

**STATEMENT ON**  
***QUEST FOR THE LIVING GOD: MAPPING FRONTIERS IN THE THEOLOGY OF GOD,***  
**BY SISTER ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON**

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***United States Conference of Catholic Bishops***

The Committee on Doctrine of the USCCB has undertaken an examination and evaluation of the book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (Continuum, 2007) by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., a professor at Fordham University. The Committee has concluded that this book contains misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors that bear upon the faith of the Catholic Church as found in Sacred Scripture, and as it is authentically taught by the Church's universal magisterium. Because this book by a prominent Catholic theologian is written not for specialists in theology but for "a broad audience" (2), the Committee on Doctrine felt obliged, as part of its pastoral ministry, to note these misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors.

This statement will first consider the importance of the topic and the method proper to Catholic theology. It is here, at the level of method, that the book rests upon a false presupposition, an error that undermines the very nature of the study and so skews many of its arguments, rendering many of its conclusions theologically unacceptable. The statement will then examine various topics addressed in *Quest for the Living God*, following the order of the chapters and noting the misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors.

**A False Alternative: "Modern Theism" or Radical Reconstruction of the Idea of God**

The heart of Christian theology is the study of God not simply as one, but also as a Trinity of persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. “The mystery of the Most Holy

Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 234). It is laudable then that Catholic theologians undertake such studies, especially when their writings advance the Church’s understanding and appreciation of the mystery of God, and build up and confirm the faith of all believers. Because the mystery of God as a Trinity of persons is the foundational mystery of the Church’s faith, it is all the more important that those theologians who do embark on the study of this mystery do so from within the very heart of the Church’s faith. Pope John Paul II stated in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*:

Theology is structured as an understanding of faith in the light of a twofold methodological principle: the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*. With the first, theology makes its own the content of revelation as this has been gradually expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church’s living Magisterium. With the second, theology seeks to respond through speculative inquiry to the specific demands of disciplined thought. (no. 65)

Theologians must, therefore, first lay hold of the content of God’s revelation, the *auditus fidei*, as proclaimed in Scripture and taught within the Church, through an act of personal faith.<sup>1</sup> Only then are they properly equipped to enquire into the content of that faith, the *intellectus fidei*, seeking a greater understanding and clearer expression of it. By means of the theologians’ reaffirmation of the Church’s corporate confession of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, their service is conformed to the mystery of their Baptism and their incorporation into Trinitarian communion through Jesus Christ.

Sr. Johnson, however, begins with a critique of the Church’s faith, or, rather of what she terms “traditional theology” or “classical Christian theology.” In response to the distortions she claims are there and to the challenges posed to faith in the contemporary cultural situation, she

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas points out that just as other sciences accept as a given the first principles of their particular science, Christian theology “does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8).

offers a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the doctrine of God. She makes this move plausible by presenting the unappealing portrayal of God to be found in what she labels "modern theism." According to Sr. Johnson, modern theism models God as "a monarch" who is at the "peak of the pyramid of being." The best theology can do is portray him "as benevolent." "'He,' for it is always the ruling male who stands for this idea, is essentially remote" (14). While loving he is "uncontaminated" by the world. "And always this distant lordly lawgiver stands at the summit of hierarchical power, reinforcing structures of authority in society, church, and family" (14). According to Sr. Johnson, this portrayal follows from the conviction that God is immutable, incorporeal, impassible, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (see 15). This is modern theism.

In contrast to such an unappealing notion of God, Sr. Johnson offers an alternative based on new and thoroughgoing reinterpretations of the traditional conception of God: "[t]heologies traced out in this book, in contrast to modern theism, are deeply concerned with God's relationship to the world" (16). She claims that "we are witnessing nothing less than a 'revolution' in the theology of God" (1, see also 13-14), a revolution that is necessary because "modern theism" has thrown the Christian faith "into crisis." "Thinking people questioned what it all meant, this old, rather creaky tradition of luxuriant doctrines and rituals and hierarchy and pious customs, and whether any of it was true" (27).

