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Johnson: Bishops' latest 'paints incorrect picture' of book

by NCR Staff

Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, whose book *Quest for the Living God* was called "inadequate as a presentation of the Catholic understanding of God" by the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee this morning, says she laments the fact that her attempts to meet with members of the committee were rebuffed.

By not meeting with her before issuing their response, Johnson said, the bishops failed to follow their own procedures for handling disputes between bishops and theologians, as laid out in a 1989 document titled "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians."

Johnson writes: "Despite the protocol 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' (1989) approved by an overwhelming majority of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops after consultation with the Holy See, this committee for a second time has shown a lack of willingness to dialogue about such an important matter as the living God in whom we believe."

"It could have been so interesting and beneficial for the church."

For the full text of the bishops' statement this morning, see: **Bishops reaffirm: ?Quest for Living God? not adequate theology.**

Moreover, Johnson writes in her statement, the bishops' latest statement "misrepresents" her book as a catechetical work and "projects meanings, discovers insinuations and otherwise distorts the text so that in some instances I do not recognize the book I wrote."

The statement, she writes, "paints an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book

develops."

In bolded text, Johnson declares: "I am responsible for what I have said and written, and stand open to correction if this contradicts the faith. But I am not willing to take responsibility for what *Quest* does not say and I do not think."

Johnson's statement, which is not yet available online, was posted on the Catholic News Service blog this morning. In it, the St. Joseph sister says she read the bishops new statement "with sadness."

Her disappointment, she says, "focuses on three issues: process, content and result."

Johnson concludes her statement by saying her book "affirms that the living God is the holy mystery of Love who cannot be comprehensively expressed or contained in any words, no matter how beautiful, sacred, official or true."

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"There is always more to discover, in prayer and in service with and for the suffering world," she writes. "It would have been a blessing if the Committee on Doctrine and I could have found common ground for dialogue on at least this point."

Johnson concludes: "I lament that this is not the case."

Following is Johnson's full statement, as posted on the CNS blog. Emphasis is found on the original.

It is with sadness that I read the October statement of the Committee on Doctrine about my book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers of the Theology of God* (Continuum, 2007). My disappointment focuses on three issues: process, content and result.

First, process. In April the committee invited me to submit observations on their original statement (dated March 24, 2011), which had been composed without any discussion or foreknowledge on my part. My response was entitled "Observations" (printed in *Origins* 7/7/11). In it I posed important questions about the nature of faith, revelation, biblical language and theology itself, figuring that discussion on these fundamental matters might clarify the content of the book and where it had been misrepresented. Both publicly and privately I made clear my willingness to meet with Cardinal Wuerl and the committee to discuss these matters at any time.

The committee did not engage these questions. No invitation was forthcoming to meet and discuss with the committee in person. Moreover, in its new document the committee addresses none of these issues ? not a single one. The opportunity to dialogue was bypassed. Despite the protocol "Doctrinal Responsibilities" (1989) approved by an overwhelming majority of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops after consultation with the

Holy See, this committee for a second time has shown a lack of willingness to dialogue about such an important matter as the living God in whom we believe. It could have been so interesting and beneficial for the church.

Second, content. As a result of the lack of process, the October statement mainly reiterates the points made in the committee's original statement. I appreciate that the new statement distinguishes between its criticism of the book and the intent of the author. It does correct some errors made in the committee's original reading of my book, and the vituperative rhetoric has been toned down. Yet there is little movement in understanding.

For example, pointing to Jesus' parable of the woman searching for her lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), my "Observations" ask: Is the church not allowed to use the language of Jesus, who casts God the Redeemer in this female image? While admitting the "possibility", the October statement draws from this question the "insinuation" that calling God "Father" obscures the truth about God, something the book never says. It further criticizes *Quest* for not making the trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit more central, noting how necessary this is in the formula of baptism. What is so baffling here is that *Quest* agrees with the validity of trinitarian language. It spends a whole chapter describing how this language came about, exploring its meaning, and affirming its use in liturgical ritual. True, *Quest* also points out that Scripture offers a multitude of other ways to speak of God, such as the above parable. For some reason, this is not acceptable.

Remaining with what is apparently a propositional notion of revelation and faith, the statement reaffirms its earlier judgment. But as Scripture itself demonstrates and my simple "Observations" try to make clear, there is so much more richness to the picture. The content of the statement disappoints insofar as it ignores the breadth and depth of God's self-gift in history (revelation) and the people's living response (faith).

Third, result. This statement, like the first, continues to misrepresent the genre of the book, and in key instances misinterprets what it says. It faults *Quest* for what it does not say, as if the book were a catechetical text aiming to present the full range of Christian doctrine. It takes sentences and, despite my written clarifications to the contrary, makes them conclude to positions that I have not taken and would never take. The committee's reading projects meanings, discovers insinuations and otherwise distorts the text so that in some instances I do not recognize the book I wrote. This October statement paints an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops.

I am responsible for what I have said and written, and stand open to correction if this contradicts the faith. But I am not willing to take responsibility for what *Quest* does not say and I do not think.

To restate what I have maintained all along: The aim of this book is to explore many ways to think about the living God. Like the householder who brings out of the storeroom things new and old (Matt 13:52), theologians over the centuries have labored to seek understanding of faith that keeps pace with history. In that tradition, *Quest* for the Living God presents contemporary theologies from around the world which, listening to the belief and practice of people of the church, try to connect the truth of the living God with the thought forms and critical issues of our day. The book's chapters clarify the new avenues of insight, rooted in Scripture: God as gracious mystery who is ever greater, ever nearer; the crucified God of compassion; the liberating God of life; God who acts womanish; who breaks chains of slavery; who accompanies the people in fiesta; the generous God of the religions; the Creator Spirit indwelling the evolving world; and Trinity, the living God of love.

I respectfully suggest that mapping these frontiers is a legitimate theological undertaking. Far from being contrary to the faith of the church, it is an exercise of that faith. **I want to make it absolutely clear that nothing in this book dissents from the church's faith about God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.**

The many new avenues of reflection signal, I think, the presence of the Spirit, alive and active, nourishing people in their hunger for God in our day. Of the thousands of messages I have received, one of the most poignant is from an elderly Catholic man who read it as part of a parish book club. The result? "Now I am no longer afraid to meet my Maker," he said ? a stunning testimony to the nonviolent appeal of the truth of the theologies presented in *Quest*.

To conclude: This book affirms that the living God is the holy mystery of Love who cannot be comprehensively expressed or contained in any words, no matter how beautiful, sacred, official or true. There is always more to discover, in prayer and in service with and for the suffering world. It would have been a blessing if the Committee on Doctrine and I could have found common ground for dialogue on at least this point.

I lament that this is not the case.

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

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- **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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