

V.A. Demant

I first met Canon Vigo Auguste Demant in the autumn of 1970. I had just arrived in Oxford as Fellow and Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford, shortly to become a University Lecturer in Theology. Oxford I scarcely knew, having been a student at Cambridge and then Edinburgh. But I knew Demant's writings: he was something of a hero of mine, though my academic interests were to develop in the direction of patristics, far from—or at least apparently—Demant's own academic concerns, what he liked to call 'Christian Sociology'. So I went to his house in Tom Quad in Christ Church and knocked on the door. I was welcomed warmly, if with some surprise. By the early 1970s, Demant had come to think that the world had passed him by and he was, I think, genuinely surprised that he was still read, and by someone so young (as I then was). That was the beginning of his last year as Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford, to which his canonry was attached. During that year, I visited him many times, often arriving for tea at about 4 p.m., and staying on for dinner in Christ Church in the evening; all the while we would be talking (while he took snuff). In autumn 1971, Demant retired from his chair; he and his wife, Marjorie, moved to a small cottage in Headington, where I continued to visit him frequently. Demant (he was always known as 'Demant', even by his wife, at least when others were there) became one of the founding members of the Christendom Trust, set up around that time by his friend of many years, Maurice Reckitt, to continue to promote (mostly by supporting lectureships and research projects) the aims of the Christendom Movement, in which Reckitt and Demant had been the leading members. This theological movement within Anglicanism can be traced back to the years between the two World Wars. It aimed to be orthodox in theology, but radical

in its analysis of society. Demant was recruited by Reckitt, and became director of research of the Christian Social Council, while continuing his vocation as a parish priest; then from 1942 to 1949, he was Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, London. Demant's energy and commitment gave the Christendom movement its intellectual coherence and even distinction. Its high point was perhaps the Malvern Conference, called by William Temple in 1941 (then Archbishop of York, shortly to become Archbishop of Canterbury) to discuss the role of the Church of England in the rebuilding of English society after the end of the Second World War. Temple's untimely death in 1944 dashed the hopes of that group. Something of the vision that inspired these men (they were mostly men, though one of the speakers at the Malvern Conference was Dorothy L. Sayers, the novelist and Christian apologist) can be seen, not only in the proceedings of the Malvern Conference (published in 1941), but in Demant's own books, such as *The Religious Prospect* (1939) and his Scott Holland lectures, *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism* (1952).

Vigo Auguste Demant was born in 1893 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the son of a teacher of Modern Languages of Huguenot descent and a Danish mother. His father was a member of the Church of Humanity in Newcastle, a secular body that followed the teachings of the French positivist, Auguste Comte. He completed his schooling in France, and spent a short time at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris, before returning to England to read Engineering at Armstrong College (then part of the University of Durham). This was a somewhat surprising background (not least then) for one who was to spend most of his long life as a priest of the Church of England, and hold canonries at St Paul's in London and Christ Church in Oxford. Unlike many of his colleagues and associates in the Christian socialist scene, Demant's sympathies were essentially cosmopolitan. From his mother, he knew Danish, and kept in touch throughout his life with his Danish relatives: he

read Kierkegaard long before translations were available in English, and it was, indeed, a lecture of his on Kierkegaard that inspired T.H. Croxall to learn Danish and write works on Kierkegaard that are still worth reading (especially his *Kierkegaard Commentary*, 1956), as well as translate some of his works. The links Demant established with Paris continued, at least during the 1930s, and he was an occasional participant in the meetings of a group of intellectuals brought together by the Russian émigré philosopher, Nicolas Berdyaev, which included such people as the lay Catholic Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain. As an Anglican, he embraced the kind of Anglo-Catholicism, that embodied a sense of affinity with continental Catholicism, rather than the more insular form of Anglo-Catholicism of many of his contemporaries (evoked under such terms as 'Northern Catholicism'). In this he reminds one of the European sympathies of his friend, T.S. Eliot. Witness to his regard and affection for two such different, though equally cosmopolitan, figures, Nicolas Berdyaev and T.S. Eliot, was to be found in the photographs of these men that he kept on his desk in the study at Christ Church (and later on the window-sill above the desk in his tiny study in the house he and his wife occupied during their last years together). Demant was rather proud of being cosmopolitan, and used to tell a story about his time in Berlin after the war, involved in the policy of 'denazification'. His interpreter offered to take him into the Russian quarter one afternoon: she said that she could not possibly take Sir Richard Livingstone, the classicist and then President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, who was there too, as he looked too English and they would be noticed, but 'with an old cosmopolitan like me', Demant used to recall, there would be no such problem.