What Sr. Johnson calls "modern theism" is actually an Enlightenment deist notion of God that contains some elements, though now misrepresented, of a traditional Catholic understanding of God. She acknowledges that modern theism is the result of the distortion of the Christian tradition by Enlightenment ideas and that it does not represent "classical Christian theology" (15). At some points, then, she claims to be retrieving the authentic tradition of "early Christian

and medieval theology" (17). At other points, however, she seems to regard "modern theism" as interchangeable with "traditional Christian doctrine" and "traditional preaching and theology," for she reproaches the latter for the same faults as the former (73, 80). While some ideas that she identifies as distortions due to the Enlightenment are in fact distortions of the Christian theological tradition, other ideas that she identifies as characteristics of modern theism, such as God's immutability, incorporeality, impassibility, omnipotence, etc. (15, 52, 54), are not distortions at all but integral and essential elements of that tradition. In any event, by associating traditional Christian theology with modern theism, she seeks to justify the need for her own proposals.

Sr. Johnson states correctly that God can, at times, be misrepresented as an arrogant monarch who acts in a tyrannical and dictatorial fashion. However, traditional Catholic teaching does not do this. Rather, it understands that God the Father is all-loving, and as such, he providentially cares for his creation. Jesus is indeed the Lord of lords and King of kings, not in the sense of pompously lording it over his subjects, but rather as the servant who lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus' name is above every other name and every knee must bend before him and every tongue proclaim him "Lord" because he humbled himself "accepting death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-11). The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to act after the manner of Jesus and so bear the fruit of charity, joy, peace, patience, and endurance (Gal 5:22-23). This traditional Catholic understanding of God bears no resemblance to Sr. Johnson's monarchical deity of "modern theism."

Moreover, God is not at "the peak of a pyramid" as if he had no concern for those whose manner of existence is lower than his own. Likewise, God is not at "the peak of a pyramid," as if God existed in manner similar to all else that is, the only difference being that he is on the top.

Within traditional Christian theology, God is indeed the supreme being, but that means that he actually exists in a manner that is uniquely his own and so his manner of existence radically differs in kind from all else that exists. Existing in such a manner does not make God remote. Rather, it allows him lovingly to employ his almighty power to bring into existence other beings and, in so doing, he is intimately related to them, especially to human beings, as the good Creator. Sr. Johnson recognizes that God's radical transcendence and radical immanence go together (16, cf. 43). As will be shown later, however, her pantheism (p. 188), as well as her rejection of divine omnipotence and impassibility, does not preserve transcendence. Furthermore, for God to be immutable, incorporeal, impassible, etc. does not mean that God is static, inert, distant, and uncaring. Rather, such attributes assure that he is supremely loving, good, and perfect. God, then, is actively involved in the world of sin, evil, and suffering. In the history of salvation he has demonstrated that he is involved, the Incarnation being the supreme culminating instance. While God is active in this world contaminated by sin, evil, and suffering, he himself is not contaminated, nor complicit, for this would deprive him of his perfect goodness and love and hinder his salvific activity within time and history.

Sr. Johnson is correct that some notions of God do wrongly portray him as a “distant lordly lawgiver” who “stands at the summit of hierarchical power, reinforcing structures of authority in society, church, and family.” This may be the view of “modern theism,” but it is not the view of traditional Church teaching. God is indeed the supreme giver of law, such as the Ten Commandments, but such laws are not arbitrary and capricious. Rather, they are laws that instruct human beings on how they are to live truly authentic human lives, godly lives of love, justice, and righteousness. While the exercise of authority in society, the Church, and the family may be flawed at times, yet the lack of structures of authority within society, the Church, and the

family would cause untold injustice and suffering. The exercise of authority that flows from the traditional Christian notion of God fosters truth, justice, equity, peace, and right order.

