

NCR Podcast: Interview with Elizabeth Johnson
Host: Tom Fox

Tom Fox: A sister in the congregation of St. Joseph who hails from Brooklyn, Elizabeth Johnson has been president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society.

She has served as a member of the national Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, a consultant to the Catholic Bishops' Committee on Women in Church and Society, a theologian on the Vatican-sponsored dialogue between science and religion, and on the Vatican-sponsored study of Christ and the world's religions.

She is also the author of the much acclaimed *She Who Is*, as well as *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, *The Church Women Want*, and *Friends of God and Prophets*. Today, Elizabeth Johnson is a distinguished professor of theology at Fordham University. Welcome, Elizabeth.

Allow me to start where many people probably start when they talk to you about your book, and that is the bad press that God has been getting recently, and even you allude to it early on in your book. Richard Dawkins, the author of *The God Delusion* is giving God a bad time. Is this deservedly so, given his arguments?

Elizabeth Johnson: To talk about Dawkins, and also Hitchens, Harris, the others that are writing those kinds of books, simply gets me very frustrated because the God that they are denying existence to is not the God that most Christians even believe in.

It's a mistake that they are starting out with, and then they deny up and down that this God in the sky, whom they imagine as an old, omnipotent man who intervenes in the world at will, to create evolutionary changes and things like that. Then they say there is no such God, but Christians don't believe in God that way so it doesn't compute. Their argument doesn't go anywhere.

If I may say, atheists of the 19th and early 20th Centuries offered really serious intellectual challenges to the faith. I'm thinking if people hear the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud in dialogue with those atheists and their attacks on God, theologians have benefited because we have gotten new angles of vision into God and new

ways of exploring who the living God is, new ways of bringing this to people.

These contemporary attacks, and they go by the name of the “New Atheists”, are very, very shallow and superficial. Truthfully for most theologians, there’s nothing to chew on there. There’s almost no way to have a dialogue with them because they’re not even talking about the same thing.

Tom Fox: Then let’s talk about your God, the God that you describe in *The Quest for the Living God*. Start with the title—why the living God?

Elizabeth Johnson: I did not want to just keep saying “God, God, God.” That summons up certain images to most people’s minds and I was trying to expand what the reference of the word “God” means in most people’s minds and hearts. The phrase “the living God” comes from the Bible. It’s found in the Psalms and the prophets.

It strikes me as a very wonderful, engaging, enticing adjective to describe God as alive, as on the move, as opening up a future, as full of beans, so to speak, as compared to the old, monarchical notion that is rather static. In scripture, they often compare the living God to a spring of living water or a well where the water is running clear.

Most times it connects with life, so the living God is the one who gives life, and all of the blooming, buzzing ideas that go with life are connected with that notion of God. So I was trying to make God seem interesting to people in general who think they know who God is, or they’re told who God is, and it sort of shuts down then.

Tom Fox: You deal with God as “gracious mystery” in your second chapter, but before that, you lay out three ground rules for the journey of this quest to recognize the living God. Could you spell out those three ground rules?

Elizabeth Johnson: The first one is that God is an ineffable, incomprehensible mystery and we can never wrap our minds around the fullness of who God is, simply by virtue of God being God and not a creature. The second rule is therefore, every word we use to speak about God has to be interpreted in a slanted direction.

It’s metaphorical, symbolic or analogical. It never means directly what we know it means in the world of creatures. It always means

that and more since God is the source of whatever it is we're saying about God.

Thirdly, therefore since no single name or word is ever sufficient, we need many words, many names, many images, many adjectives for God. Even added up all together, they wouldn't deliver the fullness of God, but each one adds to the richness and texture and the greatness of what we mean when we say that three-letter word, "G-o-d."

Tom Fox: When you speak about this living God, at the outset you quote the theologian Rahner and you write this: "The whither of our self transcendence is that toward which we are journeying, the goal toward which our self-transcending minds and hearts are forever reaching." Explain to us what you mean by "the whither."

