

# Rahner and Scheeben on Grace: Reexamining a Forgotten Resemblance

Theological Studies  
2024, Vol. 85(1) 34–55  
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DOI: 10.1177/00405639231221785  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



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## Abstract

This article demonstrates the overlooked similarity between Scheeben's and Rahner's accounts of God's self-communication to the human person through uncreated grace. It then argues that though Scheeben's conception of God's universal offer of grace evinces similarities with Rahner's "supernatural existential," Scheeben differs from Rahner by emphasizing the distinction between nature and grace. This study can help theologians to better situate Scheeben's theology amid its current renaissance and to reappropriate Rahner's basic insight about divine self-communication.

## Keywords

deification, divine indwelling, God's self-communication, grace, nature and grace, quasi-formal causality, Karl Rahner, Matthias Scheeben, supernatural existential, uncreated grace

In the mid-twentieth century, Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–88) garnered effusive praise from diverse quarters.<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar called him "the greatest German theologian to-date since the time of Romanticism."<sup>2</sup> Marie-Dominique

1. A previous version of this article was presented at the Historical and Systematic Theology Seminar at the Catholic University of America on April 12, 2023. I am grateful to my CUA colleagues, as well as to Aaron Pidel and Travis Lacy, for their insightful feedback.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 104.

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Chenu dedicated his programmatic essay “Position de la théologie” to Scheeben, whom he celebrated for heralding “the end of ‘baroque’ theology.”<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius XI lauded Scheeben as “a man of genius,” “a model of theology,” and “a model of saintly Christian life.”<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Day, reading the Rhenish theologian from the slums of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, described Scheeben as a “great theologian,” to whose “glowing and beautiful words . . . my heart and mind give ready assent.”<sup>5</sup> Given this adulation, it is unsurprising that, after a period of relative neglect, Scheeben’s theology is enjoying a renaissance. Contemporary theologians are studying Scheeben not as a mere historical figure, but as a living source who can contribute to theology today in areas such as method,<sup>6</sup> soteriology,<sup>7</sup> ecclesiology,<sup>8</sup> sacramental theology,<sup>9</sup> and, above all, the theology of grace.<sup>10</sup>

Amid this renewal of interest in Scheeben, an idea has emerged that his theology can play a reconciling function in disputes between contemporary Thomists and the intellectual heirs of the *Communio* theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac. Aidan Nichols, for example, observes that both Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and Balthasar sympathetically cite Scheeben, which Nichols takes as evidence of Scheeben’s “mediating role.”<sup>11</sup> Edward Oakes suggests that Scheeben’s theology can reconcile Lubacians and Thomists over the disputed question of nature and grace, a

3. Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Faith and Theology*, trans. Denis Hickey (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 15.
4. Pius XI, “Per le feste centenario di Scheeben,” in *Discorsi di Pio XI*, ed. Domenico Bertetto, 3 vols. (Vatican City: Libreria editrice vaticana, 1985), 3:273–74.
5. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper, 1952), 253, see also 144. One could collect an immense florilegium of praise; see Cyril Vollert, “Matthias Joseph Scheeben and the Revival of Theology,” *Theological Studies* 6, no. 4 (1945): 453–88 at 453–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056394500600401>.
6. Bruce D. Marshall, “Why Scheeben?,” *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 407–33.
7. Khaled Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 229–63, 313–31.
8. John L. Nepil, *A Bride Adorned: Mary-Church Perichoresis in Modern Catholic Theology* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023).
9. David L. Augustine, “Two Paradigms on the Eucharist as Sacrifice: Scheeben and Journet in Dialogue,” *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 2 (2018): 401–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2018.0022>; Maciej Roszkowski, “Zum Lob seiner Herrlichkeit” (Eph 1,12): *Der sakramentale Charakter nach Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2017).
10. In addition to the literature cited below, see Florian Haider, *Die Würde des Christen: Die Bedeutung des Übernatürlichen für Dogmatik und Moral bei Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Sankt Ottilien: EOS Editions, 2017).
11. Aidan Nichols, *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, (repr., Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 19. See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: Commentary on the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas, 1<sup>a</sup> 2<sup>a</sup>ae*, q. 109–114, trans. Dominican Nuns of Corpus Christi Monastery (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1952), vii.

claim further developed by Andrew Dean Swafford.<sup>12</sup> Largely absent from current Scheeben scholarship (particularly among anglophone theologians) is discussion of how his theology relates to that of another monumental twentieth-century theologian, who does not fit easily within the *Communio* or Thomist camps: Karl Rahner.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Joseph White's foreword to the new English translation of Scheeben's *Soteriology: The Work of Christ the Redeemer and the Role of His Virgin Mother* is an exception.<sup>14</sup> White presents Scheeben and Rahner as belonging to a "common modern German Catholic theological tradition" on account of their shared Scholasticism. Yet White says that Scheeben and Rahner loom within this tradition as "specifically contrary figures" and "polar opposites." Scheeben and Rahner both develop a christocentric theology concerned with deification and grace, but they do so in "radically contrasting" ways: Rahner levels Christology into "a generalized anthropology of the 'supernatural-existential,'" whereas Scheeben retains a "high account" of Christ's knowledge, priesthood, and salvific role.<sup>15</sup>

Although this contrast is accurate on some points, the overall image White presents of the relation between the two German theologians is incomplete and, therefore, misleading. For Karl Rahner—perhaps more than any other major twentieth-century Catholic theologian—carried forward the most distinctive aspects of Scheeben's theology of grace. Though this claim might be surprising to contemporary theologians accustomed to thinking of Scheeben as something of a nineteenth-century Thomist-*Communio* hybrid, a previous generation of scholars (especially those of the *deutscher Sprachraum*) noticed the resemblance between Scheeben and Rahner. Two particular similarities were pointed out. First, Eugen Paul, Leo Scheffczyk, Wolfgang Müller, and Hans Gasper noted a likeness between Scheeben and Rahner on the nature-grace relation, which, in the opinion of the last three, extends to Rahner's "supernatural existential."<sup>16</sup> Second, Josef Höfer, Norbert Hoffmann, Karl-Heinz Minz, Müller,

12. Edward T. Oakes, "Scheeben the Reconciler: Resolving the Nature-Grace Debate," *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 435–53; Edward T. Oakes, *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 32–46; Andrew Dean Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 143–97. See also Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 34.

13. Nichols notes in passing two comparisons between Scheeben and Rahner made by other theologians; see *Romance and System*, 68n11, 97.

14. Thomas Joseph White, foreword to Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics* (hereafter cited as *HCD*), vol. 5, pt. 2, *Soteriology: The Work of Christ the Redeemer and the Role of His Virgin Mother*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), xiii–xxii.

15. White, foreword to *Soteriology*, xvi–xxi.

16. Eugen Paul, *Denkweg und Denkform der Theologie von Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Munich: M. Hueber, 1970), 287–88; Leo Scheffczyk, "Schöpfung als Vor-Ordnung der Gnade zur Schöpfungslehre M. J. Scheebens," *Divinitas* 32, no. 1 (1988): 205–25; Leo Scheffczyk, "Die 'organische' und die 'transzendente' Verbindung zwischen Natur und Gnade: Ein Vergleich zwischen Matthias Joseph Scheeben und Karl Rahner aus Anlaß

Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, and Christoph Binninger identified similarities between Scheeben's and Rahner's accounts of God's self-communication to the human person through uncreated grace.<sup>17</sup> These points of likeness between Scheeben and Rahner have been overlooked by contemporary scholars. Moreover, with the exception of Scheffczyk's investigation of anticipatory notes of Rahner's supernatural existential in Scheeben, the likeness between Scheeben's and Rahner's theologies of grace has only been mentioned in passing and has never been analyzed in detail. This is especially the case with the interconnected issues at the core of both their accounts of human union with God: the priority of uncreated grace, God's self-communication, divine formal causality, and non-appropriated relations between the human person and the three Divine Persons.

