

Elizabeth Johnson on Revelation, Faith, Theology, Analogy, and God's Fatherhood

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ON MARCH 31, 2011, the USCCB Doctrine Committee issued a warning about Elizabeth Johnson's book *The Quest for the Living God*, because it "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." In her response Prof. Johnson basically repeated more briefly the positions laid out in *Quest*.¹ Only one point did she concede: that her language might have more clearly stressed that creation is God's free gift, not a necessary act. Even then she rejected the Committee's accusation that she had made the world "ontologically constitutive of God's own being." Throughout her response, however, she repeatedly questioned the Committee's judgment and its underlying presuppositions. Indeed, a vast difference seemingly exists between the methodological presuppositions employed by the Committee and those used by Johnson. The Doctrine Committee was concerned primarily to lay out the points of divergence between Johnson's presentation of the faith and traditional Catholic doctrine. It refrained from examining in detail her underlying philosophical and theological presuppositions.

¹ E. Johnson's response to the Doctrine Committee, "To Speak Rightly of the Living God" can be found on www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/EJohnson.response.CommDoct.pdf or www.ncronline.org/news/fair/Johnson-letter-us-bishops-doctrine-committee. Numbers given in parentheses in the main text refer to the section numbers which Johnson introduced into her response. References to *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007) and other books will be noted in the footnotes.

The present essay attempts such an examination in the hope of revealing why Johnson's method is flawed and why it leads to conclusions which the Doctrine Committee judged contrary to the Catholic faith.

The basic problem concerns the natural-supernatural relation and analogy. The former has been employed in Catholic theology since the thirteenth century. In the twentieth century, transcendental Thomists—such thinkers as Rousselot, Maréchal, Rahner, de Lubac, von Balthasar, and Lonergan—appealed to St. Thomas's neo-Platonic heritage, specifically his doctrine about man's natural desire to see God in Himself, in order to bridge what they considered the excessive separation of nature and grace that conceptualist theologians had introduced into Thomistic theology. Conceptualist theology presupposes an analogous concept of being at the basis of its ontology. If being can be conceptualized, then all of reality can be grasped in concepts, which supply clear distinctions among essences and between God and man. This, in turn, grounds a clear distinction between natural and supernatural orders. Natural reason can know certain truths about the world and God which are available to all, whereas supernatural faith accepts a revelation from beyond the natural world on the basis of God's authority as mediated through Christ and the Church. Faith itself is understood as the assent to revealed propositions. For not only is faith distinct from charity, the will's act, but also revelation is accepted in the way in which the human intellect normally knows, viz., in conceptual propositions.

In contrast, transcendental Thomism stresses the existential judgment as the principal means of access to being, that is, reality. Truth is in judgment. Whereas a concept is received in the passive intellect, a judgment is a synthetic, reflective act unifying subject and predicate, essence and existence, knower and known. It unifies even while postulating differences. Thus a transcendental Thomist can introduce great flexibility in his philosophy and theology, emphasizing, according to need, unity or diversity. By appealing to the natural desire to see God, the term implicitly affirmed in the dynamic judgment, he might bridge the natural-supernatural distinction even while paradoxically affirming it.² This change of perspective introduces also a different understanding of analogy, which grounds the possibility of making intelligible statements about God.

² For the contrast in method and presuppositions cf. John McDermott, S.J., "The Methodological Shift in Twentieth Century Thomism," *Seminarium* 31 (1991): 245–66; for the insistence upon paradox in Rousselot, Maréchal, Rahner, Lonergan, de Lubac, von Balthasar, Alfaro, and Mouroux, cf. John McDermott, S.J., "The Theology of John Paul II: A Response," in *The Thought of John Paul II*, ed. John McDermott, S.J. (Rome: Gregorian University, 1993), 63–64, n. 36.

Although, as far as I know, Johnson never elaborated the philosophical presuppositions of her position, she can be located within the broad spectrum of transcendental Thomism, as her frequent appeals to Rahner testify. Unfortunately her position lacks the full subtlety and depth of this tradition. As a result her theology conflates realities that should be distinguished. From this conflation results the consequent conflict with the episcopal Magisterium. Precisely because *Quest* is a popular book and does not lay out systematically its philosophical and theological presuppositions, the best way of examining the difficulties in her position may be to follow the order of Johnson's response to the bishops. This essay will examine in turn how she understands faith and revelation, faith and theology, and then analogy, before reflecting on the meaning of God's fatherhood, arriving at a conclusion, and issuing a challenge.

I. On Faith and Revelation (1, 2)

In the first two sections of her response Johnson denies the charge that she is not in accord with the Church's faith. Thus she treats faith and its objective correlative, revelation, while challenging the bishops to explain what they mean by those terms. She fears that the bishops started from a model of faith and revelation different from hers and have not recognized the legitimate plurality permitted to theologians within the Church. For "theology throughout history has articulated faith in different thought forms, images, and linguistic expressions." For her part she claims to start and end with the faith of the Church, understood in accord with Vatican II as the people of God, that is, "the whole community of believers," and to rely upon Scripture in her theology. She is "listening to theologies emerging within distinct contexts in the church. *Quest* presents ideas and images of God surfacing, being tested, spiritually prayed, and ethically lived out in eight different conversations" (Introduction).

For Johnson, faith, which is a grace, "arises in response to God's own loving self-disclosure." This revelation "happens through historical events and persons together with their interpretations, culminating in the whole event of Jesus Christ." Faith enables believers "to entrust themselves wholly to God and to assent to the saving truth which God has revealed." The reference to "saving truth" is not by happenstance; for her salvation "functions as a formal hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of scripture." To support her adoption of this principle Johnson cites *DV* 11: "The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writing for the sake of our salvation," and adds that "the official footnote quotes a text from Aquinas arguing that things which do not affect salvation do not belong to revelation."

