NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 30, 2011

A widely popular 2007 book by Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, one of America?s most prominent feminist Catholic theologians, is marred by a series of ?misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors? and thus ?does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points,? according to a statement released today by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. bishops? conference.

In particular, Johnson?s treatment of the Trinity in *Quest for the Living God*, according to the bishops, ?completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel.?

Despite that conclusion, 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.

According to the statement, the committee felt compelled to publicly denounce Johnson?s 2007 book *Quest for the Living God* 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.?

When it appeared, *Quest for the Living God* drew praise in many quarters for sketching new understandings of God based on various contemporary intellectual currents, including political, liberation, feminist, black, Hispanic, interreligious, and ecological theologies.

The statement, however, asserts that the book reaches many conclusions which are ?theologically unacceptable.?

The Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is chaired by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C. Though dated March 24, its statement on Johnson?s book was released today.

Johnson is a high-profile theologian who holds numerous awards and honorary doctorates from a host of Catholic institutions, and who has served as president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society. In 2008, *Quest for the Living God* won the first place award from the Catholic Press Association in the ?academic theology? category.

The 21-page statement from the doctrine committee outlines seven categories of problems in the book.

First, at the level of method, the statement accuses Johnson of questioning core elements of traditional Christian theology, including its understanding of God as ?incorporeal, impassible, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.? Doing so, the statement asserts, is ?seriously to misrepresent the tradition and so to distort it beyond recognition.?

Second, the statement faults Johnson for treating language about God in the Bible and in church tradition as largely metaphorical, implying that truth about God is essentially ?unknowable.? Even if mysteries such as the Trinity and the Incarnation can never be fully grasped, the statement says, they can nevertheless be ?known.?

While Johnson bases part of her argument on early church fathers, according to the statement, her position actually has more in common with Immanuel Kant and ?Enlightenment skepticism.?

Third, the statement asserts that in talking about the ?suffering? of God, Johnson actually undermines God?s transcendence, suggesting that God differs only in degree, not in kind, from other beings.

Fourth, according to the statement, Johnson advocates new language about God not based on its truth but its socio-political utility. In particular, she argues that all-male language about God perpetuates ?an unequal relationship between women and men,? and thus has become ?religiously inadequate.? In fact, according to the statement, male imagery about God found in scripture and tradition ?are not mere human creations that can be replaced by others that we may find more suitable.?

Fifth, the statement asserts that Johnson?s emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions ?denies the uniqueness of Jesus as the Incarnate Word.? In effect, according to the statement, Johnson?s argument suggests that for the fullness of truth about God, ?one needs Jesus + Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.?, a position it says is ?contrary to church teaching.?

Sixth, the statement says, Johnson?s treatment of God as Creator ends in pantheism, undercutting the traditional understanding of God as ?radically different from creation.?

Seventh, the statement faults Johnson?s understanding of the Trinity. Johnson treats traditional language about God as three persons as symbolic, according to the statement, thereby undercutting the church?s belief that ?Jesus is ontologically the eternal Son of the Father.?

In its conclusion, the statement says the root problem with Johnson?s book is that it ?does not take the faith of the church as its starting point.?

?It effectively precludes the possibility of human knowledge of God through divine revelation,? the statement says, ?and reduces all names and concepts of God to human constructions that are to be judged not on their accuracy ? but on their social and political utility.?

With today?s statement, *Quest for the Living God* joins a handful of other recent books by prominent American theologians which have been singled out for formal criticism by the Committee on Doctrine. Those works include *The Sexual Person* by Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler(Georgetown University Press, 2008); *Being Religious Interreligiously* by Peter Phan (Orbis, 2004); and two 2006 pamphlets on contraception, abortion and same-sex marriage by Daniel Maguire.

In each case, the doctrine committee criticized both the reasoning and the conclusions, but did not seek to impose any disciplinary measures upon the authors. In general, sources say, the idea behind that approach is to focus on ideas rather than persons.

It?s also striking that these statements have come from the doctrine committee of the U.S. bishops rather than the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That?s in keeping with recent congregation policy that disputes ought to be addressed on the local level whenever possible, especially when the theological issues involved have already been addressed by the Vatican in other venues.

The doctrine committee's full statement is here [1].

Here are remarks by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington [2].

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More coverage from NCR

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 [3].

Fox's review of that book is here: A hunger for mature theology [4]

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' [5]

The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at: www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm [6].

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/doctrine/statement-quest-for-the-living-god-2011-03-24.pdf
[2] http://www.usccb.org/doctrine/statement-quest-for-the-living-god-remarks-2011-03-30.pdf
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