After completing his degree at Durham, he went up to Manchester College, Oxford, to train for the Unitarian ministry (Unitarians being a kind of Christians with whom the Church of Humanity felt some affinity), and while

there he became a member of Exeter College, and took the University diploma in anthropology. After that, he served for a short time as a Unitarian minister. But he was quickly drawn to Catholic orthodoxy, in its Anglican form, and was received into the Church of England by Charles Gore, then bishop of Oxford, whom he had visited at Cuddesdon. After a brief spell at Ely Theological College, Demant was ordained priest in 1920. Soon after, he met his future wife Marjorie Tickner, whom he married in 1925. Relatively few of Demant's later associates seem to have known Marjorie very well: at Christ Church, she answered the door, and appeared with tea, but otherwise seemed buried in the depths of the vast canonry (the large house in Tom Quad in which the Demants lived has now been divided into two, if not three, residences). But she was a powerful woman, a traditional Anglo-Catholic with strong views, and among friends she had no hesitation in expressing them. Although Demant came to be at home in Anglo-Catholicism, both its doctrine and its ritual, he remained something of a questing spirit, capable of falling under the spell of, what seemed to him, people of vision (in this rather like another lifelong friend, Philip Mairet). He escaped the charm of the Armenian guru, Gurdjieff, popular in the 1920s (though he had read his work), but he fell for Mitrinovic for a while: Marjorie would later maintain that Demant had a weakness for gurus (unlike her!).

Though not exactly a guru, there was one person who dominated Demant's life and very much shaped his career, and that person was Maurice Reckitt. Reckitt was a wealthy man, a 'sleeping partner' in Reckitt and Colman (the makers of 'Reckitt's Blue' and 'Colman's Mustard'), who devoted his wealth to promoting and exploring his vision of Christian Socialism. He, in fact, belonged to a long tradition of social concern by a series of largely upper-class English Christians who realized the social implications of Christianity, that can be traced through the nineteenth century from F.D. Maurice onwards

(Reckitt himself wrote a history of this movement, *Maurice to Temple. A Century of the Social Movement in the Church of England*, 1947).¹ This movement embraced a somewhat idiosyncratic vision in which socialism meant, not some variety of Marxism or even liberal social democracy, as this century has known it, but (at least in the form that Reckitt encountered and embodied it) harked back to more medieval ideas: 'guild socialism', the idea that men (we might as well be politically incorrect, for they were) found their identity and fulfilment in groups or communities, not defined by state or nation, but by beliefs and occupations. The 'guilds' that characterized late medieval towns and cities, that exercised power on behalf of their members and shielded them from the power of the emerging modern 'state', provided a model for what Reckitt and others felt was necessary for a sane society. It is perhaps easier to identify what they were opposed to: individualism, a *laissez-faire* market system, which had led (as many had lamented since the eighteenth century) to the destruction of traditional communities, leaving individuals at the mercy of entrepreneurial market systems. But the churches' response to this, indeed its very part in this development, these Christian socialists also deplored, for they saw the churches as responding, by and large, by moralizing: by preaching an individual morality that far from challenging the social structures that such individualism had created, simply took them for granted, and indeed often shored them up.

Reckitt believed that the church should be mounting a critique of the social structures of modern society, attacking the individualism that lay at its root, and endorsing policies that would foster natural groups, such as the family and groups based on occupation and belief, to counter the unholy alliance between rampant individualism and a capitalist state. This involved an

¹ M.B. Reckitt, *Maurice to Temple. A Century of the Social Movement in the Church of England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947).