My aim in this article is threefold. First, I wish to demonstrate the substantial agreement between Scheeben's and Rahner's accounts of human union with God. Second, I

des Scheeben-Gedenkens," *Forum katholische Theologie* 4 (1988): 161–79; Wolfgang W. Müller, *Die Gnade Christi: Eine geschichtlich-systematische Darstellung der Gnadentheorie M. J. Scheebens und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1994), 290; Hans Gasper, *Die Theologie der Vermählung: Über die Einheit von Gott und Mensch und das Connubium divinum bei M. J. Scheeben* (Baden-Baden: Tectum Verlag, 2020), 91n339. Gasper (born 1942) recently published this book but still might be considered as belonging to an earlier generation of scholars.

17. Heribert Schauf, foreword to Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Heribert Schauf and Josef Höfer (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 9–12 at 11; Norbert Hoffmann, *Natur und Gnade: Die Theologie der Gottesschau als vollendeter Vergöttlichung des Geistgeschöpfes bei M. J. Scheeben* (Rome: Gregoriana, 1967), 338n; Karl-Heinz Minz, *Pleroma trinitatis: Die Trinitätstheologie bei Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1982), 193–95; Karl-Heinz Minz, "Communio Spiritus Sancti: Zur Theologie der 'inhabitatione propria' bei M. J. Scheeben," in *Geist und Kirche: Studien zur Theologie im Umfeld der beiden Vatikanischen Konzilien; Gedenkschrift für Heribert Schauf*, ed. Herbert Hammans et al. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991), 181–200 at 196–200; Müller, *Die Gnade Christi*, 286–91; Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, *Mistero trinitario ed economia della grazia: Il personalismo soprannaturale di Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Rome: Armando Editore, 1997), 286–89; Christoph Binninger, *Mysterium inhabitationis Trinitatis: M. J. Scheebens theologische Auseinandersetzung mit der Frage nach der Art und Weise der übernatürlichen Verbindung der göttlichen Personen mit dem Gerechten* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2003), 187–88, 199–200. Other comparisons between Scheeben and Rahner have been made. Ulrich Valeske finds a commonality in the two theologians' capacity to bring together metaphysics, dogmatics, and mystical contemplation, and thereby penetrate and present the content of the Christian faith in its depth and breadth; see Ulrich Valeske, *Hierarchia veritatum: Theologiegeschichtliche Hintergründe und mögliche Konsequenzen eines Hinweises im Ökumenismusdekret des II. Vatikanischen Konzils zum zwischenkirchlichen Gespräch* (Munich: Claudius Verlag, 1968), 94. Linus Hauser has compared Scheeben's and Rahner's religious epistemologies; see Linus Hauser, *Logik der theologischen Erkenntnislehre: Eine formale und transzendentaltheologische Systematik in Auseinandersetzung mit Matthias Joseph Scheeben und Karl Rahner auf dem Hintergrund der mengentheoretischen Wissenschaftstheorie* (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1996). Jerome Ebacher has proposed a dynamic theology of grace as supernaturalization mutually inspired by Scheeben and Rahner; see Jerome Ebacher, "Grace and Supernaturalization," *Angelicum* 58, no. 1 (1981): 21–32.

seek to identify the similarities and differences between Scheeben's theology of grace and Rahner's supernatural existential. Third, I want to suggest that noting the resemblance between Scheeben and Rahner can help contemporary theologians, on the one hand, to avoid oversimplified narratives about Scheeben's theology amid its current renaissance and, on the other, to repropose Rahner's fundamental insight about grace as God's self-communication in a way amenable to those wary of the supernatural existential.

## Rahner on God's Self-Communication as Uncreated Grace

In the seminal 1939 article "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade" ("Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace"), Rahner introduced several major leitmotifs that would redound throughout his mature work: the priority of uncreated grace over created grace; grace understood as God's self-communication to the human person articulated as a type of divine formal causality; and the existence of proper (i.e., non-appropriated) relations between the graced human person and the three Divine Persons.<sup>18</sup> Rahner begins the article with the assertion that Scripture and the Fathers affirmed the priority of uncreated grace over created grace, but that this order was inverted in Scholasticism.<sup>19</sup> By this Rahner means that Scripture and the Fathers understood "created grace as a *consequence* of God's communication of himself," whereas Scholastic theories conceived of "created grace as the *basis* of this communication."<sup>20</sup> Rahner seeks to restore the scriptural-patristic order using resources already present within Scholasticism.

He finds them in Scholastic accounts of the beatific vision. Through an analysis of Thomas Aquinas's claim that, in the beatific vision, the divine essence takes the place of a created *species* in the intellect, Rahner concludes that the relationship with God enjoyed by the blessed cannot be understood within the category of divine efficient causality, but rather involves divine formal causality, because God gives to the blessed not just the created gift of the light of glory but also the uncreated gift of God's very self.<sup>21</sup> Because glory is the flowering of grace, Rahner argues that the ontology of the

18. Karl Rahner, "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 63, no. 1 (1939): 137–56, republished with slight revisions as "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 319–46.

19. Rahner, "Uncreated Grace," 320–25.

20. Rahner, "Uncreated Grace," 325 (emphasis in translation but not in original).

21. Rahner, "Uncreated Grace," 326–33. Rahner cites, among other passages, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 8 vols., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), I.12.5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 2 vols., trans. Laurence Shapcote (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), III.53.

immediate vision of God enjoyed by the blessed can be applied to the ontology of grace, asserting that the uncreated grace given to the wayfarer is also an instance of divine formal causality.<sup>22</sup> Rahner names this “quasi-formal causality.” The prefix “quasi-” is added to remind us of three things: first, this type of causality is known only through divine revelation and through analogical concepts; second, God’s activity has a meta-categorical and transcendent character; and third, divine formal causality does not perfect the human person *tout court* but only in her spiritual faculties.<sup>23</sup> Quasi-formal causality, Rahner explains, restores the correct order between created and uncreated grace: God’s self-communication to the creature as uncreated grace is prior to created grace, just as a form is prior to its ultimate material disposition.<sup>24</sup> Although Rahner builds his account principally from the beatific vision, he also states that the formal causality present in Scholastic accounts of Christ’s hypostatic union can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the graced human person. He claims that the three “strictly supernatural realities”—the hypostatic union, glory, and grace—all entail a divine-human relationship based on formal, rather than efficient, causality.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Rahner notes that his account of quasi-formal causality allows us to conceive of the graced human person’s relation to the three Divine Persons in terms other than appropriation without violating the principle that in all God’s acts *ad extra*, the Divine Persons operate as a single efficient cause. He thought such an articulation was needed in order to rescue the church from the “pre-Christian monotheism” that he believed had infected wide swaths of Catholic piety.<sup>26</sup>

The ideas Rahner initially sketched in this 1939 article remained the bedrock of his thinking on human-divine union throughout his long career. Several examples will serve to demonstrate this point. Prompted by Pope Pius XII’s statement in the 1947 encyclical *Mystici Corporis* that the topic of divine indwelling contains open questions, Rahner returned to the issue in his 1957 essay “Natur und Gnade” (“Nature and Grace”).<sup>27</sup> Restating themes he had proposed nearly twenty years earlier, Rahner underscores the priority of uncreated grace, presents grace and glory as two moments in a single process of deification, describes God’s self-communication as a quasi-formal cause, and proposes non-appropriated relations between the human person and the Divine Persons. In the 1960s, Rahner repeated these arguments in his entries on

22. Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 325–33.

23. Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 330–32.

24. Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 330–34.

25. Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 329–31.

26. Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 346; see also Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 10–11.

27. Karl Rahner, “Natur und Gnade,” in *Fragen der Theologie Heute*, ed. Johannes Feiner, Josef Trütsch, and Franz Böckle (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1957), 209–30, republished as “Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 165–88 at 174–75; Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (June 29, 1943), §78, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html).



revelation and divine self-communication in *Sacramentum Mundi* and the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*.<sup>28</sup>

All these points reappear in Rahner's 1976 *Foundations of Christian Faith* (*Grundkurs des Glaubens*).<sup>29</sup> Here, in Rahner's mature work, the concept of God's self-communication assumes an ever-greater prominence and forms the backbone of his narration of the Christian faith; as he puts it, God's self-communication to the human person is "what the Christian message is really all about" (*das Eigentliche der christlichen Botschaft*).<sup>30</sup> By "self-communication" (*Selbstmitteilung*), Rahner explains, he does not mean that God says something "about" himself; rather, "what is communicated [*das Mitgeteilte*] is really God in his own being [*Sein*]." <sup>31</sup> The giver gives himself as gift so that the human person might immediately know and love God.<sup>32</sup> Though this is an "ontological [*seinshafte*] self-communication," it should not be understood in an "objectified and reified sense" (*gegenständlich-sachhaften Sinn*) but instead in a personal sense: "a self-communication of God as personal absolute mystery . . . to man as a spiritual and personal being [*Wesen*]." <sup>33</sup> In *Foundations*—nearly forty years after his early article on uncreated grace and well after Scholasticism had been displaced as the dominant theological idiom—Rahner continued to use the concept of divine formal causality to articulate God's self-communication to the human person.<sup>34</sup>

## Scheeben's Likeness to Rahner

Rahner's thinking about God's self-communication to the human person through uncreated grace as a divine formal cause did not emerge out of a vacuum. In his 1939 article, Rahner listed Scheeben among those theologians who had previously offered hints of his theory, but he did not consider in detail the substantial agreement of their theologies.<sup>35</sup> I will demonstrate this concurrence by presenting six interconnected points of Scheeben's theology of grace that exhibit a striking similarity to Rahner: the

28. Karl Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation" and "Revelation: God's Self-Communication," *Sacramentum mundi*, vol. 5, *Philosophy to Salvation*, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 348–55; Karl Rahner, "Selbstmitteilung Gottes," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd. ed., vol. 9, *Rom bis Tetzl*, ed. Josef Höfer und Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 627.

29. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978 [German original, 1976]).

30. Rahner, *Foundations*, 116.

31. Rahner, *Foundations*, 117.

32. Rahner, *Foundations*, 120.

33. Rahner, *Foundations*, 116.

34. Rahner, *Foundations*, 120–21. Patrick Burke's observation that Rahner drops the notion of "quasi-formal causality" in *Foundations* should not be misunderstood: Rahner drops the "quasi-" but retains the idea of formal causality. See Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 226, 246.

35. Rahner, "Uncreated Grace," 338–39.

aim of recovering the teaching of the Greek Fathers and synthesizing it with Latin Scholasticism; the priority of uncreated grace; the use of the beatific vision and Christ's hypostatic union as exemplars of human union with God through grace; the overarching theme of God's self-communication; the concept of divine formal causality; and the proposal of non-appropriated relations between the human person and the three Divine Persons.

I begin with the first of these points. Inspired by the Jesuits under whom he studied at the Roman College, Scheeben dedicated himself throughout his career to re-sourcing what he regarded as the neglected teaching of the Church Fathers, particularly the Greek Fathers.<sup>36</sup> He believed their theology contained the best resources for combating rationalism (represented by Georg Hermes [1775–1831], Anton Günther [1783–1863], and their disciples), Scheeben's *bête noire*.<sup>37</sup> In his mature treatment of the relation between created and uncreated grace, Scheeben lays out what he calls "the *Western, specifically scholastic*" and "the *Greek patristic*" conceptions of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup> He says that the two views may appear, at first glance, to be completely opposed: Latin Scholasticism emphasizes created grace and divine efficient causality, whereas the Greek Fathers accent uncreated grace and divine formal causality.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Scheeben believes he can demonstrate that these accounts complement and enlighten one another.<sup>40</sup> Scheeben's presentation resembles Rahner's inasmuch as both theologians argued that the Greek Fathers foregrounded uncreated grace and divine formal causality, and the Latin Scholastics created grace and divine efficient causality; moreover, both theologians sought to bring the Greek and Latin visions into harmony, rather than simply substituting the former for the latter.

Scheeben says that the main task for reconciling the Latin Scholastic and Greek patristic accounts of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is to clarify the relation between created and uncreated grace. Scheeben's account of this relation, and specifically his affirmation of the priority of uncreated grace, is a second similarity to Rahner. According to Scheeben, created and uncreated grace form two constitutive elements of a single organic process. The infusion of created grace into the soul (specifically *gratia*

36. For this formation, see Joseph Carola, *Engaging the Church Fathers in Nineteenth-Century Catholicism: The Patristic Legacy of the Scuola Romana* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 413–31.

37. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1954), 2.

38. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *HCD*, vol. 3, *God in His Fundamental, Original Relation to the World—or, the Founding of the Natural and Supernatural Order of the World*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 834, 841; all italics in quoted material throughout the current article are original unless otherwise noted. I have analyzed Scheeben's synthesis of these two traditions in greater detail in "Nineteenth-Century *Ressourcement*: The Greek Patristic/Latin Scholastic Synthesis of Scheeben's Theology of Grace," in *The Roman School: Nineteenth-Century Jesuit Theology and Its Achievements*, ed. Justin M. Anderson, Matthew Levering, and Aaron Pidel (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 170–202.

39. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:834–71.

40. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:833.



*gratum faciens*, i.e., sanctifying grace) justifies the human being through an intrinsic renewal and elevation of human nature. This prepares the soul to receive uncreated grace, which is the gift of God's very self through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> This may lead us to think that uncreated grace follows in the wake of created grace, but Scheeben explains that this is not the case. Rather, the communication of the Holy Spirit himself as uncreated grace is prior to the communication of created gifts like charity; Scheeben describes the former as the "root" of the latter.<sup>42</sup> The Holy Spirit (as uncreated grace) prepares the soul (through created grace) to be his own dwelling (once again, as uncreated grace).

