

College Theology Society backs Fordham theologian

Thomas C. Fox | Apr. 19, 2011



CTS president Bradford Hinze

The College Theology Society April 18 chimed into a growing debate between U.S. bishops and theologians, offering support to the latter in efforts to keep the frontiers of theological discussions free from new episcopal restraints.

The society's statement backed Fordham University theologian Elizabeth Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, N.Y., whose 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, was sharply criticized by the U.S. bishops' conference Committee on Doctrine last month. The bishops, after a yearlong study, found that the book, widely used in colleges and seminaries, fails to uphold authentic Catholic theology.

The College Theology Society said the doctrine committee's statement "breeds disillusionment, fear, and mistrust among younger theologians in their relation to bishops." The society is made up of theologians who teach at the undergraduate level. Founded as a Roman Catholic organization in 1953, it today describes itself as "maintaining its roots in the Roman Catholic tradition," but "increasing ecumenical in its membership and concerns."

In the wake of the doctrine committee's finding, the Catholic Theological Society of America's board of directors issued a statement April 8 faulting the bishops for failing to follow their own guidelines in dealing with Johnson, for misrepresenting the content and intent of her book, and for presenting what it they called a narrow interpretation of the role of theologians.

The Catholic Theological Society of America is made up largely of Catholic theologians in the United States and Canada.

Cardinal Donald Weurl, archbishop of Washington and head of the doctrine committee, April 18 sent a 13-page letter to the U.S. bishops defending his committee, spelling out the authoritative teaching role of bishops, while arguing for new restraints on theologians, including requests they receive approval from local bishops before publishing theological texts.

Hours later, the College Theology Society issued its statement, making the same points its sister theological society, the Catholic Theological Society of America, made 10 days earlier.

The officers and board of directors of the College Theology Society endorse the statement issued by the Catholic Theological Society of America on April 8, 2011, the statement reads.

While affirming the distinctive vocations of bishops and theologians, the CTSA statement raises important and widely shared concerns about (1) the bishops' failure to follow their own procedures as delineated in their 1983 [sic] statement on 'Doctrinal Responsibilities,' (2) the misrepresentation of Professor Johnson's position, and (3) the statement's restrictive characterization of the nature of theology. The board of the College Theology Society shares each of these concerns.

The College Theology Society statement goes on to say that Johnson's theology 'is credited with plumbing the depths of the received Catholic tradition as found in diverse scriptural and historical witnesses of faith while investigating pressing issues and searching for ever deeper understanding.'

It stated that Johnson's theology explores 'the living faith of the church as it is conveyed in communities in various cultures and contexts in the United States and throughout the world. Her gifts and talents as a highly effective theological educator are clearly displayed in this book.'

The statement went on to say that since the membership of the society includes a high percentage of younger faculty members and graduate students in theology, it is 'particularly concerned about the chilling effect the statement by the Committee on Doctrine will have on our younger colleagues.'

'Instead of cultivating a culture of open collaboration and mutual dialogue between bishops, theologians, and the people of God in the advancement of a deeper understanding of the faith, the document of the Committee on Doctrine, as well as the process by which that document was formulated, breeds disillusionment, fear, and mistrust among younger theologians in their relation to bishops and increasing sadness and fatigue among more seasoned scholars.'

The full statement follows:

The Board of Directors of the College Theology Society addresses the critique of Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by the Committee on Doctrine, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

The officers and board of directors of the College Theology Society endorse the statement issued by The Catholic Theological Society of America on April 8, 2011. While affirming the distinctive vocations of bishops and theologians, the CTSA statement raises important and widely shared concerns about (1) the bishops' failure to follow their own procedures as delineated in their 1983 statement on Doctrinal Responsibilities, (2) the misrepresentation of Professor Johnson's position, and (3) the statement's restrictive characterization of the nature of theology. The board of the College Theology Society shares each of these concerns.

The College Theology Society is a professional society of theologians, solidly rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition and with a strong commitment to ecumenical collaboration, dedicated to teaching theology at the undergraduate level. With this mission in mind, we believe that Elizabeth Johnson's book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* exemplifies a compelling style of Catholic theology that engages many different kinds of undergraduate students populating college and university campuses. Her theology is credited with plumbing the depths of the received Catholic tradition as found in diverse scriptural and historical witnesses of faith while investigating pressing issues and searching for ever deeper understanding.

This book illustrates what has been a hallmark of all of Johnson's work: a dedication to exploring the living faith of the Church as it is conveyed in communities in various cultures and contexts in the United States and throughout the world. Her gifts and talents as a highly effective theological educator are clearly displayed in this book.

Since the membership of the College Theology Society includes a high percentage of younger faculty members and graduate students in theology, we are particularly concerned about the chilling effect the statement by the Committee on Doctrine will have on our younger colleagues. Instead of cultivating a culture of open collaboration and mutual dialogue between bishops, theologians, and the people of God in the advancement of a deeper understanding of the faith, the document of the Committee on Doctrine, as well as the process by which that document was formulated, breeds disillusionment, fear, and mistrust among younger theologians in their relation to bishops and increasing sadness and fatigue among more seasoned scholars.

Finally, the members of the College Theology Society are engaged in ecumenical and interfaith education and scholarship aimed at promoting mutual understanding among ourselves and with our students of diverse faiths and worldviews. In both substance and process, the statement by the Committee on Doctrine threatens to undermine the credibility of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy among many of our respected collaborators and students of different faiths and worldviews.

We are honored to have Professor Elizabeth Johnson as a member of the College Theology Society. We fully support her during this period when the arguments advanced by the Committee on Doctrine are debated among theological faculties and in the Church and public at large. We implore the Bishops' Committee on Doctrine to recognize the deep commitment of this faithful servant of the Church and to adhere to its own processes in seeking clarification about methodologies used or conclusions reached in the work of this highly respected Catholic theologian.

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More coverage from NCR:

- [Cardinal Donald Wuerl defends doctrine committee rebuke](#) [1]
- [Theologians criticize bishops' handling of book critique](#) [2]
- [Bishops ignored own guidelines in Johnson critique](#) [3], April 7, 2011
- [Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion](#) [4], March 31, 2011
- [U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian](#) [5], 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](#) [6]
- Fox's review of that book is here: [A hunger for mature theology](#) [7]
- 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'](#) [8]

- The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at:
www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm [9]
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Links:

- [1] <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/wuerl-defends-stinging-rebuke-theologians-book>
- [2] <http://ncronline.org/node/23958/>
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