analysis of the structures of society, an analysis that would be informed by the Christian doctrine of man, created in the image of God for communion with God and with other human beings. In this analysis they took their lead from the medieval theologians, especially St Thomas Aquinas, and tended to view the society of the Middle Ages, 'Christendom', through somewhat rosy spectacles. They were not alone in their enthusiasm for the society of the late Middle Ages and its cultural achievements from gothic cathedrals to Dante: they were part of a movement of European thought that included scholars like Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Marie-Dominique Chenu, art historians like Émile Mâle, poets such as Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, and T.S. Eliot, and others, in England particularly people like Dorothy L. Sayers, Christopher Dawson, and somewhat earlier G.K. Chesterton, who popularized an appeal to the Ages of Faith against a modern society that had lost both the Faith and structures for nurturing and fostering people rather than exploiting them. One aspect of their view of medieval society was of particular importance: the sense of a set of common values, informed by the Christian Faith, in terms of which people understood themselves, their lives, and their actions. This notion of society as embodying values, in contrast to ideas of society as a social contract, stemming from the Enlightenment, was central to those who thought in terms of 'Christendom'. T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* expressed this approach with characteristic lucidity and passion.²

Reckitt devoted his time, and his considerable wealth, to promoting this vision. He founded a journal called *Christendom*; he encouraged in various ways meetings and conferences to explore and promote what he and others called 'Christian sociology', which continued after the Second World War in the annual 'Anglo-Catholic Summer Schools of Sociology'. In the 1920s he

² T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939).

discovered a young Anglican priest, V.A. Demant, and recruited him to his project (later he would sometimes claim that this was the best thing he had ever done). Demant became the principal intellect, as it were, behind Reckitt's Christendom project, and it can, I think, be claimed that it was Demant that gave the whole project intellectual coherence and even distinction. We can find support for this judgement from an unlikely source, Edward Norman, the church historian, who in his book, *Church and Society in Modern England* (1976), surveyed this whole tradition, gently (and sometimes savagely) mocking the flirtation of upper-class Anglicans with socialism; it is striking, however, that when he comes to Demant, his tone changes, from one of mockery to respect for a genuine thinker. Alongside his day job as an Anglican parish priest—for most of the thirties he was vicar of St John the Divine's, Richmond—Demant wrote a number of works as 'an unorthodox economist and an orthodox theologian' (as he put it), analysing the seeming meltdown of Western civilization signalled by the inflation of the twenties, the General Strike, the Wall Street crash, and the depression of the thirties, together with the rise of communism, nazism and fascism, all of which sought to solve these problems by the exercise of totalitarian power in a way only open to a modern State, which fascism in particular justified by appeal to ideas very like those of the Christendom ideal (hence in France the unhealthy alliance between right-wing Catholicism and the movement, *Action Française*). The first of these works was a report to the 'Christian Social Council' of the Church of England 'by its Research Committee', though, as Demant pointed out in preface he alone was responsible for its arguments and judgments. It was called *This Unemployment: Disaster or Opportunity?* (1931). In it Demant went beyond the hand-wringing and palliatives such as soup kitchens, with which the Church had responded to the growing number of unemployed during the interwar period, necessary though such palliatives

were in the immediate situation, and raised questions about the kind of society that had produced such employment (or lack of it): a society in which human beings were increasingly valued solely for their paid employment, but where the technological advances that had helped bring about this society required fewer workers. Such a society both reduced human beings to the status of worker (or employer) and at the same time required fewer people as workers: it was this contradiction that lay at the root of the real misery produced by unemployment, and made it impossible to see how the decline in demand for human energy made possible by technological advance might be regarded as an achievement and an opportunity. It was this contradiction that needed to be addressed. Demant warned against a mere palliative response, either by charity that did nothing to meet the insecurity and lack of value experienced by the unemployed, or by creating needs (not least by advertising) merely to increase the demand for labour. 'A true order would be based upon the truth that consumption is logically prior to production, that it is more fundamentally true that we produce to live, than that we consume in order that we may produce and trade. To deny this order of priority would be to deny the value of all art, science and other cultural activities which have been made possible by the release of human energy from the necessity of economic activity.' This was typical of Demant: to look beyond the immediate problem and ask questions about the values and structures of society that often, he maintained, concealed contradictions that produced the problems. As Reckitt used to say, 'you can't moralize a contradiction'; and yet the Church's response to social problems was often no more than an attempt to do just that.