Textual Misinterpretations

Underlying Johnson's position are several presuppositions, ambiguities, partial truths, and mistakes. First of all, the Thomistic text referred to by *Dei Verbum*, *De Veritate* q. 12, a. 2, does not corroborate Johnson's claim. Thomas is treating prophecy, which is only a part of revelation; he declares that "the gift of prophecy is given for the profit (*utilitatem*) of the Church"; it pertains to the salvation of souls. So prophecy can be concerned with things past, future, eternal, necessary, or contingent. He cites the *Glossa* to indicate that the Holy Spirit will teach every truth necessary for salvation. "And I say that the things necessary for salvation would be what are necessary either to instruct faith or to inform morals." He lists among them truths demonstrable by science, such as the incorruptible intellect and whatever leads creatures to admire God's wisdom and power. He adds supernatural truths, like the Trinity, which are beyond human cognition. Clearly, revelation is seen to consist of *truths* which are given by God for human salvation. Johnson's exclusion from revelation of truths that do not pragmatically effect salvation exceeds Thomas's text. The position of Thomas and Vatican II accords perfectly with 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work," which *DV* 11 cites. Human salvation does not supply the norm or the hermeneutical grid for interpreting Scripture; rather, the proper interpretation and actualization of *all* Scripture in human life will bring about salvation. By contracting the significance of revelation to human salvation and excluding all else, Johnson may be reducing theology to anthropology.³

One instance of that contraction surfaces clearly in *She Who Is*, where Johnson is representing feminist theologians:

Feminist theology repudiates an interpretation of the death of Jesus as required by God in repayment for sin. Such a view today is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry bloodthirsty, violent and sadistic father, reflecting the very worst kind of male behavior. Rather,

³ Johnson's argument was given originally in *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 78. Although Karl Rahner, S.J., "Theologie und Anthropologie," *Schriften zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954–84), 8:43, wrote: "Dogmatic theology must today be theological anthropology"—a dangerous sentence which could be interpreted as a surrender to Feuerbach—he understood his transcendental anthropology as built upon a *potentia obedientialis*, implying a "remainder concept," and as involving a necessary reference to a definitive history.

Jesus' death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human men, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God.⁴

Jesus clearly predicted His death as a "ransom for many" (Mk 10:45), and the message was repeated constantly in the early Church (Rom 3:24–25; 1 Cor 6:19–20; 7:23; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14, 20; 2 Tm 2:6; 1 Pt 1:18–19; 1 Jn 2:1–2; 4:10, 14; Acts 20:28; Rv 5:9; etc.). This death at the hands of sinners was willed by the Father; in the Garden, when Jesus could easily have escaped His fate by walking over the hill and losing Himself in the Judean desert, He accepted the Father's will instead of His own (Mk 14:36). He drank the chalice which the Father gave Him (Mk 10:38; Jn 18:11). This divine "necessity" Jesus foresaw in His life and obeyed (Mk 8:31; Lk 17:25; 24:7, 25–26; Acts 17:3).⁵ In accord with Isaiah's prophecy (53:6, 10), He was "handed over" (divine passive) by the Father (Mk 9:31; 10:33; 14:41; Rom 4:25). Jesus and His disciples recognized that the Father sent the Son to His death (Mk 12:6; Jn 3:16–20; 1 Jn 4:9–14). In fact the Father "predestined" Him to the cross (Acts 2:23; 4:25–28). That He did not spare His own Son is the surest proof of His love for us, from which nothing can separate us (Rom 8:32–39). He is the lamb sacrificed (slaughtered as victim) from the world's creation (Rv 13:8). At the Last Supper He understood His own death as a sacrifice in His "blood poured out for the many" (Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20). If the Eucharist is a propitiatory sacrifice, a point of defined Catholic doctrine (DS 802, 1740–43, 1751, 1753), to whom is it offered if not to the Father (cf. DS 1744, 1753; Eph

⁴ Johnson, *She*, 158. The notion that a symbol "functions" is also found in this work: e.g., 36, 38, 40. In *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 123–24, Johnson attributes to Schillebeeckx the view that the Father does not hand the Son over to suffering. Yet she writes, "Jesus was not crucified by accident but because of the kind of ministry he persisted in carrying out" (60, 76, 91–92). If His ministry was the Father's will, did not the Father foresee the cross? She apparently fears having any suffering attributed to God's will, even His permissive will (89; *She*, 249). It is strange that she would have God suffer with us (92; *She*, 249–54, 265–68; *Quest*, 56–68) but not have God will suffering. Does not God want us to be like Him? We exist apparently because "God too needs comfort, and human beings are called to assuage divine grief" (*She*, 260).

⁵ In *Consider Jesus*, 45, Johnson writes, "Toward the end of his life Jesus had a sense of death approaching, for threats were made on his life." Actually the New Testament witnesses Jesus' much earlier consciousness of His violent death (Mk 2:19; 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34, 38–39, 45). Johnson relies too much on the "critical wizardry" of some exegetes (73). *Consider Jesus* and *She Who Is* refer often to James Dunn, who denies Jesus' divinity. So the divine is reduced to the human. For the authenticity of the Son of Man Passion predictions cf. John McDermott, S.J., "Luc XII, 8–9: Pierre angulaire," *Revue Biblique* 85 (1978): 381–401.

5:2; Heb 10:10)? Further, Jesus' death, though caused by sinners into whose hands He was handed over (Mk 14:41; Acts 2:23), was not brought about by "human men" alone. Rather He died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:6–10). "All sinned and lack the glory of God" (Rom 3:9–12, 23; 5:12, 19). If Johnson does not accept the doctrine of original sin and recognize Jesus as the sole Savior of all men (females included) (Jn 4:42; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:4–6; Heb 12:2, 24), she runs the risk of self-justification. How can Johnson reject the imposing testimony of Scripture, which formed Tradition? St. Anselm's satisfaction theory offers but one of many possible interpretations of that Tradition. Is it not possible that the optic through which she views revelation is too narrow? Would it not be more prudent to rethink one's philosophical theology than to reject the overwhelming testimony of divinely inspired Scripture?