Elizabeth Johnson: Like myself in a way, Karl Rahner was trying to avoid the word "God" because it seemed too settled and too narrow, in common usage, so he begins the notion of how we can come to understand a little bit about God by asking us to reflect on ourselves and our mental capacity for asking questions.

As we get an answer, then we ask the next question and the next one. That is, in a sense, endless in us, the same with our hearts, our desire for love. We love and then we love further and then we're capable of even more love and that too seems like an endless capacity and dynamism in the human spirit.

He raises the question, "What's at the other end of that? What's the vis-à-vis—toward what are we tending as we think and ask questions all our life long, or as we love?" He comes up with the notion of a horizon. We're going toward something vast and great, which obviously he thinks is going to be God, and he calls God "ultimate truth, ultimate love, ultimate life," but it can't be confined in an image or a concept.

So in thinking of this horizon that surrounds our life and calls us forward all the time, he came up with the word, the "whither," the one toward whom we are going. That connected up in my mind with the notion of the living God as it's used in the Psalms and in the prophets.

I quoted that text from Rahner to give a sense of the vastness. God is the one to whom all of us are tending in our quest for knowledge and our loving and our imaginations for life. God is the whither, therefore, of all these things by which our own spirit goes forth.

That opens up a sense of the greatness, richness and vastness of what we're talking about.

Tom Fox: I very much like the metaphor you use of the parallel train tracks. Let me read this sentence to you: "We'll never reach the end of exploring, having figured it all out. It is something like parallel train tracks that appear to meet at a point in the distance, but when you get to that point, the tracks have opened up to another distant point." It's an endless journey, you're saying.

Elizabeth Johnson: Yes, and I would say, I think, along with all other theologians including Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rahner and many others, that even through all eternity, we'll never get to the end point of it.

Tom Fox: On the one hand, you're saying, as Rahner did, that you're dealing here with vast mystery and an inability to comprehend, grasp, seize or compartmentalize it. The tendency then, it seems to me by many people (you avoid it in this book), is to just throw up your arms and say, "It's all mystery. We simply don't need to use our rational faculties for any capacity to approach this God."

Elizabeth Johnson: Quite the contrary, because those who live in the monotheistic traditions—Judaism and Christianity and Islam—all have the notion that God is an infinite, incomprehensible mystery, but that God has made the Divine Self known to use in various ways, so we're not without clues or what theology calls revelation.

We're not without a word and a vision of who God is, but even with that, we will never explore the fullness of that. The movement on God's part to reveal to us something gives us endless matterful reflection and for rational thought, and that's what theology tries to do.

Tom Fox: You particularly point to doctrinal terms: the incarnation and grace, and you write, "In personal terms, they are Jesus Christ and the holy spirit." Can you elaborate on that?

Elizabeth Johnson: For Christians, the vast, incomprehensible God, Creator of the world—and the world itself is a clue in all of its beauty and power to the Creator of the world—they go further and hold that God's own Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have, in the story of Jesus then, the clues into the character of God.

Jesus is God's mercy and person, God's face, God's way of being in the concreteness of the flesh. So we have endless ways of reflecting on God through the person, life and ministry, death and

resurrection of Jesus. Continuing onward in time, the spirit, which is God's own life, communicated again to human beings through our responses and goodness, through the love of neighbor and so on, through the promptings of the call to goodness in our hearts.

We are not left without testimony to this incomprehensible God. Christian theology engages itself in trying to understand this God and speak a good word and point our hearts toward this God, using the world and especially Jesus Christ and the evidence of the experience of the spirit.

Tom Fox: You write that we are living in a golden age of discovery, and that we have many, many vast new insights into this God from various experiences of people so that one point as I understand it, you're saying in each era, we have new possibilities to discover this God and secondly, that this particular era that we're living in is an especially rich moment.

So in your book, you lay out some of these experiences and again, I think what I'm picking up here and what seems to be evident in the book is that this God that you are writing about is coming out of the lived experiences of communities of people throughout the world.

