

Scheeben in the *Kulturkampf*

THE *ERNSTFALL* AND THE THEO-POLITICS OF GRACE

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Months after the proclamation of the German Reich in the Palace of Versailles's Hall of Mirrors on January 18, 1871, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck launched a *Kulturkampf* against Roman Catholicism. This was nothing less than a "state-sponsored domestic war."¹ By the end of the decade, the Reich had shuttered hundreds of churches and religious houses, imprisoned or exiled more than eighteen hundred Catholic priests and more than half of Prussia's bishops, and seized property worth sixteen million marks from the Catholic Church.² Lay Catholics had their homes searched, lost their livelihoods, and were thrown into prison. Thousands went without the sacraments as a wave of "anti-Catholic hysteria" swept German society.³

Thomas O'Meara would have us believe that none of this mattered to a Catholic seminary professor who lived through the *Kulturkampf*, Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–88). According to O'Meara, the *Kulturkampf* "seemed remote and uninteresting to Scheeben." O'Meara makes this claim as part of an argument that Scheeben was "an abstract spiritual

1. Michael B. Gross, *The War against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 2.

2. Gross, 2. The prison conditions were grim: "a board bed, little warmth, bullying wardens, and a diet of bread and water served in what looked like a dog's bowl." Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 331.

3. Ronald J. Ross, *The Failure of Bismarck's Kulturkampf: Catholicism and State Power in Imperial Germany, 1871–1887* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 7.

writer” who conceived his theology “without any reference to the culture of the times.”⁴ O’Meara is not alone in this perception of Scheeben. Grant Kaplan has recently asked whether “the pressing problems that mark the modern era” mattered to Scheeben. Kaplan goes so far as to imply that Scheeben had an unquestioning and incurious mind.⁵ The 1912 *Catholic Encyclopedia* depiction of Scheeben is more sympathetic to him but nevertheless contributes to the idea that Scheeben was divorced from the happenings of his day inasmuch as it describes Scheeben as a “mystic” convinced of the “visions” he received from God, adding that Scheeben’s “colleagues and his friends but rarely disturbed the peace of the workroom where his spirit brooded over a chaos of literary matters.”⁶

The truth is that Scheeben was not an abstracted academic unconcerned with his times but a priest, journalist, and theologian passionately engaged in the ecclesial and political struggles of his day, especially the *Kulturkampf*. In the present article, I lay out the history of Scheeben’s participation in the *Kulturkampf*, showing that Scheeben was actively involved in the conflict as a priest and journalist. Then, by analyzing a series of articles Scheeben wrote on the *Kulturkampf*, I explain how Scheeben viewed the struggle through his distinctive theology of nature and grace. He saw the liberal secularization efforts of the *Kulturkampf* as a rebellion against the supernatural world-order and a rejection of God’s self-gift in Christ. I conclude with a consideration of the relevance of Scheeben’s *Kulturkampf* writings for our present

4. Thomas Franklin O’Meara, OP, *Church and Culture: German Catholic Theology, 1860–1914* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 66–67.

5. Grant Kaplan, review of *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, by Aidan Nichols, OP, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75, no. 2 (May 2022): 192.

6. *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al., 15 vols. (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912), 13:525.

moment, when the question of the Church's relation to the political order is drawing renewed interest.

Scheeben as Seelsorger, Reichsfeind, and Journalist

Scheeben began his apostolate in Germany in the summer of 1859 after seven years of study in Rome that culminated with his ordination to the priesthood. He spent just over half a year as rector of the church of the Ursuline-Salvator-kloster Sisters in Münstereifel and as religion teacher in their convent school before the Archbishop of Cologne, Johann Cardinal von Geissel (1796–1864), recognizing Scheeben's extraordinary intellectual gifts, transferred the twenty-five-year-old priest to the seminary.⁷ Scheeben had become a priest in order to minister among God's people, not to become a professor, and so the change of assignment came as a sacrifice for Scheeben. He wrote to his former spiritual director in Rome: "I have just been unexpectedly transferred to the seminary in Cologne as a lecturer and professor, and I go only because I am compelled by the will of the Cardinal. I had never expected this assignment under any circumstances. It cost me a great effort to leave my previous position, where I experienced so much good. Also, scholarship has lost its appeal for me since I immersed myself in pastoral work [*Praxis*], the pulpit, and the formation of children."⁸ Even as a professor, however, Scheeben maintained a robust pastoral apostolate. He bore a heavy load as a lecturer and was extremely productive as a scholarly theologian but still dedicated time every day to hearing confessions at the Mariä Himmelfahrt Kirche, often sitting for hours in the frigid cold.⁹ His early love for the

7. Joseph Carola, SJ, *Engaging the Church Fathers in Nineteenth-Century Catholicism: The Patristic Legacy of the Scuola Romana* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 422–23.

8. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Briefe nach Rom*, ed. Heribert Schaaf and Alfred Eröss (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 1939), 60. All translations of previously untranslated German works are mine.

9. Joseph Höffner, "Matthias Joseph Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik: Sein pastorales Wirken im Erzbistum Köln," *Divinitas* 32, no. 1 (1988): 447.

religious education of children was transformed into a zeal for the formation of future priests. Scheeben's seminarians struggled to understand his lofty lectures, but they dearly loved him anyway, finding in Scheeben, with his good sense of humor and down-to-earth piety (evident as he strolled the seminary courtyard praying his Rosary and reciting his Office), an exemplary priest.¹⁰

But the traditional Catholic way of life enjoyed by Scheeben and his seminarians was to have no place in the new Reich. The *Kulturkampf* struck the Rhineland's Catholics hard. In 1873, the Archbishop of Cologne, Paul Melchers (1813–95), was imprisoned for six months for resisting the anti-Catholic laws. The following year, when Melchers caught wind that he was going to be deposed and deported, he went on the run from the authorities. When Scheeben walked the streets of Cologne, he would have seen public wanted posters for his fugitive archbishop.¹¹ In the fall of 1875, the Cologne seminary was shut down. Classes were halted. Seminarians were kicked out onto the street.¹² The next summer, Scheeben had an even more direct confrontation with the Reich's *Kulturkämpfer*. The catalyst was Marpingen.

In July 1876, in the Härtelwald near the small mining village of Marpingen in the northern Saarland, three young girls

10. Carola, *Engaging the Church Fathers*, 424.

11. The posters read: "Dr. thel. Paulus Melchers, formerly Archbishop of Cologne, born in Münster and last known to be living in Cologne, 64 years of age, 1.70 meters tall, with blond hair and eyebrows, open forehead, brown eyes, slightly bent nose, normal mouth, pointed chin, elongated face, pale complexion and slender build." Quoted in David Blackburn, *Populists and Patricians: Essays in Modern German History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 156. Melchers fled to Maastricht in the Netherlands, from which he administered his diocese for the next ten years.