While Vatican II undoubtedly refers to the Church as the people of God, stressing thereby the continuity between Old and New Testaments and, in an ecumenical gesture, employing a designation dear to separated brethren, it is nonetheless clear that the council's primary image for the Church in *Lumen Gentium* is the Body of Christ. The Theological Committee, which composed the final text, noted: because it agreed with many council Fathers that the Mystical Body "is more than an image and leads more deeply into the mystery of the Church," the paragraph on the Body of Christ was placed in the text after the other images (LG 7). One Father, Karol Wojtyła, representing the Polish episcopacy, emphasized that the Body of Christ "is more than an image; for it determines the very nature of the Church under a Christological aspect and simultaneously under the aspect of the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption."⁶ In the New Testament "Body of Christ" identifies the Church much more frequently than does "People of God," even allowing for all OT citations and their usual reference to Israel. Although in Vatican II documents "People of God" is employed equally with "Body of Christ," the latter certainly brings out clearly the salvific novelty introduced by Christ. Moreover Vatican II emphasized that the Body of Christ is visibly and hierarchically organized (LG 7–8). The visible, hierarchical mediation of revelation preserves continuity with Christ's historical revelation, a link threatened by Johnson's theology (cf. below). To interpret the Church merely as "People of God" is to ignore the central aspect, even the essence of her reality.

⁶ Cf. *Relatio*, in *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican: Vaticana, 1970–99), 3/1: 173; K. Wojtyła in *Acta*, 2/3: 857.

The Truth of Faith

The main difficulty in the understanding of faith which separates Johnson from the bishops concerns the notion of truth affirmed. In Catholic theology "truth" can be understood in a Hebrew or a Greek sense. Hebrew truth refers mainly to personal fidelity; God is said to be true because He guarantees His word and keeps His promise (Deut 7:9; 2 Sam 7:28; 1 Kg 17:24; Ps 89; 132:11; Is 66:16; Jn 3:33; Rom 3:4) and men are called to be true (Ex 18:21; Is 48:1; Jn 3:21; 17:17). Undoubtedly in this sense Jesus Christ is the Truth (Jn 14:6); not only does He faithfully represent God to men (Jn 1:18; 14:9; 12:45) but also He remains faithful to His Father, doing His Father's will and making known His name (Mk 14:36; Jn 4:34; 5:30, 36; 6:38; 17:4, 6–8, 26). By comparison the Greek notion of truth stresses the correspondence of mind and reality in such a way that verbal propositions express the truth. This meaning does not contradict the notion of fidelity but is easily compatible with it. The faithful one speaks the truth. So in Jewish tradition "truth" comes to designate a doctrine revealed by God, especially the Law (Ps 25:5; 86:11; Mal 2:6; Dan 8:12; 9:13; 10:21). Likewise the gospel has "the word of truth," being itself the gospel of truth calling for conversion (Gal 2:5, 14; Col 1:5; Eph 1:13; 2 Tim 2:15, 25). Hence the gospel has to be preached in order that conversion and faith occur (Mk 1:15; Rom 10:14–17). Not only does Jesus reveal Himself and His Father through words (Mt 11:25–27; Jn 3:11–12; 17:8) but also from the very beginning the early Church formulates creeds as articles of belief; they serve as norms distinguishing faith from unbelief (1 Cor 12:3; 15:3–4; Rom 1:3–4; 10:9–10). Faith adheres to "the sound doctrine" opposed to myths and lies (1 Tim 1:4, 10; 4:1–2, 6–7; 2 Tim 4:3–4; Tim 1:9, 14; 2:1); such doctrine is taught in the Church, "the column and bulwark of truth" (1 Tim 3:15).⁷ Faith involves an intellectual act, since it is possible to call upon the Lord and not do His works (Mt 7:21–23; 21:28–31; Lk 6:46; Jas 1:22–27; 2:14–26; Ps 50; Amos 5:21–24; Is 1:10–17; Jer 6:16–21). There can be faith without works (Jas 2:17–28), and even believers shall be judged according to their works (Mt 16:27; 25:31–46; Rom 2:6, 13–15; Jn 1:22–27; 2:14–17; Rv 22:12). For salvation, faith must work through charity (Gal 5:6).

Johnson's notion of faith seems to be primarily, if not exclusively, of the Hebrew type: a personal entrusting of oneself to God, an assent to saving truth. It does not necessarily involve an assent to propositions as

⁷ Cf. Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., "Verité," in *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, ed. X. Léon-Dufour et alii (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 1092–98; John McKenzie, S.J., "Truth," in *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), 901–2; Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, trans. J. Moreau (New York: Norton, 1970), 201–2.

true and binding. Following Rahner's notion that there is only one Christian mystery, the object of faith, she writes: "Rather than being propositional it [the one mystery in Christian faith] does not reside in doctrinal statements but in the reality of God's own being as self-giving love." This mystery is identified as "the ineffable God" who is "infinite, incomprehensible, inexpressible."⁸ Thus she can accuse the Committee of conflating faith with theology (4). Indeed she does later accuse the bishops of adhering to predetermined neo-scholastic formulas with an insistence that "the truth must be expressed in an explicitly determined set of words, words assumed to have a certain a-historical, unchanging meaning" (10). Of course, human words can never be a-historical inasmuch as they are spoken in time by material mouths. But the reverse question can be put to Prof. Johnson: can there be any propositions about God which correspond definitively with God's reality? If not, the content of faith cannot be intellectually expressed, and then believers cannot express to themselves or others what they really believe. Words become permanently relativizable. When one cannot express to oneself what one believes, how is the position of the believer different from the unbeliever? The unbeliever does not believe; the believer does not know what he believes. Must there not be some permanent intellectual content in human words in order that human intellectual communication occur over the ages? How else might the twenty-first-century Christian recognize that he believes what Peter and Paul believed, viz., what Jesus Christ preached and who He is? If Paul felt compelled to put himself in accord with Peter lest he "run or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2), should not latter-day Christians recognize the same compulsion for intellectual and moral integrity and for unity in the faith? There is only "one faith" and "no other gospel" than the one Paul preached (Gal 1:6-7; Eph 4:5).

