantially, Christopher Dawson. I shall also situate his oeuvre within a longer vein of thought stretching from Edmund Burke, who witnessed the birth of secular ideology in the Europe of the 1790s and who still speaks immediately to us about the emergence of the "ideological" mindset *avant la lettre*, to Vaclav Havel, whose postwar experiences of a kind of *neo-totalitarianism* in Communist Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution of 1989 offers a fascinating bookend to the sweep of Demant's thesis.

Demant in and beyond his time

Born in 1893 in northern England, son of a Unitarian father of Huguenot descent, Demant took a degree in engineering after a period of academic study in France, and then attended Oxford to train for the Unitarian ministry. He converted to Anglo-Catholicism in 1918 and entered the priesthood two years later. In 1929, he became Director of Research for the Christian Social Council, and was an active participant in the Christendom Group.³ At the same time, Demant began publishing on the growing social crisis of the interwar years, with works ranging from a report on *The Miners' Distress and the Coal Problem* (1929) and *This Unemployment: Disaster or Opportunity?* (1931) to a string of volumes of collected essays on the Christian response to the social and political upheavals of the modern state. After the Second World War, he published his Scott Holland lectures for 1949 under the title *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism*, and, that same year, was appointed Canon of Christ Church and Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of

³ The Christian Social Council was an outgrowth of the Conference for Christian Politics, Economics, and Citizenship (COPEC), which was held in Birmingham, April 1924, and was attended by approximately 1800 delegates. See Bruce Wollenberg, *Christian Social Thought in Great Britain Between the Wars* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 39-40. The lineage of English Christian Sociology is outlined, with particular reference to the Christendom Group and Demant's role within that association, in David Lyon, "The Idea of a Christian Sociology: Some Historical Precedents and Current Concerns," *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 3 (1983): 230-34. For an important, if narrower, historical context for (and somewhat sideways glance at) the Christendom group, see John Kent, *William Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149-51.

Oxford, a post from which he retired in 1971. He died in 1983.

Across his writings, Demant sought an explanation for the almost inexplicable rise of totalitarian ideologies across swathes of Europe during the late-1920s and 1930s, and his investigations acquired an emphasis on the centrality of the pre-political stratum of human social existence. For Demant, the pre-political was not *non*-political in the sense of being separate from the political, nor did it indicate a pre-contractual society anything like those inhabiting the pages of Thomas Hobbes or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It posited, instead, a network of natural affections and affiliations that bind humans together and against which the stated goals of a formal political system or constitution might be measured. Ironically, our understanding of this concept is obscured nowadays by the very pervasiveness of government in modern society, a situation only intensified by the state's benign role in the emerging ideology of the liberal democracies that triumphed over fascism, Nazism, and militant Japanese nationalism in 1945. The eventual outcome of the Second World War appeared to validate liberal democracy as an idea and a system with an almost innate ability to energize its people in a common cause for the good. This impression was strengthened by the later, much less bloody (at least for the democracies themselves) victory over Soviet Communism in 1991. In both cases, it was not difficult to read history as the triumph of liberty over totalitarian ideology, of the free association and development of "the people" over enforced conformity to a system of oppressive power wielded by a closed elite. As the democracies articulated and committed themselves to universal human rights enjoyed by citizens (and not only citizens) from birth, what need, or even room, was there for the "pre-political"?

Through the thirties, in publications such as *God, Man, and Society* (1933) and *Christian Polity* (1936), Demant contended that Christian Sociology, as he understood it, exposed a deep flaw in the response of the liberal democracies to the totalitarian systems. The emerging struggle, he argued, was not between democracy—or the "democracies"—on the one hand and three closed ideological systems on the other, but between four competing ideologies. The conclusion he drew from this, and which he pursued in his later, postwar writings such as *Theology of Society and Religion and the Decline of Capitalism*, was that any "success" achieved against the forces of totalitarianism will not have addressed the real malaise of society and man's relationship to politics; indeed, it may itself be explained by democracy's greater ideological capacity to mobilize its human and material resources in a prolonged fight, and so, ironically,

aggravate the distemper.

Central to Demant's thesis was the belief that the totalitarian political systems that had sprung up in the twentieth century were not so much advanced manifestations of secularism as responses to the radical secularization of the populations of Europe, which had taken a foothold during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, accelerated through the following century, and now shaped liberal democracies equally. Disclosing, here, the influence of the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, Demant believed he saw in this process a cultural amputation that had produced a distorted, fatally partial conception of human existence. The practical expression of secularism in the mid-twentieth century was not to be found in any particular totalitarian system, but in the ideological mindset that accompanied secularism naturally as it extinguished the "created-ness" of man from the world of political organization and virtue: "Man completely dismissed his creaturehood. He has become in his own eyes the artificer of reality, the creator of values, and the judge of God."⁴

In a nutshell, "secularization," in dismissing the "creaturehood" of man, denied what Demant called the "threefold aspect" of man's "social living," which arises from the acceptance that man has a foot both in the temporal world and *at the same time* in the transcendent: a paradox that is rationally inadmissible and therefore turned into a contradiction by the modern liberal mind.⁵ The "threefold aspect" is man's relation with his God or Creator, with his fellow creatures, and with the material world of Creation, and, given such, any attempt to address a malaise in man's social condition that ignored any of these dimensions would necessarily metastasize rather than remedy the malaise. A secular liberal democracy might vanquish totalitarianism of a racist or economically reductionist kind, from Demant's perspective, but it could not resolve the problems that had given rise to those systems until it faced its own limited perception of human nature. Worse, in the absence of such humility, the loss of liberty and the stripping of dignity would be perpetuated in fresh, perhaps more refined and camouflaged forms.

The first principles upon which Demant rested his analysis of societal crisis did not permit a distinction between secular and religious institutions. Instead, Demant dealt out a smart critique of the Church itself for failing to affirm the threefold aspect of social living in its integrity. Some

⁴ V. A. Demant, *Christian Polity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 67.