In the 1930s, Demant published a series of books on 'Christian sociology', as he and Reckitt called it, with titles like *God, Man and Society: an Introduction to Christian Sociology* (1933), and *Christian Polity* (1936). In 1939, on the eve of the

Second World War, there appeared what is perhaps his most important book, *The Religious Prospect*.³ By now, Demant's importance was recognized in the Church of England, and in 1942 he was appointed Canon of St Paul's. During the war, he was involved with others in planning for the rebuilding of society that would be necessary when the war ended. He participated in the Malvern Conference called by William Temple in 1941, and contributed to the symposium edited by Maurice Reckitt, *Prospect for Christendom: Essays in Catholic Social Reconstruction*, published in 1945. But the hopes of Demant and others that the post-war period would see the Church of England taking the lead in a serious attempt at social reconstruction were dashed by the death of William Temple in the last months of the war after only two years as Archbishop of Canterbury and the appointment of the conservative Geoffrey Fisher to succeed him. Nevertheless, Demant continued to promote his understanding of Christian sociology, and in 1949, the year after he was appointed Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford and Canon of Christ Church, he gave his Scott Holland Lectures, *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism*.⁴ These lectures were also given in an abbreviated form on the BBC Third Programme, and thereby reached a wide, though discriminating, audience. The title, of course, alludes to R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, which was also based on a series of Scott Holland Lectures, but was intended as a continuation, not a rebuttal of Tawney's thesis, showing how, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religion in the form of Catholic Christianity had provided a critique of capitalism. It is perhaps Demant's most elegantly written book, and still worth reading; some of his prophetic remarks, for instance on the ways in which television and the car would further erode the few centres of community to be found in modern society, have been amply fulfilled. As a

³ V.A. Demant, *The Religious Prospect* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1939).

⁴ V.A. Demant, *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

Canon of Christ Church, however, Demant seemed to fall silent. He continued to appear at the Anglo-Catholic Summer Schools of Sociology, but he published little. In 1957-8 he gave the Gifford Lectures at St Andrew's University in which he explored what he called the 'natural history of Christianity', that is Christianity as a human activity in a social context. But these lectures were given *ex tempore*, and he never managed to publish the book of the lectures, as the terms of the lectureship require, although he did manage a brief article outlining their scope which appeared in *Theology*. It is clear from the notes (in a large exercise book, with quotations on one side and the outline of the lectures on the other) that had these lectures been published at the beginning of the 1960s, as they might have been, they would have been seen to raise most of the theological and ethical concerns of that decade, and might even have affected its course.⁵ But, in fact, at Christ Church Demant seemed to retreat into safer territory: spirituality and ethics. Two small books from this period pursue such matters: *A Two Way Religion* (1957), based on broadcast talks in which he presented the Christian life as 'a double movement: inward to the divine realm, and outward to the neighbour and society', and *Christian Sex Ethics* (1963), about sexual morality. Though they cover a much more modest canvas than his earlier books, there is the same desire to reach beyond immediate problems to the underlying structures that determine them. They also reveal Demant's wide reading in areas that might surprise someone familiar with his earlier works. He was, for instance, very knowledgeable about the so-called Christian mystical tradition, and especially fond of the writings of St Bernard of Clairvaux. While at Oxford, he supervised research students studying medieval mysticism, notably John Clark, who has gone on to combine the life of a busy parish priest in the

⁵ Recently, a reconstruction of Demant's Gifford Lectures has been published, edited by Ian S. Markham and Christine Faulstich: *The Penumbra of Ethics: The Gifford Lectures of V.A. Demant with critical commentary and assessment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

Newcastle diocese with research that has established him as perhaps the most learned scholar on both the text and the theology of the fourteenth-century English mystics (and now editor of the papers of Dom Augustine Baker). Demant also took a firm stand on the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood: as a member of the commission set up to consider the problem in the sixties, he submitted a strongly argued minority report expressing his opposition to the possibility of women's ordination. Demant resigned from his Oxford chair in 1971, at the age of 77, and went to live in the Oxford suburb of Headington. During his retirement, he remained mentally active, though he was increasingly frail physically. Reckitt, who predeceased him, planned for his lifelong project of 'Christendom' to survive him, by setting up in 1971 the Christendom Trust, of which Demant was the first chairman. In the winter of 1982/3, Demant fell ill—for the first time in his life, he claimed—and died on 3 March 1983, at the age of 89.

