

Unevolved

How the Bishops Misread Elizabeth Johnson

By John F. Haught

Last month, the [Committee on Doctrine](#) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a [critique](#) [PDF] of theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson's book [Quest for the Living God](#), claiming that it "contaminates the traditional Catholic understanding of God" and therefore "completely undermines the gospel." The bishops' statement concludes:

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 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 nonspecialist readers and is being used as a textbook for the 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.

Few contemporary theologians have communicated an appreciation of the Christian mysteries more faithfully, consistently, and intelligently than has Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ. *Quest for the Living God* is but one of her many profound works unfolding the richness of Christian faith. Throughout her distinguished career, Johnson has brought the love of God into the hearts and minds of countless readers, including many Catholic students, with force and clarity. And, unlike many other theologians, she has done so in a way that takes seriously the discoveries of science, especially evolution.

Johnson does not need me to defend her. However, as I see it, the bishops' statement reflects, among other problems, a theological failure to take evolution seriously. I suspect this has something to do with some strong opinions of Fr. Thomas Weinandy, OFM Cap, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and author of [Does God Suffer?](#) and [Does God Change?](#) (in both books his answer is no). Weinandy, with whose writings the statement has unmistakable verbal and ideological similarities, links suffering so closely to human sin that his theology lacks the breadth to take in the full drama of life that Darwin and his followers have laid open. This is true, more or less, of contemporary theology in general, but the structure of Weinandy's theology is especially resistant to evolution. Unfortunately, this carries over in a significant way into the bishops' criticism of Johnson.

In order to take evolution seriously theology has to ask whether God cares about the suffering of *all* living beings, not just humans. Today almost all theologians who take evolution seriously have accepted the idea of a suffering God in one form or another. Of course, what it means to say that God suffers has always been a matter of dispute in theology, and the issue remains unsettled. When Cyril of Alexandria stated that "the Impassible suffers," he captured the paradox perfectly. Yet, Weinandy, with whom I had a brief and cordial acquaintance

many years ago when he was an adjunct instructor in theology at Georgetown, has consistently tried to dissolve Cyril's paradox by declaring straight out that God does not suffer. His flattening of what has always been a lively theological enigma is evident throughout the committee's critique of Johnson's book. How so?

God cannot suffer, Weinandy maintains, for if God suffers, divine transcendence is jeopardized. Following a traditional formulation, his refrain is that Jesus suffers as man, but *not* as God. But such propositions have always floated in a sea of theological paradox, and Weinandy, as I read his scholarly work, wants to rescue God finally from any such ambiguity. In a [2001 article in *First Things*](#), he writes: "The truth that God does not suffer is at the heart of the gospel, making it truly good news." I doubt if many biblical scholars, preachers or theologians have ever summed up the New Testament message this way, but Weinandy persists, "The compassion of God is seen...not in His suffering in solidarity with humankind, but in His ability to alleviate the cause of human suffering—sin." He says nothing about God's possible solidarity with nonhuman pain or suffering.

Theologically, associating suffering exclusively or even primarily with sin has always been problematic, as the book of Job already testifies. However, in his book [Jesus the Christ](#) Weinandy goes so far as to identify *sin* as the "source of all suffering." His citing the "cause" of suffering as sin, together with his literalist denial of divine suffering, is the central core of a doctrinal program to which all other theological ideas must bend. No doubt he can find in Patristic thought a verbal ancestry for his commitment to divine impassability (nonsuffering). The problem, however, is that this theological program, if applied rigorously, now renders it impossible for Christians who embrace it to take evolution seriously.

Taking sin as the sole cause of suffering narrows the understanding of Christ's redemptive work down to that of the removal of human guilt and leaves the larger drama of life and the 14 billion year cosmic process outside the range of God's healing love. A purely expiatory theology of suffering—the idea that all suffering is caused by sin—is especially out of place when one contemplates the endless ages of predation, life feeding on life, extinctions, and violent deaths of sentient organisms throughout prehuman evolution, not to mention innocent human suffering. Weinandy's claim that suffering is essentially the result of sin is also the grounding assumption of today's antievolutionist biblical literalists. It is a significant obstacle to any serious theological encounter with evolution.

How, though, does this discussion of evolution, sin, and suffering bear on the bishops' statement? I think the imperviousness of Weinandy's theology to evolution supports and coincides with the severe judgment by the bishops' statement that Johnson has gone astray from Christian faith in her espousal of panentheism. This is a serious charge, so it is important to understand where it comes from.

