

# Catholic crackdown: Elizabeth Johnson and the bishops

by [Amy Plantinga Pauw](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue



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In March the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a critique of Elizabeth Johnson's 2007 book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (Continuum). Though Johnson faces no official sanctions (like those handed down to other American Catholic theologians, most recently to Roger Haight), the bishops declared that her book is marred by "misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors" and fails to "accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points." The U.S. bishops have investigated and disciplined other women theologians in conjunction with their positions on ethical

issues and women's ordination, but this appears to be the first time they have investigated a woman theologian on account of her writings.

In a letter accompanying the 21-page critique of Johnson, Cardinal Donald Wuerl asserted that the bishops were moved to act out of concern for the spiritual welfare of students who might encounter Johnson's work and "be led to assume that its content is authentic Catholic teaching."

In *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, and professor of systematic theology at Fordham University, gathers recent Christian reflection from various cultures and contexts around the world. The book includes chapters on post-Shoah, feminist, black, Latino, interreligious and ecological theologies and draws widely from contemporary Catholic and Protestant voices.

In her initial public response to the Committee on Doctrine's critique, Johnson expressed hope that the bishops' statement would trigger more theological reflection regarding the mystery of the living God. This hope has borne fruit as theological responses to the bishops' statement have multiplied and interest in Johnson's book has increased dramatically.

In June, Johnson issued a much fuller public response to the bishops, articulating the role of theology in the church, clarifying her own theological methods and positions, and charging that her book was "thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented in the committee's Statement." She also reiterated a concern with process expressed in her earlier response: that she was never invited to have conversation with the committee prior to its public critique of her book. "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," Johnson declared.

In some ways, Johnson's story is a microcosm of the enormous changes taking place in the leadership of American Catholicism over the past 50 years. Priest shortages and scandals have created opportunities for more lay leadership in parishes, including new leadership roles for women. The gradual trajectory toward a more democratic parish culture has been paralleled by broader understandings of theological authority. Teachers of Catholic theology, from parish schools to graduate

programs, are increasingly laypeople. Johnson's *Quest for the Living God* is intentionally aimed at a wide audience, and along with her other books it has found broad appeal among lay Catholics.

Even as the bishops insist that the teaching office belongs first to them, their actions against Johnson are a tacit acknowledgment of her significant theological authority in the church. Johnson is a member of a religious order, and women's orders especially have been contested sites for shifting understandings of clerical power in recent years. As another contemporary Catholic theologian and woman religious, Sandra Schneiders, affirms, "religious life is a charismatic life form, called into existence by the Holy Spirit, to live corporately the prophetic charism in the Church. It is not a workforce gathering recruits for ecclesiastical projects, and it does not receive its mission nor the particular ministries of its members from the hierarchy."

While the hierarchy seems to prefer a workforce content to follow its directives, members of religious orders are seeking a more collaborative relationship with ordained leadership. Indeed, part of the indignation in Catholic theological circles over Johnson's treatment was the perception that the Committee on Doctrine violated its own procedures in not seeking informal conversation with Johnson as a first step in resolving its concerns about her book.

In the days following the bishops' statement, public support for Johnson poured in from the Catholic Theological Society of America, the College Theology Society and the Catholic press. Her colleagues lauded her theological insight, her constructive use of tradition, her devotion to the church and her generous ecumenism. The bishops' action will likely have a chilling effect on younger, less established Catholic theologians, but at least for now Johnson's popularity and influence as a teacher of theology at Jesuit-run Fordham University seem little threatened by it. Despite this official expression of disapproval by members of the hierarchy, Johnson clearly remains a prophet with honor in the American Catholic world. She dares to speak out in order to keep the church accountable to its own best principles and commitments.

Johnson serves as a prophet for Protestants as well. American Catholic feminist theology grew up alongside the civil rights movement, and from the beginning it brought forth prominent figures who found an avid following among Protestant women on similar paths. At a time when the leaders of the burgeoning ecumenical movement were almost all men, feminist theology sponsored a quiet ecumenism of its own. In the years after Vatican II, Catholic women in increasing numbers pursued

theological education at all levels, and a movement for women's ordination rose up. Some mainline Protestant bodies were beginning to ordain women to pastoral ministry at about the same time, but these women faced many obstacles and battled much discouragement. Many Protestant women turned to the writings of their Catholic sisters for theological guidance and support.