From the above, it is evident that *Quest for the Living God* contaminates the traditional Catholic understanding of God, which arises from both revelation and reason and which has been articulated by the Fathers and the Scholastics, especially Thomas Aquinas, and taught and professed by the Church, with Enlightenment deism. Such a notion of God may conform to what is termed “modern theism,” and so be in need of reform as the book suggests. However, to give the impression that “modern theism,” is virtually identical with the traditional Catholic notion of God is seriously to misrepresent the tradition and so to distort it beyond recognition. Nonetheless, as seen in the above analysis, this is what *Quest for the Living God* has done at its very onset. It is this misrepresentation that Sr. Johnson takes as a warrant for articulating her many models of God, models that she proposes as more attractive than “modern theism.”

*Quest for the Living God* speaks of a crisis within the Church, a crisis reflected in the disjuncture between “modern theism” and a more contemporary understanding of God based upon secular experience. The real crisis, however, the one that this book illustrates, is reflected in the disjuncture between a proper and authentic understanding of the traditional notion of the Christian God and an understanding of God that no longer comports with Christian revelation and the Church’s profession of faith.

### **A False Presupposition: All Names for God are Metaphors**

Sr. Johnson also justifies her radical revision of the traditional Christian understanding of God by asserting that the Church's names for God are metaphors that arise from religious experience and that consequently can be replaced by human ingenuity if that experience undergoes a change. For Sr. Johnson, theology begins with an acknowledgment that God is a

mystery beyond all human understanding and that human language about God reflects human understanding and not the divine reality. “The first and most basic prescript is this: the reality of the living God is an ineffable mystery beyond all telling” (17). It is the “beyond all telling” that is key to Sr. Johnson’s understanding of God. This is her first “ground rule.”

The second ground rule is that no expression for God can be taken literally. She explains as follows:

Our language is like a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. To equate the finger with the moon or to look at the finger and not perceive the moon is to fall into error. Never to be taken literally, human words about God proceed by way of indirectness. They set off from the spare, original, strange perfections of this world and turn our face toward the source and future of all without capturing that essence of the mystery. (18)

Sr. Johnson is entirely correct on this: the Catholic theological tradition affirms that no human language is adequate to express the reality of God. Catholic teaching maintains that human concepts apply to God only in an analogous fashion. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, "We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking" (no. 40). All creatures in some way resemble God, who is the source of any perfection found in them. Creatures possess only some perfections, and these only in a limited way. God possesses all perfections infinitely. From our knowledge of creatures we can come to understand a perfection such as goodness, but when we would attribute the perfection of goodness to God we must remember that God is good in a way far surpassing the way that creatures are good. Our language does apply to God, but only by analogy. "Admittedly, in speaking about God like this, our language is using human modes of expression; nevertheless it really does attain to God himself, though unable to express him in his infinite simplicity" (no. 43).

While Sr. Johnson is well within the Catholic theological tradition when she maintains that human language is never adequate to express the reality of God, she departs from that tradition when she makes the more radical claim that human language does not attain to the reality of God. For her, the meaning of the concept "good" derived from our knowledge of creatures is "lost" when it is applied to God. "We literally do not understand what we are saying. Human comprehension of the meaning of 'good' is lost, for we have no direct earthly experience of anything that is the Source of all goodness" (19).

While God is a mystery that cannot be fully comprehended and thus fully articulated, nonetheless, according to the Catholic theological tradition it is possible to make statements about God that are true even if they do not express the fullness of the mystery. That tradition acknowledges that there is a difference between God's being incomprehensible and God's being unknowable. To say that God is not comprehensible is to say that he cannot be completely known and understood.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, God is knowable in the sense that human concepts do reflect some real if limited knowledge of God. For Sr. Johnson, if God is incomprehensible he is also unknowable. This is incorrect.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch. "The believer's act [of faith] does not terminate in propositions, but in the realities [which they express]."<sup>3</sup> All the same, we do approach these realities with the help of formulations of the faith which permit us to express the faith and to hand it on, to celebrate it in community, to assimilate and live on it more and more. (no. 170)

The doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation, for example, state truly what the mystery of God is even if they do not and cannot express fully the mystery. The mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation are known even if they are not completely comprehended. These doctrines are not

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<sup>2</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 7.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, *ad* 2.

merely fingers pointing one in the direction of an unknowable mystery. They actually allow one to know the truth of what the mystery is.

