

Here Be Dragons

A 12-Week Dialogue with *Quest for the Living God*, Hedgerow Seminar, Fall 2011

Author and theologian Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, warns readers that her book will take them to theological frontiers like those medieval mapmakers labeled “Here be dragons.” The book reflects the “theological labors” of recent theologians who wrestle with the Holocaust; liberation of the poor; the experience of slavery, racism and sexism; interfaith experience; and evolutionary cosmology. A lively national dialogue has followed the March 2011 U.S. Catholic bishops’ critique of *Quest* and Sister Elizabeth’s response. Participants will read *Quest*, engage the issues, ask questions, identify worldviews, and dialogue with those finding faith and those finding dragons beyond past boundaries.

Required Reading

- Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*. New York, Continuum, 2008.
- Statement on *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, Committee on Doctrine, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (March 24, 2011). Online at *National Catholic Reporter* (ncronline.org); *CNS Origins* (April 7, 2011), Vol. 40, No. 43) or in class.
- “To Speak Rightly of the Living God: Observations on the Statement of the Committee on Doctrine of the USCCB on *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*,” Elizabeth Johnson (June 6, 2011) Available ncronline.org; *CNS Origins* July 7, 2011, Vol. 41, No. 9; or in class.

Assignments

- Each session centers on a chapter from *Quest for the Living God*
- Prepare, read, and reflect on the assigned chapter and sections of the bishops’ statement and Johnson’s observations that relate to the chapter.
- Use the questions on the syllabus as a focus.
- Pay attention to questions that arise as you read. Pay attention to where the reading resonates with or sheds light on your experience. Bring questions and insights to class for our table sharing.
- Keep a journal of short statements that record your learnings and persistent questions.
- Session 12 asks for participants to express and share their learnings in some way, writing, art, music, drama.

Instructors:

Rhodora Beaton, Ph.D., University of Notre Dame; Assistant Professor, St. Catherine University

Rev. J. Michael Byron, S.T.D., Weston School of Theology; Professor, St. Paul School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas

Rev. Lynne Lorenzen, Ph.D., Claremont; Professor Emerita, Augsburg College

Joan Mitchell, CSJ, Ph.D., Luther Seminary; Good Ground Press

September 19 Modern Theism, What Is It?

Quest for the Living God, Chapter 1; Bishops' Statement, "A False Alternative" and "A False Presupposition" Presentations will introduce this content.

Instructors: Lorenzen, Mitchell

1. What is theology? Where does theology start? The bishops' statement criticizes Johnson for not starting with revelation and Church teaching (Statement: A False Alternative). How does our experience in the Spirit interact with established doctrine?
2. Why reconstruct the idea of God? What is modern theism? Where does it begin? What are its weaknesses? Is it the same for Protestants and Catholics? Bishops' Statement, "A False Alternative"
3. The bishops' statement claims Johnson equates the modern theism and classical Catholic theology. What is their critique? How do modern theism and classical Catholic theology differ?
4. What do you appreciate or question about Johnson's description of her theological method? The bishops' statement stresses the knowability of God. These are Johnson's three principles (17-22):
 - The reality of God is an ineffable mystery beyond all telling.
 - No expression of God can be taken literally. We negate the negation implicit in every analogy.
 - The consequent necessity of giving to God many names.

September 26 Gracious Mystery, Rahner, the Turn Toward the Subject *Who is the living God in the context of the secular world?*

Read *Quest for the Living God*, Chapter 2; Johnson Observations, Intro, sections 1, 2, 3

Instructors: Lorenzen, Mitchell

1. What is theology? See Johnson Observations, "Introduction," section 1 "The Faith of the Church"
2. Where do you place yourself in reaction to the idea of God as incomprehensible mystery—relieved, disoriented, dizzied, frightened? Quest, pp. 38-39
3. Is God knowable? What does God being incomprehensible mean? How does Johnson respond? See section 2, "God's Self-Disclosure."
4. What is the importance of historical consciousness to theology? See Johnson Observations, Section 3, "The Craft of Theology."
5. What happens to our understanding of Jesus, who he was, his significance, if we shift from the position that the incarnation is a response to sin to the position that it was always part of God's plan of love and union with us? 40