⁵ The term appears in V. A. Demant, "The Philosophic Basis of Christian Sociology," *Christendom: a journal of Christian sociology* 1, no. 2 (Sept 1932): 173.

religious responses had become absorbed into spirituality, others into an obsession with social structures of evil. Some promoted a misguided emphasis on the Church's independent rights vis-à-vis the state, and others a misconception that the state's role is shaped by the sinfulness of man, rather than by humankind's ultimate destiny. Christian Sociology, in contrast, stood upon a recognition of man's social nature in its completeness as a prerequisite for creating room in which to reconstruct and revitalize pre-political institutions and affections—the appropriate ground of the Church's competences. Otherwise, the social message of the Church would serve merely as a tool to retrench, in a distorted liberty of the People, the exalted purpose of the state as the protector and summation of the promise of those very associations and affections.

Demant's writings appear pressingly resonant in today's world, where secularization has become the chief source of the liberties and the measure of the kind of justice offered by modern democratic states, but where the exercise of free thought, conscience, and speech appear increasingly threatened or constrained. Those same writings, though, and their pivotal concept of the "pre-political," also suffer from the theological and ecclesiological contexts in which they first circulated. This is why I am going to situate the argument for Demant's continued significance within both his contemporary intellectual network and the broader intellectual tradition that I mentioned earlier. I hope thereby to facilitate the application of the "pre-political" as a diagnostic tool through the recovery of an emphasis upon two facets of that concept: first, the inseparable three-fold—or Trinitarian—nature of man's political and social existence; second, the importance of remembrance, or a collective historical imagination, in the cultural underpinning of political and social systems. Each offers an ingredient of Demant's compelling prognosis of liberal democracy's boundary syndrome that might illuminate the path ahead.

Defining and defending the "pre-political" realm

What was Demant attempting to recover in his use of the term "pre-political," and how did he limn that concept in his own words? It must be acknowledged at the outset that his use of the term across his publications is not as precise as one might wish; but in an essay of 1943, "The Theology of Politics," we can read what may be one of the sharper definitions: "In each new generation man begins again as a being whose relations with others are a family affair. Man begins as a tribesman, a man of natural relationships. This *pre-political* basis, this pre-condition of political activity, is a necessity for the freedom, decision and thought

which make politics.”⁶ The argument encapsulated here is one that Demant was emphasizing much earlier, as we have already seen: that man’s eternal nature is threefold, whereas, since the eighteenth century, the concepts of the state and its competencies in civil society have come increasingly to privilege only one dimension, whether that be reason, race, economics, or “the doctrine of the absolute individual.” On the very verge of war in 1939, Demant warned that, in both totalitarian and “nominally liberal” societies, “public ethics, education, family life and cultural achievement, *which are by nature anterior to the State*, are treated not as the purposes whose spontaneous vitality it exists to foster, but as means to the consolidation of bare political power.”⁷ He had made a very similar point some years earlier in his essay “The Church and the Modern State,” only this time he did so under the variant denomination of the “super-political” realm, in which he included “specifically religious practices, the pursuit of knowledge, the creation of beauty and the direct intercourse with other persons in family ties and friendship [which] may not be subordinated to any political end.”⁸ Having advocated during the war for, “[a]n integrating principle for the pre-political sphere, which includes family, culture, livelihood must be found,” Demant slipped in a further variant when he observed that “[t]he recreation of political consciousness depends upon regaining strength in the non-political realm.”⁹

Demant’s definition may not be as succinct as T. S. Eliot’s, who famously described the “pre-political” as “the stratum down to which any sound political thinking must push its roots, and from which it must derive its nourishment. It is also ... the land in which dwell the Gods of the Copy Book Headings ... the domain of ethics—in the end, the domain of theology.”¹⁰ It is still, though, sufficiently clear when read across the range of his writings: the pre-political reinserts a natural, innate reality of human association into the healthy structuring of human society and thereby reorients us to the correct meaning of the *zoon politikon*. The *polis*

⁶ Demant, *Theology of Society: More Essays in Christian Polity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 214. Demant’s own association with the term comes through T. S. Eliot, who, in his 1955 lecture on “The Literature of Politics,” specifically acknowledged borrowing the term “from Canon Demant, the Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford.” T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), 144.

⁷ Demant, *The Religious Prospect* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1939), 240-41 (italics added).

⁸ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 144.

⁹ Demant, *Theology of Society*, 218. In fairness, it should be noted that Demant is warning here, amid the heat of nationalistic militarization of society, that part of our political malaise was a surfeit of citizenship.

¹⁰ Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, 144.

that is nowadays so often identified, in a kind of synecdoche, as embracing all human associations, is rather prefigured in the “less perfect” formations out of which it is formed, upon which it stands and by which it is comprised. Consequently, it cannot be said to supersede those associations in any way that would entitle *it* to dictate *their* purposes.

A similar convergence of “pre-political” perspectives can be traced back over a century before Demant to Edmund Burke’s writings on civil society and politics. This ought not to surprise us, despite the gap in time and the fact that there appears to be no evidence that Demant was in any direct way influenced by Burke. After all, Demant was consciously critiquing the Enlightenment and the host of competing political movements that gained traction in the nineteenth century from Burke’s *bête noire*, Jacobinism: progressivism, rationalism, nationalism, socialism, and secularism.¹¹ It follows that the most eloquent and striking examples of Burke’s recourse to the “pre-political” realm can be found in his later thought, drawn forth by the immediate provocations of the French revolutionary government in the 1790s, for this was the point when the logic of a progressive, secular rationalism incorporated universal human rights into the very foundation of constitutional sovereignty in the name of the People. Against the threat of a society under the rule of a self-referential man-made law, applied through a freshly imposed geometrical system of administration, Burke attempted to reassert the place of traditional, pre-existing cultural ties and institutions. These he elaborates upon memorably in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791) as “obligations to mankind at large, which are not in consequence of any special voluntary pact [but] arise from the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of choice.” They are the consequence of innate physical instincts out of which “arise moral duties, which, as we are able perfectly to comprehend, we are bound indispensably to perform.”¹² This necessary inversion of what the radical revolutionary mindset understood as sovereignty and legislative justice Burke encapsulated in his late works, the “Letters on a Regicide

¹¹ We cannot, of course, speak of Burke’s own sociological analyses without distorting anachronism; though it is worth noting Robert Nisbet’s description of Burke as the “original sociologist” in his work *The Sociological Tradition*. For a study of Nisbet’s Burke, see Luke Sheahan, “Conservative, Pluralist, Sociologist: Robert Nisbet’s Burke,” *Studies in Burke and His Time* 28 (2019): 28–63. The longer history of “Christian Sociology” can be examined in David Lyon, “The Idea of a Christian Sociology: Some Historical Precedents and Current Concerns,” *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 3 (1983): 227–42.