By defining “mystery” in this way, Sr. Johnson defends her freedom to offer all sorts of statements about God that may point in the direction of the mystery; she simultaneously admits that they do not say anything literal about God. This is her third ground rule. Quoting Aquinas, she argues that there are many names for God employed throughout history within many different cultures and religions (see 21-22). Aquinas did say that there are many names for God, but for him these names are derived either from the use of reason or from divine revelation, and all express some truth about the reality of God; they are not mere pointers to a mystery that can never be known in itself.

Despite Sr. Johnson’s critique of Enlightenment theism, her understanding of the unknowability of God has more in common with Enlightenment skepticism about the possibility of knowing metaphysical realities than with the apophaticism of the Church Fathers. The Church Fathers, most prominently the Cappadocians, were well aware that God is incomprehensible, but they founded this judgment on what God had truly revealed about himself as found in Scripture and Tradition. This revelation provides true knowledge of God as a trinity of persons, who create and redeem in love, a revelation that manifests not the unknowability of God, but his incomprehensibility. The theology of the Cappadocians, like all authentic Catholic theology, is governed by the truth of biblical revelation and its linguistic expression.

Sr. Johnson’s notion of the unknowability of God bears a strong resemblance to that of the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that human knowledge and concepts do not attain to the reality of things in themselves, but only express how things appear to our minds. Sr. Johnson faces a problem similar to that of Kant: since all names for God are merely

metaphors that we use to point to the divine reality but that never actually lay hold of it, there appears to be no objective means for judging among metaphors for God as to which are closer to the truth. Indeed, as we shall see below, for Sr. Johnson, metaphors for God are to be evaluated not on the basis of their accuracy with regard to the nature of God, but primarily in terms of how they function in human society.

The false presupposition on which this book is founded, then, is the conviction that all names for God are metaphors. It is important to evaluate how this false presupposition influences the various notions of God discussed in the book.

### **A God Who Suffers**

In the light of the Holocaust and other horrendous evils, modern theism found itself unable to defend belief in its “omnipotent, omniscient Supreme Being” (52). Sr. Johnson acknowledges that Metz and Schillebeeckx believe that God stands in solidarity with those who suffer (see 56 and 65), but do not suggest that suffering affects the divine nature. Moltmann and Soelle, however, propose that God does indeed suffer as God. “They developed the powerful symbol of the suffering God who endures and is defeated with those who suffer. This symbol opens up the idea that God takes the pain of the world into the divine being in order there to redeem it” (56). This stands in stark contrast to the modern theism which was influenced by Greek philosophy. “Possessing all perfections in an unimaginable way, the divine nature has no possibility for change, cannot be affected by the world, and, of course cannot suffer. Divine dignity depends on this” (57).

In her antipathy for this latter position, Sr. Johnson gives the impression that she finds nothing wrong with Moltmann’s understanding of the cross, namely, that on the cross the Son suffers not only in his human nature but also in his divine nature (see 60-62). She looks very

favorably, moreover, on Soelle's rejection of divine omnipotence: "Soelle makes a major contribution to the question of suffering with her work on divine power" (63). Sr. Johnson might say in her defense that she is only presenting the thought of Moltmann, Soelle, and other theologians, and not actually subscribing to it herself. She has selected the ideas of these particular theologians, however, as well as those of the other theologians that she presents in the book, as representing what she considers to be the most important and most praiseworthy developments in recent theology, those that she considers provide the basis for the future of Christian theology. Certainly, the reader is given the impression that a God who suffers as God is far better than one who does not.