6. Johnson argues that for Karl Rahner all Christian doctrine comes to this: “the living mystery of absolute fullness, who is nameless and beyond imagination, has drawn near to us amid the tangle of our lives through Jesus and the gift of grace, even when we do not realize it, in order to be our salvation, splendor, and support over the abyss. Consequently, while the outcome of our own life and that of the world is not yet known, we can have confidence that it is an adventure held safe in God’s mercy. Faith then becomes an act of courage. We can dare to hope.”
7. What do we love better, the little island of our own certitude or the ocean of incomprehensible mystery? *Quest*, 46

October 3 The Crucified God of Compassion

Who is the living God in the context of the unspeakable suffering of the Holocaust?

Read *Quest for the Living God*, Chapter 3; Bishops’ Statement, “A God Who Suffers”
Johnson Observations, section 6, “A Suffering God”

Optional: John F. Haught and Brian Davies, “The Suffering of God: Evolution & Theodicy,” *Commonweal* 6/3/2011

Instructor: J. Michael Byron

1. What questions does the Holocaust and other genocides raise for you—whether or to what extent does God suffer with the world? How does Johnson’s experience in South Africa during Apartheid change her assumption God could not suffer?
2. Where do you stand with Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, and Soelle that “Only a suffering God can help?” How do you answer those who want a God who stops pain? *Quest*, 56
3. What are the roots of seeing God as unable to suffer? What is at stake in maintaining the impassibility of God? What are the roots of God as capable of pathos? What is at stake in God acting freely compassionate in relation to creation and humans?
4. How does evolution address suffering?
5. Metz argues both Moltmann and Soelle are wrong to thinking a suffering God will help. He asks us to remember and lament. How does this help us confront overwhelming suffering? *Quest*, 65-67

October 10 Liberating God of Life

Who is God in the context of wretched poverty?

Read *Quest for the Living God*, Chapter 4; Johnson Observations, section 3, “The Craft of Theology”

Instructor: Joan Mitchell with Kathleen Judge, CSJ

1. What causes the rise of liberation theology? How have the poor discovered God accompanies them?
2. How did liberation theology spread in Latin America? What lasting impact has it had among Christians?
3. What have I done to crucify the poor? What must I do for people who are poor to rise?
4. What do the exodus story and Mary's Magnificat have to do with liberation?
5. What does the image of God the liberator means for us in the United States?
6. How can we struggle to change the cocktail glass economic stratification which is not the case in the U.S., too?
7. Why does the bishops' statement accept this section?

October 17 God Acting Womanish

Who is the living God in the context of women's experience?

Read *Quest for the Living God, Chapter 5; Bishops' Statement, "New Names for the Unknown God;" Johnson Observations, section 5, "Speaking About the Living God: Religious Language"*

Instructor: Rhodora Beaton

1. What is your experience of the effects of the women's movement in society, church, and your life?
2. What important differences and commonalities do feminist, womanist, mujerista, and developing world theologies have?
3. What are the benefits and complications of speaking of experience as a source for theology?
4. How does your experience bear out or contradict Elizabeth Johnson's insistence "an image of God functions" and is never neutral?
5. What is at stake in this argument? What is important about the biblical basis of the images?
6. How do you respond to the biblical images of God as mother, as wisdom, as *ruah*, *abuela*?
7. How womanish does your God act?
8. How do you respond to the bishops' critique that Johnson has reduced "all theological language and concepts to mere metaphors? How does Johnson respond?
9. How do you respond to the challenges of dualism in church and world?
10. The bishops' committee quotes extensively from Quest in this section. Yet Johnson in her response states several times that she is "puzzled" by their conclusions. To what can we attribute this confusion?

October 24 God Who Breaks Chains

Who is the living God in the context of white privilege and racism?

Read *Quest for the Living God, Chapter 6; Johnson Observations, section 3, "The Craft of Theology"*

Instructors: Joan Mitchell, Lynne Lorenzen

1. How does Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection help slaves claim their human dignity?
2. What is the vision of black liberation theology?
3. What does it mean to say God is black and Christ is black?
4. What does the biblical story of Hagar reveal about who God is?
5. What do African American women's stories of survival reveal about who God is?
6. How do African American women's experiences of suffering, surrogacy, and servanthood reshape theologies of the cross and discipleship?
7. Why does the bishops' statement accept this chapter?