A third likeness lies in the common method Scheeben and Rahner employ to present a theology of uncreated grace. Operative within Scheeben's patristic-Scholastic synthesis is his methodological principle that insight into one theological mystery is gained by comparing it with other mysteries.<sup>43</sup> Like Rahner, Scheeben posits a tight, exemplary nexus between the human-divine unions found in grace, glory, and Christ's hypostatic union.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, both authors construct their ontologies of grace by borrowing from the metaphysical blueprints of the beatific vision and the hypostatic union. This maneuver leads to their common conviction that grace involves the communication of God's very self to the human person as an uncreated gift. Just as the blessed *in patria* know and love God immediately, so, too, Scheeben thinks, the supernatural knowledge and love of the graced human person *in via* has as its "most proper object God himself, as he is in himself [*wie er in sich ist*]" inasmuch as "the divine essence [*Wesenheit*] in itself is offered for our living possession and enjoyment."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, just as the created grace of union joins Christ's human and divine natures, so, too, Scheeben says, created sanctifying grace is the bond connecting the human person to the person of the Holy Spirit as uncreated grace.<sup>46</sup>

This takes us to a fourth similarity between Scheeben and Rahner: both think of grace as God's self-communication to the human person. It has been argued that Scheeben differs from Rahner inasmuch as he wishes to exclude "the idea of a

41. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:872–83.

42. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft—noch einmal," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Heribert Schaaf and Josef Höfer (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 203–37 at 225; Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:853.

43. See Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *HCD*, vol. 1, pt. 2, *Theological Epistemology: Theological Knowledge Considered in Itself*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 877–87; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946), 19–21.

44. He calls the hypostatic union and the beatific vision "the ideal types or fundamental forms" of grace. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:600; see also Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *HCD*, vol. 5, pt. 1, *Soteriology: The Person of Christ the Redeemer*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2020), 434–39.

45. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *HCD*, vol. 2, *Doctrine about God, or Theology in the Narrower Sense*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 1071.

46. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:883.

self-communication of God as a formally intrinsic, ontological-objective act.”<sup>47</sup> In response to this claim, it is important to observe that Scheeben repeatedly uses the phrase “God’s self-communication” (*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*) to describe God’s gift to the creature.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the idea of the communication of the divinity is an overarching theme in Scheeben. The following lines take us to the heart of his theology:

If the internal divine relations and processes [*Vorgänge*] are externally imitated and reproduced by the communication of the divine nature to rational creatures . . . [then] *the Trinity is clearly the basis for the possibility, as well as the exemplar and goal, of the supernatural order of grace among creatures*. The very essence [*innerste Wesen*] of the Trinity consists in the substantial communication of the divine nature to other persons. Hence the true meaning of the Trinity must consist in the fact that on its basis, according to its model, and for its glorification, a grace-filled communication of the participation in the divine happens *ad extra*, and that the Trinity consequently forms the root for the order of things called forth through this communication, out of which it arises.<sup>49</sup>

Three key elements of Scheeben’s theology are here contained in a nutshell. First, the idea of divine communication predominates in his doctrine of God: he conceives of the Trinity as a linear communication of the divine substance from the Father through the Son to the Holy Spirit. Second, for Scheeben, divine supernatural activity *ad extra* is a “prolongation and continuation” (*Ausdehnung und Fortführung*) and an “imitation and reproduction” (*Nachahmung und Reproduktion*) of the intra-divine life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup> Third, therefore, the eternal processions and the temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit all are instances of the communication of the divinity.<sup>51</sup> In short, the idea of God’s self-communication is a leitmotif of

47. Tanzella-Nitti, *Mistero trinitario*, 287.

48. Scheeben describes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as “the self-communication [*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*] of God to created persons”; states that God “*gives himself to [the creature] as a gift or to be the creature’s own* and consequently communicates himself to the creature as a *substantial and uncreated gift of grace*”; says that grace resembles the unitive action joining Christ’s human and divine natures inasmuch as both cases involve a “substrate . . . of a spiritual nature to be perfected supernaturally by God’s self-communication”; and often employs similar expressions such as a “*communication of God’s substance*” or a “communication . . . of the substance of God himself.” Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 238–69 at 268; Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:832, 3:834–35, 3:844, 5.1:436, 5.1:523.

49. Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 141, translation modified (emphasis in original but not in translation).

50. Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 137.

51. Scheeben, *HCD*, 2:354. Scheeben expressly says of grace, “This communication of God’s own life to the soul appears as an *imitation, continuation, and extension of that manifestation and communication of life which takes place in God himself in the Son and in the Holy Spirit*.” Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 137.

Scheeben's theology as it is of Rahner's, one which spans the inner life of God and divine activity in the world.<sup>52</sup>

Scheeben describes God's self-communication to the human person as a type of formal causality—a fifth characteristic he shares with Rahner. Scheeben develops this idea by applying the patterns of the beatific vision and Christ's hypostatic union to grace. He examines the same passages of Aquinas that Rahner would later consider, and, like Rahner, explains that Aquinas's theology of the beatific vision involves a type of formal causality. Scheeben describes this as "the sinking-in [*Einsenkung*] of the divine substance into the mind's eye [*geistige Auge*] of the blessed, in order to fructify this eye by its very self as a quasi-intelligible form [*als forma intelligibilis gleichsam*]."<sup>53</sup> Scheeben also conceives of Christ's hypostatic union as an instance of formal causality, what he describes as "an *information* or *formation* of the humanity by the Word" (*eine informatio oder formatio humanitatis per Verbum*).<sup>54</sup> So, too, Scheeben continues, God's communication to the creature through grace is an information akin to the soul's information of the body. From his battles with nineteenth-century rationalists, Scheeben was keenly sensitive to the dangers of a pantheistic abrogation of the God-world distinction, and so he explains that this is not information "in the strict sense by *inherence* and *confusion* into one nature" (*per inhaerentiam et confusionem in unam naturam*) but "by *coherence* and *passing into* or *indwelling*" (*per cohaerentiam et immeationem oder inhabitationem*), which occurs when a lower substance is "adorned and crowned, fulfilled and impregnated" by a higher substance.<sup>55</sup>

Wishing to distance Scheeben from Rahner, Tanzella-Nitti points out that Scheeben never uses the term "quasi-formal causality" (*causalità quasi-formale*).<sup>56</sup> Nichols similarly says that Scheeben differs from Rahner because the latter introduces "the innovative notion of 'quasi-formal' cause for Uncreated Grace."<sup>57</sup> It is true, strictly speaking, that Scheeben (as far as I am aware) never uses the exact phrase "quasi-formal causality." But he comes very close. Scheeben says that God acts through grace as a formal cause, routinely using both the Latin *causa formalis* and the German *Formalursache* (as well as *Formalgrund* and *Formalprinzip*).<sup>58</sup> Moreover, he says that, in the case of grace, "formal cause" must have a broader meaning than it usually carries in philosophy and theology. Just like Rahner, Scheeben expresses this broader meaning through the adjectival "quasi-," calling the conferral of uncreated grace a

52. Rahner thinks the primordial intra-divine self-communication is the basis of God's self-communication *ad extra*; see Rahner, *The Trinity*, 99–103.

53. Scheeben, *HCD*, 5.1:438, translation modified.

54. Scheeben, *HCD*, 5.1:399–400, translation modified.

55. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:850.

56. Tanzella-Nitti argues that Scheeben thinks of God's causality in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a "not totally extrinsic exemplary-sealing causality" (*causalità esemplare-sigillativa non totalmente estrinseca*). Tanzella-Nitti, *Mistero trinitario*, 286, 288.

57. Nichols, *Romance and System*, 97n141.

58. See, e.g., Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:865, 3:879; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft—zum letztenmal," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 270–99 at 274–79.