It is her understanding of "mystery" and "symbol," moreover, that allows Sr. Johnson to present this understanding of God as a viable alternative to traditional Catholic teaching. In her view, all statements about God, whether hers or those of the theological tradition, are metaphorical and do not express any literal truth about the "mystery" of God. With the metaphor of the suffering God, however, she believes that she and other theologians are saying something that is important for contemporary human beings.

Later in her book, Sr. Johnson advocates an understanding of God that implies that the finite order is ontologically constitutive of God's being. It is this view of God, which she identifies as "panentheism," that allows her to predicate suffering to God as such. It is only because God partakes of the finite order that the suffering within the finite order redounds to him. However, such an understanding undermines God's transcendence in that God's manner of existence, as Creator, would no longer differ in kind, but only in degree, from that of all else that exists.

## **New Names for the Unknown God**

Sr. Johnson argues that women "have experienced strong discomfort with the dominant images of God as father, lord, and king" (96) and that female language for God is not only permissible but necessary. For Sr. Johnson, language for God should be analyzed not primarily in terms of its adequacy for expressing the reality of God—all human language fails to attain the reality of God—but in terms of its socio-political effects. She sees God-language as a human construction that is created in a particular socio-political context and reflects socio-political power relations. In her view, the traditional Christian language for God arises from a patriarchal social structure in which men possess the preponderance of power. The male imagery of God is a device used by the patriarchal power structure to perpetuate itself. "As hallowed by tradition and currently used, all-male images of God are hierarchical images rooted in the unequal relation between women and men, and they function to maintain this arrangement" (96). Now that society has begun to change, the traditional images of God have become "religiously inadequate" (96). "Instead of evoking the reality of God, they block it" (96).

As part of the effort to complete the overthrow of unequal and unjust power relations, she argues that it is necessary to replace the traditional language and concepts of God with new language and new concepts of God that will serve the purpose of promoting the socio-political status of women both in society and in the Church. Instead of as the "patriarchal lord who required their obedience," women have begun to envision God in "non-authoritarian ways" (96-97). Moreover, this replacement of the patriarchal system requires the use of female imagery for God.

Holy mystery who is source, sustaining power, and goal of the world cannot be confined to any one set of images, but transcends them all. Should femaleness be an obstacle to naming the divine? Or can women's reality function as a sacramental sign of God's presence and action? If God created women in the divine image and likeness,

theologians reasoned, then can we not return the favor and employ metaphors taken from women's lives to point to the living God? Can the living God not be spoken of in female terms? (97)

Sr. Johnson discusses feminine images of God found in the Bible – “mother” and “Holy Wisdom (Sophia).” “A veritable symphony of images in addition to mother and Wisdom enables women and girls to recognize themselves in language about God. The Spirit of God, named with the feminine noun *ruah* in Hebrew, is often depicted in Christian art as a dove, the ancient symbol of the goddess of love” (106). Sr. Johnson seeks to avoid a dualism where male images denote “reasonableness, power, justice-making, and headship” and female images denote feminine traits.

In other words, women reflect God not only as mothering, nurturing, and compassionate, although certainly that, but also as powerful, taking initiative, creating-redeeming-saving, wrathful against injustice, in solidarity with the poor, struggling against and sometimes victorious over the powers of this world. Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, these female images open up insight into the maternal passion, fierce protectiveness, zeal for justice, healing power, inclusive hospitality, liberating will, and nonhierarchical, all-pervading relationality that characterize divine love. In the process, they carry back to women the stamp of the divine likeness. (109)

What is lacking in the whole of this discussion is any sense of the essential centrality of divine revelation as the basis of Christian theology. 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 according to our own human judgment. The standard by which all theological assertions must be judged is that provided by divine revelation, not by unaided human understanding. God does use human, and thus limited, means in revealing himself to the world. The only way, however, that one can reliably discern what is fallible and thus revisable is by first adopting and appropriating the standard of divine truth which has been received by revelation. Unfortunately, the point of departure for *Quest for the Living God* is not the divine revelation, accepted in faith by the Church, but non-theological norms, which are used to critique the Catholic theological tradition.

