



For Elizabeth Johnson,
SAVING GOD'S THREATENED CREATION IS CENTRAL TO THE FAITH¹

Marian Ronan, the author of this paper, is a Grail member in the USA. She is Research Professor of Catholic Studies at New York Theological Seminary. Versions of this review appeared in the February 2015 issue of Gumbo, the monthly newsletter of the U.S. Grail, and in the March-June 2015 issue of EqualwRites, newsletter of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference. Marian blogs at <http://marianronan.wordpress.com>.

In the years after Vatican II, women's issues and environmental issues became increasingly important for many Catholics. In the 1970s, Kenyan Catholic Wangari Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, an environmental non-governmental organization focused on the planting of trees, environmental conservation and women's rights. In 1975, U.S. Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether published *New Woman, New Earth*, an exploration of the connections between sexism, racism and environmental destruction. In the 1990s, Brazilian theologians Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff wrote pioneering studies of the connection between the oppression of the poor and the destruction of the earth.

At the same time, Catholic women's groups, including the Grail and many congregations of women religious, engaged in environmental activism as well as organic farming, permaculture, and tree-planting. Other Christian churches and their clergy and theologians have likewise worked to reverse the destruction of the planet and the oppression of women that is linked to it. Yet, as the distinguished U.S. eco-feminist theologian Catherine Keller observed recently, 'Christianity on the whole continues to function as an anti-ecological public force'.

Critics focus particularly on the Christian belief that human dominion over the earth is central to the doctrine of creation. Feminist theologians have worked to reconstruct this understanding of creation and its corollary, the belief that men should dominate women because women are intrinsically connected to the earth.

Yet, given the way the 'Christian' U.S. and the rest of the 'First World' continue their brutal practice of 'extractivism'², it can be argued that these feminist and eco-feminist efforts have failed. One reason for this may be that many feminist theologians shifted to theoethical concerns (sexism, racism, colonialism, etc.) and paid less—and sometimes no—attention to classical systematic Christian theology. But if Christian practice regarding creation is going to change as radically as it must in this

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014.

² In the context of ecology, *extractivism* is the process of removing raw materials from the natural environment. Also used in the context of economics, in relation to the spending of income derived from these materials.

era of climate catastrophe, then the theology that under-pins it must be transformed as well. Elizabeth Johnson's new book, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, makes a significant contribution to such a transformation.

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson, a professor of theology at Fordham University, New York, USA, and a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, NY, fashions an intellectually sophisticated, yet lyrical, dialogue between the theory of evolution, especially Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and the Nicene Creed. Her purpose in so doing is to demonstrate that 'love of the natural world is an intrinsic part of faith in God', and to create a theology that will generate passionate, ethical action toward plants, animals and ecosystems—as passionate as that which drives faith in God.

The first three chapters of *Ask the Beast* comprise a close reading of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. If, like me, you have gone your whole adult life 'believing' in evolution without having read Darwin, or even particularly understanding the theory of natural selection, these chapters alone make *Ask the Beasts* invaluable. As one reviewer remarks, 'A more careful and sensitive reading of (*The Origin of Species*) would be hard to find anywhere, and not just among theologians'. In the fourth chapter, Johnson explores how aspects of Darwin's theory have 'evolved' since Darwin's own time, even as contemporary scientists affirm that the theory of evolution is 'accurate beyond reasonable doubt'. (102)

Throughout the rest of the book, Johnson constructs a dialogue between Darwin's theory of natural selection and the Nicene Creed, a dialogue that will enable Christians to shift their faith from an 'abstract and distant deity' to a 'living God intensely engaged with the world'. Chapter 5 braids Darwinism with biblical images, the theology of Thomas Aquinas and contemporary theology to represent the entire natural world, and not merely human history, as the dwelling place of God. The Holy Spirit, an afterthought in most anthropocentric theology, is the primary actor in this profound theological deepening. (This was also the case in Johnson's 1992 theological reconstruction, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*.) By dint of its ongoing evolution, the natural world 'continuously participates in the livingness of the One who is sheer, exuberant aliveness'. (148).

The next three chapters fill out this vision, exploring the freedom of creation, the suffering and death of all things, and *creatio ex nihilo*³ / eschatology, in dialogue with Darwinian thought. Finally, in chapter 9, Johnson's argument culminates in a new, deeply moving paradigm, that of the 'community of creation', in place of the earlier top-down, human-dominion paradigm of creation.

It's hard to convey adequately the scope and artistry of Johnson's writing. I was especially moved by the last six chapters, in which Johnson weaves together images and concepts from *The Origin of Species* and other scientific sources with theological texts from across the centuries, powerful biblical material, selections from English literature ('The world is charged with the grandeur of God ...'⁴) and the thinking of other eco-theologians. The concluding chapter alone would make a splendid prayer book.

³ 'creation out of nothing'

⁴ From Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, 1918.

Elizabeth Johnson has shown considerable courage in writing *Ask the Beasts*. As you may remember, in 2011 the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a stinging critique of Johnson's previous book, *Quest for the Living God*, claiming that it completely 'undermines the Gospel'. (This condemnation was subsequently reiterated by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.). A number of the theological issues that the bishops targeted in that book are also pivotal in *Ask the Beasts*. As Georgetown theologian John F. Haught explains, the bishops' critique of Johnson focused particularly on Johnson's position that God suffers along with creation.⁵ Their position is predicated on the argument that God cannot suffer because suffering is always the result of sin. Such a theology serves to keep God separate from, uncontaminated by, a sinful humanity.

