

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

February 13, 2014 at 3:15pm

With book on God and Darwin, Elizabeth Johnson gets her voice back

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Throughout her acclaimed career as a theologian, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson has devoted much of her scholarship to contemplating God's relationship with human beings.

Widely considered one of the architects of feminist theology, Johnson's groundbreaking text *She Who Is* offered a vision of Christian theology and women's experience.

Her 2007 book *Quest for the Living God* explored the fruits of theologies developed through political, liberation, Hispanic, black, feminist and interreligious perspectives and contemplated the Christian understanding of God as Trinity.

But in her forthcoming title, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, Johnson turns her gaze upon God's relationship with the nonhumans of the world.

"What became clear to me in the writing process is that 'the beasts' have their own relationship to God, apart from us, as creatures of God whom God also loves," says Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph and distinguished professor at Fordham University. "It's not all about us."

As the book's title suggests, the seeds for this new project were planted back in 2009 during the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The dean of Fordham College invited interested faculty members to study the text as a group.

"We read two chapters a month," Johnson recalled in a speech at Fordham earlier this month. "All along, I kept a running list of theological questions that were occurring to me." By the time the seminar ended, "I

was primed to say there was something we theologians had missed, and we need to start thinking about it."

Though for years Johnson had been writing shorter essays and speeches encouraging theologians to take account of the natural world, reading Darwin made her realize she needed to develop this idea more fully.

She took inspiration for her book proposal -- and its title -- from a striking section of Chapter 12 of the Book of Job:

But now ask the beasts to teach you,
and the birds of the air to tell you;
Or the reptiles on earth to instruct you,
And the fish of the sea to inform you.
Which of all these does not know
That the hand of God has done this?

"In theology, we have been so anthropocentric, so focused on ourselves," Johnson says, "and in the history of the church, a lot of our focus has been on redemption and salvation. We haven't thought to ask the beasts to teach us. So I decided to do this."

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In 2010, she applied for a research leave for the 2011-2012 academic year to write the new book. She couldn't have realized then how graced her timing would be.

A 'straw book' set up to be destroyed

In March 2011, Johnson made headlines when the doctrinal committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops severely criticized *Quest for the Living God* for not being in accordance with official Catholic teaching. The book, they declared in a statement, "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in that Gospel."

In an interview with *NCR* this week, Johnson said she was genuinely at a loss to figure out what she had said that was so wrong. She was further upset because, up until that point, she was unaware the book was being discussed and assessed by the committee.

When requested by the committee to do so, she submitted a 38-page response to their concerns in June 2011, indicating her willingness to meet with the nine men who had signed the criticism.

That October, the committee reaffirmed its condemnation of the book without ever discussing the matter with her. Informing her of the coming critique, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, then chair of the committee, offered to meet one-on-one with Johnson.

But Johnson saw no point, since the deed was done. "True dialogue," she says, "could happen only if I met with the whole committee in advance of their decision to discuss the theological issues they were raising." They had made it obvious they were not interested in doing that.

Johnson says the committee's second statement demonstrated that they hadn't taken her lengthy defense into serious consideration. "They recycled the same criticisms as if I hadn't said a word in response.

"As I studied their statements, I realized that they took my words and twisted them," she continued. In

some cases, "they claimed that I said the opposite of what I had actually written."

To get through the crisis, Johnson enlisted the help of two canon lawyers as well as a small group of theologians who counseled her.

After the committee reaffirmed its condemnation, the canon lawyers advised her to let go of the situation. "They told me, 'this is political, not theological,' " Johnson recalls. "The committee set up my work as a straw book to destroy."

When her circle of theologians agreed that the committee's statement was without substance, Johnson decided to respond with a lament.

"I am responsible for what I have said and what I have written," she wrote at the time, "but I am not willing to take responsibility for what *Quest* does not say and I do not think."

A dialogue with the whole nine-member committee "could have been so interesting and beneficial to the church," Johnson also wrote. To this day, her willingness to meet with the whole Committee on Doctrine remains, but she considers it most unlikely ever to happen.

Johnson is still moved by the abundance of emails and letters of support she received from around the world. Though she regrets that there was no way to bring closure to the incident, it did create a substantial boon in sales of *Quest*. It also helped propel her more deeply in a whole new research agenda.