In fact, it is Sr. Johnson's radical position on the unknowability of God that has prepared the way for this. By reducing all theological language and concepts to mere metaphors, Sr. Johnson has effectively eliminated as a criterion both divine revelation, to which Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition bear witness, and the Church's teaching which interprets them; she thus opens the way for other criteria that would evaluate theological affirmations as social and political phenomena.

### **The Presence of God in All the Religions**

While Sr. Johnson states on a number of occasions that Jesus provides a unique encounter with God (see 155), yet she also wants to argue that there is more to God than that which is revealed through Jesus. Again, this is in keeping with her understanding of "mystery." No metaphor or symbol embodies the whole truth of who God is.

Sr. Johnson argues that the Church has grown in its understanding and appreciation of other religions. The Church went from a negative evaluation of other religions to a more positive assessment at Vatican II, although the Council was working with a "fulfillment model." "According to the fulfillment model that shaped the council's thinking, all religions are meant to reach their true fulfillment in the one church of Jesus Christ" (157). However, John Paul II did speak in *Redemptoris Missio* of the Spirit being present in other religions. The conclusion could then be drawn ("not definitive," though "heading in the direction of yes") that "thanks to the presence of God's own Spirit, people are saved through the practice of their religion, not despite it" (158). What Sr. Johnson is doing here is setting the stage to argue that the Spirit of God is at work in other religions in the same manner that the Spirit is working within Christianity and thus other religions are equally salvific.

Sr. Johnson is critical of *Dominus Iesus*. "This declaration met with a decidedly mixed reception" (160). Some applauded the document for upholding the centrality of Jesus. "But the

torrent of criticism from religious leaders and scholars across a broad spectrum shows that something essential was seriously missing” (160). If the Spirit of God can be found in the sacred texts of other religions, then these “cannot be mere human inventions, as the declaration also asserts” and thus to declare that such religions are “‘gravely deficient’ redounds to insult the divine manner of acting in the world” (161). The conclusion to be drawn from this is simple.

As the argument over *Dominus Iesus* shows, there is no consensus on the vital issue of what God intends by the existence of multiple religious paths. *Dominus Iesus* is one way to interpret the religions in the light of faith in Jesus Christ, but people in dialogue who themselves confess Christ as the Way have experienced a reverence for other religions that points to a broader, deeper, wider play of God’s merciful ways. (161)

It appears that, for Sr. Johnson, the Spirit has inspired the sacred texts of other religions in a way that is similar to that of the Bible, and thus is working in a similar manner within those religions as well. In developing this argument, Sr. Johnson undermines the uniqueness of Biblical revelation and even denies the uniqueness of Jesus as the Incarnate Word. Moreover, she places the teaching of the magisterium on a par with the opinions of “other” theologians.

The heart of the issue here comes down once more to Sr. Johnson’s understanding of “mystery” and “metaphor/symbol.” In her view, because God is the primordial mystery “there is no end to the being and fullness of God” (161).

At the outset it opens the possibility that others might have distinct encounters with the divine that can be new resources for Christian exploration into the overabundance of God. To put it simply, the living God is not a Christian. Rather, the incalculable mystery, which the Christian scripture dares to call love (1 John 4:8 and 16) is not constrained in loving but freely pours out affection to all and each one. (162)

While “in Jesus Christ, God’s saving activity reaches its greatest intensity in history in the concrete” (162, see 174); while “the crucified and risen Word of God and the church that proclaims God’s mercy in him are normative and constitutive for the salvation of all”; still, “the manifestation of God’s presence and activity in the religions cannot be limited to what has been

revealed in Jesus Christ and proclaimed by the church” (162-3). The Spirit of God does not simply repeat what “she” has revealed in Jesus, otherwise these religions would not be different from Christianity (see 163). Because the mystery of God is so full it is not exhausted by any one religious tradition.