Panentheism (as distinct from "pantheism") is the venerable notion that everything ("pan" means "all") exists *in* God rather than outside of the divine life. It is not a new idea in religious and theological history. As Paul says in Acts, God is the one "*in* whom we live and move and have our being." Christian versions of panentheism imply, therefore, that God's mode of being is wide, deep, and compassionate enough to embrace all of creation—including the undeserved suffering of nonhuman life which Darwin himself found so excessive. Panentheism, as many contemporary Catholic theologians understand the term, is also perfectly consistent with the affirmation of divine transcendence (see, for example, K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*).

Beneath the statement's repudiation of panentheism lurks not only Weinandy's claim that all significant suffering is the consequence of sin but also his judgment that a suffering God would be in danger of being absorbed into the world and hence contaminated by sin and evil. Such a being would be, in his view, less than "God," even though for other theologians the eternal, unchanging fidelity of God reveals itself most powerfully in images of divine solidarity with the world's suffering. For many contemporary theologians, divine transcendence is expressed, not suppressed, by God's empowering participation in the world's anguish and struggles, including the whole drama of life. Weinandy declares in his *First Things* article, however, that a theologian who accepts a suffering God necessarily succumbs to panentheism, just as a proponent of panentheism is bound to accept the erroneous idea of a suffering God.

Weinandy's writings and the bishops' statement harbor a distorted understanding of panentheism. They carelessly conflate it with pantheism, the belief that no distinction exists between the world and God. Their caricature of panentheism is then mistakenly projected onto Johnson's book, implying that her work tends toward pantheism, which it clearly does not. Instead, her theology preserves the qualitative distinction between God and the world. The "mutual abiding" of God and the world to which Johnson refers, and which the statement characterizes as contrary to church teaching, is completely consistent with the traditional Christian (Trinitarian and Chalcedonian) principle that "true union differentiates." God's intimacy with the world, as Karl Rahner and other Catholic theologians have noted, paradoxically makes the world something distinct from and *other* than God.

Weinandy's detachment of God from life's suffering also undergirds other criticisms of Johnson's book as well. I cannot elaborate here, but the bishops' statement expresses uneasiness with Johnson's allowance for revelatory experience in non-Christian religious traditions, for indeterminacy and self-creativity in natural processes, and for using a plurality of analogies and metaphors for God. The statement's objection to new ways of imaging, thinking, and talking about God is consistent with a theological decision to protect God from too close a contact with human experience, the suffering of life, and a universe that, as contemporary cosmology has shown, is still in the making. This is especially ironic since the sacramental quality of Catholic life and thought has always featured a God who *touches* the world in order to heal it.

Even so, my main objection is not that a particular theologian takes a firm stance on the never fully settled topic of God and suffering. Much more problematic is that the USCCB seems to want to make one debatable, scientifically uninformed interpretation of an ancient theological paradox a test of orthodoxy in the work of a widely respected Catholic theologian who also happens to take science seriously. As a Catholic, I want the Committee on Doctrine to teach authoritatively. However, given the problematic process that went into shaping the statement, as well as its failure to take evolution seriously, just how much authority can scientifically educated Catholics attribute to it?

Finally, what seems most obviously unjust is the [nondialogical character of the process](#) that led to the statement's harsh accusations. One might assume, of course, that the bishops on the committee were continually involved in the process. If so, why did they not point out the distortions in the statement's understanding of panentheism? Why did they not ask if there might be more nuanced theological ways of understanding the relationship of God to the world and to suffering? Were other theologians invited to participate in this process? If so, on what points did they perhaps differ from Weinandy's opinions? Above all, of course, why did

the committee not consult Elizabeth Johnson herself, just to make sure the bishops fully understood what they were rejecting. Why was she not invited to clarify her understanding of God before, rather than after, the release of the statement?

Related: [Teilhard and the Question of Life's Suffering](#), by John F. Haught

[Dennis O'Brien's review](#) of *Quest for the Living God*

From dotCommonweal: [Did the Committee on Doctrine Read 'Quest for the Living God'? It's Not about the Feminism \(Except When It Is\) USCCB Helps Boost Theologian's Amazon Ranking](#)

USCCB Committee on Doctrine

Donald Cardinal Wuerl
Archdiocese of Washington
Chairman

Most Reverend Leonard P. Blair
Bishop of Toledo

Most Reverend Daniel M. Buechlein, OSB
Archbishop of Indianapolis

Most Reverend José H. Gomez
Archbishop of Los Angeles

Most Reverend William E. Lori
Bishop of Bridgeport

Most Reverend Robert J. McManus
Bishop of Worcester

Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli
Bishop of Paterson

Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron
Archbishop of Detroit

[Read full critique](#) (Note: this is may take a few minutes to download, depending on your connection speed)