12. The seminarians were not allowed to return until 1886. For the history of the Cologne seminary during the *Kulturkampf*, see Norbert Trippen, "Das Seminar unter dem Einfluß von Neuscholastik und Ultramontanismus (1842–1875)" and "Das Seminar im Kaiserreich (1886–1918)," in *Das Kölner Priesterseminar im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Norbert Trippen (Siegburg, DE: Franz Schmitt, 1988), 84–133.

reported that a woman in white who identified herself as “the Immaculately Conceived” had appeared to them. Within days, thousands of Catholic pilgrims flooded the apparition site. Imperial authorities viewed the mass of pilgrims as a Catholic uprising and sent an eighty-man military company to disperse the pious crowds. The soldiers violently cleared the pilgrims—many of whom were on their knees and in song—from the site of the visions. Then the soldiers plundered the village. A military occupation of Marpingen was ordered, which lasted two weeks.¹³ Because the *Kulturkampf* had left the local diocese of Trier without a bishop, the local pastor called upon Scheeben, already a renowned theologian, to come and investigate the veracity of the apparitions. Scheeben traveled to Marpingen in mid-September and spent a week there. He was appalled by what he found. As a counterattack to the Prussian violence, Scheeben publicized the marauding that had taken place. In a September 26 article in the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, then the largest circulation Catholic newspaper in Germany, Scheeben reported that the behavior of the Prussian army in Marpingen “was worse than that to be expected of troops in an occupied country.”¹⁴ Scheeben’s motive, in part, was political: *Reichstag* elections would be held in January, and he believed that publicizing the army’s conduct at Marpingen would drum up support for the Catholic Center Party (*Zentrumspartei*).¹⁵

The imperial authorities did not take Scheeben’s criticism well. The priest was charged with defamation of the Prussian army and was tried in a criminal court on April 14, 1877. But

13. David Blackburn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 202–6.

14. Quoted in Blackburn, *Marpingen*, 206.

15. An editor of the *Kölnische Volkszeitung* later said that Scheeben’s article had been “heavily used” in the Center Party’s campaign. David Blackburn, *The Marpingen Visions: Rationalism, Religion, and the Rise of Modern Germany* (London: Fontana, 1995), 278; Blackburn, *Marpingen*, 246. For the history of the Center Party during the *Kulturkampf*, see Ellen Lovell Evans, *The German Center Party, 1870–1933* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 55–94.

the persecution of Scheeben backfired. The proceedings against the priest were widely publicized, and the prosecution and its witnesses made a poor impression.¹⁶ Scheeben's report of the soldiers' behavior was deemed accurate, and he was acquitted. The state appealed the decision, and Scheeben was retried at a court of appeal a month later. Once again, Scheeben was judged to have provided a true account of the army's conduct and was acquitted. The state appealed a further time, but the case was rejected.¹⁷ Historians regard the Scheeben-Marpingen trial as turning the tide of public opinion in the *Kulturkampf*. As David Blackbourn explains, the incident proved "an embarrassment to Prussian state and liberalism alike" and generated sympathy for the Catholic cause: "Scheeben had flushed out the state authorities and started to put them on the defensive."¹⁸ The defamation charge was not the lone legal action taken by the Reich against Scheeben. He was also fined for celebrating Mass in violation of the law at the parish church in Marpingen—in whose neighboring woods, Scheeben had come to believe, the Blessed Virgin Mary had appeared.¹⁹

Beyond his reporting from Marpingen, Scheeben was active throughout the *Kulturkampf* as a journalist. Although Scheeben's contributions in the field of Catholic journalism tend to be overshadowed by his monumental achievements as a dogmatic theologian, he so distinguished himself as a journalist that it was remarked shortly after his death, "Certainly Catholic journalists will always grant this blessed man [Scheeben] a place of honor among themselves and preserve

16. Blackbourn, *Marpingen*, 246, 266.

17. Blackbourn, 273–74.

18. Blackbourn, 372, 246.

19. Blackbourn, 220. Scheeben published several articles about the apparitions in the *Kölnische Volkszeitung* and the *Pastoralblatt*. They are collected in Maria-Irma Seewann, *Innerkirchliche Auseinandersetzung*, vol. 3/1, *Die Sprache Gottes Verstehen: Dokumentation zu den Ereignissen in und um Marpingen 1876–1877* (Friedelsheim, DE: Arbeitskreis Wissenschaft und Glaube, 2007), 379–415.

his memory.”²⁰ Scheeben frequently published articles about religious matters in the daily *Kölnische Volkszeitung* and regularly contributed to a variety of Catholic journals, including the *Literarischer Handweiser*, the *Literarische Rundschau*, the *Frankfurter zeitgemäße Broschüren*, the *Tilburger Monatshefte*, and the more scholarly, Mainz-based *Der Katholik*.²¹ In 1864, Scheeben assumed responsibility for the *Kölner katholischer Hausfreund*, a popular monthly that he turned into a weekly newspaper.²² In 1867, Scheeben founded the *Kölner Pastoralblatt*, a monthly review for clergy. In the “Prospectus” published in the first issue, editor Scheeben laid out the scope of the periodical: “The content of the review should include all those topics that somehow touch on the area of pastoral work.”²³

To address the controversies in Germany sparked by the First Vatican Council, Scheeben founded another journal in 1870 called *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869*.²⁴ In 1872, the name was changed to *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftlichen Besprechung der großen religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart*.²⁵ The *Periodische Blätter* published a range of material covering religion, politics, and culture, which included original articles, book reviews, and statements by the Catholic hierarchy and various Catholic associations. In 1872, Pope Pius IX wrote to Scheeben blessing and encouraging the

20. Johann Hertkens, “Professor Dr. M. J. Scheeben: Leben und Wirken eines katholischen Gelehrten im Dienste der Kirche,” in *Festschrift zur Feier der Konsekration und Enthronisation des hochw. Herrn Dr. Hubert Theophil Simar, Bischofs von Paderborn* (Paderborn, DE: Junfermann, 1892), 25.

21. Hertkens, “Scheeben,” 19–21; Höffner, “Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik,” 449.

22. Höffner, “Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik,” 449–50.

23. Quoted in Höffner, “Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik,” 451.

24. *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869*, ed. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, 3 vols. (Regensburg, DE: Pustet, 1869–71).

25. *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftliche Besprechung der großen religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart* [henceforth *PB*], ed. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, 11 vols. (Regensburg, DE: Pustet, 1872–82).

work.²⁶ The review ran for thirteen years, all under Scheeben's editorship.

The *Kulturkampf* was a major topic treated in the *Periodische Blätter*. Articles regularly appeared commenting on the latest anti-Catholic legislation. The opening salvos of the *Kulturkampf* were made in 1871 and 1872 with the abolishment of the Catholic section of the ministry of culture, the "Pulpit Paragraph" that banned clergyman from expressing political opinions, and the School Inspection Law that placed confessional schools under the supervision of the state.²⁷ The *Periodische Blätter* responded with articles on the role of clergy in politics,²⁸ on the theology of the Bavarian ministry of state,²⁹ and on the content and limit of the obedience Catholics owed to civil authorities.³⁰ When the Jesuits were expelled from the Reich in July 1872, a statement of protest against the anti-Jesuit law immediately appeared in the *Periodische Blätter*.³¹ After the introduction of the 1873 May Laws, which transferred control of religious training, ecclesiastical appointments, and disciplinary authority over clerics from the Church to the state, the *Periodische Blätter* printed a collective statement by Germany's bishops stating that they could

26. "Schreiben des hl. Vaters an den Herausgeber dieser Zeitschrift," *PB* 1:100.

27. For an overview of the *Kulturkampf* laws, see Otto Pflanze, *The Period of Consolidation, 1871–1880*, vol. 2, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 202–6; Douglas W. Hatfield, "Kulturkampf: The Relationship of Church and State and the Failure of German Political Reform," *Journal of Church and State* 23, no. 3 (1981): 465–84.

28. "Der Klerus und die Politik," *PB* 1:1–14, 53–75, 129–41, 228–41.

29. "Die Theologie des bayerischen Staatsministeriums," *PB* 1:15–44.

30. "Urtheile hervorragender deutscher Staatsgelehrten über den unbedingten und unbegrenzten staatlichen Gehorsam," *PB* 1:394–403; "Ueber die Pflicht des Gehorsams gegenüber der weltlichen Obrigkeit, sowie die Pflicht und das Recht des passive Ungehorsams und die Sündhaftigkeit des aktiven Widerstandes gegen dieselbe," *PB* 1:442–60, 485–508.