Elizabeth Johnson: That's absolutely right. For example, they're the experiences of women, the experience of very poor people in Latin America, the experience of African-Americans coming out of slavery and so on. Those experiences are all within Christianity, but let me add the experiences of Christians, let's say, in India, where they live in a wider religious framework in their culture.

All of these experiences have raised in people's minds new sense of who the living God is, and then this becomes put into words by theologians and it seems to indicate that we should act a certain way and then they say it to the whole church because this is something too good to keep to only one group.

My take on what's been going on in the last half century in the Church and in the churches ecumenically, is that the spirit is moving again and there are new, as you say, lived experiences of God. So as I say in the book, it's moving here, our understanding of God, starts in the heart of people and goes into the head with communities of discourse that speak theologically, and then moves out into the hands, putting this into practice.

It's not an ivory tower effort. That was the point I was trying to make all the way through the book. This isn't coming out of scholars to begin with; this is coming out of communities of believers.

Tom Fox: Let's start and walk through some of these experiences. You start, perhaps rightly so, with the problem of evil and suffering. You have a chapter called "The Crucified God of Compassion—Unspeakable Suffering," and we see that everywhere and we've experienced it. Can you elaborate a little bit on this first insight into God through the crucifixion and suffering?

Elizabeth Johnson: The idea really surfaced in a strong way after the Second World War in Germany as a new generation of theologians, young people, tried to come to terms with what had happened in their country, especially with the Holocaust of the Jews.

What they came up with, and it has spread widely around the world, is that instead of allowing this kind of thing to happen, especially great moral evil like that or committing it, which was the answer that classical theology gave, there's more engagement of God in that suffering than we had realized.

The source for this kind of reflection actually was scripture itself—the compassionate God spoken of by the prophets who weeps with people's pain, who feels what they are suffering and so on. By identifying with those who suffer, through the story we have that we tell of Jesus Christ, it's able to bring new life at the other end of it.

They came up with the idea of not just saying God is above the fray, but God is in the fray, and not just in the cross, although that's where it's writ large on the world, but crosses keep on getting set up metaphorically throughout history. What is shown in the death of Jesus there is to be carried out.

Where is God when this suffering is going on? Right there with the sufferers and in the suffering, in compassionate solidarity with those who suffer, carrying them through. So the notion of the suffering God is rising around us like a tide, almost unstoppable, whatever school of theology you're looking at, for the most part. That's becoming a much more fruitful way of thinking about God in relation to suffering.

Tom Fox: The second insight is liberating God of life and you cite the struggle for justice in a context of wretched poverty.

Elizabeth Johnson: Yes, and that of course is Latin American liberation theology, who took their clue from the book of Exodus. When the slaves are in dire straits under the Pharaoh, it's interesting that the God of Abraham does not identify with Pharaoh, which most deities do identify with the one in power, but instead chose the slaves as a very dear treasure.

As the voice in the burning bush says to Moses: 'I have seen their suffering, I have heard their cries. I feel what they're going through so I've come down to liberate them.' That becomes paradigmatic, the signature of the way God acts in the world when people are in oppressed suffering, that rather than siding with the oppressor, God is with the oppressed in order to liberate them.

Tom Fox: Then you have God acting as womanish. Why the word "womanish"?

Elizabeth Johnson: That's the word that comes from African-American women. It's a folk word that's used when someone says to a girl, "You're acting womanish." It means you're acting brazen, bold and uppity and sassy and all those good things. You're not acting "passive and feminine" in the stereotypical way.

That chapter deals, obviously, with women of all races and the discovery they're making of their own subordination in religions and in society, due to the notion of God's overwhelming maleness, which is a metaphor and isn't literal.

Recapturing female images of God and letting that spill over to enhance the dignity of women, and therefore, to point to a transformation of the relationship between women and men in all societies, in the religions and in the churches, is what that is. So when women stand up, get uppity, claim their dignity and their equality, God is with them, and it's even true that God is acting that same way.

Tom Fox: Explain to our listeners why you speak of the danger of dualism in this context.

Elizabeth Johnson: This goes back to early Christian theology when it began to use Greek philosophical terms and concepts. Greek philosophy divided the whole universe into two elements, namely spirit and matter. They ranked them—spirit was more important than matter and should control matter.

