

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 31, 2011 at 11:39am

Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion

by NCR Staff

The decision by the U.S. bishops to condemn a popular theology book by St Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson as not in accord with authentic Catholic teaching came without conversation and painted an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops, Johnson said in a statement this morning.

The bishops' doctrine committee, chaired by Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, released a statement yesterday saying Johnson's book, *The Quest for the Living God*, completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel.

According to the bishops' statement, the committee felt compelled to publicly denounce the 2007 book because it is directed to a broad audience, and because it's being used in many venues as a textbook for the study of God.

The bishops did not call for any disciplinary measures against Johnson, such as a ban on teaching or publishing. Johnson, 69, is a distinguished professor of systematic theology at the Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York.

In a written statement to the press this morning, Johnson said she appreciated that the bishops had given attention to the subject of her book, but that she had "never been invited" to discuss any issues they found with it.

"I would have been glad to enter into conversation to clarify critical points, but was never invited to do so," said Johnson. "This book was discussed and finally assessed by the Committee before I knew any discussion had taken place."

Johnson also said that as a result of the lack of dialog, the bishops' statement "radically misinterprets what I think, and what I in fact wrote."

"The conclusions thus drawn paint an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops," said Johnson. "A conversation, which I still hope to have, would have very likely avoided these misrepresentations."

In a statement released on the bishops' conference Web site yesterday, Wuerl said "it would have been helpful" if Johnson had originally sought an *imprimatur*, or an official declaration from a bishop that the book could be published.

"By seeking an *imprimatur*, the author has the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the bishop concerning the Catholic teaching expressed in the book," said Wuerl. "Thus, clarifications concerning the text can be made prior to its publication."

Wuerl also said the doctrine committee "would welcome an opportunity to discuss Sister Elizabeth's writings with her."

In a statement released to the press this afternoon, Jesuit Fr. Joseph M. McShane, the president of Fordham University, called Johnson a "revered member of the Fordham community" who tries to "wrestle with the mystery of God and God's action in the world."

Johnson "approaches her work as a theologian very seriously and looks upon the action that the bishops' conference [took] as an invitation to dialogue --dialogue on both the mission and craft of the theologian, and on the complexity that a serious theologian faces as she or he tries to explain God to the modern world," wrote McShane.

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Below is Johnson's full statement to the press. Keeping follow *NCR* for updates on this story.

Response by Dr. Elizabeth Johnson C.S.J., March 30, 2011:

It is heartening to see the Bishops Conference give such serious attention to the subject of the living God. I appreciate how this statement acknowledges the laudable nature of the task of crafting a theology of God, and the number of issues on which the statement judges that I am "entirely correct." The book itself endeavors to present new insights about God arising from people living out their Catholic faith in different cultures around the world. My hope is that any conversation that may be triggered by this statement will but enrich that faith, encouraging robust relationship to the Holy Mystery of the living God

as the church moves into the future.

I would like to express two serious concerns. First, I would have been glad to enter into conversation to clarify critical points, but was never invited to do so. This book was discussed and finally assessed by the Committee before I knew any discussion had taken place. Second, one result of this absence of dialogue is that in several key instances this statement radically misinterprets what I think, and what I in fact wrote. The conclusions thus drawn paint an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops. A conversation, which I still hope to have, would have very likely avoided these misrepresentations.

That being said, as a scholar I have always taken criticism as a valuable opportunity to delve more deeply into a subject. The task of theology, classically defined as "faith seeking understanding," calls for theologians to wrestle with mystery. The issues are always complex, especially on frontiers where the church's living tradition is growing. Committed to the faith of the church, I take this statement as an occasion to ponder yet further the mystery of the living God who is ineffable.

At this time I will make no further statements nor give any interviews.

More coverage from NCR:

- **U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian**, March 30, 2011
- Shortly after Johnson's book *The Quest for the Living God* was published, she discussed it with *NCR* editor Tom Fox. Their discussion was posted to the *NCR* web site as a two part podcast:
Elizabeth Johnson and the Quest for the Living God
- Fox's review of that book is here: **A hunger for mature theology**
- In August 2008, Johnson addressed a joint assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the main umbrella groups for women's and men's orders in the United States, meeting in Denver. *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. covered the event and filed this story:
Theologian Elizabeth Johnson: 'Drench anger with forgiveness'
- The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at:
www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm

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