31. The statement was issued by *Der Vorstand des Vereins der deutschen Katholiken*; "Protest gegen das Jesuitengesetz," *PB* 1:403–4.

not follow these laws.³² With the May Laws, the Reich's war against the Church entered a new, more combative phase. The heightened conflict is reflected in the content of the articles Scheeben ran in 1873, which included a lengthy, five-part installment on martyrdom and a defiant article whose title asked, "Ist es möglich, die Welt zu entchristlichen?" ("Is it possible to dechristianize the world?").³³ After the term "Kulturkampf" was coined by the liberal Rudolf Virchow in 1873, "Kulturkampf" [sic] regularly appeared as a category in the *Periodische Blätter's* Table of Contents.³⁴ Articles examined the emergence and essence of the *Kulturkampf* as well as its historical antecedents, ranging from the persecutions of Christians under the Roman emperors Diocletian and Julian to the situation of the Church under Napoleon.³⁵ The Reich engaged in a propaganda campaign aimed at presenting Catholics as un-German, and so Scheeben ran a series of articles demonstrating that the Catholic Church had been integral to the formation of German culture.³⁶ Finally, the journal pub-

32. "Kollektiv-Erklärung der Preußischen Bischöfe an das k. Staatsministerium, vom 26. Mai," *PB* 2:281–82. For a summary of the May Laws (also called the "Falk Laws," after the Minister of Education, Adalbert Falk [1827–1900]) and excerpts of their most important statutes, see J. F. Maclear, ed., *Church and State in the Modern Age: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 267–72.

33. "Das Martyrium," *PB* 2:353–76, 385–403, 504–23, 548–65; "Ist es möglich, die Welt zu entchristlichen?" *PB* 2:297–322.

34. See, e.g., the Table of Contents ("Inhalt") in *PB* 4, 5, and 7.

35. "Schein und Wesen im deutschen Kulturkampf," *PB* 3:506–13; "Der Kulturkampf auf dem Gebiete des Unterrichts," *PB* 4:35–44; "Die diokletianische Christenverfolgung," *PB* 3:251–66; "Die julianische Christenverfolgung," *PB* 3:67–89, 97–115; "Ein napoleonisches Vorbild des deutschen Kulturkämpfers," *PB* 3:44–47; "Aus dem österreichischen Kulturkampf im vorigen Jahrhundert," *PB* 4:129–35.

36. The first of these articles begins, "The blessings of Christian culture in Germany are now more than ever threatened by modern paganism [*Heidenthum*]. The foundation of this culture was once laid with unspeakable effort, work, and perseverance. It is certainly instructive, in our days, to look back on those times. In this way, many will be encouraged to ensure that Christian culture in Germany is preserved and remains victorious in the current '*Kulturkampf*' ["*Culturkampfe*"]. This culture was founded through the Christian monarchy [*Königthum*]

lished a bevy of articles examining the two, interconnected issues at the core of the *Kulturkampf*: the church-state relation and liberalism.³⁷

Not only was Scheeben the editor under whose watch all of these *Kulturkampf* articles ran; he was also the *Periodische Blätter*'s principal author. Because many of the *Periodische Blätter* articles were published anonymously and none are signed by Scheeben, this is not immediately obvious. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to conclude that Scheeben wrote many, if not most, of the anonymous *Periodische Blätter* articles. In an undated letter to Benjamin Herder, Scheeben wrote, "The *Dogmatik* must be put aside for a while, because I must write the *Periodische Blätter* all by myself."³⁸ In his influential *Die zwei Wege der neueren Theologie*, Karl Eschweiler concluded that Scheeben himself wrote "almost all" of the first four volumes and "the greater part" of the remaining ten volumes of *Das ökumenische Concil/Periodische Blätter* a position shared by Cyril Vollert, the mid-twentieth-century Scheeben scholar and translator.³⁹ Martin Grabmann, the

in the closest union with the Catholic Church." "Die Gründung des christlich-deutschen Königthums und christlich-deutscher Cultur im zehnten und zu Anfang des elften Jahrhunderts," *PB* 4:82. The articles are collected in Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Gründung des christlich-deutschen Königtums und christlich-deutscher Kultur zur Zeit der Sachsenkaiser*, ed. Heinrich Raskop (Mainz, DE: Matthias Grünewald, 1936).

37. Representative pieces include "Das Verhältniß zwischen Kirche und Staat nach den Vorlagen des vaticanischen Concils," *PB* 1:45–52; "Ist die Kirche ein Staat im Staate?" *PB* 2:188–90; "Die christliche Staatsidee," published in twenty-six installments in *PB* 8–10; "Der Liberalismus als System, vom theologischen Gesichtspunkt aus betrachtet," *PB* 7:172–92, 258–83, 289–302, 449–72; "Wesen und Ursprung der Internationale," *PB* 1:290–92, 341–57, 405–18. Though the Reich harassed and persecuted the Catholic press, it never succeeded in muzzling dissident Catholic voices; see Ross, *The Failure of Bismarck's Kulturkampf*, 158–79.

38. Quoted in John Courtney Murray, "The Root of Faith: The Doctrine of M. J. Scheeben," *Theological Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1948): 27n31. Murray says another letter provides "similar testimony."

39. Karl Eschweiler, *Die zwei Wege der neueren Theologie: Georg Hermes–Matthias Joseph Scheeben. Eine kritische Untersuchung des*

eminent twentieth-century medievalist and an editor of Scheeben's *Gesammelte Schriften*, judged that Scheeben wrote a good portion of the *Periodische Blätter* himself.⁴⁰ Heinrich Raskop said that the articles in *Periodische Blätter* are "so uniformly designed and so strongly influenced by the editor's personality" that Grabmann's judgment will be confirmed by anyone who reads through the volumes of the periodical.⁴¹ An attentive reading of the *Periodische Blätter* confirms the judgment of Eschweiler, Vollert, Grabmann, and Raskop. In the analysis offered below, I have selected five *Periodische Blätter* articles representative of the journal's stance on the *Kulturkampf* that I take to be written by Scheeben on account of their content, vocabulary, and style.⁴² These articles also evince Scheeben's distinctive theology of grace applied to social and political realities. In order to see this, we must first

Problems der theologischen Erkenntnis, digital ed., ed. Thomas Marschler (Augsburg, DE: Benno Filser, 2010 [1926]), 125n10; Cyril Vollert, SJ, foreword to Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Cyril Vollert, SJ (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1954), xii.

40. Martin Grabmann, "Scheebens theologisches Lebenswerk," in Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Natur und Gnade/Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade*, ed. Martin Grabmann and Josef Höfer (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 1941), xxxi.

41. Heinrich Raskop, foreword to Scheeben, *Die Gründung des christlich-deutschen Königtums*, 191–92. Karl-Heinz Minz likewise attributes many of the *Periodische Blätter* articles to Scheeben; see Karl-Heinz Minz, *Pleroma trinitatis: Die Trinitätstheologie bei Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Frankfurt am Main, DE: P. Lang, 1982), 14–15. Scheeben also anonymously authored many articles in journals besides the *Periodische Blätter*, e.g., in the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*; see Höffner, "Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik," 449. Because Scheeben's archives were destroyed in the Allied bombings of World War II, there is no way to prove with certainty which articles he wrote.

42. Two comments about my treatment of these articles are in order. First, I recognize that my analysis, restricted to five articles and focused on the intersection of political theology and the theology of grace, is limited; the *Periodische Blätter* articles on the *Kulturkampf* (and on the related issues of Vatican I and the Döllinger affair) cover thousands of pages and are deserving of a monograph-length study. Second, because these articles are relatively unknown, have never been translated into English, and are available only in Fraktur, I have included many translated excerpts to offer a sampling of the tone and substance of Scheeben's *Kulturkampf* writings.

step back and consider how Scheeben understood the relation between nature and grace.

