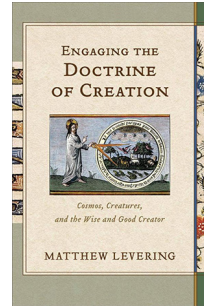


## Book Review

Matthew Levering.

*Engaging the Doctrine of Creation:  
Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*  
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

Reviewed by, Stephen Vantassel.  
King's Evangelical Divinity School



Levering holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr. Chair of Theology at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake's Mundelein Seminary. *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation* is yet another installment in Levering's efforts to defend traditional Catholic teaching within the field of systematic theology. While the book decidedly addresses the doctrine of creation as expected in a systematic text, Levering purposely avoids the difficult, perhaps impossible, task of covering all the issues entailed by the subject. For instance, he frankly admits that he ignored angelology and engaged divine providence in only an indirect manner. Likewise, he explained that he did not expend great attention to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

Instead, Levering selected key topics that he considers to be important either theologically or were especially timely. In this way his theological efforts are to be seen as trying to address contemporary problems or controversies rather than all the issues that were historically related to the subject. Thus, his text only addresses seven key topics, namely divine ideas, divine simplicity, creatures, image of God, human population growth, original sin, and atonement. Each topic is given its own chapter.

Chapters one and two discuss divine ideas and divine simplicity. Levering seeks to defend traditional views of God's freedom

(i.e. that He could create or not create without compunction) and God's immutability (i.e. that God's act of creation did not incur a change in Him). With contemporary theology still feeling the influences of process theology, Levering's thoughts here can be as disruptive, as they throw one back to an earlier view of God, as they are difficult to comprehend. Levering admits, at least in regards to divine simplicity, that his explanation fails to completely satisfy because our creaturely limitations prevent us from fully grasping the concept.

In chapters three through six, Levering looks to find ways to reduce the conflicts between Christian teaching and contemporary scientific claims about life and human origins. He directly considers questions by atheists such as, Why did God make so many creatures just to have them go extinct?; Why does so much of our genetic material seem to be useless code? etc. Likewise, he considers questions of how to harmonize biblical teaching (and Magisterial dogma) with scientific assertions. For instance, science asserts that humans did not evolve from a pair of humans. If this is true, how would this correlate with the Biblical claim of Adam and Eve? In addition, if there is no original human pair, how does this impact the notion of original sin? His approach is decidedly irenic without passively yielding all truth to contemporary science. Readers who reject a symbolic interpretation of the Genesis account will think

that Levering holds “scientific claims” in too high a regard. Nevertheless, his discussion is thought provoking.

Levering’s chapter on human population growth was of particular interest to me because of the impacts humans have on the environment. Levering defended Catholic teaching on procreation, albeit weakly. I was disappointed that Levering accepted the doomsday claims of the environmental activists without much criticism. I think he could have made a good case to show that decline in human morality (e.g. divorce and other divinely condemned moral evils) pose significant environmental threats yet are typically ignored by the environmental movement. For instance, divorce requires humans to double the amount of land being consumed because instead of a husband and wife sharing a home, they now have two homes with all the accompanying material consumption needed to run those homes. Likewise, scripture is replete with statements about how environmental devastation comes as punishment for failing to follow God’s commands. Is it any stretch to think that the environmental devastation of certain parts of the world is related more strongly with political and moral corruption than with population growth? Levering could have improved this chapter considerably by reading Calvin Beisner and others critical of the doomsday narrative of the “environmental movement.”

In his final chapter, Atonement, Levering discusses Nicholas Wolterstorff’s argument against the principle of reciprocity as a basis for the atonement. Levering convincingly shows that Wolterstorff neglected to consider the evidence Scripture provides supporting the principle of reciprocity as a proper aspect of justice. Levering concludes that the appropriate to show how much God cared for us. I am not

convinced that God could have overlooked the penalty of sin, but readers can evaluate Levering’s thoughts for themselves.

As an Evangelical Christian, I found this text beneficial and challenging. It was refreshing to read Levering’s cogent, nuanced, and respectful defense of historic Catholic teaching. Too many times, I have seen purportedly Catholic theologians do their best to attack and undermine Catholic teaching. It is almost as if these theologians were closet Protestants. Levering reminds us that faith seeking understanding is a better way to engage difficult topics. To be sure, I would have appreciated a more thorough and broader treatment of the doctrine of creation. But despite his decision to select only seven key elements, I think he chose well. In this regard, readers will find his work both enlightening, in that they will be exposed to overlooked areas of theology, and empowered to defend doctrines historically proclaimed by the faithful. Professors in upper level graduate theology courses should consider this book as a supplemental text.