As we have seen, Demant described himself, at least in his pre-Christ Church years, as 'an unorthodox economist and an orthodox theologian'. I would like to explore a little of what this meant by looking at what seems to me the most important of his books, *The Religious Prospect*, published in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War. In his introduction, he argued that the failure of the Church to respond to the manifest problems of the thirties was not at all because the Church had fallen behind the times, but because it had failed to be true to itself. As he put it, 'this weakness, I hold, is due, not to the Church's being bound by its tradition, but to its departure from that tradition.'⁶ He went on to make a distinction, important for the argument of the book, between 'doctrine' and 'dogma': 'I use the term "doctrine" for the

⁶ *Prospect*, 17.

consciously held theories, and the term "dogma" for the assumptions that are taken for granted as the absolutely right way of looking at reality.⁷

This distinction between doctrine and dogma, Demant had borrowed from T.E. Hulme; or rather he found in Hulme a distinction he expressed in terms of different kinds of doctrines, though he also used the term 'dogma'.⁸ It is probably necessary now to introduce T.E. Hulme: he was a thinker and writer who had moved in the circles of such as Ezra Pound. He had been killed in 1917 in the course of the First World War: after his death a volume called *Speculations* was published by Herbert Read (1924), consisting of various essays, philosophical, political, art historical, and concluding with an appendix called 'The Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme', consisting of five poems (the canon has since been expanded).⁹ In the wake of the war, he was both fashionable and also something of a counter-cultural figure. T.S. Eliot, who never actually met him, remarked of him that he 'had an aptitude for theology'.¹⁰ By this aptitude for theology, Eliot was doubtless referring to his defence of the 'dogma of original sin'. One of the pieces published by Herbert Read was on 'Romanticism and Classicism', which Hulme opposed in these terms:

Put shortly, these are the two views, then. One, that man is intrinsically good, spoiled by circumstance; and the other that he is intrinsically limited, but disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent. To the one part man's nature is like a well, to the other like a bucket. The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of

⁷ *Prospect*, 20.

⁸ Demant quotes him and acknowledges his indebtedness to him in *Prospect*, 20-21 (quoting from *Speculations*, 50).

⁹ T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, ²1936; first ed. 1924)

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, ²1964), 149.

possibilities, I call the romantic; the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call the classical.¹¹

And he went on to note that 'the Church has always taken the classical view since the defeat of the Pelagian heresy and the adoption of the sane classical dogma of original sin'. Demant, with his language of dogma, was consciously drawing on an idea that he could expect his readers to recognize, if not actually accept.

And it is with dogmas, in the sense in which Demant has defined it, that the argument of *The Religious Prospect* is primarily concerned. For these underlying assumptions affect the way people think, more than consciously held doctrines. They affect the very way in which people understand things: dogma, in this sense, 'is something through which men see and think, rather than something they look at or think about'.¹² This is especially relevant to our understanding of human nature: because we are ourselves human, Demant argues, we cannot derive an understanding of humanity from the outside, by direct inspection. We can only gain a sense of the nature of humanity by seeing how we react to events. Demant maintained that the twists and turns of the modern soul revealed a striving to find a central position, a point of rest, but one that it could never attain:

This central position or truth about man is never revealed phenomenally. Like the star we cannot see but whose existence and properties we know by the movements it causes, it is deduced from the actions and counteractions of human thought and affairs. Something of the essential nature of man is thus unfolded, and that nature appears to

¹¹ Hulme, *Speculations*, 117.

¹² *Prospect*, 19.

be the one assigned to him by the thought modes of the Christian tradition when it has held on to all the elements given in its revelation.¹³

Demant developed this theme by arguing that modern thought had succumbed to the dogma that all is becoming, that there is a perpetual flux manifest in evolution, in which we are all bound up. From such a dogma, one could not logically avoid some form of totalitarianism, for there is no reason why the development of the individual should not be subsumed under the development of a larger entity, a state or a race striving for ultimate hegemony. From the point of view of this modern 'dogma', liberalism could never assert itself against fascism or nazism or communism. But the Christian dogma, though many Christians had lost sight of this, denied that all was becoming: it asserts a distinction between being and becoming, arguing that God is the creator, himself belonging to being (or rather transcending being, and thus even further removed from becoming), who has created a realm of beings, pre-eminent among whom are human beings, created in his image. Individual human beings therefore belong to being, and their meaning cannot be wholly subsumed under the category of becoming. It is this dogma that gave rise to liberalism, as an entailment of Christian dogma, in which sense it affirmed the infinite value of the individual. The fundamental problem of modern Western civilization is that those who affirm a secular doctrine of liberalism cannot sustain this on the basis of the underlying modern dogma (of liberalism) that all is becoming. Only a return to Christian dogma can justify the doctrine of liberalism against the modern totalitarian challenges. Grounding liberalism on Christian dogma places liberalism in the context of moral absolutes that are derived from the natural order that itself stems from God's creative purpose. The Christian understanding of the human person as created in the image of God affirms an