But such a dualist theology is utterly incompatible with the evolution of species. Johnson's expansive reading of natural selection in *Ask the Beasts* includes the essential function of the suffering and death of some non-human species in the eventual emergence of higher species (including us). But the suffering of non-human species is not, by definition, a result of sin, so all suffering cannot be the result of sin, and it is not theologically inconceivable that God should suffer. For Johnson, God's oneness with all of creation is so fundamental that God suffers along with creation, even as She is also greater than that suffering.

It may be that the bishops will attack Johnson's theology in *Ask the Beasts*, as they did the theology in her previous work, though with Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment and his emphasis on mercy, perhaps not. All that notwithstanding, the news about the effects of human-induced climate change on God's creation grows increasingly dire. Christians (including the U.S. Catholic bishops) must acknowledge that the obligation to save that creation is at the heart of Christian teaching if such teaching is not soon to become irrelevant. There's no better way to begin this life-and-death conversion than by engaging deeply with *Ask the Beasts*.

Addendum after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's Encyclical '*On the Care of Our Common Home*'.

Anything written about Catholicism and the environment demands reconsideration after the publication of Pope Francis's attention-grabbing encyclical on June 18, 2015. This includes my review above of Elizabeth Johnson's *Ask the Beasts*.

A major question involves the place of women, and of feminist theology and activism, in Catholic teaching on climate change and environmental destruction. As I have argued elsewhere⁶, despite the occasional action to the contrary (such as washing women's feet on Holy Thursday), Pope Francis adheres to the traditional Vatican position on women and sexuality. That is to say, he continues the teaching on complementarity enforced by his papal predecessors. In this teaching, women are intrinsically passive and receptive and men active, just as Christ is the male Spouse and the Church is the receptive, obedient 'wife'. It seems likely that the Pope himself actually holds these positions but, even if he didn't, given the institutional church's focus on sexual teaching since Vatican II, his moving in any other direction would risk a civil war! What Pope Francis says about population and abortion in

⁵ www.commonwealmagazine.org/unevolved

⁶ <https://marianronan.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/christ-the-spouse-pope-francis-and-womens-ordination/>

Laudato Si' certainly suggests that his position on women and sexuality are consistent with the teachings of Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

In my review, I situate Elizabeth Johnson's *Ask the Beasts* within the history of feminist theology. Doing so at the time made sense, given Johnson's historic role in Catholic feminist theology and particularly given the ferocious criticism by the U.S. Catholic Bishops of her previous book, *Quest for the Living God*. I also argue that Johnson showed considerable courage in publishing *Ask the Beasts* since she includes in it some of the theological positions singled out by the U.S. bishops.

What I do not say is that in various places in the book, Johnson also is careful to emphasize the basically orthodox Catholic positions she holds on the transcendence of God, along with God's profound love and connection with creation. In these passages she is rebutting the bishops' suggestions that she is, in effect, a pantheist, someone who denies any separation between God and the material world.

At a lunch we shared after I had published my review of *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson told me that some feminists had criticized the book because it says very little about women. I myself had overlooked this fact because I was at the time unable to think of Johnson's work outside the context of her massive contribution to feminist theology. But as I returned to *Ask the Beasts* after our luncheon conversation, I had to admit that Johnson says very little about women or feminism there. I would argue, however, that her reconfiguration of God's relation to creation in light of evolution is implicitly feminist, because it undercuts the classic Christian polarization between women/earth on the one hand and male God/heaven on the other.

Later in our luncheon I asked Johnson another question. Now I put that same question to all of us who are reading this Resource Paper:

The issues that Pope Francis addresses in *Laudato Si'* are matters of life and death. Might it not be wise then for at least some of us to stop talking about the feminist issues that have been the cause of so much conflict between the Vatican, the hierarchy and Catholic women, and to focus instead on spreading the Pope's call for 'integral ecology'?

Furthermore, some conservative Catholic bishops, priests, politicians and churchgoers have tried to dismiss the Pope's words as going beyond the scope of his knowledge and authority. Should Catholic women activists and theologians criticize the encyclical from the left, objecting, for example, to his dismissal of population as an environmental issue, because it can be seen to be so closely tied to issues of reproductive freedom? Or should we put our own deeply held concerns about women's equality in the Church aside, and support Pope Francis? After all, isn't he downright heroic to have put out this stinging critique of neo-liberal capitalism, overconsumption and a free market economy, that are doing so much harm not only to the air we breathe, but to the lives of the dwellers of sub-Saharan Africa, of the islands of the Pacific and the fields of southern California, including of our own Grail sisters?

I leave us in the Grail to discuss and decide these questions among ourselves. But to illustrate where I come down on it, let me tell you a story. Since the publication of the encyclical, I have been working with an ad hoc group of Catholic laywomen and sisters here in New York City to draft and send out a series of inserts about *Laudato Si'* to be published in parish bulletins. I wrote the series of inserts, which other members of the committee then edited and circulated. At a certain point, the chair of the

committee said she hoped I didn't mind that she hadn't included my name as the author of the inserts. She didn't want anybody to Google my name and find my blog or all the books and articles I've written on Catholic feminist issues and then dismiss the inserts as too radical.

I said I didn't mind at all.

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