In the decades since, as Protestant feminist voices have multiplied and as the voices of black, Latina and Asian women have intersected and shifted the conversation, this theological ecumenism has remained extremely fruitful, though still below the radar of most official ecumenical engagement. It is fair to say that many Protestants who would not venture to read Thomas Aquinas or Karl Rahner on their own have engaged these central Catholic figures through Johnson's books. Likewise, Johnson's writings on the communion of saints and Mary have challenged Protestants who might otherwise have ignored these theological topics.

In *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson describes three groups of women in the church. The first group feels forced to leave the institutional church "whose male dominance so distorted their religious experience." The second group "defects in place, remaining in but not of the system." The third group, which includes Johnson herself, is determined "to reform the church for the benefit of the gospel in coming generations."

The first group is represented best by the radical feminism of Mary Daly, who was a professor of theology for 35 stormy years at another Jesuit-run institution, Boston College, and who died early last year. Her writings were full of brilliant, gleeful sarcasm toward the institutional church. In her 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology*, for example, Daly derided classical accounts of the eternal trinitarian processions as "the most sensational one-act play of the centuries, the original *Love Story*, performed by the Supreme All Male Cast." In this divine "Men's Association" Daly found the mythic paradigm for all patriarchal human institutions, especially the church. For Daly there was no alternative to leaving the institutional church behind and seeking out a separatist feminism.

Johnson agrees with Daly about the damage that patriarchy has done to the church, but as a reformist feminist she aims to stay in and help build up the church. In contrast to Daly, Johnson (as she said in a recent interview) views women and men as "equal in sin and grace." She credits living in a women's religious community and having six sisters for disabusing her of "romantic notions" of women's superior

virtue. Johnson longs for a church in which power is shared and in which there is genuine partnership between men and women in ministry. She finds deep resources in scripture and Catholic tradition to support her efforts toward a reformed church.

Perhaps the bishops view Johnson's theological work as dangerous precisely because (unlike Daly) she does not ridicule or reject tradition. Rather, Johnson embraces it, while advancing a more nuanced understanding of what Catholic tradition means. She is loyal and critical at the same time.

The Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow asserts that when "we refuse to sever or choose between different aspects of our identity, we create a new situation. If we are Jews not despite being feminists but *as feminists*, then Judaism will have to change." Likewise, Johnson is a Catholic *as a feminist* and a feminist *as a Catholic*. She regards Catholic tradition less as an objective deposit than as a dynamic process—a view that she sees as the church's own. Theology is an ongoing craft that seeks new understanding of the faith in each time and place.

While much of 20th-century feminist theological thought emphasized critique and revision, Johnson is among a growing number of women theologians who emphasize constructive theological engagement from a particular confessional perspective. Johnson's theology draws on scripture, early and medieval theologians and official Catholic Church teachings in an attempt, as she describes it in her book *She Who Is*, "to braid a footbridge between the ledges of classical and feminist Christian wisdom." She claims that tradition as her own and constructively carries it forward in feminist directions.

Johnson's work is a challenge and an invitation to Protestants, both to savor the feminist wisdom of the Catholic tradition and to drink deeply from the wells of their own particular traditions. Groups of Reformed and Lutheran women theologians have recently published books that take up this challenge. In *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (which I coedited with Serene Jones) and *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* (edited by Mary Streufert), women theologians draw on distinctive themes from their own heritage, such as the emphasis on God's law and on human work in Reformed thought, and on justification and theology of the cross in Lutheranism; they explore how these themes intersect with their feminist, womanist and *mujerista* commitments. These theologians, along with Johnson, reject the notion that the church's faith has been defined for all time by certain male voices of

the past, or that a certain contemporary reading of these classical voices determines the boundaries of appropriate theological reflection today. They understand that all appropriations of theological tradition are selective and contextual. These women are traditional theologians, in the sense that they are deliberate about carrying theological traditions forward. *Transformative Lutheran Theologies* quotes Vida Dutton Scudder: "For to remain a member of a historic Church is not to achieve finality. A creed is not an imprisoning wall, it is a gate, opening on a limitless country that cannot be entered in any other way."

Johnson's approach to the Trinity in *Quest for the Living God* is a good example of her constructive appropriation of theological tradition and can inform contemporary Protestant struggles over appropriate language for God in worship. Appealing to the apostolic benediction of 2 Corinthians 13, she affirms that trinitarian reflection "is an interpretation of who God is in the light of the glad tidings of salvation." Her fundamental criticism of the intricate trinitarian terminology of Catholic neo-scholasticism is that it has lost touch with the historical story of redemption. By contrast, she finds that the various theologies described in her book represent "a renaissance of insight into the critical, hopeful, practical meaning of the Trinity in our contemporary world."