Sr. Johnson’s position on that matter is not in keeping with the Christian understanding of Jesus as the fullness of truth. For the fullness of “truth,” according to Sr. Johnson’s argument, one needs Jesus + Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. (see 174-79). Sr. Johnson’s conclusion is contrary to Church teaching. “Disputes about how to reconcile core Christian affirmations about the salvific role of Jesus Christ with the validity of other religions are numerous. There is as yet no theological consensus” (175).

### **Creator Spirit in the Evolving World**

There are two problematic concerns in Sr. Johnson’s chapter on evolution. First, how does one conceive of a transcendent God who is equally immanent within the world and history?

The mental model that allows for the most intelligible interpretation of this presence is panentheism (all-in-God). In recent centuries theology worked mainly with the model of theism. This construal infers God to be the highest member of the order of being. It insists on God’s difference and distance from the world while paying little attention to divine nearness. Its opposite model is pantheism (all is God), which erases the difference between created and uncreated, thereby collapsing God and the world into each other. Unlike either of these patterns, panentheism envisions a relationship whereby everything abides *in* God, who in turn encompasses everything, being “*above all and through all and in all*” (Eph 4:6). What results is a mutual abiding for which the pregnant female body provides a good metaphor. (188)

The panentheism presented in *Quest for the Living God*, however, lacks any characteristic that would constitute a real difference between it and pantheism. “Mutual abiding” is not an adequate description of the Biblical conception of Creator and creation, according to which God as Creator exists in a different ontological order than that which he creates.

In fact, it is only because God is self-existent, and thus radically distinct from creation, that he is able to bring into existence, out of nothing, other beings. It is precisely the act of creation that establishes both the transcendent otherness of God as well as his intimate relationship to creation, for creation only exists by being related to God as its Creator. “[B]ecause he is the free and sovereign Creator, the first cause of all that exists, God is present to his creatures' inmost being: ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ In the words of St. Augustine, God is ‘higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self’” (*Catechism*, no. 300). The panentheism espoused by Sr. Johnson, however, fails to respect not only the transcendent integrity of God, but also the integrity of the created order, for in this view the finite created order finds its value not in its own created being, possessing its own inherent created value, but in being ontologically constitutive of God’s own being.

The second concern is over the evolution of human beings.

Modern forms of theism assume that God intervenes in the world at will to accomplish divine purpose apart from natural processes. But the scientific picture of the universe indicates that this is not necessary. Nature is actively organizing itself into new forms at all levels. Even the emergence of life and then mind can be accounted for without special supernatural intervention. (192)

For Sr. Johnson, material forces and their self-organizing processes can account for the human spirit with both intelligence and free will. She writes: "Human thought and love are not something injected into the universe from without, but are the flowering in us of deeply cosmic energies, arising out of the very physical dynamism of the cosmos, which is already self-organizing and creative" (185). Even on a purely philosophical level, however, such claims are subject to refutation. The physical cannot account for the non-physical, and the self-organization of created realities does not explain itself. Moreover, “[t]he Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God – it is not ‘produced’ by the parents – and also that it is

immortal” (*Catechism*, no. 366; see also Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, no. 36). It is the spiritual nature of the human soul that allows human beings, through their bodily senses, intellectually to know the truth and freely to will the good and so act upon it.

### **Trinity: The Living God of Love**

Sr. Johnson wishes to limit our understanding of God to the economy of salvation. In her view, we can grasp the economic expression of God within the finite order of time and history, but we do not know God as he immanently exists as a Trinity of persons.

At the outset and all through this chapter [chapter 10] it is crucial to keep this point in mind: the point of trinitarian language is to acclaim the living God as the mystery of salvation. Whether found in scripture, creed, liturgy, doctrine, or theology, it is Christian code tapping out the belief that the living God made known through Jesus and the Spirit is dynamic Love encompassing the universe who acts to save. At the most basic it is saying, very simply, “*God is love*” (1 John 4:16). (202-3)

Sr. Johnson’s presentation of the teaching of the Council of Nicaea is ambiguous. According to her, by its teaching the Council aimed to protect “the church’s faith that Jesus is God’s self-revelation, the true Wisdom of God sent to save and set free” (205). This minimalist interpretation of the Council, however, conceals the fact that it is one thing to say that “Jesus is God’s self-revelation,” which could simply mean that through Jesus God provides us a human image of who he is, and quite another to say that Jesus is ontologically the eternal Son of the Father. Only the second understanding affirms a true metaphysical Incarnation.