This question is not new. In 1970 Hans Küng questioned papal infallibility precisely because the human mind, according to him, cannot make a definitive judgment about God and divine things. Karl Rahner attacked Küng not only because he rejected a defined truth of Vatican I and Vatican II, the infallibility of the pope, but also because he denied that propositions can provide lasting truths. Rahner opined that he has to treat Küng as a liberal Protestant, who acknowledges as a binding authority neither Scripture nor council. However limited and capable of improvement dogmatic and other propositions may be, it is impossible without them to distinguish truth from falsehood and, without that distinction, continuity with Jesus' truth is lost. Faith as a basic human decision cannot

⁸ Johnson, *Quest*, 43.

be demanded unless intellectual truth is definitively proposed to men.⁹ Before Küng, Leslie Dewart, facing the problems of dogmatic development, had questioned the possibility of permanent dogmatic statements, inasmuch as such statements have to be reconceptualized repeatedly in order to adapt them to the understanding of new historical epochs. Truth is allegedly valuable only insofar as it contributes to human self-transcendence and self-possession. Bernard Lonergan criticized him for relativizing dogma and ignoring the whole notion of judgment in which truth is said to abide.¹⁰ "Truth is in the intellect composing and dividing." That is Thomas's opinion (*ST* I, q. 16, a. 2), which repeats the view of Aristotle (*Metaphysics* VI 4, 1027b17–29; IX 10, 1051b1–1052a3).

Development of Dogma

The question of dogmatic development seeks a resolution. How can there be growth in understanding as well as adaptation to new *Weltanschauungen* without changing the content that previous propositions affirmed? Reconceptualization entails endless problems. Different words or concepts obviously have different meanings, and their meanings signify within wider systems of thought. It is not easy to find the same meaning in two systems of thought when their parameters have shifted. Indeed, were it possible to attain an overview linking the old formulations and the new reformulations within their accompanying worldview, one would have to ask why the new formulation cannot be proposed within the wider systematic perspective. But of course, even the overview is different from the original statement, and the dilemma of Plato's third man returns.¹¹

Unfortunately an ambiguity resides at the foundation of Rahner's and Lonergan's thought. Their appeal to judgment as foundational, on the one

⁹ Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Enquiry*, trans. E. Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971); Karl Rahner, S.J., "Kritik an Hans Küng: Zur Frage der Unfehlbarkeit theologischer Sätze," *Stimmen der Zeit* 186 (1970): 361–77; idem, "Replik auf Hans Küng," *Stimmen der Zeit* 187 (1971): 145–60; cf. also his earlier "Zum Begriff der Unfehlbarkeit in der katholischen Theologie," *Stimmen der Zeit* 186 (1970): 18–31.

¹⁰ Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), esp. 90–118; Bernard Lonergan, S.J., "The Dehellenization of Dogma," in *A Second Collection*, ed. W. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 11–32.

¹¹ Cf. Plato, *Parmenides* 132a–133a; the designation "third man" stems from Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 9, 990b15–991a8; VII 1, 1038b34–1039a14; XIII 4, 1079a11–13. On the question of dogmatic development, I think that the basis for an answer has been laid in my articles: "Faith, Reason, and Freedom," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67 (2002): 307–32 (reprinted in *Faith and Reason*, ed. A. Fisher and H. Ramsay [Adelaide: ATF, 2004], 215–47), and "The Sacramental Structure of Reality," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17/1 (2010): 57–79 (updated and reprinted from *La Scuola Cattolica* 128 [2000]: 273–99).

hand, allows them to insist on the validity of concepts. No judgment can occur without a subject which is identified by a concept or of which a concept is predicated. In Rahner's words, "An 'it' alone without a 'something' about it can in no way be imagined in thought." For "the judgment [*conversio ad phantasma*] is exactly the referral of the universal to a material singular (*Dies da*)."¹² Similarly, Lonergan insists that knowledge consists in the response to two questions posed by the mind: *quid sit*, identifying an essence, and *an sit*, asking whether the essence exists.¹² So the judgment necessarily presupposes as its condition of possibility a validly abstracted universal concept. On the other hand, precisely because a judgment is a synthetic movement of the mind, the problem of conceptual relativism continually reemerges. While a judgment presupposes a concept for the subject of a proposition, conscious truth is attained only when the mind transcends the concept to affirm its relation to existence (reality). The concept is thereby acknowledged as insufficient per se to bring the mind to reality. It is only an abstraction, and concrete reality is submitted to an infinite number of possible abstractions which do not exhaust it. Not surprisingly, Küng claims that he is only developing further Rahner's insights, and a later student of Rahner's thought, Mary Himes, contends that dogma is open to repeated reformulations and "formulations of faith are necessary and helpful but only insofar as their connection to the experience of that mystery which grounds religious life is recognized and thematized." For "faith is not ultimately grounded in obedience to propositions but in free and loving contact with that mystery to which all propositions of faith, however inadequately, refer." Similarly David Power employs an allegedly Lonerganian method so to reformulate Trent's position on the Mass's sacrifice that he can deny that the Mass's sacrificial character binds faith's confession. Admittedly, Lonergan's revision of his thought in *Method in Theology*, where he postulated an infused divine love as the basis for human cognition, makes it harder to maintain the primacy of intellectual judgment. Nonetheless, neither Rahner nor Lonergan ever abandoned the validity of judgmental truth

¹² Karl Rahner, S.J., *Geist in Welt* (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1939), 82, 288–89; Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Verbum*, ed. D. Burrell (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 1–66, 94–95. Although Rahner starts, like Heidegger, with a question, his question, unlike Heidegger's, is articulated and thus presupposes knowledge, a judgment. The two thinkers at the origin of transcendental Thomism, P. Rousselot and J. Maréchal, were very concerned with saving conceptual validity within the transcendental spiritual dynamism: cf. John McDermott, S.J., *Love and Understanding* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1983), 25–42, 51–86, 154–66; and Daniele Moretto, *Il Dinamismo intellettuale davanti al Mistero* (Milan: Glossa, 2001), 104–32, 152–82, 235–44, 301–37.

and, consequently, the possibility of valid conceptual abstractions. Unless concepts somehow grasp reality, no judgment can affirm reality over them. So a valid judgment of truth presupposes valid abstractions. Without them it is impossible to think coherently and distinguish truth from falsehood.¹³ Rahner himself writes that what prevents his transcendental theology from devolving into “classical Modernism,” the Catholic version of Protestant liberalism, is his insistence that the conceptually expressed reflection in the human spirit’s original self-possession is not supplementary or superfluous; instead, as a universal, it belongs to the original self-possession. Precisely because he upholds the validity of concepts, he never denies any defined dogma, however novel his reinterpretation of it might be.¹⁴