“quasi-information” (*Quasiinformation*).<sup>59</sup> On other occasions, Scheeben will qualify formal causality with German words such as “gleichsam,” “gewissermaßen,” and “in gewissem Sinne,” which approximate the meaning of “quasi-.”<sup>60</sup> Scheeben’s contemporary Theodor Granderath accused Scheeben of violating the Council of Trent’s teaching that the only formal cause of justification is created grace (the same charge William Hill levelled against Rahner a century later).<sup>61</sup> This sparked a drawn-out controversy between the theologians, during the course of which Scheeben said that the idea that the Holy Spirit is not only an efficient and exemplary cause, but also a formal cause “of our supernatural being [Sein]” is “*the core of my teaching*.”<sup>62</sup>

As we saw above, Rahner believed that divine quasi-formal causality opens up the possibility to conceive of proper—that is, non-appropriated—relations between the human person and the three Divine Persons. He named Scheeben as a forerunner of this idea.<sup>63</sup> The argument, which is essentially the same for Scheeben and Rahner, proceeds as follows:<sup>64</sup> When God bestows created supernatural gifts, he acts as an efficient cause. When God acts as an efficient cause, the principle of this action is the divine nature, which is common to all three Divine Persons. At the level of efficient causality, therefore, divine activity cannot be hypostatically proper, but is necessarily common. Its trinitarian character comes about only through appropriation—that is, attributing to one Divine Person an action that is really common to all three (e.g.,

59. Scheeben, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft—zum letztenmal,” 279.

60. Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:715, 3:841, 5.1:438.

61. “The one formal cause [*unica formalis causa*; of justification] is the justice of God: not that by which he himself is just, but that by which he makes us just.” Council of Trent, chap. 7 of “Decree on Justification” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent—Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London and Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 673; Theodor Granderath, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft und das Tridentinum,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 5, no. 2 (1881): 283–319; William J. Hill, “Uncreated Grace—A Critique of Karl Rahner,” *The Thomist* 27 (1963): 333–56 at 354, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1963.0019>. Scheeben and Rahner responded to this criticism in the same way: both argued that Trent must be interpreted within its historical context; when this is done, it is clear that Trent did not aim to lay out a comprehensive theology of human union with God, but only to respond to the errors of the Reformers concerning justification. See Scheeben, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft in den Gerechten und das Tridentinum,” 186–90; Scheeben, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft—noch einmal,” 219–20; Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 341–42.

62. Scheeben, “Die Kontroverse über die Formalursache der Gotteskindschaft—zum letztenmal,” 275. Rahner and Balthasar both observed that Scheeben made extensive use of the concept of formal causality. See Rahner, “Uncreated Grace,” 339; Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:110–11.

63. Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” 175.

64. Scheeben’s treatments of the matter, from which the following synthetic presentation is drawn, are Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 146–80; Scheeben, *HCD*, 2:1057–77, 3:832–84 (especially 3:859).

attributing creation to the Father). The unity of divine activity in creation is expressed in the axiom *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.<sup>65</sup> The importance of the axiom is easy to see: if the individual Divine Persons were understood to be acting as individual efficient causes in the created order, trinitarian theism would slide into tritheism; there would no longer be three Divine Persons, but three gods. However, if through uncreated grace God communicates himself to the creature as a quasi-formal cause, the creature enters into a relation with God not founded exclusively on divine efficient causality. Instead, in receiving uncreated grace, the creature knows and loves God as he is in himself and therefore enjoys relations with the Divine Persons in their hypostatic distinctness. It is important to note that Scheeben did not think that the human person is united through grace exclusively to the Holy Spirit like Christ's human nature is united exclusively to the Son (a theory that had been proposed by Dionysius Petavius [1583–1652], and more recently, by David Coffey).<sup>66</sup> Instead, Scheeben thought that all three Divine Persons dwelt in the human person with their personal character—what can be called a proper, nonexclusive divine indwelling.<sup>67</sup>

## The Supernatural Existential and the Divergence between Scheeben and Rahner

In Rahner's mature work, he developed the points he held in common with Scheeben in close association with his concept of the supernatural existential. Thus, we must consider where Scheeben's theology stands vis-à-vis Rahner's famous theorem. Rahner introduced the supernatural existential amid the mid-twentieth-century nature-grace debates, as he sought to stake out a position between that of the neo-Scholastics (against whom Rahner leveled the charge of extrinsicism) and the position now associated with de Lubac (which Rahner thought threatens the gratuity of grace).<sup>68</sup> The German Jesuit argued that to be a human being is to be a created spirit always open to the self-communication of God. The human intellect is dynamically ordered toward

65. The axiom is alternatively expressed as *omnia opera ad extra sunt communia toti trinitati*. Theologians usually regard this axiom as a corollary of the Council of Florence's affirmation *omniaque [in divinis] sunt unum ubi non obviat relationis oppositio*. See Council of Florence, "Bull of Union with the Copts," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I—Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London and Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 570–71.

66. See Dionysius Petavius, *De Trinitate*, vol. 3, *Dogmata theologica* (Paris: Ludovicum Vivès, 1865), bk. 8, c. 4–6; David Coffey, "A Proper Mission of the Holy Spirit," *Theological Studies* 47, no. 2 (1986): 227–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398604700202>.

67. This phrase is inspired by Malachi Donnelly's analysis of Scheeben; see Malachi J. Donnelly, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit according to M. J. Scheeben," *Theological Studies* 7, no. 2 (1946): 244–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056394600700203>.

68. Rahner, *Foundations*, 126–33. Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship of Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, 297–317 at 311–17 (the essay was originally published in 1950); Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

the infinite in such a way that there is an a priori “preapprehension” (*Vorgriff*) of absolute being in all apprehensions of finite being. This preapprehension is the condition that renders knowledge of finite objects possible, as they are profiled against the horizon of the absolute.<sup>69</sup> Yet this orientation cannot be considered an ordering to the formal supernatural end of the beatific vision.<sup>70</sup> Rahner argues, rather, that the human capacity to receive the love that God is—a capacity that is the central and abiding existential of humanity—must be unexacted and “supernatural,” because only if this capacity is unexacted does grace remain unexacted. Rahner calls this capacity the “supernatural existential” (*übernatürliche Existential*). The supernatural existential is the necessary condition for the acceptance of the gift of God’s self-communication, and yet, at the same time, this self-communication of God is already present inchoately in the supernatural existential and in the dynamism of the human spirit’s transcendental movement.<sup>71</sup> In light of the supernatural existential, nature, in a theological sense, may be seen as a “remainder concept” (*Restbegriff*), that which remains over and against the supernatural existential when the latter is subtracted. Rahner notes, however, that this distinction cannot be stated with neat precision because human beings never find themselves in a state apart from the supernatural existential.<sup>72</sup> This last point is crucial for Rahner: the supernatural existential “is present in *all* men as an existential [*Existential*] of their concrete existence [*Dasein*].”<sup>73</sup>

Scholars have voiced conflicting opinions about the relation of Scheeben’s theology to Rahner’s supernatural existential. In a 1970 study, Paul suggested that Scheeben’s idea that human nature is always ordered and called to grace had been a precursor of Rahner’s supernatural existential.<sup>74</sup> In a paper delivered at a 1988 conference commemorating the centenary of Scheeben’s death, Scheffczyk briefly noted what Richard Schenk describes as “the bothersome appearance of too close an affinity of [Scheeben’s mature] position to the supernatural existential of Karl Rahner.”<sup>75</sup> Scheffczyk analyzed this semblance in more detail in a second 1988 article, in which he distinguished Scheeben and Rahner more sharply, contrasting Rahner’s “transcendental” theology with Scheeben’s “organic” theology.<sup>76</sup> In a 1994 monograph, Müller claimed that Rahner’s theology fulfilled a *desideratum* of Scheeben by providing a philosophical approach “to the transcendental nature-grace unity.”<sup>77</sup> In a 2020 book, Gasper quotes a passage from Scheeben about the supernatural ordering of human

69. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, ed. Andrew Tallon, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994), 45–54.