¹² Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981 – 2015), 4:442–43.

Peace" (1796-97), where he famously asserted that "manners are of more importance than laws [for u]pon them, in a great measure the laws depend."¹³

Yet we should note that Burke's understanding of the "pre-political" appears also in his early writings. In *A Vindication of Natural Society*, published in 1756, Burke adopts a more oblique approach to the theme by parodying the ideas of those *philosophes* and "free-thinkers" who were, at the time, positing a sharp demarcation between "natural" and "artificial" society. Here, an intellectual construction designed, to some degree, to provide a theoretical critique of the limitations of social and political life in an advanced civilization is exposed as little more than a frivolous intellectual sham—though one that, in the hands of an accomplished orator or wordsmith, could inflict significant damage on a society. In the *Vindication*, our imaginary *philosophe* artfully stirs up his audience to acknowledge that all the ills and injustices of society have derived inherently from the very artifice of constructing a state. This he does through a vivid, though nothing more than an *apparently* erudite, recitation of the evils of war and social inequality inflicted by governments on nations and nations on each other, from the time of Sesostris to the present. He then describes various forms of government along with the corresponding evils that they engender. At the end of what nowadays would presumably pass for a "systemic" diagnosis, we might expect the solution to this moving catalog of suffering to be a radical return to natural society or the dismantling and reconstruction of civil, social man. In either case, the solution would necessarily deny or delegitimize any conception of a "pre-political" realm. As it is, the wise observer (a parody of the "free-thinker" Lord Bolingbroke) appears uninterested in offering any resolution to or alleviation of the evils he has laid out, beyond presenting a Stoical front before a world unequipped to confront the "truth." The reader may well feel bemused and frustrated; but, if it had not struck us before, we are left in no doubt by the formal "Preface" Burke inserted into the second edition that the denouement is bathetic because the argument, while emotive, was always sterile, relying as it did on the flat reduction of the drama of history to a chronology of events and numbers—the stripping of any transcendent concept of humankind stemming from a religious perception of the relationship between the natural and the artificial. This is encapsulated in Burke's comment that the *Vindication* was intended to show that "the same Engines which were employed for the Destruction of Religion, might be

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9:242.

employed with equal Success for the Subversion of Government.”¹⁴ In brief, the parody of the *Vindication* feeds on the injustice of man-made law without the right to appeal—or, more fundamentally, exposes the stain of an original sin without the hope of redemption.

This is where, it seems to me, Burke’s “pre-political” perceptions return us most closely to those of Demant, since we are presented, *mutatis mutandis*, with the central link between the malaise of liberal democracy and the process of intellectual and political secularization that gathered pace with the Enlightenment. The same point can be approached in a slightly different way by appreciating that this reading of the *Vindication* is also a fine-tuning of the debate about Burke’s use of the concept of natural law that is now many decades old, the stress here pressing more immediately on a critique of the thought of seventeenth-century Protestant writers such as Grotius and Pufendorf than on a defense of earlier Thomistic thought. Demant’s introduction of the concept of natural law is similarly historically inclined. In “God and History: A Comment on Gierke and Contemporary Heresy” (1934), he writes: “The outlook represented in the past by Natural Law underlies all theories that look to an original social nature of man or a final state where his true nature will be expressed in social structure. The French Revolution, the American Declaration of Independence, the conception of Humanity, all philosophic internationalism, and the teleological, that is to say the socialist, elements in Marxism—all these assume the existence of some law, some universal principle of right and justice which is in the nature of things, and by which the actual, positive and social movements and institutions can be measured.”¹⁵ In other words, what has been lost in the process of secularization is the location of a point beyond the practical and theoretical reaches of the state, by which the organs of political power and even the sovereign law itself might be measured in relation to each individual who falls within their orbit.

Yet to seek the contours of natural law in the historical, Demant insists, is not to historicize it, since the problem of injustice and oppression, and the question of righteous resistance, cannot be resolved within the state itself, however benign or tolerant its legal and constitutional foundations might be. The ultimate needs of human beings “cannot be discovered from the present demands of men entangled in the social struggle itself; these will always be largely relative, partial, or negative.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: 134.

¹⁵ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 115. The essay originally appeared in *Christendom: A Journal of Christian Sociology* 4, no. 16 (December 1934): 255-64.

The discovery must come from a sphere of knowledge which sees human beings as more than merely social victims or as the raw material for social solutions.”¹⁶ In the *Vindication*, we can already discern Burke’s razor-like perception of that somber reality, which he recapitulated most forcefully in the early days of the French Revolution: “On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy . . . laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests. In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.”¹⁷

Demant’s emphasis upon the pre-political realm as the locus of the diagnosis and the remedy for the malaise of the body politic clearly requires a robust awareness both of the spiritual dimension of human nature and of the perennial interface between that nature and the flaws of human association, or “civil” and “artificial” society. His solution to the crises facing societies in interwar Europe requires that humans, reaching beyond their imputed secular roots, “have to regard human society as more than a purely natural phenomenon, deriving its problems from the interaction of the spiritual and ethical nature of human beings with its background in the natural world.”¹⁸ From any other perspective, it is difficult to see human society as founded on the law of creation rather than the creation of law. In searching thus for “the correct analogy for human society,” Demant finds it in “the Blessed Trinity, for it is an analogy based upon a causal relation.”¹⁹ Given the corresponding emphasis upon man’s created-ness, that concept is understandably and almost necessarily tethered to an orthodox Christian definition of the term. First, man’s nature compels him to associate with others: there is a tendency to unity as completeness which establishes the peculiarly Christian paradox of the individual finding liberation in his membership of a community. This is one step in dismantling the wall of separation constructed between “rational” natural man and “artificial” society. Second, man’s nature contains a spiritual dimension that orients it to the eternal. That impulse may be coopted (or “immanentized”), as Demant explains in his early publication *God, Man, and Society* (1934), but it cannot be denied or ignored without distorting the other facets of his nature. The result of such

¹⁶ Demant, *God, Man, and Society*, 32.