That a relativizing view of dogma underlies Johnson’s explicit propositions may be seen both in her understanding of theology as emerging from believers’ lived experience in the Church and especially in her reference to revelation as “culminating in the whole event of Jesus Christ.” An “event” is a happening or a becoming. Since becoming participates in both being and non-being, its intelligibility cannot be grasped, as Plato (*Timaeus* 28a) and Aristotle (*De Interpretatione* 9, 19a35–b3) realized long ago. Insofar as becoming implies potency, it escapes the principle of contradiction (*Metaphysics* IX 8, 1050b8–13, 30–34). For that reason many Protestant theologians prefer to speak of revelation as an event: an event is not subject to the laws of human ontology but leaves God free to intervene where and when He wishes.¹⁵ Because an event escapes ontology’s

¹³ H. Küng, “Im Interesse der Sache,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 187 (1971): 43–45, 105–14; Mary Himes, *The Transformation of Dogma: An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* (New York: Paulist, 1989), esp. 153–58; David Power, O.M.I., *The Sacrifice We Offer* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 138–54. For a more balanced and nuanced view of Rahner and Lonergan on dogma, cf. Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* (New York: Fordham, 2002), and John McDermott, S.J., “Tensions in Lonergan’s Theory of Conversion,” *Gregorianum* 74 (1993): 101–40.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, S.J., *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 26–27. Cf. John McDermott, S.J., “Karl Rahner in Tradition: The One and the Many,” *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* 3 (2004–2007), esp. 10–20, 52–60.

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, “The Idea of God and Modern Man,” in *Translating Theology into the Modern Age*, ed. R. Funk (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 89: “The Christian faith speaks of a *revelation* which it understands to mean God’s act as an event which is not visible to the objectivizing thought of reason, an event which as revelation does not communicate doctrines, but concerns the existence of man and teaches him, or better, authorizes him to understand himself as sustained by the transcendent power of God.” Cf. John McDermott, S.J., “Jesus: Parable or Sacrament of God?” *Gregorianum* 78 (1997): 484–90; 79 (1998): 545–51, for reflections on Bultmann, Barth, and Schweizer and revelation as an event. Eberhard

necessary laws, faith's response to it cannot be based on reason; thus faith remains God's free gift. Unfortunately this option separates faith from reason and results in the almost uncontrollable pluralism of doctrinal expressions in Protestant theology.¹⁶

In Johnson's response, moreover, it is unclear how revelation culminates in the Christ-event. Did Christ "once for all" accomplish salvation and revelation in the past (Heb 7:27; 9:26; 10:10), or is His event ongoing so that revelation continues into the present? Johnson seems to prefer the latter interpretation:

The fundamental nature of Christian identity as life in Christ makes it clear that the biblical symbol Christ, the one anointed in the Spirit, cannot be restricted to the historical person Jesus nor to certain select members of the community but signifies all those who by drinking of the Spirit participate in the community of disciples. Christ is a pneumatological reality, a creation of the Spirit who is not limited by whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

This "symbol Christ" allows her to follow Sandra Schneiders in separating Christ from Jesus: "This means that Christ, in contrast to Jesus, is not male, or more exactly not exclusively male. . . . Christ is inclusively all the

Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1977), 209–10, 221–23, 309–10, 338, 394–400, 406, 415, 465, 497, 499, 510, 513, 517 n. 3, 530–31, so emphasizes revelation and faith as an event of speech that possibility is previous to being (291–95, 398), the principle of contradiction does not apply (294), and God takes non-being into Himself (297–98, 304–5, 522), into His eternal becoming (526–27); for God is not subject to metaphysics (49). Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–98), 2:285, 319, 344–46, 350–51, 354, 360–68, emphasizes the resurrection event as the foundation of Christian faith. There the event of the Incarnation became complete (383–86) and Jesus attained "to the dignity of the Kyrios" (2:283; 1:264). For God's self-revelation occurs in action (1:243, 368). Before the eschaton, which the resurrection anticipates, all dogmas are only provisional hypotheses and Scripture itself is distinguished from divine truth (1:16, 25, 54–56, 207–11, 250, 340).

¹⁶ In *She*, 207, Johnson interprets the cross as "a trinitarian event opening up a path for the suffering of the world to enter the very being of God." The resultant lack of distinction results in the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity (199, 227) and the "reciprocal relation," "mutual immanence," and "mutual indwelling" of God and the world (181, 228, 234–36) in the womb of Holy Wisdom (179–81). In quoting Rahner's axiom, "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice-versa," Johnson overlooks that the two names "immanent" and "economic," to which correspond "modes of subsistence" and "modes of presence," imply a difference, not a simple identity. Moreover, Rahner does not hold consistently to his own axiom: cf. Burke, 73–90, esp. 88–90, and John McDermott, S.J., "Rahner in Tradition," 30–34, esp. nn. 50–51.

baptized.”¹⁷ Christ seems to be an ongoing event, not limited to any particular time and place. How then can Jesus Christ’s temporal mission be definitive? Is Christianity losing its historical moorings? Why has the Church said that revelation was completed with the apostles (DS 3020, 3421)? Is Jesus only an “historical person,” that is, a human person? Was Paul mistaken in preaching “Christ crucified” and not Jesus crucified (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2; Gal 3:1; 6:14)?

Foreshortened Christology

The distinction of Christ from Jesus apparently lies in Johnson’s truncated version of Rahner’s descending Christology. Although she admits that descending and ascending Christologies are not mutually exclusive, she develops the latter at greater length. Whereas man is a mystery, “a thirst for the infinite,” whose “nature as a concept cannot be totally grasped,” God is a greater mystery, “utterly incomprehensible.” From Rahner’s suggestion that “person” in the Trinity be replaced by “distinct manner of subsistence or self-subsistence” or “a mode of being” so that “God’s own self has three different ways of being, or exists in three distinct manners of subsistence,” Johnson applies the designation “Father” to God’s self, “Son” to God’s self-uttering, and “Holy Spirit” to “the power of unifying love, always bringing the divine self-expression back into the primordial unity.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, neither Johnson nor Rahner explains what “a manner of subsistence” or a “way of being” or a “mode of being” actually is or does. It fits no metaphysical category. The divine nature seemingly remains the one goal of human thirsting and one agent (nature) or self vis-à-vis the world.¹⁹

“The Christological question arises when we inquire after what happens when these two [the mystery of human nature and the mystery of divine nature] enter into union in the incarnation.” Johnson upholds Jesus’ full humanity in His union with God. On the basis of Rahner’s neo-Platonic axiom that autonomy increases in proportion to ever greater unity with God, Jesus “is genuinely human and in fact more human, more free, more alive, more his own person than any of us, because his union with

¹⁷ Johnson, *She*, 162; cf. also 98 for the juxtaposition of “the risen and exalted Christ” and “the historical Jesus of the ministry.” The citation is from Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 54.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 24–27, 68; idem, *She*, 215; idem, *Quest*, 204, 212–13. Cf. below n. 27 for the resulting confusion.