70. Rahner, 58–64.

71. Rahner, *Foundations*, 126–33.

72. Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship of Nature and Grace,” 310–17.

73. Rahner, *Foundations*, 127.

74. Paul, *Denkweg und Denkform*, 287–88.

75. Scheffczyk, “Schöpfung als Vor-Ordnung der Gnade,” 206, 217–20; Richard Schenk, “Grace as the Gift of Another: M. J. Scheeben, K. Eschweiler, and Today,” *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 503–13 at 506.

76. Scheffczyk, “Die ‘organische’ und die ‘transzendente’ Verbindung.”

77. Müller, *Die Gnade Christi*, 290.



moral action *in concreto* and then states baldly, “This, in essence, is what Rahner calls the supernatural existential.”<sup>78</sup> Others, like White and Joseph Ratzinger, interpret Scheeben’s theology as contrasting with—and in Ratzinger’s case, offering a corrective to—Rahner’s supernatural existential.<sup>79</sup>

A thorough analysis of this issue would require a comprehensive presentation of Scheeben’s extensive theology of nature and grace, which I cannot offer here. The issue is further complicated by two ambiguities in Rahner: first, the relation between the supernatural existential and the human subject’s natural dynamism and preapprehension of God; second, the relation between the supernatural existential and grace.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, several observations can be made. The similarity between Scheeben’s theology of grace and Rahner’s supernatural existential is located in Scheeben’s conviction that all human beings exist within what he calls “the current supernatural world-order” (*in der gegenwärtigen, übernatürlichen Weltordnung*).<sup>81</sup> Scheeben, like Rahner, rejects the position (later associated with de Lubac) that human nature is intrinsically ordered to a supernatural end. But Scheeben, again like Rahner, stresses that, in the current economy, God has called all human persons to a supernatural end and sends supernatural grace into the hearts of all, even those outside the visible bounds of the church.<sup>82</sup> Scheeben imprints the idea with a Christic stamp, stating (in anticipation of *Gaudium et Spes*, §22) that God has united himself to the whole human race through the Incarnation; he describes the Incarnation as a higher order in which the orders of nature and grace are taken up.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, human moral acts within the current economy cannot be neatly divided into those with a merely natural vs.

78. Gasper, *Die Theologie der Vermählung*, 91n339.

79. White, foreword to *Soteriology*, xix. Ratzinger opines that Scheeben’s emphasis on the supernatural can help overcome a leveling of the nature-grace distinction that results in everything becoming “christological,” leading to a banal immanentism and political messianism; Ratzinger subtly links this to Rahner. Joseph Ratzinger, “Geleitwort,” *Divinitas* 32, no. 1 (1988): 11–12. See also Hoffmann, *Natur und Gnade*, 77n.

80. Gerald McCool notes that commentators have had difficulty understanding the metaphysics of the supernatural existential and its relation to grace because Rahner was not clear. David Coffey explains that Rahner could say what the supernatural existential does (orients us to God) and what it was not (a constitutive element of human nature) but “was unable to say what the supernatural *was*.” Patrick Burke remarks, “It does not seem by any means clear what precisely this supernatural existential is.” See Gerald A. McCool, introduction to *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald A. McCool (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), xiii–xxviii at xxvi; David Coffey, “The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (March 2004): 95–118 at 97; Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 70.

81. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 93n8, translation modified.

82. Scheeben, 323.

83. Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 366–68; Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:683–85. “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.” *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §22, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

supernatural import. Instead, all human activity—and even certain institutions that in themselves have only a natural aim, such as the state and marriage—has a supernatural significance.<sup>84</sup> These elements of Scheeben's theology lend support to the arguments of those who see in it a supernatural existential *avant la lettre*.

Nevertheless, critical differences remain. In general, the theological momentum of Rahner's supernatural existential moves toward articulating a universal, transcendental human experience of God (which includes that of non-, or "anonymous," Christians),<sup>85</sup> whereas the momentum of Scheeben's theology goes in the opposite direction, toward an emphasis on how the reception of grace through an encounter with Christ and the Spirit categorically mediated by the church and her sacraments elevates the human person into a new and higher state of life. Rahner was concerned about a two-tiered, extrinsicist neo-Scholastic model of nature and grace, and so he highlighted the intrinsic connection of nature to grace through his transcendental analysis of the human person as a "hearer of the word" ordered through her spiritual faculties to God as the infinite horizon of being.<sup>86</sup> Scheeben, in contrast, was troubled by nineteenth-century rationalism's tendency to level the distinction between nature and grace in a such a way that the supernatural dimension of Christianity was eviscerated and the Christian life was recast as a secular humanist project.<sup>87</sup> This prompted Scheeben to emphasize the initial distinction between the orders of nature and grace in their essential constitutions—not because he wished to carve out space for detailed considerations of human nature treated in abstraction from grace (whether for natural theology, natural law, etc.) but because he believed that the more one sees how grace surpasses nature, the more one will marvel at the glorious heights to which nature is elevated through its deifying union with grace.<sup>88</sup>

84. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 92; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *HCD*, vol. 6, *The Realization of the Salvation Merited by Christ in Individual Human Beings through the Justifying Grace of Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 467–503; Scheeben, *HCD*, 3:983; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Ist es möglich, die Welt zu entchristlichen?," *Periodische Blätter zur Wissenschaftlichen Besprechung der grossen Religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart* 2 (1873): 297–322.

85. Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 390–98.

86. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship of Nature and Grace," 297–317; Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 166–69; Rahner, *Foundations*, 123–24. Marc Ouellet argues that, for Rahner, "the supernatural existential conditions natural desire and so penetrates it a priori that the distinction between nature and grace tends to resolve itself into identity"; see Marc Ouellet, "Paradox and/or Supernatural Existential," *Communio* 18 (Summer 1991): 259–80 at 272.

87. See, e.g., Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen in ihrer Bedeutung für christliche Wissenschaft und christliches Leben," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 13–42.

88. See, e.g., Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 13; Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 4–7. Balthasar puts it well: "God's revelation of himself, according to Scheeben, means the transporting of man from his own immanent and finite sphere into the divine, transcendental, and infinite

Numerous other differences follow; here, I will mention three. First, even though Scheeben and Rahner propose similar ontologies of human-divine union focused on God's self-gift as uncreated grace, they arrive at this meeting point through different approaches. As Scheffczyk has explained, Rahner approaches the nature-grace union "from below" through a "transcendental" theology based on the human spirit's intrinsic dynamism; Scheeben proceeds "from above" and posits an "organic" conception of the union, underscoring that grace, revelation, and even creation itself are gifts descending from the trinitarian God.<sup>89</sup> Second, Rahner's account of God's self-communication is more apophatic than Scheeben's: for Rahner, God communicates himself as "absolute mystery";<sup>90</sup> for Scheeben, God communicates himself in the flesh of Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.<sup>91</sup> Rahner by no means would deny this—after all, Christ is the "irreversible climax" of God's self-communication for Rahner.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the accent is different in the two theologians: Rahner's transcendental approach points to a general, anthropological experience of standing before the horizon of the absolute mystery of God, whereas Scheeben's presentation of God's self-communication remains within the register of a classical theology of categorical revelation and the divine missions.<sup>93</sup> Third, although Scheeben affirms the universality of God's salvific will and the corresponding means through a gift of grace that is given to all people, Scheeben does not suggest, as Rahner does, that God's universal salvific will expresses itself *in concreto* as a permanent "existential" of human existence that is, as Rahner sometimes suggests, prior to human freedom. For Scheeben, there is a universal offer of grace in the sense that *all* human persons are offered saving grace, not universal in the sense that all human persons exist *at all times* in a graced (or, at minimum, "supernatural") condition. Rahner, in contrast, denies that the offer

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sphere, an experience such as is portrayed, for instance, by the well-known Renaissance woodcut which shows a man piercing the sphere of the world with his head and gaping with astonishment at the mysteries beyond the world." White is correct to speak of a "good extrinsicism" in Scheeben. See Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:106; Thomas Joseph White, "Good Extrinsicism: Matthias Scheeben and the Ideal Paradigm of Nature-Grace Orthodoxy," *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 537–63.