¹³ *Prospect*, 19.

individualism, but a very different kind of individualism from that which has evolved in modern thought. The latter kind of individualism sees human individuals as units, who find their meaning in relation to some simply historical community, whereas Christian individualism—or better personalism—finds meaning in the individual himself, in his relationship to God, which transcends any significance the individual finds for himself in the historical communities of which he is a part, and places limits on the claims that any earthly community may make in regard to the individual person. It is the purpose of the Church to articulate the consequences for humanity of the dogma on which it is based.

The truth as a personal philosophy without the Church as a supernaturally begotten entity is no real hindrance; and a Church as a collection of men with a naturalistic ethic has no wall for its back in resisting State encroachments. But where men give allegiance to an actual, visible, concrete body with the stream of its life traversing the temporal scene with its source and destination in a supertemporal spiritual world, and where such allegiance means that man *cannot* (not only *ought not*) be trimmed to the shape required for him to be just an item in the purpose of a tribe, a state, a nation, a class interest or a race, there totalitarianism meets the flaming sword that guards the tree of life.¹⁴

The rest of the book explores the way in which these principles provide the only hope for humanity by developing an understanding of human nature as essentially seeking transcendence because of its created openness to the transcendent Creator. Reading the book now nearly eighty years on, one is constantly made aware of its prophetic nature: in many respects here we find an analysis that has been borne out by the history of the century. It was, for

¹⁴ *Prospect*, 53.

instance, a Church being true to its own principles in supporting Solidarity in Poland against the totalitarian claims of the Communist state that led to the eventual fall of communism.

In a more academic vein, Demant makes the distinction that contemporary secular liberal political philosophy has made, notably in Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous inaugural lecture at Oxford, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', between what Berlin called negative and positive freedom. Demant argues that liberalism must find negative freedom the more fundamental (as Berlin was to argue), for in doing so it expresses its aspiration for transcendence denied by its fundamental secularism. For Demant, however, it is positive freedom that is the more fundamental, the freedom *'for realizing what is specific, definite, positive, and therefore limited, in the nature of man as a being'*.

Modern thought cannot give value, importance, and dignity to human existence without making it infinite in its possibilities. Authentic religious thought, on the contrary, finds the significance of human existence in its relation to the eternal, unconditioned, reality behind the phenomena of the world process. Man can thereby apprehend perfection and find his value, importance, and dignity without the fantastic notion of his limitless possibilities—indeed precisely in the fact that as a being he has a limited definable nature, significant because of its relation to the unconditioned—or, as Christian theology would say, because of its creation by God. Without the dogma of a transcendent source of meaning, human existence can only find its meaning by giving itself divine attributes.¹⁵

It is this sense of a transcendent realm, ignorance of which, or denial of which, leads to the dangers of bewildering endless choice (the choice we find

¹⁵ *Prospect*, 74–5.

in the supermarket), or worse the danger of thinking that we can evolve in ourselves this transcendent realm by, as Demant put it, giving ourselves divine attributes.

As well as the works that Demant published, there remained in his papers (and in the last few months of his life, he made a determined effort to destroy what was left of his papers), as well as the large notebook which I have mentioned, from which he delivered his Gifford Lectures, a folder of sermons that he had arranged for publication. As his literary executor, I attempted to get these published, but got nowhere. Just recently, however, they have been published by a Polish priest, fr Sławomir Nowosad, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. It is called *Not One World, but Two: A Miscellany of Preachments*. Demant arranged these sermons into six sections—Explorations, Doctrinal, General, Social, Commemorations, and a final section of obituaries (all of them, I think, sermons) of four people who had been of importance to him: William Temple, Michael Foster, T.S. Eliot, and Cuthbert Simpson—William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been an early inspiration for Demant; Michael Foster, a philosopher who had been a colleague at Christ Church; T.S. Eliot, the poet, who had been a close friend of Demant's; and Cuthbert Simpson, who had been his colleague at Christ Church for most of his time there, first as Canon and Regius Professor of Hebrew (1954–9), and then as Dean of Christ Church (1959–69), also a close friend. As a priest, Demant preached frequently, belonging to a school that prepared sermons as literary pieces, carefully thought out and written down: these sermons were often preached on several occasions, and I recall the time when I persuaded him to preach at Sunday Evensong in Worcester College Chapel, hearing the crackling of the ancient leaves of paper as he turned from one page to another. The title is significant: *Not One World, but Two*. It is a quotation from