October 31 Accompanying the God of Fiesta

Who is the living God in the context of LaLucha (the struggle)?

Read *Quest for the Living God, Chapter 7; Johnson Observations, section 3, "The Craft of Theology"*

Instructor: Joan Mitchell

1. How do the two conquests affect Latino/Latina people today?
2. Who are the *mestizaje/mulataje*? What positive and negative cultural characteristics does this mixing produce?
3. How has the enculturation of Christianity developed in Hispanic/Amerindian peoples? Why is popular religion so important?
4. What is the option for the poor? What is the option for the faith of the poor?
5. How is theological reflection on *la Virgen* a pneumatology rather than a Mariology?
6. What does the Hispanic experience of accompaniment reveal about the mystery of God? How does Hispanic culture celebrate its theology of accompaniment?
7. What is the importance of beauty—*flor y canto*—in Hispanic culture and liturgy?
8. Why does the bishops' statement accept this chapter?

November 4 Soul Conference: Religion & a New Environmental Ethic

Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Premiere of film, "Journey of the Universe"

Jeanne d'Arc Auditorium, St. Catherine University, 7 p.m.

November 7 Creator Spirit in the Evolving World

Who is the living God in the context of evolution?

Read *Quest for the Living God, Chapter 9; Bishops' Statement, "Creator Spirit in the Evolving World"* Johnson Observations, section 9, "Creator Spirit in the Evolving World"

Instructor: Rhodora Beaton

1. What makes the Spirit the Cinderella of the Trinity?
2. How does the Church in which you grew up understand the Spirit's activity?
3. What is panentheism and how is it distinct from theism and pantheism? Why does Elizabeth Johnson find this to be a helpful category? On what grounds do the bishops object? What is each side trying to protect?

4. How do you feel when you contemplate the sheer size and age of the universe?
5. How is the Spirit present and active in the natural world? Which description of divine energy makes the most sense to you? How do you describe God's actions in your life?
6. In her response Elizabeth Johnson says that "the point of this chapter is not to resolve this question" of material and spiritual evolution. The bishops do not deal directly with her application of the primary and secondary causality as a possible explanation. Johnson says she is "still thinking about" it herself. What do you think of her proposal?
7. What does it mean in practical terms to see our neighbors not only in outcasts and enemies but in whales and rain forests?
8. What might it mean to think of ourselves as "true earthlings?"

November 14 Generous God of Religions

Who is the living God in the context of religious pluralism?

Read *Quest for the Living God, Chapter 8; Bishops' Statement, "The Presence of God in All Religions;" Johnson Observations, section 8, "The Generous God of Religions"*

Instructor: J. Michael Byron

1. What is your experience of the pluralism of religious believe where you live?
2. What makes the Second Vatican Council and its document *Nostra Aetate* a watershed? How does *Dominus Jesus* temper these documents?
3. Is there more to God than is revealed in Jesus Christ? How do you respond to the question: how can Christians make room theologically for God's handiwork in other religions and hold faithfully to Jesus Christ?
4. How are you encountering the mystery of God in the encounter among religions? What is your experience of religious dialogue, of religious practice, of working together for justice, of theological insight?
5. What religious practices from other religions draw you toward God? What practices have you incorporated in your spiritual life?
6. Of what value are diverse paths into the mystery of God?

November 21 Trinity, the Living God of Love

Who is the living God in the context of new science?

Quest for the Living God, Chapter 10; Bishops' Statement, "Trinity: the Living God of Love;" Johnson Observations, section 10, "Trinity: the Living God of Love"

Instructors: Lynne Lorenzen

1. What are the roots of the doctrine of God as Trinity? How has the meaning of person evolved? What are the roots of the East and West going different ways on this?
2. What do you believe about the Trinity? How does this doctrine affect your faith?
3. How do you respond to imaging the Trinity as *perichoresis*, as the divine dance of life, of interrelationships in communion?

4. How is the Trinity a practical doctrine with consequences for Christian life?
5. What ways of speaking of God most draws you into encounter with the living God of your experience?

November 28 Final Gathering

Bring a creative expression of your learnings and/or persisting questions? One option is to make 10 statements that describe what you have learned which to share in our closing.