

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

April 11, 2011 at 9:56am

Quests for the living God

by Thomas C. Fox

COLUMN

Shock reverberated through the ranks of Catholic theologians and beyond at the end of March after the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine found that a 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, by esteemed theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, fails to embrace authentic Catholic teaching.

That shock turned to dismay after Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph, disclosed that the committee had come to its searing conclusion without so much as ever having contacted her for input during its yearlong study of her book.

Johnson said, "It is heartening to see the bishops' conference give such serious attention to the subject of the living God." In a brief statement she lamented she had "never been invited" to discuss any issues with the committee. "I would have been glad to enter into conversation to clarify critical points, but was never invited to do so," she said. One result of this absence of dialogue is that in several key instances the bishops' assessment "radically misinterprets what I think, and what I in fact wrote," she said. "The conclusions thus drawn paint an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops." Yipes.

Johnson is no flame-throwing radical. Her work is viewed by peers as thoughtful, temperate and faithful to mainstream post-Vatican II theology. A former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, she is the recipient of 13 honorary doctorates. She is such a pillar within Catholic academia that the bishops' negative assessment appears to say more about the committee than about the scholar.

There is a kind of breathless quality to the 21-page committee report. It finds error in virtually every

chapter of the book. Sadly, the report reveals hostility to the work and author. This is a document, it seems, that the reputable bishops who make up the doctrine committee might someday wish they had handled differently.

Meanwhile, the attack on *Quest for the Living God* represents more than one negative assessment of a theological book, but rather a new siege against mainstream post-Vatican II theology. The bishops at the council encouraged theologians to explore the modern world for the life of the Spirit, for the living God, within it. In the council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) the bishops saw a world filled with the Spirit, guiding the lives of the faithful. The bishops asked theologians to discern and interpret society to bring the Gospels to greater life. Much Catholic theology during the past five decades has followed this more inductive approach. It is not always simple and not always clear, but it is often relevant and inspiring.

Human experience, full of suffering, celebration and deep mystery, is Johnson's starting point in *Quest for the Living God*. The bishops maintain she fails to begin with postulated truths stemming from scripture and tradition. Johnson finds God to be ineffable, incomprehensible mystery. Without having spoken to her, the bishops charged that she asserts an "unknowability" of God that undermines the Gospel. She replies that this misrepresents her thinking and what she actually wrote in her book.

Johnson cites Aquinas, who wrote, "God surpasses whatever we can understand and account for in terms of our human categories of thought." He explained that this is why we must give God many names. The ones Johnson chooses are not simply made up for expedience's sake, but come out of scriptures. When she writes of the "incomprehensibility" of God, she is not saying we can "know nothing about God," but rather no single name offers a completely adequate understanding. God is "always more." This is not to say God is "unknowable."

The book, meanwhile, does not touch on the normal tripwire issues that set so many prelates twirling. No abortion, no contraception, no women's ordination. That said, a committee made up of only men (nine bishops) faces a distinct credibility gap taking on a woman theologian. Little that they can say on gender issues is untainted by long-festering wounds felt most deeply by women. Many Catholics are likely to find just a bit of defensiveness in criticisms such as these in the committee's assessment:

The "traditional Catholic understanding of God bears no resemblance to Sr. Johnson's monarchical deity. In her view, the traditional Christian language for God arises from a patriarchal social structure in which men possess the preponderance of power. ...

"The names of God found in the scriptures are not mere human creations that can be replaced by others that we may find more suitable according to human judgment."

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Cardinal Donald Wuerl, doctrinal committee head, said he would welcome an opportunity to discuss Johnson's writings with her. Let's pray this happens. I'd bet more than a few Catholics would line up to purchase tickets for that event. *NCR* would eagerly provide full transcripts on our Web site. Oh, what a church we are. All of us, on quests for the living God.

[This article also appears as an Editor's Note in the April 15 print issue of *NCR*.]

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- **Theologians criticize bishops' handling of book critique**, April 8, 2011
- **Bishops ignored own guidelines in Johnson critique**, April 7, 2011
- **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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