89. Scheffczyk, "Die 'organische' und die 'transzendente' Verbindung."

90. "The immediacy of God in his self-communication is precisely the revelation of God as the absolute mystery which remains as such." Rahner, *Foundations*, 44–89, 117–22, quotation at 120. See also Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, 36–73; Karl Rahner, "The Hiddenness of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 227–43; Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, 244–54.

91. See, e.g., Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 141–80; Scheeben, *HCD*, 2:621–41.

92. Rahner, *Foundations*, 117, see also 193–95.

93. Stephen Duffy argues that Rahner's desire to move beyond ontotheology led to his emphasis on divine mystery; see Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 272–75.

of grace in the supernatural existential is “intermittent,” insisting that it is permanent and constant.<sup>94</sup> In sum, both those who see in Scheeben a forerunner to Rahner’s supernatural existential and those who present Scheeben’s theology of grace in contrast to Rahner’s theologoumenon have good reasons for their claims. Any comprehensive comparison between Scheeben and Rahner must admit both perspectives.

## Contemporary Implications

The ongoing Scheeben renaissance shows no signs of abating—on the contrary, with the recent completion of the full English translation of Scheeben’s multivolume *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik* interest in Scheeben is likely to increase. My demonstration of Scheeben’s substantial agreement with Rahner on human union with God serves as a challenge, both to theologians sympathetic to Scheeben and to those who are not, to avoid oversimplified accounts of Scheeben’s theology and its contemporary and future relevance. One explanation for why Scheeben’s theology could serve as a common source for twentieth-century theologians as diverse as Garrigou-Lagrange, Balthasar, and Rahner was that Scheeben expressly aimed to stand outside the parameters of any particular school.<sup>95</sup> Scheeben was an immensely varied, subtle, and original thinker, and one should take pause before attempting to situate him too facilely in any “school” (however broadly we conceive of that term) of nineteenth-, twentieth-, or twenty-first-century theology.<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless, Scheeben’s theology of human-divine union places him in a distinct genealogical line that began in the seventeenth-century with Petavius, Louis Thomassin (1619–95), and Leonardus Lessius (1554–1623),<sup>97</sup> passed through the nineteenth-century Jesuit Roman School theologians Carlo Passaglia (1812–87) and Clemens

94. Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” 175.

95. In an 1885 letter to Benjamin Herder, Scheeben noted the difficulties he was encountering while writing on grace, explaining, “Almost all write about these questions according to the prescription of a school. But if one seeks the truth, and thereby wants to do no one an injustice, he must look over, compare, and ponder a thousand things that others neither need to think about nor think about.” Quoted in Heribert Schauf, foreword to Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, vol. 6, *Gnadenlehre*, ed. Josef Höfer et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1957), v–xxi at v. Rahner, similarly, avoided belonging to a single school; see Karl Rahner, “Experiences of a Catholic Theologian,” trans. Declan Marmion and Thiessen Gesa Elsbeth, *Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (2000): 3–15 at 10–12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100101>.

96. For the difficulty of classifying Scheeben’s theology, see Evan S. Koop, “On Scheeben’s Place in Nineteenth-Century Catholic Theology and the Question of His Theological Method,” *Nova et Vetera* 21, no. 2 (2023): 471–508.

97. See Petavius, *De Trinitate*, vol. 3, bk. 8, c. 4–6; Ludovicus Thomassin, *De incarnatione Verbi Dei*, vol. 3, *Dogmata theologica* (Paris: Ludovicum Vivès, 1866), bk. 6, c. 8–20; Leonardus Lessius, *De perfectionibus moribusque divinis*, ed. P. Roh (Freiburg: Herder, 1865), bk. 12, c. 11.

Schrader (1820–75)<sup>98</sup>—and their brightest student, Scheeben—and was carried forth into the twentieth century by thinkers such as Maurice de la Taille and Rahner.<sup>99</sup> The individual theologians within this familial line held unique views and sometimes disagreed with each other, but their theologies of human union with God shared an overall shape marked by commitments to uncreated grace, divine formal causality, and non-appropriated relations to the Divine Persons. In these aspects, the paradigm they proposed represented an alternative to the mainstream of Latin Scholastic theology, which tended to emphasize created grace, divine efficient causality, and appropriated relations to the Divine Persons. By the middle of the twentieth century, the current to which Scheeben and Rahner belonged had gained such momentum that a controversy over the nature of divine indwelling erupted in Catholic theology.<sup>100</sup> The fact that recent studies of Scheeben have overlooked his similarity with Rahner is partially due to the fact that this larger controversy over divine indwelling receives little attention in the theology of grace today, whereas another grace controversy that raged at the same time—namely, the nature-grace dispute sparked by de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*—is once again of intense interest.<sup>101</sup> Scheeben scholarship reflects these trends: whereas now his nature-grace theology is of preeminent interest, a century ago, his theology of divine indwelling elicited more secondary study than any other topic in his corpus.<sup>102</sup>

These same trends are reflected, albeit in a different way, in attitudes toward Rahner. It is perhaps surprising that, as we move into the middle of the twenty-first century, interest in the nineteenth-century Scheeben is increasing and interest in the twentieth-century Rahner is declining. Scholars sympathetic to Rahner have asked openly

98. Carlo Passaglia, *Commentariorum theologicorum pars prima: De ecclesiae jure in sciendis profitendae fidei formulis de Divinae Trinitatis ratione in vestustioribus symbolis expressa de theologica unita et distincta* (Rome: Ex Typographia Bonarum Artium, 1850), 43–75; Clemens Schrader, *Theses theologicae* (Vienna: Mayer, 1864), thesis 12 of *Theses de gratia*.

99. Maurice de la Taille, *The Hypostatic Union and Created Actuation by Uncreated Act: Light of Glory, Sanctifying Grace, Hypostatic Union*, ed. C. Lattery, trans. Cyril Vollert (West Baden Springs, IN: West Baden College, 1952).

100. For a summary of the positions on offer, see Prudence de Letter, “Sanctifying Grace and the Divine Indwelling,” *Theological Studies* 14, no. 2 (1953): 242–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00062278.1958.10596503>.