The U.S. bishops faulted Johnson methodologically for not starting with "the content of God's revelation . . . as proclaimed in scripture and taught within the Church." The charge of starting with human experience rather than with scripture and church teaching has frequently been leveled at feminist and liberation theologians. But it is hard to make that charge stick for someone as steeped in sacred text and liturgy as Johnson is. As a theologian, she is always starting in the middle of things—she does her theological reflection in the confluence of scripture, tradition and human experience. Indeed, her deep immersion in the practices of the church is part of the experience from which she draws, as she attempts to engage the many challenges posed by the contemporary world. As Johnson stated in her response to the bishops, *Quest for the Living God* is "written from faith for faith in the context of the church."

Regarding appropriate language for the Trinity, Johnson appeals to Thomas Aquinas in asserting that all language for God is analogical: "The incomprehensible mystery of God is always ever greater than our thought." *Incomprehensible*, however, does not mean *unknowable*. Echoing Augustine, Johnson finds the goal of acknowledging the incomprehensibility of God to be "the knowing of God through love." The negation required by the tradition of analogy must end in adoration. She also cites

the implication that Aquinas drew from the nonliteral character of God-talk—"the necessity of giving to God many names"—and uses it to anchor theology's task of "voicing the mystery anew in contemporary idiom." Human beings, she argues, "name God with a symphony of notes." Here too the U.S. bishops found fault with Johnson. While they agreed that all language for God is analogical, they cautioned that "the names of God found in the Scriptures are not mere human creations that can be replaced by others that we may find more suitable."

This is a surprising charge, since Johnson's strategy for God language is always one of supplementing the tradition, not replacing it. Furthermore, the supplementary images she advocates in *Quest for the Living God* are biblical ones like Mother God and Holy Wisdom. However, by calling attention to the conditioned character of all human language for God, even the language of revelation, Johnson also calls into question the assumption that names like King and Lord are uniquely appropriate.

One of Johnson's maxims is that "language for God functions": it both reflects our world and "shapes the way we construct our experience of the world." She perceives an intimate connection between the resistance and injustices that she and other women have encountered as church leaders and theologians and the reflexive assumption that God is appropriately imaged and spoken of only in male terms. Hierarchical images like King and Lord are "rooted in the unequal relation between women and men, and they function to maintain this arrangement."

Though there is broad feminist consensus that language for God functions, *how* it functions is a subject of some debate. In some contexts, male language for God may subvert rather than reinforce patriarchal power, and it is not clear that the function of female images for God is always liberating for women. The liturgical use of gendered language for God has been a less central topic among women theologians of color, who have had other, more pressing theological concerns. And even in Protestant traditions in which women have some role in shaping liturgical language, there is disagreement about whether the best strategy is to edit old language, craft new language or, for a variety of reasons, simply live with a lopsidedly male vocabulary for God in worship. Protestants will perhaps need to find other theological resources besides Aquinas in thinking through their approach to language for God and the problems of exclusively male images. But Johnson's approach of "giving to God many names" certainly seems preferable to the strategy of subtraction currently in vogue in some mainline churches, which results in a very restricted vocabulary for prayer and praise.

Johnson takes a broad-brush approach to historical and theological sources. Her preferred method is to set out a theological buffet rather than to craft a precise argument. There is plenty in her writings that other theologians will want to quibble with. Yet Johnson rightly perceives that being a theologian requires risk and invites disagreement. Her generous, nondefensive posture encourages the kind of reflection and argument that moves the discipline of theology forward. She has put her deep familiarity with classical and contemporary traditions to work in producing theological reflection for the whole church. This is an enormous gift in a time when church and academy often seem disconnected.

Barred from an all-male priesthood, Johnson has gone on to have much wider and deeper influence on American Catholic life through her writing, teaching and other service to the Catholic community than she ever would have had as the leader of a single parish. If she presents a problem for the Catholic hierarchy, it is a problem of their own making. Johnson's exclusion from the priesthood ironically has ensured her freedom as a prophetic voice for a transformed church leadership.

Protestants also need to cultivate this prophetic voice across differences of gender and race. To use Johnson's poignant phrase, women and persons of color have been "long silent and invisible in shaping the public culture of the church." In mainline Protestant bodies, clergy who are women or members of racial-ethnic minority groups remain heavily concentrated in associate positions, in small and struggling churches and in alternative ministry settings. Yet since they have not been barred from ordination altogether, these members of the clergy face the temptation to protect their modest gains by deferring to established patterns of church leadership. Johnson's example challenges all Protestants to find ways of "living corporately the prophetic charism."