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2001), 240.

¹⁸ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

denial was the materialist or reductionist fate, economic or racial, that Demant identified in the totalitarian systems of the thirties. This further stage of self-recognition militates against the search for perfection or a “Republic of Virtue” either in the construction of perfecting institutions or in the rejection of all existing power structures. It can therefore be seen as denying the validity of a wall of separation between “natural” man and “artificial” society. Third, that spiritual dimension means that man’s nature places him in a state both of *being* and of *becoming*, an insight that relates particularly to the physical, cultural medium of man’s existence. This is a point that Demant stressed frequently throughout his writings, but perhaps nowhere more lucidly than in defining the purpose of Christian Sociology as “enlarg[ing] the conception of man so that he shall be seen as a much less simple being, as a creature with his roots in the spiritual world, and with one foot, as it were, always outside time.” Man has a foot on the earth and a foot in eternity: enwrapped in his immediate circumstances, but not imprisoned by them, nor by the past or the future. The wall of separation between natural and artificial is erased.

Demant’s pursuit of the pre-political in and beyond history

These three features of man’s nature correspond to Demant’s trinity of relationships that form man’s whole “self”: a relationship with other men, with the Creator, and with the sculptured environment. They also raise the question of what this trinity of relationships means in practice. In “Grace and Natural Law,” Demant lays out the implications of rejecting the redemptive link between creature and Creator, which is that law and justice become determined only by man’s “proper” relationship to other men and to his physical environment. In the shadow of “Enlightenment” thought, this may be interpreted positively by seeing a “rational” natural law as the final realization of human potential—to take charge of that environment and enforce choices that will further equity, cooperation, and human liberty. While this is the root of the ideology of “liberal democracy,” Demant warns us that it can also validate an existing hierarchy of “being,” based on race, perhaps, or kinship, or socio-economic class—any of those features of the physical environment that now are authorized to locate law and justice simply in terms of “being.” This is the case in the fascist, communist, and totalitarian ideologies of the thirties, and, while it still appears to many nowadays as the antithesis of the ideology of “liberal democracy,” where a concept of “being” is succumbing to a total commitment to “becoming,” in *each* case, to quote

Demant directly, “Freedom from God means slavery to creation.”²⁰ The analogy of the Trinity affirms that humans in society are both in a state of *being* and *becoming*.

Demant’s critique of the immanentizing of mystery, or the elimination of the transcendent aspect of human nature, reads the Enlightenment as a debasement of natural law in a new hubristic claim over the laws of the physical world, where “Creation has been interpreted in terms of law, instead of law in terms of the real nature of Creation.”²¹ This insight is not unique by any means; but the analogy of the Trinity enables it to operate in a number of fields whose connectivity is concealed from those observing from a position entirely within, and committed to, liberal democracy. By way of illustration, let us briefly compare Demant’s diagnosis at this point with a more famous response to Enlightenment ideology to be found in the writings of Isaiah Berlin. The shift from “sin and redemption” to the language of “liberty” is not as wide as it might seem at first, since the liberal democracies reified “liberty” precisely as the intellectual kernel of their fight against the oppressive, perfectionist ideologies of their enemies, a practice resumed after the defeat of National Socialism and fascism, in the Cold War. In *Two Concepts of Liberty*, published in 1958, Berlin addressed the “open war that is being fought between two systems of ideas which return different and conflicting answers to what has long been the central question of politics—the question of obedience and coercion.”²² We might note at the outset that Berlin lays out the issue as a polarity. Liberty (or “freedom”), which has had “more than two hundred senses . . . recorded by historians of ideas,”²³ can be boiled down to two central, antagonistic ones: “negative” and “positive” freedom, each representing interpretations of the source of law in civil society that are irreconcilable. Demant, on the other hand, examining concepts of liberty prior to the outbreak of war in an essay entitled, “The Catholic Doctrine of Freedom,” eschews such polarities and directs us, instead, to the Augustinian sense of *libertas minor* and *libertas maior*. It is notable that the terminology Demant applies here rests exclusively and adamantly on a recovery of the missing element of man’s nature—the association with God—and that is what Demant has in mind when he couples the word “grace” to the concept of natural law. “An autonomous world,” he writes (that is, a world in which law determines being, or

²⁰ Ibid., 96.

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121.

²³ Ibid.

creation), “becomes a world upside down, diabolical. If the covenant of grace has no word for this disorder, who has? for grace is the only life which is given from the outside.”²⁴ Berlin’s analysis is of its time, shaped by the experience of the totalitarian systems of the interwar years and the emergent superiority of the Western liberal democratic tradition; but, against Demant’s diagnosis, it is precisely the duality of that argument that exposes the shallowness of a concept of liberty that lacks the givenness of creation and transcendence, that denies (in Burke’s haunting phrase) the “unbought grace of life.”