Nature, Grace, and the Supernatural World-Order

Scheeben's theology of nature and grace emerged out of his retrieval of the Greek Fathers, his synthesis of their thought with Latin scholasticism, and his administration of this elixir to a Church and theological culture in Germany enervated by rationalism. During his months in Münstereifel, the twenty-four-year-old Scheeben penned his first academic article, "Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen in ihrer Bedeutung für christliche Wissenschaft und christliches Leben" ("The Doctrine of the Supernatural in Its Significance for Christian Scholarship and Christian Life").⁴³ In it, he offers a diagnosis and proposed cure for "rationalism" (*Rationalismus*), which he defines as "the ambition of human reason to acknowledge no other being [*Sein*] than that joined to the nature of man, no other knowledge than that attainable through reason itself, and no other good worthy of love nor standard for action other than something that is recognized by reason and is connected with the nature to which reason belongs."⁴⁴ For Scheeben, in other words, rationalism is not simply a noetic error but a complete *Weltanschauung* that distorts orthodox Christian teaching on three fronts: epistemically, rationalism reduces all knowledge to that obtainable by unaided human reason, thus displacing faith; metaphysically, rationalism rejects any order of being beyond nature; and ethically, rationalism reduces the Christian life to a secular humanist project.⁴⁵

43. The article was published in two parts in *Der Katholik* (40, no. 1 [1860]: 280–99 and 40, no. 2 [1860]: 657–74), and is reprinted in Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen in ihrer Bedeutung für christliche Wissenschaft und christliches Leben," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Heribert Schauf and Josef Höfer (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 1967), 13–42, to which citations refer.

44. Scheeben, "Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen," 18 (emphasis removed).

45. Scheeben, 13–32. Scheeben associated rationalism with Georg Hermes (1775–1831), Anton Günther (1783–1863), and their disciples; see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *God in His Fundamental, Original Relation*

To overcome rationalism, Scheeben believed that a re-proposal of the authentic Christian doctrine of the supernatural was necessary.⁴⁶ I say “re-proposal” because Scheeben, as he explains in his first book *Natur und Gnade* (1861), thought that rationalism’s roots lied in a forgetting of the theological riches of the Fathers and Scholastics.⁴⁷ The most neglected of all were the Greek Fathers, whose theology, Scheeben believed, contained the best resources for defeating rationalism. Whereas Augustine’s battles with Pelagianism led him—and subsequently much Western theology—to emphasize how grace heals nature, the Eastern Fathers underscored how grace elevates human beings above their nature to a deifying communion with God.⁴⁸ Scheeben dedicated himself throughout the remainder of his career to recovering the forgotten theology of the Greek East and to synthesizing it with the Latin West.⁴⁹ This produced a theology of nature and grace characterized by two elements.

First, Scheeben stresses the difference between nature and grace in their essential constitutions. He believed that “Christianity cannot be comprehended in its due nobility and its true, inner quality unless its real, specific difference from all that is merely natural and rational, that is, from all that lies in the

to the World; or, *The Founding of the Natural and Supernatural Order of the World*, vol. 3, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics* [henceforth *HCD*], trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 652; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Theological Epistemology: Theological Knowledge Considered in Itself*, vol. 1.2, *HCD*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 1112. All citations to *HCD* refer to paragraph number (which is the same in English and German).

46. Scheeben, “Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen,” 13–14; Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, xvii.

47. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, xx, 6–10.

48. Scheeben, xviii–xix.

49. For more on this synthesis, see my “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, SJ (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2024), 170–202.

realm of nature and reason, is clearly perceived.”⁵⁰ For Scheeben, supernatural mysteries comprise “a higher heavenly world, a mystical cosmos.”⁵¹ Scheeben affirms “a double ontological order” and insists that the human person has a twofold end, one natural, the other supernatural.⁵² Scheeben rejects the position, later associated with Henri de Lubac, that human nature is intrinsically ordered to the supernatural end of the beatific vision.⁵³ Indeed, Scheeben thinks that the fundamental error in misconstruals of the nature-grace relation is the belief that nature, apart from grace, is ordered to a supernatural end.⁵⁴ Human beings have an obediential potency for the beatific vision, but they receive a positive orientation to their supernatural end only through grace.⁵⁵ It is important to observe that Scheeben underscores the distinction between nature and grace not because he wishes to establish a natural foundation for speculations in natural theology or natural law prescinding from grace and revelation but rather because he thinks—in contrast to his rationalist opponents—that the Christian message that God has called the human person beyond her nature to participate in his divine nature will shine with greater beauty and glory the more one sees how grace exceeds nature.

Scheeben’s emphasis on the distinction between nature and grace is paired with a second move: his claim that all human persons live “in the current supernatural world-order” (*in der gegenwärtigen, übernatürlichen Weltordnung*).⁵⁶

50. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 13.

51. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Theological Epistemology: The Objective Principles of Theological Knowledge*, vol. 1.1, *HCD*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 33 (emphasis removed).

52. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 11.

53. Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

54. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 80.

55. Scheeben, *HCD* 3:924–25; Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 39–42.

56. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 93n8, translation modified. Scheeben sometimes associates the supernatural world-order with Christ’s Incarnation, which he describes as a higher order in which the orders of

According to Scheeben, God has created all human persons for the supernatural end of deifying union with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, God has offered all human persons the grace needed to attain their supernatural end.⁵⁷ Though Scheeben insists on the integrity of nature and its distinction from grace, at the same time, he underscores that human nature *in concreto* is always called to a supernatural end and exists within an overarching supernatural world-order.⁵⁸ Scheeben spells out the consequences of this reality:

The existence of the universal divine order, which gives a supernatural finality to the creature, essentially includes the final perfection or beatitude to which the creature would otherwise be ordered by nature and which is, therefore, referred to as the natural end. This end is currently no longer *the ultimate final end* and *no longer even has the character of an end that is sought-after and attainable by itself alone*. In other words: If the creature is ordered through divine order to a supernatural beatitude, then God cannot permit that it strives for a merely natural beatitude. . . . There is also, in reality, for the aspiration of the creature, no double eternal life, no double final end, one for the natural order and one for the supernatural order. Rather, the former is jointly connected with the latter and taken up into it; i.e., is only sought-after and attainable with it and in it.⁵⁹

nature and grace have been taken up; see, e.g., Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, SJ (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1946), 356, 428–30.

57. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 298, 323; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Realization of the Salvation Merited by Christ in Individual Human Beings Through the Justifying Grace of Christ*, vol. 6, *HCD*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 467–503.

58. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 92; *HCD* 3:1158.

59. Scheeben, *HCD* 3:983.

At first glance, this passage may seem to contradict Scheeben's affirmation of a double ontological order that we saw earlier, but closer inspection shows that it does not. For Scheeben, human beings possess a natural end and a supernatural end. In theory, God could have created humans without calling them to a supernatural end, but in the current order, he has not done so. Thus, the natural end, though really existent, is always subordinate to and taken up into the supernatural end. Put differently, for Scheeben, there is no concretely existing "pure nature" that is not destined for a supernatural end. As a consequence, usually "all the activity human beings now perform is directed [*zugelenkt*] by God in one way or another to a supernatural end."⁶⁰ Furthermore, a purely natural end is not attainable in the current order. If the human person neglects her supernatural vocation, not only will she miss eternal salvation, but she will experience no "true temporal well-being [*Heil*]."⁶¹ Culpable indifference toward grace is a "outrage" (*Frevel*) against one's own nature.⁶²

In the introductory volume of his *Dogmatik*, Scheeben said that theology in his time had the particular task of responding to "rationalism, naturalism, and liberalism." Against liberalism, theology "demonstrates the justification and the extent of the influence of the supernatural order on man's entire interior and exterior life. In doing so, however, just as the confusion of 'nature and grace, human science and divine faith' must be avoided by making a rigorous distinction, so too at the same time the organic connection and intimate interrelationship between the natural and the supernatural order (caused precisely by that rigorous distinction) must be emphasized."⁶³ This passage, with its emphasis on both the distinction and interrelationship between the natural and supernatural, sums up well Scheeben's theology of nature

60. Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 92.