101. The literature is extensive. Examples include Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*, 2nd ed. (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010); John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Jacob W. Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

102. See, e.g., Donnelly, “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit according to M. J. Scheeben”; Bernard Fraigneau-Julien, “Grâce créée et grâce incréée dans la théologie de Scheeben,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 4 (1955): 337–58; Heribert Schauf, *Die Einwohnung des Heiligen Geistes: Die Lehre von der nichtappropriierten Einwohnung des Heiligen Geistes als Beitrag zur Theologiegeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der beiden Theologen Carl Passaglia und Clemens Schrader* (Freiburg: Herder, 1941), 152–84.

whether Rahnerian theology has a future.<sup>103</sup> The displacement of Rahner's theology from the preeminent place it occupied for decades is due to a variety of factors, ranging from changes in theological formation (e.g., a decline in familiarity with the Scholastic theological idiom required to understand Rahner) to those of ecclesiastical politics (e.g., the promotion of *Communio* theologians under the papacies of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI). A major factor, undoubtedly, has been the frequent criticism that Rahner's transcendental theology in general and supernatural existential in particular reduce grace to a universal human experience and undermine the unique particularity of Christ's work in the church and her sacraments.<sup>104</sup>

Evaluating the accuracy of this criticism and whether Rahner has resources to rebuff it are not my present concerns. Rather, I wish to point out that many who hold this judgement of Rahner tend to dismiss his theology of grace wholesale. This, I suggest, is a mistake. For Rahner's most important achievement in the theology of grace was not the supernatural existential (nor the related idea of the anonymous Christian), but his conviction that grace, most fundamentally, is the uncreated gift of God's very self to the human person. Just weeks before his death in 1984, Rahner gave a talk summing up his life's work under four "experiences." The second was God's self-communication:

For me, therefore, the true and sole center of Christianity is the real self-communication of God to creation in God's innermost reality and glory. It is to profess the most improbable truth, namely, that God in God's very self with infinite reality and glory, with holiness, freedom, and love can really and without any holding back enter the creatureliness of our existence. Everything else that Christianity offers or demands of us is by comparison only provisional or of secondary importance.<sup>105</sup>

103. Philip Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 281–96.

104. See, e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 101–13, 146–49; Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 162–71. See also Stephen J. Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, 43–62 at 59; Declan Marmion, "Rahner and His Critics: Revisiting the Dialogue," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2003): 195–212, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000306800301>. The decline of interest in Rahner, however, has not been so severe as that predicted by Balthasar, who, on the occasion of Rahner's death, remarked, "Karl Rahner is dead. I think he will soon be buried—not only bodily, but intellectually"; quoted in Andreas R. Batlogg, "Church Father of the Twentieth Century," trans. Thomas F. O'Meara, *Philosophy & Theology* 30, no. 2 (2018): 503–6 at 503, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol201963114>.

105. Rahner, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," 7–8. Bert van der Heijden has convincingly argued that God's self-communication is Rahner's fundamental theological principle. David Coffey calls God's self-communication Rahner's "great synthesizing idea." See Bert van der Heijden, *Karl Rahner: Darstellung und Kritik seiner Grundpositionen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1973); David Coffey, "A Proper Mission of the Holy Spirit," 243.



Rahner succeeded in midwifing this conviction into the mainstream of Catholic theology. As Ursula Lievenbrück has narrated in detail in the aptly titled *Zwischen donum supernaturale und Selbstmitteilung Gottes*, the Catholic theology of grace underwent a dramatic transformation in the twentieth century from thinking of grace primarily (or, in some cases, exclusively) as a created “supernatural gift” to considering it as “God’s self-communication.”<sup>106</sup>

Rahner, to be sure, developed the ideas of divine self-communication and the supernatural existential in association with each other. I would contend, however, that it is possible to distinguish them. Rahner’s argument that grace consists in the communication of the uncreated gift of God’s self focuses on the metaphysics of the graced human person’s deifying communion with God; the supernatural existential concerns, primarily, the extent and mode by which this gift is given. Classified within a traditional *de gratia* register, the former concerns divine indwelling; the latter, the nature-grace relation. One can embrace Rahner’s account of the primacy of uncreated grace, divine formal causality, and the human person’s proper relations to the Divine Persons without affirming his transcendental method or supernatural existential. Scheeben’s theology testifies that this is the case. As I have demonstrated, his theology betrays a substantial agreement with Rahner concerning human-divine union: both theologians, seeking to recover the theology of the early church and synthesize it with Latin Scholastic theology, argued that God communicates his very self to the creature through uncreated grace as a divine formal-cause, bringing the creature into proper relations with the Divine Persons. Yet Scheeben offers this account without the commitment to a universal, transcendental experience of grace that Rahner’s critics find so troubling. In so doing, Scheeben’s theology refocuses our gaze on the fundamental contribution of Rahner’s monumental theology of grace, and, in a perhaps unexpected way, can repropose it to a new generation of theologians for whom the name “Rahner” elicits suspicion.<sup>107</sup>

The importance of Scheeben’s and Rahner’s conviction that grace consists in the gift of God’s uncreated self is manifold; here, in closing, I will name three implications for contemporary theology. First, the theological current represented by Scheeben and Rahner both prompted and morphed into a personalist theology of grace in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theologians decided that they could better express Scheeben’s and Rahner’s core idea of God’s self-communication within a personalist framework than with admittedly clunky Scholastic terms such as “divine quasi-formal

106. Ursula Lievenbrück, *Zwischen donum supernaturale und Selbstmitteilung Gottes: Die Entwicklung des systematischen Gnadentraktats im 20. Jahrhundert* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2014).

107. For a recent criticism of Rahner, see Matthew Levering’s narrative blaming Rahner for giving rise to a deficient theology of evangelization that downplays conversion to Christ and entrance into the Catholic Church; Matthew Levering, “Two Visions of Evangelization,” *The Catholic World Report*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/09/20/two-visions-of-evangelization/>.

causality.”<sup>108</sup> However, Scheeben’s and Rahner’s detailed analyses of human union with God (which, in part, can be attributed to their Scholasticism) offer a granularity that personalism cannot. As David Coffey puts it, personalism “secures impact,” whereas Scholasticism “makes for precision.”<sup>109</sup> Both are needed. Second, Scheeben and Rahner continue to challenge theologians to explore with rigor the trinitarian contours of grace. Their work serves as a prompt to revisit the dispute about proper vs. appropriated relations between the human person and the Divine Persons—a controversy that was broken off rather than settled. Third, the recalibration in the Roman Catholic understanding of the relation between created and uncreated grace contains untapped ecumenical resources for dialogue with Protestant and Eastern Orthodox Christians, both of whom tend to reject the notion of created grace.<sup>110</sup> Although Scheeben and Rahner both affirm created grace, their work stands as a lasting reminder that grace, in the final analysis, is the gift of God’s very self.

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108. See, e.g., Juan Alfaro, “Person and Grace,” in *Man before God*, ed. Denis Burkhard (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1966), 174–98; Robert L. Faricy, “The Trinitarian Indwelling,” *The Thomist* 35, no. 3 (1971): 369–404 at 373, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1971.0027>.
  109. David Coffey, “The Gift of the Holy Spirit,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1971): 202–23 at 204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114007103800302>.
  110. Karl Barth sees the doctrine of created grace as a “gnosticising conception of grace as a mediatorial sphere.” Sergei Bulgakov thinks created grace is “clearly contradictory” and succumbs to “the theological temptation of Arius” to posit a *tertium quid* between God and creation. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt. 1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 84; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 299. The US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue’s 1983 statement “Justification by Faith” lists both Scheeben and Rahner as Catholic theologians who can contribute to an ecumenical agreement over the contested issue of justification; see US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, “Justification by Faith,” *Origins* 13, no. 17 (6 October 1983): 287–88.