"I felt vastly depleted and very discouraged after that experience," Johnson remembers. "It was a matter of prudential judgment as to where my life energy should be spent."

"The vocation of the theologian is a special role in the church, and I decided to go forward with that vocation," she continued. "I issued my lament, said 'amen,' and turned my attention to God and the earth."

As the crisis wound down in fall 2011, Johnson had just started her one-year research leave to write *Ask the Beasts*. Writing a new book about God from another angle, she recalls, was both a creative and healing process.

"Slowly, my life came back, my voice came back."

A community of creation

Johnson says she approached her new project by reading the Nicene Creed and *On the Origin of Species* as "partners." *Ask the Beasts* "tells the story of nature through Darwin's eyes, and sees it all through the creed."

The first four chapters offer a close reading of Darwin, and Johnson hopes this section will inspire people to read *On the Origin of Species* so they, too, can experience the feeling of what he was discovering. "He almost couldn't believe it himself," she says.

"Darwin saw a profound interrelatedness among organisms in every locale, along with the unity of all life throughout time and space," Johnson observes. "It is a revelation."

The creed, she explains, is really a narrative of God's evolutionary relationship to the world. "God makes the universe, comes into the world, goes down into death, rises again. And, with the spirit, God continues to give life to creation and ready it for the life of world to come."

Reading it in dialogue with Darwin deepened her appreciation of the idea that God created an evolutionary world. "God the creator made the world with the power to create itself," she says.

She found further support for her ideas throughout the Bible. "There are gorgeous nature themes throughout the Scriptures," she says. Unfortunately, a narrow interpretation of Genesis 1:28, where God declares that human beings should have dominion over all of the creatures of the earth, has distorted our understanding of God's relationship to creation.

"During the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, we took the notion of dominion and turned it into domination," Johnson notes. Most of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, particularly the Book of Job, suggest a paradigm of "a community of creation, not of human dominion."

Our diminished understanding of God's presence in creation can actually be traced back to the Middle Ages, Johnson says, when theologians made a strict distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Though their aim was to protect the Christian understanding of God's free gift of grace, as an indirect consequence, we began to see the work of God only in the supernatural while the natural world became simply a backdrop.

"We forgot that creation was also the work of God and that God is present in it," Johnson says. "We began to believe that what is natural is not 'of God' in the same way the supernatural is."

'Breaking twigs off of the tree of life'

Unfortunately, God's great work in creation now finds itself radically challenged by human greed, overpopulation, pollution and excessive consumption.

Johnson now finds herself issuing laments not about the hierarchy, but for the earth and its creatures.

"If you pay attention to the reality of other species, the picture is pretty grim," Johnson says. One conservative estimate suggests that, since 1980, 10 percent of all species have gone extinct, and currently, 350 species are going extinct every day.

"We are breaking twigs off of the tree of life," she says. "We are cutting off the promise that they hold within themselves that other creatures within the evolutionary process will develop."

"That history will not repeat itself," Johnson continues. "As Jonathan Schell said decades ago, 'When we murder someone, we kill their life. When we make a species go extinct, we kill their birth.'"

Asked whether she expects any backlash from the hierarchy for this latest book, Johnson pointed out that, in his inaugural Mass last March, Pope Francis made nearly 10 references to protecting the earth, interconnecting it with caring for the poor.

It's an idea *Ask the Beasts* picks up on, too. "Ecological devastation affects poor people more than the wealthy, at least at this point," she says.

Johnson also notes that church exhortations on environmental justice aren't new to Francis. "For years there have been beautiful, magnificent teachings from popes and bishops, but it hasn't caught fire in people's hearts in the Catholic church the way social justice or the option for the poor has."

If the vision were to catch, it could be used in liturgy, art, homilies and catechesis. "We have to show that this isn't just something we're adding on to our faith, but who we are going to be as a church," Johnson

insists. "We have to be converted to the earth.

"Caring for the earth protects all of life. Now we have to make it an intrinsic part of our love of God."

Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love will be available March 15 in the U.S. Look for a full review in NCR's Summer Books special section in our April 25th print edition.

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

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