Our exploration of the “pre-political” realm so far has carried with it strong intimations of the extent to which Demant deemed culture and history crucial to the effective operation of that realm of a justly ordered and free civil society. The historical writings of Demant’s contemporary, Christopher Dawson, largely neglected in history departments nowadays, focused particularly on the historical emergence, function, and development of culture and its relation to religion and the concept of “progress” in time and across civilizations. Concerning “progress,” the ideological apology for all modern totalitarian systems and for “liberal democracy,” Dawson argued (drawing on St. Augustine’s *City of God*), that one world-shattering consequence of the Incarnation was the perception that the “measure of time is not to be found in things, but in the soul.”²⁵ It followed from this that “progress” was not, as many twentieth-century historians believed, a modern concept, tightly bound to a secularized chronological narrative of salvation and eschatology or a variant of the theory of evolution, but was essentially defined, instead, by the historicization of memory—the continuous human act of representing, enacting, and anticipating. In other words, “progress” is, and always has been, a process of human growth instantiated in, and propelled by, *culture*.

But, argued Dawson, with the dawning of the Enlightenment (or the “Apocalypse of Reason,” as he terms it in *Progress and Religion*), the religious dimensions of culture were increasingly secularized and marginalized, and an essential orienting feature of civilizational progress was therefore lost, to be replaced by a faith in empirical science and technology. Progress had become a two- instead of a three-dimensional historical force.²⁶ Dawson traced this development back to the crisis of the Refor-

²⁴ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 103.

²⁵ Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 333. Dawson references *City of God* XII, xx.

²⁶ Quoting from Dawson’s *Progress and Religion*, Demant argues to this effect in

mation, when Lutheranism had sundered law and grace, separating the civil and the religious in matters of salvation and “liberty.” The impact this sundering would have on that *mysterium fidei* of the Trinity may have taken a century or so to be absorbed fully into the issue of church-state relations, but the consequence of this recession of grace, as we have noted above, was to render morality and law self-referential in the state, providing a toleration dependent upon an accompanying thinning of the concept of liberty. For Demant, Dawson, and others in the circle of Christian Sociology and its quarterly journal *Christendom*, that was precisely why the modern liberal democratic state offered no real salvation from enslavement to “progressive” totalitarian systems. Culture and progress had become disengaged.

Dawson’s exposition of historical progress appears in striking harmony with Demant’s use of the term “grace” to measure the health of a culture and his consequent lamentation over the dominant legacy of the Enlightenment and its economic implications. In *Christian Polity*, Demant writes that Enlightenment man is “turned loose to *do* lots of things and to *be* nothing in particular.”²⁷ Since historical man is also cultural man, a loss of the sense of *being* detaches man from the moral and social orientation that is ingested from pre-political associations, so any sense of *becoming* that would serve to fix the very purpose of the political sphere also comes unmoored. This essential connection leads Demant to situate cultural activity firmly within that pre-political realm. In an essay for the collection *Prospects for Christendom: Essays in Catholic Social Reconstruction*, published in 1945, he writes:

Cultural activities have a metaphysical priority in that in them the spirit of man operates most centrally from within outwards, less conditioned by the determinisms which of necessity belong to political and economic activities. . . . Cultural bonds are more essentially spiritual and universal than political or economic ones. Therefore, a society in which the cultural life has not a certain priority in this sense, violates the natural order of man’s inner structure.²⁸

Demant stops short here of arguing that culture precedes political and economic organization historically; but, as with the wider concept

God, Man, and Society: An Introduction to Christian Sociology (Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1934), 162-65.

²⁷ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 39 [emphasis added]. Compare *Caritas in Veritate*, ¶11; “Authentic human development concerns the whole person in every single dimension.” Demant praises Catholicism for its appreciation of the status of man in this essay, “The Status of Man.”

²⁸ V. A. Demant, “The Idea of a Natural Order,” in *Prospects for Christendom: Essays in Catholic Social Reconstruction*, ed. Maurice B. Reckitt (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), 39.

of the pre-political, it takes “metaphysical” precedence precisely as it yields to physical and moral imperatives that shape the social artifice of the state. In so doing, cultural activity reconciles the tension between the particular and the universal, the timeless and the timebound and so nourishes the healthy development (or progress) of society by holding the respective spheres of the political and pre-political the right way up.

The right way up. From the perspective of a system that prioritizes one subsidiary aspect of human existence above the spiritual—race, perhaps, or economics, or “liberty” or “equality” as abstract rights—an imbalance between our consciousness of both being and becoming may infect or, rather, toxify the cultural realm, and lead to an inversion of the political and the pre-political. This will happen, Demant emphasizes, not only when the state is sanctified, as in fascist or communist systems, but also when liberal democracy develops to the point of sanctifying individual freedom and elevating the autonomous individual above all the associations and communities through which man achieves true freedom. Put another way, culture is enervated as the person surrenders to the “individual,” or “self.” In any case, the problem reduces to a failure to grasp the complete, three-fold dimension of true human living upon which Demant constructs the whole critique of Christian Sociology.

Perhaps we can set both feet back on the ground at this point to obtain a sharper sense of how Demant understands the operation of this metaphysical, cultural pre-eminence in more practical and time-bound terms. Again, we might visit his concept of liberty and its relation to progress and historical development. In “The Catholic Doctrine of Freedom,” following the Augustinian distinction between *libertas minor* and *libertas maior* mentioned above, Demant emphasizes that liberty once had meaning only in relation to an ultimate goal or end: being was invested with liberty insofar as it pursued a path of rightly becoming. With accompanying grace, it is clear from this analysis that civil law must be preceded by a natural law that is integral to the pre-political condition, a crucial insight when understood authentically because it points us, and all our social and political determinations, to the reality of humans as both *being* and *becoming*. “In the Middle Ages,” Demant continues (drawing upon the work of Bede Jarrett, but, again, revealing the influence of Dawson on his thought), “liberty was sought and fought for, not in its own name, but in the name of justice. Men wanted to be free *to fulfil certain purposes* . . . Men rallied to a charter always more readily than to a demand for freedom. No one was urged to strive for freedom for the mere purpose of being free, but for the purpose of fulfilling a law. *It was*