61. Scheeben, *HCD* 3:983–84.

62. Scheeben, 3:933, see also 3:712.

63. Scheeben, 1.2:1118.

and grace. It also points to the implications of this view for the social and political order: the supernatural order must influence not only one's interior, private life but also one's exterior, political life. Scheeben developed this idea at length in his articles analyzing the Reich's war on the Catholic Church.

Liberalism, the *Kulturkampf*, and the Rebellion against the Supernatural World-Order

It has been said that "Scheeben the priest directed the pen of Scheeben the theologian."⁶⁴ His *Kulturkampf* articles show that the inverse is also true: Scheeben the pastor perceived the persecution his flock was enduring not principally as a violation of rights nor as an offense against religious freedom but as a rebellion against the supernatural world-order through an ill-fated attempt to order public life according to nature alone. He called this attempt "liberalism" (*Liberalismus*). Scheeben recognized in real time what contemporary scholarship has confirmed: Bismarck and his satraps may have supplied the *Kulturkampf*'s muscle, but liberalism provided its ideology. The *Kulturkampf* came about through an alliance between the Reich's Chancellor Bismarck and the National Liberal Party (*Nationalliberale Partei*), which emerged as the dominant party in the Reichstag after the first federal elections on March 3, 1871, and remained in power until 1880.⁶⁵ Though Bismarck and German liberals might seem like unlikely allies, they were united by their opposition to the Catholic Church. For Bismarck, this opposition was largely pragmatic. He saw Catholics, with their allegiance to the pope, a foreign head of state, as a threat to the unity of the Reich. Lacking an external foe during peacetime, Bismarck found that the internal threat of Catholics—whom he regarded as *Reichsfeinde* ("enemies of the state")—offered a convenient substitute, an enemy around

64. Höffner, "Scheebens gelebte Dogmatik," 448.

65. For the history of nineteenth-century German liberalism, see James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

which Germans could rally in opposition.⁶⁶ Liberal antipathy to Catholicism was deeper and more ideological. German liberals thought that Catholic backwardness was the main impediment to the civilizing mission of social progress they believed had come late to their nation, and they were intent on ridding society of the influence of the Catholic Church.⁶⁷ As Michael Gross has demonstrated, the *Kulturkampf* was not an exception to liberal principles but their culmination: “Anti-Catholic intolerance was not derivative but constitutive of liberalism; it was not an ancillary expression but, on the contrary, at the core of liberalism in Germany.”⁶⁸ The main *Kulturkampf* laws all aimed at achieving long-desired liberal goals—namely, secularizing the state, marriage, and education. Scheeben’s *Kulturkampf* writings sought to unmask the pernicious error in this attempted secularization and to explain why liberalism did not lead to neutrality toward the Church but to the brutal persecution Catholics were suffering in the *Kulturkampf*.

What, for Scheeben, was liberalism? He thought that liberalism was something of a shape-shifter and, therefore, difficult to define.⁶⁹ Most fundamentally, Scheeben viewed liberalism as a subspecies of his perennial foe rationalism. Rationalism, as we have seen, limits human knowledge to the capacity of unassisted natural reason, thereby excluding supernatural truths and the divine authority of the Church. Liberalism is the concrete application of this idea to social and political life. In Scheeben’s words, liberalism “has undertaken the task of transferring the rationalistic errors from the school of heresy and of heretical philosophism [*Philosophismus*] into public life and of giving them life and form [*Gestalt*] in political

66. Katja Hoyer, *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire, 1871–1918* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2021), 83.

67. Blackbourn, *Populists and Patricians*, 148–60.

68. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 22.

69. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 181.

institutions.⁷⁰ This modern heresy, Scheeben averred, differs from other heresies in that it acts covertly and more subtly, but, nevertheless, it has the same aim: “the dechristianization of the world.”⁷¹ Observing that the challenges the Church must confront change throughout the centuries, Scheeben said that the specific battle the Church must fight in his time was for Christian principles not to be restricted merely to private life but to apply to social and political life as well.⁷² All of the large and small questions of the era could be reduced to one fundamental question: “Should the principles of natural justice and of Christianity provide the measure [*maßgebend*] for the life and aim of society and her institutions, as they are for the life and destiny of individuals, or not? Yes or no—here lies the decision.”⁷³

Some nineteenth-century Catholics answered “no.” They thought that liberalism and Catholicism could be reconciled.⁷⁴ According to these “liberal Catholics” (to use Scheeben’s description), the state is concerned with the natural order, and the Church with the supernatural order; thus, a separation between Church and state is not only possible but desirable.⁷⁵ Scheeben noted that the separation of Church and state conflicts with centuries of Church teaching and practice, but he was not content merely to argue from authority and so proceeded to diagnose the error of liberal-Catholic proponents of

70. Scheeben, 191. The historical link between rationalism and support for the *Kulturkampf* buttresses Scheeben’s position. Many rationalists became Old Catholics after Vatican I, e.g., the Hermesians Johann Baptist Baltzer (1803–71) and Peter Joseph Elvenich (1796–1886) and Günther’s disciples at the University of Bonn, Theodor Weber (1836–1906) and Joseph Hubert Reinkens (1821–96), who became the first German Old Catholic bishop. The Old Catholics, in turn, supported Bismarck’s war on the Roman Catholic Church.

71. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 6.

72. Scheeben, 11.

73. Scheeben, 12.

74. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 173

75. Scheeben takes the French newspaper *L’Ère nouvelle*, published by Jean-Baptiste Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802–61), Frédéric Ozanam (1813–53), and Henri Louis Charles Maret (1805–84), as an example of liberal Catholicism. “Der Liberalismus,” 296–97, 272–83, 289–90.

the separation of Church and state.⁷⁶ Their mistake ultimately concerned nature and grace, inasmuch as they failed to grasp that the current economy is not natural but supernatural. Scheeben explains:

It is false that the state in the actual world is a purely natural society. The state could also exist, of course, among men even if they were not obligated to attain a supernatural end, and, in this hypothesis, it would be of a purely natural order. But in the presently existing order, where every man is obligated to strive for his supernatural end, and where society, which is the association [*Vereinigung*] of men, has the same end, it is absolutely necessary that society as such strives for the supernatural end, and therefore the state cannot regard itself as belonging exclusively to the natural order. The Church, on the other hand, is essentially supernatural. But it is impossible that it should not, at the same time, be related to nature, for the supernatural necessarily has the natural as its basis.⁷⁷

Here we see a concrete application of Scheeben's theology of nature and grace to the political order. Though nature and grace are essentially distinct, they are caught up with one another in the current economy. For this reason, Scheeben explains, institutions that in themselves have only a natural significance, such as marriage and the state, in the current graced order possess a supernatural import. The liberal notion of a state that limits its concerns to the natural and excludes the supernatural corresponds, in the theology of grace, to a counterfactual state of pure nature. Therefore, Scheeben says, the liberal idea of the separation of Church and state can only be regarded as a "utopia" (*Utopie*).⁷⁸

76. Scheeben, "Der Klerus und die Politik," 61.

77. Scheeben, "Der Liberalismus," 298.

78. Scheeben, 299.

It is important to make clear that Scheeben is not denying that the Church and state each have their proper domains—he emphatically affirms this. But he does wish to dispel the idea that these domains are extrinsic to one another: the state exists to assist people to achieve their natural end and to provide those natural means that provide the necessary basis for attaining a supernatural end; the Church exists to direct men to their supernatural end and to ensure that natural things are ordered toward the ultimate supernatural end.⁷⁹ Such an understanding of the church-state relation expresses a distinction but not separation between nature and grace, whereas the separation of Church and state advocated by liberals involves “the tearing-away [*Losreißung*] of the natural from the supernatural order.”⁸⁰ Because of the interweaving of the natural and supernatural, Scheeben does not think that the state can base itself exclusively on natural law apart from the divine law.⁸¹ This interweaving is seen especially in marriage and education, two realities that fall under the overlapping interests of the state and the Church. Scheeben repeatedly returns to these two topics in his arguments that public life cannot be arranged according to nature alone.⁸² Not incidentally, marriage and education were the two spheres that Bismarck and the liberals were most intent on secularizing.