When they translated that into human terms, they identified men with spirit and women with matter; men with mind and rationality, and women with bodiliness, passion and emotions. There was a privileging of one and a disparaging of the other. That understanding of the nature of women has rolled on through the centuries.

All of the great theologians of the past have used it and it's a dualism—it's a dividing of human beings into these radically different essences. Given that difference in our nature, that should therefore dictate our social roles, so men who are rational should therefore lead, and women who are emotional and bodily should therefore obey, et cetera.

Virtually all thought done by women on feminist theory, various kinds of theologies, are querying and criticizing that construction of human nature, especially of women's human nature, as being very damaging to our human dignity as women, and to women and men in community together.

Wherever dualism raises its head, it gets criticized. For example, theologians thought it was not proper to refer to God in feminine terms even though it's there in the Bible, because it would be using an inferior type of nature, namely women's nature, to refer to the infinite God and that would not give God dignity and so on.

So be reclaiming their own humanity and our own day, woman are once again liberating God's infinite mystery to be able to be referred to, not in dualistic or stereotypical terms, but in the fullness of women and men together.

Tom Fox: The next God seems to grow out of the Gods you just described, and that is the God who breaks chains.

Elizabeth Johnson: That's the experience of African-Americans in our country. The amazing thing there is that they were Christianized and what they heard in the gospel was this liberating message unlike what their masters wanted them to hear, namely slaves be subject to your masters.

So they have this enormous identification in their spirituality with the exodus from slavery, but also with Jesus because Jesus knows their troubles, Jesus suffered like them and he was whipped like they were whipped. He died on the cross but he rose again and he's coming for them.

There's hope at the end of this road, which when you are told basically that you are a non-person, you were bought and sold and your wife/husband/children are sold out from under you, and you're just a thing that is put to use, the dignity of your humanity is kept alive, almost against every odd by the sense of God, who is there to break the chains.

Tom Fox: The next chapter has a different flavor. You speak of accompanying God of fiesta.

Elizabeth Johnson: This is the notion of God that has emerged in the Latino community, those of Hispanic, Spanish descent, Central American, Latin American and Caribbean descent, who are in North America now, in the United States. Our political situation is different from Latin America so what they do is not called liberation theology, but the notion of God there, as I say in the book.

Latino theologians haven't done a lot of work on that yet, but looking at the popular piety, the way it's lived in the families and in the communities, you can get the clue of what this God is. Again, it's a God who walks with them in suffering. You see this in the Good Friday processions.

But also a God of flower and song, *flor y canto*, who has this touch of beauty, this flair of a flower, a song, a fiesta going on in the midst of the suffering. It's not an either/or, it's a very unique symbiosis of death and resurrection as they live out the knowledge of God in their midst.

Tom Fox: You then speak of "generous God" of the religions and you speak particularly of the bountiful God, there's a wideness in God's mercy. Can you speak about that?

Elizabeth Johnson: That notion of God is coming up from Christians in Asia. The Roman Catholic Church, in the documents of Vatican II especially, "Nostra e Tate," the decree on non-Christian religions, made this extraordinary statement that whatever is good and holy and truthful in other religions reflects a ray of the truth, goodness and holiness of the one God, going on the belief that there is only one God and that all goodness and truth comes from that one God.

Subsequent to the council, there has been a great deal of attention to the scriptures of other religions, to the savior figures in other religions, and to the way of life that includes a lot of asceticism, a lot of goodness, charity and prayer. This experience that Christians in Asia are having is that the God they believe in through Jesus

Christ has also been active in these other religions in different ways or patterns.

So they are experiencing a broadening out of the notion of who God is, and the word “generous”—that God has left no people without testimony to God’s existence and it’s seen especially in the religions. The word “generous” is what’s being used there.

Tom Fox: As an aside, I wrote a book called *Pentecost in Asia* that outlined some of that very same thinking.