for liberties rather than liberty that men would die."²⁹

That linguistic shift from the abstract singular "liberty" to the historicized plural "liberties" may be said to represent something of a cardinal point in Demant's thought, since it reveals the overriding necessity of a mature, rightly ordered historical sense, embedded in culture, for a truly free society and for inoculation against the temptations of the totalitarian mindset. From Demant's position, we can see how history has in the main, until the recent preponderance of Enlightenment thought, both cataloged and directed an effort by humans to *preserve* liberties rather than to *struggle* for a particular conception of justice. Resistance and revolutions were prudential matters of loss and gain: resisters identified their cause with liberties embedded in existing social associations rather than as individuals claiming abstract rights against such associations or to restrain those around them. And if we ask what difference there was, then, between this concept of revolution and a continual process of reaction and stasis, the answer would surely be that, while the initial spark might be discontent at something felt to have been lost, the second stage, the articulation of that loss for the purpose of political action, would inevitably be accommodated to the new material circumstances of society, albeit tethered by a spiritual thread conceptualizing a "dignity" validated by the memory of the past and embedded in a "pre-political" consciousness. Culture would assert its metaphysical pre-eminence in physical and moral expression.

Like Burke and Dawson, Demant saw the march of history as not simply a catalog of change (progressive or otherwise), but a movement spangled, as it were, with points of direct connection to tropes embedded in nature-as-art and confirming through the resulting equilibrium that man, by his *being*, and for his *becoming*, has a foot both in time and in eternity. In Demant's mind, the danger in losing the ability to reconnect with these tropes, to recover that equilibrium, is that man makes a god out of history—God being the *becoming*, rather than the *is* in history—and, by the same process, man's foot in eternity is dislodged. But that is not all. The god of becoming is a fickle deity, and will eventually turn upon its own acolytes, as it did in the hubristic nightmare of 1914, or with the nemesis it visited upon the Marxists later.

²⁹ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 81 (italics added).

In search of Demant's pre-political realm today

It could well be said that Demant's anxieties concerning the political trajectory of a triumphant liberal democratic ideology are confirmed around us today. In the past quarter of a century, for all its accompanying promotion of anticolonialism and diversity, Western liberal democracy has adopted a virulent and highly successful hegemonic form with which it has achieved domination over half the globe through ideological conformity and economic and commercial supremacy. Those who determine the paths of "progress" and reap its rewards comprise a weaponized intelligentsia operating increasingly through monopolistic Internet "platforms." Old-fashioned military superiority has made its contribution; but the dreams of world domination originally harbored by the perverse rulership of Soviet Communism or the Third Reich really now appear to have been brought within reach (thankfully more benignly) by the extraordinary, added capacities of computerized markets and communications. The accompanying dangers are there, and have been rehearsed many times: the use of language to simplify and polarize the perennial tensions of civic social life, the decline in the dignity of labor and in the equity of reward for that labor, the growing intolerance of diversity of thought, the suffocating surveillance (increasingly, the auto-surveillance) of individuals in the name of freedom, and—perhaps the thread that links them all—an increasing infantilism in the way society understands culture and absorbs its past. Our last question, then, is whether Demant offers us an answer that might still have purchase in the modern, secularized world.

The patently spiritual, Christian basis of much of Demant's thinking might seem to be an insurmountable obstacle here; but Christian Sociology was by no means a project in evangelization simply aiming to refill the pews of emptying church buildings. If it is, indeed, the autonomous individual or the atheistic communist rejection of "createdness" that underlies the political perversion of culture in the loss of what is truly humane, rejecting revealed religion or Trinitarianism does not invalidate an argument that relies upon a transcendent aspect of human existence. By the same token, Demant argued that even Christian responses stripped of the dogmatic reassertion of a spiritual dimension (and worship) will fail to address the true cause of our social malaise. "State Absolutism," he wrote in *Christian Polity*, "partly is the revenge taken by the religious nature of man for the apostasy of the Church," a point upon which he was quick to elaborate: "Totalitarianism is not a phenomenon to which the Church can pharisaically say 'No'; it is a phenomenon which should turn the Church

to a revolutionary penitence for its apostasy.”³⁰ Later, in “The Idea of a Natural Order,” he was to define his strategy as working for “a society which shall reflect the essential nature of man better than that of the recent period in the West” through “Christian and non-Christian co-operation.” This would involve joining with “all who believe that man has a real structure and who, through discernment of conscience or insight into the forces of history, have some convictions concerning the permanent needs of men through all phases and periods.”³¹ When he then identifies the stuff of a healthy culture as including “specifically religious practices” (with worship itself defined as “[t]he submission of the partially free creature, by his freedom, to the fact of his creaturehood”³²) along with “the pursuit of knowledge, the creation of beauty and the direct intercourse with other persons in family ties and friendship,” his purpose in reemphasizing the orthodox theological positions of the Church is first and foremost to reawaken consciousness of that dimension as the only way of recovering the pre-political. Such “expressions of man’s spiritual nature,” he states bluntly, “may not be subordinated to any political end.”³³

While the recovery of a vibrant adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity is probably beyond imagining now, Demant’s thesis still operates: only a state that acknowledges the authority of a sphere beyond its own boundaries can claim true authority for its own functions. Like T. S. Eliot in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Demant is pointing to a vision of recovery that does not depend on a conscious re-Christianization of society or the rebuilding of a Judeo-Christian culture *tout court*. I shall briefly discuss two such features, which might lead us to some practical options for real progress. They are a sharper awareness of the insidious power of the ideological mindset to drive impressions of social reality, and an accompanying, invigorated concept of the personhood of individuals.

We have already brushed up against the matter of the ideological mindset a number of times; and we should return to it as a starting point for any discussion of the contemporary relevance of Demant’s ideas, not least because the word ideology has metastasized in recent decades until, confusingly, it is seen to be almost synonymous with coherent or

³⁰ *Christian Polity*, 124, 131.

³¹ Demant, *Theology of Society: More Essays in Christian Polity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 70. In respect of Demant’s use of the term “permanent needs” this essay first appeared in a volume entitled *Prospects for Christendom* (1945), which was also published by Faber and Faber and also included T. S. Eliot’s essay “Cultural Forces in the Human Order.”