the Second Book of Esdras—‘For this reason the Most High has made not one world but two’ (2 Esdr. 7.[50])¹⁶—which sums up the ‘dogma’ from the perspective of which alone, Demant maintained, it is possible to justify a true understanding of what it is to be human: a free rational being, created in the image and likeness of God, belonging to being, but participating in becoming. For these sermons explore, as a priest and preacher, rather than as an academic theologian or philosopher, the way in which acknowledgment of the transcendent realm transforms our sense of what it is to live in the world of becoming.

One of the sermons included—for the period of Ascensiontide—has as its text 2 Esdras 7:50: *The Most High hath made not one world, but two.*¹⁷ In this sermon he draws out the significance of the Ascension of Our Lord. It is a learned, but accessible, sermon, despite quotations from Lenin (writing to Gorky), Charles Kingsley, George Santayana (one of his novels), Fichte, and G.K. Chesterton, and references to Aldous Huxley, Karl Barth, and Newman. The Ascension demonstrates the truth of the verse from 2 Esdras, that God created not one world, but two. Towards the end of the sermon, Demant sums up what we are to learn from the Ascension:

Precisely because there is an eternal world alongside of and penetrating this world of time and succession, Christians know and live by the faith

¹⁶ I am not clear how Demant came across this verse. He can hardly have come across it in his reading of the Bible, as it is not included in the 2 Esdras to be found in the Apocrypha of the KJV. 2 Esdras (also called 4 Esdras, of the Fourth Book of Ezra) is not included in the LXX, as there is no Greek version of it, nor in the standard versions of the Vulgate, though there is a Carolingian MS which includes the passage in which 2 Esdras 7:[50] occurs; it exists, at least in part, in many ancient translations: Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, Georgian. See *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (London: DLT, 1983), 518–19.

¹⁷ The archaic ‘hath’ makes me think that Demant is probably quoting from R.H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigraph of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), volume 1 of which includes the apocrypha, but I have not been able to check.

that this time, which is the manner of our existence, is no mere string of happenings, but a drama of significant events.

He continues:

I need not therefore be too heavily concerned that I cannot see nor control the results in nature and history of my present doings. With Newman, I need not ask to see the distant scene, for this one step is taken, not that I know for sure where it may lead me or any successors, but having learned to recognize the echo it must make in the courts of heaven where Christ hears and assesses, the Ascension tells me I can find the right way of living in the present moment.

In some ways, Demant must seem a voice from a past age, an age when the idea that the Church of England might have a serious role in the future of the nation still made sense, though I rather suspect that, for Demant, the moment for that had passed with the untimely death of Temple. After the Second World War, with Fisher at the helm of the Church of England rather than Temple, the Church concerned itself less with building a new and more just society in England than with the revision of canon law. Nevertheless, he belonged to an age where the intellectual currents were, if not favourable to Christian concerns, at least aware of them, and it made sense to explain how any true liberalism, that respected the rights of the individual, indeed promoted the value of the human as created in the image of God, would be frustrated if it sought purely secular roots. I wonder who would hear that now, or even understand. For all that, the intellectual credibility of Demant remains to be rediscovered by a new generation, and it is indeed my impression that the thought of the circle to which Demant belonged—the

likes of Eliot, Christopher Dawson, and others—is beginning to awaken interest. So, too, might be the case with Vigo Auguste Demant.¹⁸

¹⁸ Most of this lecture has appeared before in two different contexts: in an article ‘V.A. Demant’, *Tufts Review* 1, vol. 3 (May, 1999), 8–18; and as the foreword to *Not One World, but Two*, 7–12.