¹⁹ For Rahner’s detailed position cf. John McDermott, S.J., “The Christologies of Karl Rahner,” *Gregorianum* 67 (1986): 87–123, 297–327, and “Rahner in Tradition,” 1–60, esp. 36–45, 55–60.

God is more profound.” This occurs because at the Incarnation “God who is love eternally self-expressing within the divine being as the eternal Word, self-expresses outwardly into the history of this earth. God’s own inner Word is spoken into the medium of human flesh, bringing Jesus into existence.”²⁰ If it sounds strange that Jesus should come into existence and be “his own person” due to His union with God, that is because Johnson considers “Jesus” the name of the human subjectivity involved in the “incarnation.” Jesus has “normal limited human knowledge.” His ignorance about the future (Mk 13:32) need not imply imperfection, since our ideal of perfection is no longer knowledge but freedom, and “full, clear knowledge of the future” would remove the condition for freedom’s operation. “For real freedom to operate we must take a risk.” Despite this limitation of freedom, Jesus possesses “pre-thematic consciousness” of being the Word made flesh. This personal intuition of the person who He is needs, however, a whole lifetime to be spelled out in clear terms. “As with all of us, the mystery of his person was never totally expressed in concrete terms until the time of his death, when he transcends this world and is raised from the dead.”²¹

Johnson’s insistence on risk and ignorance as a condition of freedom seems to be contradictory. Not only would she apparently deny freedom to the omnipotent God but also she contradicts her understanding of Jesus’ union with God. If freedom grows in proportion to union, Jesus is most free in the beatific vision. In it there is no risk of sin. Rahner insists on Jesus’ possession of the beatific vision throughout His human life; only thus can He be the full reflection of God in a human nature. If Jesus were peccable, He cannot be God and the salvation which He worked in history would be dependent upon a human freedom, which cannot communicate definitive salvation. That is why Athanasius and Cyril insist that the central actor in the historical drama of salvation be divine, and why Maximus Confessor places freedom in Jesus’ person, not in His finite will.²² Johnson may refrain from attributing the beatific vision to Jesus inasmuch as its possession terminates all human desire, and that termination is hardly compatible with a growth in explicit knowledge: if the goal

²⁰ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 27–30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40–42.

²² Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* II:67–71, 76–77; III:38 (PG 26, 289A–300A, 308B–312B, 404C–405B); Cyril of Alexandria, *In Joannem*, I:1; V:2 (PG 73, 205A–208B; 753C–756A); *idem*, *In II Cor.* 5:5–6:2 (PG 74, 946A); for Maximus cf. Guido Bausenhardt, “*In allem uns gleich außer der Sünde*” (Mainz: Grünewald, 1992), 148–67, and John McDermott, S.J., “How Did Jesus Know He Was God? The Ontological Psychology of Mark 10:17–22,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009): 273–83.

is possessed, why is there need of partial conceptual knowledge? Yet if Johnson holds that Jesus falls short of explicit knowledge of God and Himself, how can He be the full revelation of God before Easter? (Rahner allows that Jesus “erred” about an imminent arrival of God’s kingdom. His position leaves unexplained why anyone should follow a fallible “savior” who errs about the central theme of his preaching.) If Jesus’ full knowledge arrived only with the resurrection, why did the Church accept as revelation the gospels about Jesus’ pre-paschal ministry? They would not comprise trustworthy divine revelation. One sees why for Johnson the “Jesus-event” has to be continuous revelation on earth: all conceptual knowledge falls short of the “pre-thematic” knowledge of God.²³

In *Quest*, Christology comes to the fore briefly when Johnson considers the notion of a sacrament; she cites this text from *Quest* in her response (8):

Originating in God’s loving desire to communicate with people in a saving way, specific things such as persons, events, texts and rituals become bearers of the power of this desire in history. Through them God approaches; through them people become conscious of divine presence and make their response. In Christian faith, Jesus is *the* sacrament of this two-way encounter. Wishing to unite with the human race in its joys, sinfulness, and terrible suffering in order to save, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us as a human being. Through his life, death, and resurrection God has forged a saving bond with the human race that cannot be broken. The cross brings God’s love into the depths of our death; Christ’s risen humanity is the pledge of life for all into the eternal future. God thereby posits the incarnate Word in history in order to signal a broader economy, the presence of God’s saving will coextensive with the history of humankind.²⁴

Johnson may have italicized *the* before “sacrament” since Roger Haight’s *Jesus Symbol of God* had earned a rebuke from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith because he allowed other saving symbols alongside Jesus. Haight had drawn erroneous conclusions from Rahner’s theology of the symbol. Rahner had understood a symbol as the visible expression of a grace already received, equivalently a sacrament, and had applied his insight to Christ, the Church, and the seven sacraments, so that there was

²³ A basic difficulty underlies Rahner’s and Johnson’s positions: “pre-thematic” knowledge is non-conceptual knowledge. But Thomism recognizes as intuitive only sensation and the beatific vision. “Pre-thematic” knowledge seems to imply the beatific vision. This holds true of everyone’s alleged experience of grace. But we do not enjoy the beatific vision: cf. McDermott, “Rahner in Tradition,” 27–36.

