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Bishops ignored own guidelines in Johnson critique

by Joshua J. McElwee by Thomas C. Fox

The U.S. bishops chose not to follow their own guidelines in handling disputes between bishops and theologians before issuing a critique last week of a 2007 book by a prominent U.S. theologian.

In a statement dated March 24 and released March 30, the bishops' doctrine committee said that the book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by Fordham University theology professor St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, is marred by "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors" and "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel."

The public finding, the committee determined, was necessary because the popular book is directed to a broad audience and is being used as a textbook for the study of God.

According to guidelines approved by the U.S. bishops in 1989, doctrinal disputes with theologians are to be kept as local as possible and are to follow carefully delineated steps involving dialogue with the theologian to clarify data, meaning and the relationship with Catholic tradition while identifying the implications for the life of the church.

The committee, however, chose not to notify Johnson -- viewed as one of the nation's leading systematic theologians -- that it had undertaken a study of her book. It did not engage her in conversation before issuing its findings.

Despite the harsh conclusions by the committee, the bishops did not call for any disciplinary measures against Johnson, such as a ban on teaching or publishing.

It was in the late 1970s and early '80s, with several major theologians being investigated by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that the question of handling disputes between bishops and theologians began to receive focused attention in the United States.

The Catholic Theological Society of America and the Canon Law Society of America established in 1980 a joint committee, headed by Jesuit Fr. Leo O'Donovan, with three members from each society as part of the committee. They worked for three years before producing a report they submitted to the bishops. The U.S. bishops' conference then worked on the document, which was eventually sent to Rome for approval. The conference finally embraced it in June 1989, by an overwhelming 214-9 vote.

Titled "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians," it included an approving appendix letter written by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

The purpose of the nine-year exercise was to establish precise guidelines that urged formal and informal cooperation between bishops and theologians -- including private dialogue -- to resolve conflicts and avert the use of formal procedures.

The U.S. bishops' doctrine committee is currently chaired by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington and includes nine bishops.

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Speaking in a phone interview April 5, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, confirmed the committee did not follow the guidelines set out in the 1989 document. He cited several reasons, including the urgency of the matter, the widespread use of the book, and the ineffectiveness of other earlier efforts to resolve conflicts.

He also said the book had already been published. The doctrine committee, Weinandy said, found "no ambiguities" concerning certain errors in sections of the book.

On the issue of following the procedures set forth in "Doctrinal Responsibilities," Weinandy said, "The bishops felt that, all things being equal, those guidelines should be or can be employed. But when it seems imperative that something needs to be said and said soon, that cannot always be done. The book was out there for three years before it was brought to our attention, so I think the bishops were wanting to clarify the situation as quickly as they could."

When asked how long the bishops' committee had been looking at Johnson's book, the priest said "probably a year or so, from beginning to end." He also said the bishops' statement went through several drafts.

Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Mary Ann Hinsdale, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, said she was "utterly astounded" to learn the bishops did not follow the procedures in the "Doctrinal Responsibilities" document. Hinsdale, a professor of theology at Boston College, said the doctrinal committee's statement "seriously misrepresents what I understand her [Johnson] to be doing in *Quest for the Living God*."

"Much of the book is a re-presentation of what other theologians are saying about 'the living God' today.

In seeking to "map" the terrain of recent theological scholarship, she is doing exactly what "Doctrinal Responsibilities" advocates when it says, "As members of diverse communities, theologians have the responsibility to seek suitable ways of communicating doctrine to people today. They should adapt the communication of their research to the audience of their lectures or publications, and take into account the effect their presentation may have."

O'Donovan, former president of Georgetown University in Washington, said, "It's regrettable, and much more than regrettable, that our bishops have not seen fit to use procedures they themselves adopted in the document 'Doctrinal Responsibilities.' That text, after all, was framed not only to resolve doctrinal difficulties but to promote cooperation between bishops and theologians. In my opinion, it would be hard to find a theologian today who is more committed than Beth Johnson to true expression of Catholic teaching and also to a spirit of cooperation in the church."

Weinandy, who has been the executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine since 2005, lamented that in past instances dialogue with theologians "came to nothing."

While the committee "wants to be fair," he said, its ultimate responsibility is "to ensure that the faithful receive the faith as it is proclaimed and believed by the church. That was very much on their [the committee's] mind in this particular book."

Weinandy also urged theologians to seek dialogue before publication of their works either in the form of an *imprimatur*, an official declaration from a bishop that the book is in accord with Catholic teaching, or by meeting personally with a bishop.

"If dialogue is to take place, then dialogue should start prior to publication of the book and not afterwards," said Weinandy. "Otherwise the bishops are always caught trying to play catch-up. And so they're always at a disadvantage."

Wuerl made a similar point in a letter he wrote that accompanied the committee's 21-page rebuke of Johnson's book. "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."

Imprimaturs have largely gone out of style in the past half century with the exception of catechetical textbooks.

Quest for the Living God, released in October 2007, has sold more than 20,000 copies, a high number for a book dealing with Catholic theology. Since the bishops' criticized the book publically, it had sold an additional 819 copies as of April 5, according to Continuum, the book's publisher, which also said a typical initial print run of one of its academic texts is under 1,000 copies.

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More coverage from *NCR*:

- **Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion**, March 31, 2011
- **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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