

Bishops to discuss Johnson's defense of her 2007 book

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 6, 2011



Elizabeth Johnson

Update: The U.S. bishops' committee for doctrine, which severely criticized a popular theology book as "undermining the gospel," is expected to discuss the author-theologian's response to their criticism when the bishops meet June 15-17 near Seattle in Bellevue, Wash., Capuchin Franciscan Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the U.S. bishops Secretariat for Doctrine told Catholic News Service June 8.

In a June 1 letter to the bishops' doctrine committee, theologian Elizabeth Johnson strenuously defended the orthodoxy of her 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

The bishops' doctrine committee in late March, after studying the book for one year, concluded it "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points" and "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel."

Johnson, professor of theology at Fordham University in New York, said in her letter to the committee that it had thoroughly misunderstood, misrepresented, and misinterpreted the book.

Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph, taking up an offer by the Committee on Doctrine to begin a dialogue centered on the book, sent the committee a 38-page letter countering the critique. The committee of nine bishops is headed by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington.

NCR received a copy of the Johnson letter from someone not connected with Fordham University.

Johnson wrote that at the outset of the critique, the committee had made "several erroneous moves" that jeopardized the accuracy of its judgment, by:

- Deciding that the book did not start with the faith of the church;
- Interpreting her critique of the theological position known as modern theism as criticism of the faith of the church;
- Misconstruing her position on religious language as leading to Kantian skepticism.

?Given these initial misreadings, what follows was almost bound to miss the mark. Ideas are taken out of context and twisted to mean what they patently do not mean. Sentences are run to a conclusion far from what I think or the text says. False dilemmas are composed. Numerous omissions, distortions, and outright misstatements of fact riddle the reading. As a work of theology, Quest for the Living God was thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented in the committee?s statement. As a result, the statement?s judgment that Quest does not cohere with Catholic teaching is less than compelling. It hangs in the air, untethered by the text of the book itself.?

Full text of Johnson letter

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In addition to ?misreading? the content of her book, Johnson criticized the committee?s process.

?To use a judicial metaphor: The fact that Quest for the Living God was brought up on charges by person or persons unknown, put on a yearlong trial, and found guilty before I was ever informed adds to the problematic aspect of the statement?s appearance. In my view, it would have been better to have this dialogue prior to the release of the statement. Then, if the Committee on Doctrine still wished to make a statement, it would at least be based on an accurate reading of what the book actually says.

?Simple human courtesy would indicate that springing such a public critique without warning is neither a generous nor respectful way to treat an adult. Were it not for the graciousness of Archbishop Timothy Dolan, my local bishop, I would have found out about the statement online or in the newspaper. It is no disparagement to the episcopal office to suggest that the committee might have garnered less criticism from scholars and the reading public if it had followed a more dialogical procedure. Furthermore, in a letter to the Fordham University faculty cited in the press, Thomas Weinandy, OFM Cap, executive secretary of the Committee on Doctrine, wrote that the critique of the book ?in no way calls into question the dedication, honor, creativity, or service of its author.? This is interesting to know, because the statement?s harsh tone, disparaging words, ridicule, and rhetoric of fear certainly created that impression in my own mind and in the view of the public at large.?

She wrote that she admitted to curiosity about the process followed by the committee to arrive at its statement.

?Did each of the nine bishop members or their theologians read the book and draw up notes? Did they discuss the points to be made and debate them pro and con? Did they vote on the final document? I ask because of my work on faculty and professional committees where factual distortions are called into question and positions change as people hear each other?s arguments. The numerous misreadings of Quest flagged in these observations make me query if the committee might not find a more satisfactory way of proceeding to assure more accurate outcomes.?

Johnson is a distinguished professor of systematic theology at the Jesuit-run Fordham University. She is a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and one of its most well-known members.

The bishops? March critique upset a number of Catholic scholars and triggered defenses of Johnson's works. Among the groups that responded were the boards of the Catholic Theological Society of America and College Theology Society. Both issued statements criticizing the work of the bishops? doctrine committee.

The faculty at Fordham was equally indignant. An April 19 statement, signed by 180 faculty members, defended Johnson as ?an esteemed and cherished member of the Fordham community for over two decades.?

They sent a letter to the committee to convey their "unconditional support" for Johnson, saying they were "dismayed" at the committee's action. They urged the bishops' conference "to take steps to rectify the lack of respect and consideration" shown to a Catholic scholar "who has given a lifetime of honorable, creative, and generous service to the church, the academy, and the world."

Responding to these harsh criticisms, Capuchin Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy, executive director of the doctrine committee, April 28 addressed a letter to the Department of Theology at Fordham. He said the doctrine committee "takes seriously your concerns."

The letter assured the faculty that the committee never intended to tarnish Johnson's reputation or impugn her honor or dedication to the church.

Weinandy stated the doctrine committee "in no way calls into question the dedication, honor, creativity, or service" of Johnson.

He went on to say the committee had written to Johnson reiterating its willingness to enter into dialogue with her. He said the committee would receive "any written observations on the content of the committee's statement that she may wish to offer."

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