²⁴ Johnson, *Quest*, 176.

a unity in diversity of God with the finite symbol. Extending that insight, Haight recognized that Jesus' humanity was only a finite human symbol and therefore could not be absolute. He did not pre-exist His humanity and Nicaea should be reinterpreted to mean that "not less than God was present to and operative in Jesus." Wherever grace, that is, God in His presence, is accepted, a symbol comes to expression, and, given God's universal salvific will, other figures can mediate grace in other religions just as Jesus' humanity serves as a symbol-sacrament for Christians. Other religions can be recognized as "mediators of God's salvation on a par with Christianity." God is normatively revealed both in Jesus and in other religions. Hence "Jesus is not constitutive of salvation universally . . . and it is not necessary to think that God as Spirit can be incarnated only once in history."²⁵ By the italicized *the* Johnson stresses the uniqueness of Christ. One notes, however, that there is a two-way encounter, that is, from God and from Jesus' human subjectivity. That still leaves unanswered the problem exploited by Haight: how can a finite symbol claim absolute adherence from all men? Moreover Johnson's affirmations need not affirm more than what Haight affirmed. Jesus is *the* symbol "in Christian faith," which could mean "only for Christians." The Word becoming flesh, a fine Scriptural phrase, has previously been interpreted only as God's presence to Jesus. The saving bond cannot be broken, because Jesus has been resurrected—God does not change that—and He serves as a sign for all who can or wish to perceive it. Jesus' historical act does not necessarily effect salvation; He only "signals" it.²⁶

²⁵ Roger Haight, S.J., *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 404–17, 436–45, 446–65, 485–89; quotes from 415, 456, 460.

²⁶ Johnson's response (8), synthesizing *Quest*, 155–58, claims that Vatican II (AG 9) "affirms 'elements of truth and grace' in the religions 'as a sort of secret presence of God.'" Actually she interjects "the religions." The text reads: "Whatever elements of truth and grace, being as it were God's hidden presence, were being found among the nations, those elements [missionary activity] liberates from malign infections and restores to Christ, its author, who overturns the devil's empire and impedes multifarious criminal wickedness." Cf. *Quest*, 156, for the same error. *Quest*, 157–58, misconstrues *Redemptoris Missio* by equating the "Spirit's presence and activity" with a sanctifying activity realized in other religions; that equation lies in her Rahnerian theology, but not in the encyclical's theology. For her, God is everywhere self-giving presence, or grace (41–44, 162); she cites the Indian episcopal conference, which attributes a salvific role to other religions (157–59, 162–63, 171–74, 178). Yet *Redemptoris Missio* states, "Jesus Christ is the one savior of all, the only one able to reveal God and lead to God" (5), and insists on "the necessity of the Church for salvation" (9). At issue is not whether God's grace is given beyond the Church's visible bounds but whether sanctifying or uncreated grace, as opposed to actual grace, is given and accepted

While Rahner's early Christology is a descending Christology, whereby all that Jesus did, His deeds as well as His words, is considered divine revelation, its Monophysite tendency is balanced by his later ascending Christology whereby Jesus' hypostatic union is explained in terms of the beatific vision. This more Nestorian cast of thought, which allows in Jesus a free, self-conscious center of activity vis-à-vis the divine free, self-conscious center of activity, is more preferred by Rahner as time progresses and he enters into dialogue with modern exegesis. He explains the hypostatic union and soteriology as inner moments within the more fundamental divinization of the world and muses: "Perhaps it is possible to be an orthodox Nestorian or an orthodox Monophysite. If this were the case, then I would prefer to be an orthodox Nestorian."²⁷ In any case, this Nestorian tendency explains how Johnson can write, "The divine quality of the Compassion of God became incarnate in [Jesus]." Here not a person, but a quality becomes incarnate. Similarly, after identifying Sophia as "a female personification of God in outreach to the world" who "creates" and

there and whether non-Christian religions mediate that grace *qua* religions. Only God, who reads hearts, can answer the first question, and *Dominus Jesus* answered the second question negatively, thus preventing intellectual chaos. (Cf. John McDermott, S.J., "Did That Really Happen at Vatican II?" *Nova et Vetera* 8 [2010]: 452–55.) Johnson, *Quest*, 160–62, finds *Dominus Jesus* inadequate for ecumenical discourse: "To put it simply, the living God is not a Christian." Though not cited by Johnson, *Redemptoris Missio* 10 states: "Christ's salvation is open to [non-Christians prevented from hearing the gospel] through a grace, which, despite a secret bond (*necessitas*) with the Church, does not lead them formally into her, but illuminates in a way befitting their interior condition and the collateral circumstances of events (*res*) and times." An illuminating grace is usually an actual grace; how Christ's salvation reaches individuals is left sapiently vague. The insistence on the bond with the Church underlines the necessity for salvation's mediation through her.

²⁷ Karl Rahner, S.J., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, ed. P. Imhof and H. Biallowons, English ed. H. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 126–27; idem, *Grundkurs*, 200–201. In this latter work, Rahner reverses the perspective of Scripture and Thomas (ST III, q. 2, a. 10; q. 6, a. 6c et ad 2; q. 7, a. 13c et ad 2–3). Yet Rahner, "Jesus Christus," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. K. Rahner et alii (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 2:923, also claims that Jesus is the primary datum of faith and is not just subsumed under an abstract, possible schema for interpreting reality. He also insists on the continuing mediation of Christ's humanity for our salvation, even in the beatific vision; but it is not clear why participation in Christ's humanity is necessary if grace is a participation in God's nature (cf. McDermott, "Christologies," 107–8; this article originally identified the Monophysite and Nestorian tendencies openly, but the journal editor insisted on the removal of those judgments. Nonetheless the perceptive reader easily catches the implications of the article. If all that Jesus did reveals God, His visits to a *gabinetto* imply God's fearsome wrath.

redeems," Johnson follows Paul in seeing Jesus as the wisdom of God and Sophia incarnate. "As Sophia incarnate Jesus can be discerned as a coincidence of opposites in every respect: . . . a man yet the prophet and very presence of Sophia herself." "Jesus is identified as the human being Sophia became." In another work Johnson refers to a hyphenated "Jesus-Sophia" and identifies Jesus as Sophia as well as "the prophet and son of Sophia." This would be pure contradiction unless there were two subjects in Jesus. So Johnson's distinction of Jesus and Sophia parallels the distinction of Jesus and Christ already noted. If Christ and Sophia are just other terms for God, then one sees why Johnson can hold that "each of us is a little word of God."²⁸ All who receive God in grace become His self-expression in the flesh. But how do two free, self-conscious subjects (natures) in Jesus avoid Nestorianism or Arianism? Johnson's reformulation of dogma for modern or post-modern readers does not quite resolve all problems for anyone who is seeking the ultimate unity of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, insofar as Johnson would follow Rahner in interpreting the hypostatic union in terms of the beatific vision, there is no reason why other humans cannot enjoy a hypostatic union. Christ's salvific uniqueness is lost.