Scheeben further employs his theology of grace to unmask liberalism’s claim to religious neutrality. Because the current economy is supernatural, efforts to exclude from civil law the Church’s supernatural teaching and authority in areas such as marriage and education cannot be seen as returning the state to something like a healthy secularity. Rather, these attempts aim at a dechristianization that will only lead to godlessness. Scheeben says of the governing authorities in Europe: “They have declared themselves to be non-

79. Scheeben, 299.

80. Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 58.

81. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 298.

82. See, e.g., Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 60, 449–56, 463–71.

confessional [*confessionslos*]. They pass non-confessional laws, introduce non-confessional marriages, establish non-confessional schools, and form a non-confessional society. But non-confessionalism [*Confessionlosigkeit*] is synonymous with irreligion [*Religionslosigkeit*], and irreligion is synonymous with godlessness [*Gottlosigkeit*], because man can only be joined to God through religion and without a confession he cannot have religion. The governments of Europe, therefore, have fallen away from God and from the Church of God itself and are leading the peoples to the same apostasy.”⁸³ For Scheeben, the material attempt to circumscribe political life to the limits of nature formally entails a rejection of God, because it involves a refusal to affirm the authority of God’s representative on the earth, the Catholic Church.⁸⁴ Scheeben goes so far as to suggest that the core of liberalism is the rejection of God. Thus, he says, liberalism is not a new idea but an old one, older even than humanity itself: “the liberal idea” first found expression in Satan’s “non serviam.”⁸⁵ Because liberalism denies the supernatural, it grows “into a formal anti-Christian doctrine in all political and social things.”⁸⁶ Liberalism is “an entirely new state religion, the official and obligatory anti-Christianity.”⁸⁷ Scheeben leaves no doubt about liberalism’s ultimate intentions: “Liberalism wants to dechristianize the state, the family, the school, and thereby the whole society. It has launched a war against the kingdom

83. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Eine Neujahrsbetrachtung über die Weltlage,” *PB* 2:3.

84. Scheeben, 4.

85. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 172.

86. Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 7.

87. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 190. A long, anonymous article published in the *Periodische Blätter* (but which I do not think was written by Scheeben) puts it thus: “The alleged neutrality [*Gleichgültigkeit*] of the state in religious matters is nothing but an abject irony and a despicable lie. There is no stronger proof of the hopeless stupidity of certain people than the fact that they allow themselves to be fooled by such phrases and lies.” “Die christliche Staatsidee,” *PB* 8:248.

of God on earth in order to eliminate God himself from the world.”⁸⁸

Inasmuch as the triune God’s deification of the human person is a major leitmotif of Scheeben’s theology,⁸⁹ it is striking that he says, “Liberalism is nothing other than the self-deification [*Selbstvergötterung*] of man in the superstitious cult of freedom.”⁹⁰ Elsewhere, Scheeben associates liberalism with “the deification of the creature” (*Vergötterung der Creatur*) and the “deification of nature” (*Vergötterung der Natur*).⁹¹ These claims are not empty rhetorical flights but rather accord with the substance of Scheeben’s whole argument: by refusing to acknowledge a supernatural good greater than the nature of man, rationalistic liberalism has put man in the place of the greatest good, thus setting man in the place of God. A similar dynamic unfolds in the social and political sphere. Liberalism claims the state is independent of the divine authority of the Church, thus claiming it is free from God and thereby making the state into a god—what Scheeben calls the “deification of the state.”⁹² In words that are chilling to read after the horrors of the twentieth century, Scheeben says that the choice facing Germans is whether a future generation will worship the true God or “the absolute god-state” (*der absolute Gott-Staat*).⁹³ He concludes a long article on liberalism thus: “There is only one fully valid answer that can counter the *non serviam* of the revolution—that is, to the liberalism conceptualized in this work: ‘*Quis ut Deus?*’ Man is not God.”⁹⁴

Scheeben lays out the consequences of the liberal rebellion against the kingdom of God. Because God has created

88. Scheeben, “Eine Neujahrsbetrachtung,” 1–2.

89. For a focused treatment of deification in Scheeben, see Scheeben, *HCD* 3:674–99.

90. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 269.

91. Scheeben, 471. See also Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 53.

92. Scheeben, “Eine Neujahrsbetrachtung,” 4; “Zur Geschichte des vatikanischen Concils,” *PB* 2:274.

93. Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 66.

94. Scheeben, “Der Liberalismus,” 472.

the natural order for the supernatural, if the supernatural order is rejected, the natural order no longer corresponds to God's designs for it, and so it falls into a state of corruption and enmity toward God and man.⁹⁵ People are free to submit to God's natural and supernatural designs or to reject them, Scheeben continues, but they are not free to determine the consequences of spurning God's plan. They cannot reject the Christian supernatural world-order and then claim for themselves a "merely natural, purely human order."⁹⁶ Rather, if they reject the supernatural, they have rejected what God has willed for human nature, and thus they fall into a state far below that of nature and embark on a path of destruction, which Scheeben describes as follows:

If the individual man does not stand his ground as a Christian in the supernatural order of grace and divine adoption; then at the same moment he becomes a servant of sin, according to the word of eternal truth: "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" [John 8:34]. His life is no longer governed by reason and conscience but by the passions and cravings of the flesh. He also lives no longer according to the order natural to men. He no longer maintains himself in his life as a man but, according to his appetites and actions, falls down into the order of irrational and conscienceless animals. The devastation of his body and soul and also the destruction of all his external relationships follows, until finally infirmity or illness, poverty or crime, brings to an end his entire existence. This process of destruction spreads with natural necessity through families, communities, nations, and states, in the progression in which they fall away from Christianity, from the Church, and thereby, from God. With the disappearance of divine faith and Christian

95. Scheeben, "Eine Neujahrsbetrachtung," 5.

96. Scheeben, 6.

morality, the supernatural life disappears; with the disappearance of the supernatural life, rational life disappears (it is therefore rightly said that whoever loses faith also loses reason); with the disappearance of rational life, the reign of the passions begins; the reign of the passions becomes the reign of vice; the reign of vice, however, is the destruction of all the goods of humanity.⁹⁷

Two salient points emerge from this passage. First, we see once again that, for Scheeben, the claim to return materially to the level of nature formally is a rejection of God's offer of grace. This offer demands a decision from the human person that involves an either-or: either one accepts grace and becomes a child of God or one rejects God's offer and becomes a slave to sin. There is no middle ground of living at the level of nature. Second, Scheeben insists that the choice to accept or to reject God's plan in the supernatural world-order and bear the consequences that follow applies not only to individuals but also to families, communities, and states. He therefore concludes that the root cause of European societies' troubles and decline was their falling away from the Church.

Scheeben warned that the secularization project of the liberal *Kulturkämpfer* would not bring about a flourishing society of philanthropic humanists but instead would cast Germany back into the darkness of barbaric paganism. Long before Joseph Ratzinger made the term "new pagans" common parlance in certain Catholic circles with his 1958 essay "Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche" ("The New Pagans and the Church"),⁹⁸ Scheeben warned of the "new pagans" (*Neuheiden*) that were on the rise in Germany.⁹⁹ He frequently

97. Scheeben, 6–7.

98. Joseph Ratzinger, "Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche," in *Kirche–Zeichen unter den Völkern: Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften 8/2 (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 2010), 1143–58.

99. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Das Martyrium," 353.

called liberalism a form of paganism (*Paganismus*).¹⁰⁰ Without God, Scheeben predicated, the European peoples would return to barbarism—and this barbaric new paganism would be worse than that of pre-Christian pagans, whose culpability had been limited because no one had preached to them the true God.¹⁰¹ Scheeben announced in no uncertain terms where the dechristianization of Germany would lead:

Whatever man does at present to strip the state of its Christian character and to make the chasm between state and Church ever more gaping after he has broken up the bridge binding them together—whatever man does to set up in the place of the principle of Christian authority, the terrorism of the bayonet; in the place of Christian love of brother, a rhetorical love of “humanity” and “man”; in the place of the Christian moral law, a vague notion of virtue and justice: one day the fruit of what they have sown will ripen for them—and what will the harvest be? “He who sows wind will reap the whirlwind” [Hos 8:7]. They however, will reap blood—blood flowing in streams.¹⁰²

Scheeben thus prepared his flock to shed their blood in witness to Christ. His long article on martyrdom begins: “The history of the Church has now entered a period once again in Europe that urges us to focus our minds and hearts on martyrdom and to familiarize ourselves with it. For the times of persecutions are starting to be renewed.”¹⁰³ Scheeben tells his fellow Catholics that they are in the midst of a fierce battle not just for their material possessions and civil rights but for their spiritual existence. The *Kulturkampf* aims “at a complete

100. Scheeben, “Der Klerus und die Politik,” 55. For Scheeben’s conception of paganism, see Scheeben, *HCD* 3:265.

101. Scheeben, “Eine Neujahrsbetrachtung,” 10–11.

102. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Ist es möglich, die Welt zu entchristlichen?” 317–18.

103. Scheeben, “Das Martyrium,” 353.

extermination of Christianity.” He points out that, in one sense, it is ironic that Catholics are being persecuted “in an age of freedom, Enlightenment, progress, humanity, and in a constitutional state that has chosen rights for all as its motto!”¹⁰⁴ Seen from a deeper, Christian vantage point, however, this persecution is unsurprising, because martyrdom belongs to the nature of the Church in her relation the world. The following lines take us to the heart of the article:

Martyrdom lies in the very nature of the Church of Christ and proceeds from its essence [*Wesen*]. Its inescapable necessity becomes apparent as soon as the Church is placed in and next to a world that stands in sharpest contrast to it and is thought of as a supernatural order of salvation among humanity set against the preternatural [*außernatürliche*] influence of the powers of darkness. It should not be surprising, therefore, if martyrdom actually happens. On the contrary, it would be strange, and a sign of the worst kind, if it nowhere and never appeared again. Thus, martyrdom was foretold by Christ the Lord himself of his Church, and its essential conditions were also established and determined by him. In its realization, therefore, martyrdom is a characteristic of the true Church and the true discipleship of Christ, one established by the Son of God himself that is unmistakable and recognized by everyone.¹⁰⁵

Here, finally, we have reached the conclusion of Scheeben’s argument explaining why Catholics were being persecuted in the *Kulturkampf*. Because those who reject the supernatural world-order are not neutral to Christ but in opposition to him, they will also attack the members of Christ’s body on earth. In words redolent of Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s “Meditation on

104. Scheeben, 354.

105. Scheeben, 354.

the Two Standards” from *The Spiritual Exercises*, Scheeben describes the world as a battle of two great opposing army camps outfitted for war, one led by Christ and the other by Satan (whose camp, Scheeben says, aims at the destruction of “the supernatural order of salvation”).¹⁰⁶ All human persons without exception, Scheeben insists, “must make a choice either for the kingdom of God or for the kingdom of Satan. They must fight in one camp or the other. No one can remain neutral.”¹⁰⁷

The *Ernstfall*

Gerald McCool once observed that the nineteenth-century church-state disputes were inseparable from the theological controversies of the era, specifically “the one basic problem concerning the relation between nature and grace.”¹⁰⁸ Our analysis of Scheeben has confirmed this judgment. However, Scheeben’s respective views on nature-grace and church-state coordinate in perhaps unexpected ways. In the twentieth century, theologians such as de Lubac blamed two-tiered, extrinsicist conceptions of the nature-grace relation with facilitating the rise of secularism, because this theology made it possible to conceive of a self-sufficient natural order independent from grace and the human person’s supernatural end.¹⁰⁹ On the one hand, the strong distinction Scheeben posits between nature and grace could be taken as a good

106. Scheeben, 355; Scheeben, “Ist es möglich,” 298. See Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), nos. 136–48. Scheeben would have been familiar with this meditation from his spiritual formation under Jesuits in Rome.

107. Scheeben, “Das Martyrium,” 355.

108. Gerald A. McCool, SJ, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 27.

109. See, e.g., Henri de Lubac, “Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred,” in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 230–33. For a recent restatement of this position, see Andrew Willard Jones, *The Two Cities: A History of Christian Politics* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2021), 263–64.

example of the nature-grace extrinsicism vilified by theologians such as de Lubac.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, whatever extrinsicism is present in Scheeben's understanding of the nature-grace relation is counterbalanced by his equally strong insistence that the current order is not natural but supernatural. His fundamental criticism of the *Kulturkampf's* liberal project of secularizing the state, marriage, and education is based on his conviction that, in the current economy in which God has called all human persons to a supernatural end, the attempt to order social and political life according to nature alone apart from consideration of the human person's supernatural call in Christ entailed a formal rejection of God that would, ultimately, bring about destruction.

A century after Scheeben, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his small book *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*, argued that the Christian life is characterized by what he calls "the *Ernstfall*"—that is, a situation of seriousness, of decision, even of emergency, which requires from the human person an election for or against Christ.¹¹¹ As the very form of Christian existence, the *Ernstfall* demands a readiness to give everything for Christ, even to the point of shedding one's blood. Balthasar uses the concept of the *Ernstfall*—which, like so much in Balthasar, has its roots in Ignatius's *Exercises*—to dispel the idea that one can take a stance of neutrality before God's self-revelation in Christ. Balthasar's notion of the *Ernstfall* expresses well the main idea underlying Scheeben's *Kulturkampf* writings. For both theologians, the dramatic necessity of making a decision for or against Christ is a consequence of the universal offer of grace. This is notable, because one might think that

110. Aidan Nichols rightly suggests that passages from Scheeben offer good examples of the "extrinsicism" and "a two-storey model" of nature and grace bemoaned by twentieth-century theologians. Aidan Nichols, OP, *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, repr. (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 288.

111. Published in English as Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994 [1966]).

a capacious sense of God's gracious, supernatural activity would dissipate the dramatic tension of the *Ernstfall*, dull the Church's evangelical edge, and collapse into the sort of milquetoast "anonymous Christianity" that Balthasar excoriates in *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*.¹¹²

Scheeben's theology and, in a particular way, his application of this theology to the *Kulturkampf*, show that the opposite is true. For Scheeben, all of creation exists in the current supernatural world-order. All men and women have been joined, in some mysterious way, to Christ through his Incarnation.¹¹³ The vocation of all human persons is to receive the supernatural gift of divine life and to glorify God. From one angle, these claims can lead to an optimistic view of the world, one which sees that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" and notices that "Christ plays in ten thousand places," to borrow from Scheeben's contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89).¹¹⁴ From another angle, however, Scheeben's sense of the current supernatural world-order heightens the drama between the Gospel and the world—that drama Hopkins captures in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" commemorating the five Franciscan nuns exiled by the May Laws who drowned at sea, victims of the *Kulturkampf*.¹¹⁵ For Scheeben, all of human life is imbued with a supernatural significance, and every moral choice is ultimately a decision for or against God. There is no backstage area where one can sit out the theo-drama, no pocket of pure nature to which one

112. In the afterword to the third edition of *Cordula*, Balthasar associates bad versions of the "anonymous Christian" theory more with Karl Rahner's disciples than with Rahner himself. He compares the German Jesuit to "the sorcerer's apprentice who was no longer able to exorcise from his disciples the spirits he had conjured up." Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 148.

113. Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 366–668; Scheeben, *HCD* 5.1:871–92. On this point, Scheeben anticipates the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* §22, December 7, 1965, vatican.va.

114. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 66, 90.

115. Hopkins, 51–63.

can flee as to a neutral ground to avoid the *Ernstfall*. Any attempt to construct a society independent of the supernatural revelation God has given in Christ and entrusted to his Church (especially a society to whom that revelation has been explicitly preached) will end in disaster—or as Scheeben put it, in rivers of blood. The doctrine that Christ is head of the whole human race means “that the whole man is entirely fitted into [*hineingestellt*] the supernatural order based on Christ, that he therefore must not stand on his own or regard himself as his own but rather must serve Christ in everything and through everything, and that finally, since he finds everything in union with Christ, therefore in separation from Him has to expect the fate of members or branches that have been chopped off.”¹¹⁶ In short, for Scheeben, the only true humanism is Christian humanism, and Christian humanism, in the final analysis, is deification.

Scheeben Revisited

By 1887, the German Reich’s war on Catholicism was, for all intents and purposes, over. The next year, Scheeben died at the age of fifty-three. But his *Kulturkampf* writings would live on. In the 1930s, as a new Reich cast its ever-blackening shadow over Europe, German Catholics turned to Scheeben for inspiration. Catholic bookstores and publishing houses in Germany received frequent requests from young Catholics for Scheeben’s books. Introducing Scheeben’s new collected works as the Nazis reached the height of their power, editor Josef Höfer asked what the German Catholic youth were seeking in Scheeben. He suggested that they hoped to find in Scheeben “the ‘essentially’ Christian” (*das “wesentlich” Christliche*), a presentation of the faith that could inspire them to set out on “the venture of Christian existence.”¹¹⁷ Among those inspired

116. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Soteriology: The Work of Christ the Redeemer and the Role of His Virgin Mother*, vol. 5.2, *HCD*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 876.

117. Josef Höfer, “Die Theologie M. J. Scheebens in neuer Ausgabe,” insert in Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 1941), 12–13.

by the new editions of Scheeben was Edith Stein, who, in a letter dated April 9, 1942, called the 1941 edition of Scheeben's *Mysterien* "beautiful."¹¹⁸ Exactly four months later, she was martyred in an Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chamber. As German Catholics contended with the Third Reich, they found special value in Scheeben's analysis of the Church's battle with the Second Reich six decades earlier; the series of articles he published in the *Periodische Blätter* demonstrating the contribution of the Catholic Church to German culture were collected and republished as a book.¹¹⁹

If O'Meara erred in his judgment that the *Kulturkampf* was remote and uninteresting to Scheeben, another claim he made about Scheeben hit closer to the mark—namely, that "in the birth of the world of Vatican II" Scheeben "was mute."¹²⁰ Or, as another scholar more sympathetic to Scheeben has put it, "After the Second Vatican Council interest in Scheeben vanished, almost without a trace."¹²¹ It is striking, therefore, that as the Church enters the post-post-conciliar era, the phenomenon that happened in Germany during the *Nazizeit* is repeating itself: Catholics, especially young Catholics, are returning to Scheeben. One reason for the renewal of interest in Scheeben is the rekindling of theological controversies that were quiet in the immediate post-conciliar period. Consider, for instance, the nature-grace controversy: it raged in the mid-twentieth century, largely disappeared for several decades after the most recent council, only to be taken up with new vigor in the past twenty years, which has prompted theologians to look to Scheeben as a way forward in the dispute.¹²²

118. Edith Stein, *Selbstbildnis in Briefen II*, vol 3., *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 2003), 542.

119. Scheeben, *Die Gründung des christlich-deutschen Königtums*.

120. O'Meara, *Church and Culture*, 67.

121. Bruce D. Marshall, "Why Scheeben?" *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 409.

122. See, e.g., Edward T. Oakes, SJ, "Scheeben the Reconciler: Resolving the Nature-Grace Debate," *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 444–53; Andrew Dean Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

The question of the Church's relation to the political order has followed a similar course. Fierce debates were fought in this arena in the mid-twentieth century. Then, for almost half a century after Vatican II, the church-state controversy was mostly quiet. Few Catholics questioned the Church's seeming endorsement of non-confessional states and her broader reconciliation with the liberal democratic political order. In the past decade, however, a new wave of Catholics has questioned this post-conciliar consensus. They are skeptical of the possibility of a rapprochement between Catholicism and liberalism and have reposed the desirability of Catholic confessional states.¹²³ In 1878, Scheeben said that the hour seemed near when the liberal forms of social and political life would "collapse into their own hollowness and emptiness."¹²⁴ Some Catholic thinkers, pointing to the increasingly apparent social and political pathologies of the West, believe that hour has now arrived.¹²⁵ This belief, undoubtedly, is a primary catalyst of the current swell of interest in the relation between the Church and the political order. Catholics are reexamining political-theological works from the past to find wisdom for the present.¹²⁶

123. This literature is vast, much of it is online, and it is not homogenous. Examples include D.C. Schindler, *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity, 2021); Thomas Crean, OP, and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2020); posts on The Josias website (<https://thejosias.com/>); essays on the Postliberal Order substack (<https://www.postliberalorder.com/>); and articles in *New Polity: A Journal of Postliberal Thought*.

124. Scheeben, "Der Liberalismus," 173.

125. See, e.g., Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

126. See, e.g., Edmund Waldstein, OCist, "Integralism and Gelasian Dyarchy," The Josias website, March 3, 2016, <https://thejosias.com/2016/03/03/integralism-and-gelasian-dyarchy/>; William McCormick, SJ, *The Christian Structure of Politics: On the "De Regno" of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022); Thomas Pink, "Suarez and Bellarmine on the Church as Lawgiver," in *Legge e natura: I dibattiti teologici e giuridici fra XV e XVII secolo*, ed. Riccardo Saccenti and Cinzia Sulas (Arricia, IT: Aracne, 2016), 287–332.

So far, this new ressourcement of Catholic political thought has not extended to Scheeben, even as many other topics in his theology are being re-sourced.¹²⁷ Catholics desirous to carry out today what the Second Vatican Council described as the “duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” would do well to study Scheeben’s *Kulturkampf* writings, for they are an exemplary performance of this duty.¹²⁸ Scheeben was not only a speculative theologian of the highest caliber but also a priest and journalist who labored under the banner of the cross for the progress of the kingdom of God amid the spiritual, cultural, and political battles of his time. The confluence of these two aspects of Scheeben’s character is on full display in his *Kulturkampf* writings, where his speculative theology of grace and practical political theology intermingle. Christians will find in these waters a living font that can reinvigorate theology, public life, and the Church today.

127. In addition to the nature-grace literature cited above, see, e.g.: in theological method, Marshall, “Why Scheeben?”; in soteriology, Khaled Anatolios, *Deification Through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 229–63, 313–31; in ecclesiology, John L. Nepil, *A Bride Adorned: Mary-Church Perichoresis in Modern Catholic Theology* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023); in sacramental theology, José Granados, *Introduction to Sacramental Theology: Signs of Christ in the Flesh*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 279–82, 377.

128. *Gaudium et Spes* §4.