Sr. Johnson also faults the later theological development of the Nicene Creed for separating the God for us (*pro nobis*) from God in himself (*in se*). “Theologians started to make a real distinction between God revealed in the history of salvation, otherwise known as the economy of salvation, and God who exists apart from the world in an eternal, divine realm”

(206). In Sr. Johnson's view, such a distinction has spawned trinitarian speculation that borders on the bizarre and the completely irrelevant.

Today this school of thought's laborious explanation of various fine points in the trinitarian construct elicits a host of criticisms. The fundamental problem lies in the fact that reflection lost touch with the historical story of redemption, where all trinitarian meaning has its roots, ending up with a description of God that had little or no contact with Christian life. It presented its thinking in highly obtuse prose; scholars today take issue with its "abstruse analysis," "irrelevant abstractions," "philosophical mazes," "elaborate theological maneuverings," "complex celestial mathematics," and "obscure language," along with its "sheer long-windedness." For all its abstraction, furthermore, this theology presented its findings as if they were a literal description of a self-contained Trinity of three divine persons knowing and loving each other. This, of course, is not the case, no such literal description being possible. (207-8)

According to Sr. Johnson, "the biblical story of encounter with God--the story of the personal God of Israel encountered in the concrete life and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth and present through the Spirit in the life of the church and the world--was transposed into an abstract, complex, literal, and oppressive trinitarian theology" (209). Theology lost sight of the fact that the "intent of this trinitarian symbol is not to give literal information but to acclaim the God who saves and to lead us into this mystery" (209).

Once again, it is evident that, according to Sr. Johnson, language about God, even Trinitarian language, does not actually provide knowledge of and truth concerning God and the manner of his existence. For her, God remains mysteriously unknowable. This position, however, completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in that Gospel, for it supposes that the Church does not proclaim what is actually true, but only the symbolic expression of what ultimately cannot be known, and the faithful do not believe what is actually true, but only some symbolic expression of that which can never be identified. In contrast the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*. As personal

adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what he says. (no. 150; see also no. 144)

## **Conclusion**

In some ways, *Quest for the Living God* presents itself as a retrieval of the authentic Christian theological tradition. Against the contamination of Christian theology after the Enlightenment by modern theism, Sr. Johnson claims to be retrieving fundamental insights from patristic and medieval theology. As we have seen, however, this is misleading, since under the guise of criticizing modern theism she criticizes crucial aspects of patristic and medieval theology, aspects that have become central elements of the Catholic theological tradition confirmed by magisterial teaching. Similarly, she claims to be retrieving the classical understanding of the incomprehensibility of God. Again, as we have seen, her understanding of this is not that of the Catholic theological tradition, for it effectively precludes the possibility of human knowledge of God through divine revelation and reduces all names and concepts of God to human constructions that are to be judged not on their accuracy (all are deemed inaccurate) but on their social and political utility.

The basic problem with *Quest for the Living God* as a work of Catholic theology is that the book does not take the faith of the Church as its starting point. Instead, the author employs standards from outside the faith to criticize and to revise in a radical fashion the conception of God revealed in Scripture and taught by the Magisterium. While the book at times displays an engagement with the Catholic theological tradition and remains in continuity with it, it also departs from that tradition at a number of crucial junctures. For these reasons, combined with the fact that the book is directed primarily to an audience of non-specialist readers and is being used as a textbook for study of the doctrine of God, the Committee on Doctrine finds itself

obligated to state publicly that the doctrine of God presented in *Quest for the Living God* does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points.

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