Elizabeth Johnson: Yes, indeed. What struck me when I read the book by Jacques Dupuis, *The Theology of Religious Pluralism*—he was Jesuit from Europe who spent his life in India teaching and being in dialogue—is that he is so overwhelmed by the generosity of God that he says he ends up on his knees weeping of how marvelous this God is. So rather than making us lose the notion of God, if one follows carefully what’s going on here, it just makes it much greater.

Tom Fox: And then Creator’s spirit in the evolving world.

Elizabeth Johnson: Right. This is the God, of course, of evolution, of the cosmos. As science today is giving us new notions of how we all came about over endless numbers of 14 billion years and billions of galaxies and so on, we get a sense of God who isn’t only focused on the human race.

Our notion of God, until rather recently in the last couple hundred years, was very human-centered. This isn’t to say God isn’t concerned about the human race, but there’s an entire natural world out there, both our own planet with all of its species and life-giving forces, and then the universe itself.

So to go back to ancient scriptures and also to early Christian theology, which was very aware of this, and put our approach to God in a more cosmic framework is to open up all kinds of possibilities about the God that we believe in.

Tom Fox: In that discussion of our Creator’s spirit, some authors get into the distinction of pantheism and panentheism. How do you deal with the notion that we are of God, part of God, in God, but not God?

Elizabeth Johnson: I like to draw a big circle that stands for God. Then draw a second circle which stands for ourselves. If you draw that circle to be exactly the same as the big circle, therefore collapsing the two into

each other, that's pantheism—all is God. But if you draw that big circle which is God, and then draw within it another circle, a little circle and that's us, then that is panentheism—all is in God in whom we live and move and have our being.

That's just a little visual way of showing that, in that we are from God, God dwells within us and we dwell within the embrace of God, but we are not God. We are infinite, we are creatures, we come in to being, we pass away, we die. God is the living god of eternal life, who does not die, so there's a huge difference. I mean, the different can't even be expressed.

Tom Fox: The final chapter deals with “Trinity: The Living god of Love” , and this is a theme that you've dealt with in earlier writing.

Elizabeth Johnson: Yes, because it's been my conviction, as I was going through these various theologies of God coming up from these different communities and their lived experience. What's happening, without anybody deliberately trying to do it, is a new appreciation of the Trinitarian nature of God, who is infinitely beyond us and it with us in our suffering in history, which is in Jesus in Christ and then is with us in a pervading way throughout our lives and throughout the whole universe, the spirit.

As we Christians talk about God, we want to tell the story in those three tones, or those three inclinations, those three keys, and we don't do justice to the God that we have been given to know if we don't do it in that tri-fold way. I say that because when you say “trinity” to people, their eyes glaze over.

In a simple way, people get the imagination of three people or three separate persons, or “two men and a bird,” as Sandra Schneiders puts it. My point is to say that this is such a wonderful notion of God and the way it's so diminished in our imaginations if we don't stop and think about it, we can't afford to lose it. It's been refreshed in these wonderful ways by the theologies that are going on that I try to trace in the book.

Tom Fox: Are there any other points that you'd like to summarize or conclude with?

Elizabeth Johnson: I would conclude by saying two things. One is, I wrote this book because as I say in the preface, it strikes me that there is such a hunger for a mature faith in people today and that hunger isn't often met; it's not being fed by much that we hear in the Church. Preaching needs to be reformed—our own bishops say that.

I just wanted a book out there, a simple book that people could pick up and read and munch on and feast on and have a banquet in terms of what's going on in the theology of God. I think, therefore the book, while it's very theological in its own way, is written without footnotes. It's trying to put this out there in a way that's more accessible to people and it certainly does lead toward a spirituality.

The other thing, in the epilogue to the book, I did write these words, and may I conclude with them: "These gateways, meaning these different theologies, offer us glimpses of the living God, at once ineffable, vulnerable, liberating, relational, justice loving, beautiful, generous, cherishing, dynamic and adventurous, at once creative, redemptive and embracing, in a word, love."

Tom Fox: I'm most grateful for your having taken the time to share these thoughts with me and with our listeners.

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