³² Demant, *Christian Polity*, 70.

³³ *Ibid.*, 144.

systematic thought. It is not: it is a mindset—a choice in the way we interpret the world around us—and so there is an alternative. We can choose, and we can choose *not*, to see creation ideologically, which is to say that we can still transform a life of paradox and tension into a liberating adventure rather than a lodestone of angst. The first step in that process is to familiarize, or re-familiarize, ourselves with the flawed illusions of the beast of ideology, and here Demant’s underlying conception of man as a creature capable of apprehending his “created-ness”—living within Creation but destined to immortality—may be of real assistance.

That mindful created-ness as an antidote to ideology allows the individual to acknowledge how his or her *being* enters into *becoming* without being subsumed by it, or, more prosaically, how the individual becomes aware of that individuality in submitting to his or her social dependence. In Demant’s words: “These two poles of the doctrine of Creation [the individual and the social] constitute not only an intellectual paradox, but in practical life an eternal tension.”³⁴ As such, they liberate the individual from the real, servile consequences of an ideological mindset that, incapable of accepting that our natures are both temporally and spiritually oriented, explains away that paradox as, rather, a contradiction which itself conceals the hidden, fundamental—the word *à la mode* is “systemic”—feature of reality that explains the evils of artificial society. The threefold conception of man’s true nature is reduced to Casaubon’s “key to all mythologies,” and, in the process, the sphere of culture is desiccated and reduced to merely a subsection of the artificial state.

No wonder, then, that the impact on historical awareness of the ideological mindset, and the servility to which it runs, is always to reduce the past and the future to the plaything of the present. Since one, *and only one*, essential aspect of the human condition is privileged to explain and justify the progress this domination requires (or, in latter days, to provide the systemic critique of the evils it has produced), Demant reasoned that political ideology must define and contain, within the goal of the city, or the end of politics, the wholeness of human nature:

Man came to be regarded first as political subject, then as economic producer, then as eating to encourage trade, as consumer to help industry, and as interest-earning debtor. Along with the delusive victory of political freedom, [man] has been enslaved to a series of totalitarianisms built upon segments of human life. Modern humanism cuts off man from any law except that of his own being. The inevitable result is that he becomes a lackey, of some instrumental activity of his existence.³⁵

³⁴ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 29. Emphasis added.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 88. Compare *Caritas in Veritate*, ¶16: “To regard development as a vocation is

Seen from this perspective, ideologues may be said to peddle in a kind of alchemy, offering the formula by which all experience and data are compounded into a single key that opens all knowledge of the world around us, rendering redundant the religious instincts and the thick cultural contexts which feed man's threefold nature.

The opening chapter of *God, Man, and Society* is titled "The Church and Social Redemption," and here Demant raises one further path to ideological servility. "The most insistent question," he writes, "to which humanity is likely, for some generations, to expect an answer from religion is the question: has human history a meaning?"³⁶ While all totalitarian ideologies have been based upon a dogmatic, materialist answer to that question, the ideology underpinning democratic liberalism has its answer, too: that history has no meaning beyond progress toward the greater realization of an individual, abstract liberty exercised under the protection of the state. This is, at root, an historical and cultural distortion, and Demant would hardly have been surprised that, consequentially, the individual in liberal democratic society nowadays appears often incapable of bearing too much history, cowering within a "culture" that offers only the shallow orientation of the present. Without evident material progress, and any sense of a transcendent nature in man, we are bound to confront, in Demant's haunting phrase, "the futility of history."³⁷

The point is, history is "futile" when its only response to injustice or evil in society is that, since every form of human association is artificial, the individual, in theory, is obligated to nothing but the power of the physical and biological laws of existence. At this point, all or none of the social injustices we encounter—"systemic" disorders, if we must—are attributable to human choice or to moral flaws that could have been corrected. Such a catalog of the sins of "artificial society" can elicit either a kind of elitist stoicism (in the vein of Burke's parodic *Vindication*), or, as today, an apparently unquenchable rage to obliterate and eradicate what the past has bequeathed us, as if it were nothing but a sick joke played at the expense of posterity. As Burke wrote of the French revolutionaries: "Something they must destroy, or they seem to themselves to exist for no purpose."³⁸

to recognize, on the one hand, that it derives from a transcendent call, and on the other hand that it is incapable, on its own, of supplying its ultimate meaning." Pope Benedict XVI, 2009.

³⁶ Demant, *God, Man, and Society: an Introduction to Christian Sociology* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co, 1934), 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock

In the mixture of such historical sterility with the progressive energy of Enlightened man, Demant sees only the restless incursion of state power, with politics reduced to the occasional operation of a safety valve to reduce perennial social tension:

Where the God-and-man relation is cut off from man's other relations, where there is no hierarchy of human purposes with its meaning in the eternal world, there are no norms for resolving the violence in the conflicts of interest in earthly relations. . . . The taking of man out of the organic scheme of things, in which he is both dependent and responsible, leaves him swinging between conceptions of absolute impotence and absolute independence.³⁹

It is hard not to sense the aptness of this description for the world, and the fate, of the modern "liberated" individual, who has no recourse to any standard beyond the limits of the civil laws that define his or her identity. When confronted with this state of affairs, why should embracing a paradox not come as blessed relief, and an act of true liberation?

And it is, perhaps, with this challenge that we can start to discern more sharply the essential relationship between this "liberated" individual and the recovery of the complete human, that is, the person who draws from his or her culture the tools to deal with and mature in the tensions of being and becoming: the person who, in his or her individuality, constructs the political out of the pre-political. Such a reference to "personhood" was not, of course, particular to Demant during the interwar years, as he himself was aware: "Enough has been said by others about the Christian demand that the State must recognize the right of persons, that is, certain spheres of political direction; and also the right of associations whose life is their own and not derived from that of the State."⁴⁰ But, as argued above, his own treatment contains nuances that are worth our serious consideration.

In *God, Man, and Society*, Demant finesses the relationship between "personhood" and the "individual" by dividing the latter into a "healthy" individualism and the kind of individualism that is a catalyst for cultural and social corrosion: "The sign of true individuality," he writes, "is that men think and talk about the things they feel worth doing, and not about their being individuals," whereas in an ideologically driven totalitarian state, "[t]he life of the unit becomes expressed not in terms of its own activities and the social relationships which those ac-

(Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 50. The sentence does not appear in the first edition of the book.

³⁹ Demant, *Christian Polity*, 89.

⁴⁰ Demant, *God, Man, and Society*, 181-2.

tivities naturally bring, but in terms of the abstract unit as distinguished from or related to other units.”⁴¹ By this route, we are returned to the associative element of personhood that is pre-political and forms the rising agent, as it were, of civil, or artificial, society. Consequently, we are also warned that the paradox of the condition, and the tension it naturally nurtures in and between those very associations, provides one of the most powerful incentives for the ideological mindset. In an essay entitled “The Importance of Christopher Dawson,” included in *Theology of Society* (1947), Demant acknowledges and affirms Dawson’s achievement in elevating the discussion about liberal democracy above the familiar political antitheses of democracy and dictatorship, socialism and capitalism: “[S]trangely enough, it is the epoch which adopted the label of ‘humanism’ that has so impoverished man’s understanding of himself that the human world is divided into camps, each fighting for one element in the truth as if it were the whole.”⁴² For Demant, Dawson has delineated masterfully the “wriggles of this atomized and disintegrating mass man,” and we should consequentially take to heart his warning that “[w]e are in as real a danger as other nations . . . of succumbing to an overmastering purpose of mere social solidarity for want of a more ultimately human purpose animating our common life.”⁴³

How sharply one might perceive the shadows of the recent riots in American and European cities in that powerfully brutal but compassionate prophecy! But the same prophecy also brings us to the positive practical message embedded in Demant’s contrast of the individual with the person, as it foreshadowed the phenomenon of post-totalitarianism that was later exposed by the Czech writer Vaclav Havel in his famous essay, “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel’s definition of ideology and its modus operandi in that impressive and influential essay fits remarkably with the trajectory of Demant’s secularized society: “Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.”⁴⁴ Upon that definition, Havel peels back the veil of a special kind of acquiescence by individuals in the loss of their own liberty. This is what he terms the “post-totalitari-

⁴¹ Ibid., 148.

⁴² Demant, *Theology of Society*, 189. The essay focuses on Dawson’s book *Beyond Politics*; it originally appeared in the journal *Nineteenth Century*.

⁴³ Ibid., 189-90, 194.

⁴⁴ Vaclav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 30.

an system,” that is, “a world of appearances, a mere ritual, a formalized language deprived of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality.”⁴⁵ If the language carries more than a whiff of the eighties, the semblance of this scenario with contemporary liberal democracies can hardly be denied and surely remains highly instructive. It is the renunciation of the paradox of personhood and the accompanying, defective substitutions for those natural, pre-political associative impulses that ensnare us. “[N]ot only does the system alienate humanity,” Havel continues, “but at the same time alienated humanity supports this system as its own involuntary masterplan, as a degenerate image of its own degeneration, as a record of people’s own failure as individuals.”⁴⁶

My stated goal in placing Demant within a wider span of thought was to suggest that, as his ideas spoke not merely to the historical circumstances of his day, so the form in which they were conveyed might be transposed to our times—that they participate in a powerful continuity beneath the distinctness of the language. Havel’s diagnoses rest heavily on the brittleness as well as the strength of language as a tool of oppression. The arrival of the “Twitterverse” and social media and the censorial powers of multinational corporations have certainly made such a transposition seem increasingly remote; but the very title of Havel’s inspiring challenge to the self-imprisoned in the Communist Eastern Bloc, the “power of the powerless,” carries the hope that, if Demant is right in his understanding of the permanent features of the human drama, of the continuing option for the “pre-political” and for the “person,” all is not yet lost for the free individual in society.

Conclusion

Addressing the postwar challenge to freedom and order in his country, Demant stated that “the mission before English society is to recover a real sense of community which will call out genuine social faith, while preserving the freedom for which English life and thought has always been jealous.”⁴⁷ This appeal to a “genuine social faith” we have traced through his conception of the “pre-political” realm of human existence, the open and the concealed threat of totalitarianism to “liberal” societies

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38. Here, again, Havel almost seems to echo Demant’s striking apophthegm—an intriguing variant on one we have encountered above, that “State absolutism is the revenge taken by the social nature of man on the political plane, for disintegration in the socio-biological one.” See Demant, *God, Man, and Society*, 181.

⁴⁷ Demant, *Theology of Society*, 194.

through the lure of the ideological mindset, and the alternative sense of a vital freedom that exists in the fullness of human personhood. In each case, we have implicitly returned to the theme of boundaries: ironically, the boundaries constructed upon the secular promise that man had the mental capacity to transcend all physical boundaries, proceeding from a “blinding conceit” that “[t]he modern world starts from the autonomous individual and tries to persuade him to be a social being.”⁴⁸

I have not claimed any great analytical originality for Demant’s “pre-political” diagnosis of the threats to mid-twentieth-century liberal democracy, but I am suggesting that his writings, unfamiliar to many as they are, can offer a freshness and clarity that may deepen our understanding of the nature of those threats today. First, that diagnosis affirms the naturalness of human association itself, from the creative act of conception to the realization, in the natural artifice of civil society, of what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called the “authentic human development [of] the whole of the person in every single dimension.”⁴⁹ Second, it restores the primacy of the personal, including the liberty of the person to validate the particular and the unusual, above the pervasive claims of the ideological mindset. Finally, it values striving for a language and style of conversation that engages with and even celebrates the paradoxes and tensions of social living: to think as a person considers, rather than as an individual calculates.

⁴⁸ Demant, *God, Man, and Society*, 166.

⁴⁹ See Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, ¶11.