Theological Pluralism

Catholic theology and the Magisterium have long recognized a legitimate pluralism. But a substantial difference exists between the traditional

²⁸ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 33, 104–5, 111–12, 126; idem, *She*, 91–99, 157, 154, 157–58, 160–61, 213, 217; cp. *Quest*, 176, 189, 191. Johnson's use of hyphenation can be confusing. While "Jesus-Sophia" apparently reflects a Nestorian double subjectivity, such expression as "Sophia-God" (157–60, 213, 218) and "Spirit-Sophia" (157, 213) apparently intend an identity. Wisdom is also identified with the Word (99, 214). All this happens because these are various "personifications" of God. So "God is God as Spirit-Sophia" (213). Despite the identity of Wisdom and the Logos (99, 214), Wisdom is not a second Trinitarian person but is simply identified with God. Thus arise the "triune mystery of Sophia" and "the metaphor of Sophia-God as a Trinity of friendship" (213, 221–22). For Wisdom is lively "in three distinct movements, shapes, manners of subsistence, *hypostases*, modes of being, persons" (215). Sophia is "a personification of God's own being" (91) or "of God's own self" (93). Since the Trinitarian "manners of subsistence" have no function, there is obviously only one self in God and that self, designated by various names, expresses itself in various human beings. Cf. also Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 53: "All life is a gift and Woman Wisdom, a personification of the Creator Spirit, gives that gift." Benedict Spinoza's Wisdom-Christology, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. Elwes (1883; New York: Dover, 1951), 14–15, 18–19, is amazingly similar to Johnson's, but where she relativizes Scripture before experience, he subordinates Scripture to reason (14–15, 27–28, 33–36, 40–42, 61–68, etc.). Reason is concerned with truth and wisdom while Scripture teaches piety and obedience (190, 194–95).

understanding of pluralism and that proposed more recently by transcendental theologians. Traditionally theologians accepted as the irrefutable foundation of their theologies the clear affirmations of Scripture and the dogmas defined by the Magisterium; pluralism resulted from the various interpretations given to those statements and dogmas. Transcendental theologians, in contrast, extend the notion of pluralism to the ongoing, polymorphic reformulation of the dogmas themselves. Certainly the insistence on the permanence of dogma cannot be ascribed to neo-scholastic thinkers alone. So to ascribe it betrays a lamentable ignorance of history. Already at the second ecumenical council, Constantinople I, the Fathers stood on the defined faith of Nicaea, considering it “authoritative” or “decisive” (*kuria*: DS 151), and at the Council of Chalcedon the Fathers not only reaffirmed the Nicene creed as “immobile” (*asaleuton*) and “unsailable” or “irrefutable” (*aparencheireton*) but also proclaimed their own unity in understanding with Nicaea, Constantinople I, and Ephesus. Later councils made explicit what was contained in Nicaea’s faith (DS 300–302; cf. also Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 36, a. 2, ad 2).²⁹ Perhaps the dogmatic development which those councils, the recent Magisterium, and Johnson desire might be better attained by a more profound study of such basic terms as nature, substance, person, and being than by attempting to recast the entirety of theology and dogma into new molds. From Nicaea to Constantinople III, the greatest theological minds did not reject those terms but sought to penetrate ever more profoundly their meaning. Indeed, all theologians who considered themselves bound to an ecclesial dogmatic tradition have sought to explicate those terms. Does Johnson consider it possible to do theology or even to think coherently without the employment of such terms? If she wishes to recast theology, she owes the Church, both the people of God and the Body of Christ, a more exact consideration of basic terms. She explicitly recognizes the councils as authoritative (10), but she does not employ the language of the councils. In what sense do the councils enjoy authority for her theology? How can they serve as a “touchstone for centuries of theological interpretation” if they do not provide intelligible standards for understanding the faith? If their language is ignored, what service do they provide?

²⁹ Beyond Lampe’s dictionary, Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* lists for the verb form *parencheiro* the meaning “interpret symbolically.” Given the alpha-primitive in the adjectival form *aparencheireton*, this would mean that the creed is not to be interpreted symbolically. That may be stretching a point, but the Fathers certainly intended to insist that their decisions and definitions be accepted.

II. On Faith and Theology

A further confirmation of Johnson's understanding of faith and revelation is offered in her treatment of the faith-theology relation (3–4). Quoting CCC 66 on revelation as “already complete,” but not yet “completely explicit,” she projects theology's role as bringing “out faith's meaning afresh.” She sees theology as the praxis of faith seeking understanding in various ways throughout history. As a disciplined reflection it is “rooted in different imaginations: analogical, dialectical, liberationist” and it has employed “different philosophies: Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, process, analytic, while not being tied to any one.” She judges theologies on their ability to “sustain the inquiring minds and committed praxis of the people of the church” as well as to “influence official church teaching.” *Quest*, she holds, rests on the conviction that “the symbol of God functions” in ethical practice, and she wished to identify the ethical practice flowing from each theology of God “in order to ascertain if justice, peace, and right order really are the result.” This accords with the pragmatic norm expounded in *She Who Is*:

In the course of this program [feminist theology] one criterion recurs as a touchstone for testing the truth and falsity, the adequacy and inadequacy, the coherence and incoherence of theological statements and religious structures. This criterion, variously enunciated, is the emancipation of women toward human flourishing. As a gauge it is applied in a practical way, the adequacy of a religious symbol or custom being assessed according to its effects.³⁰

However vague the “flourishing of women” may sound—it encompasses “embodiment, sexuality, passion, the erotic” as potential goods to be reclaimed for the “erotic power . . . which alone can heal the broken-heartedness that is patriarchy's legacy”—Johnson and feminists choose it as the ultimate standard, “an a priori option” not further justified by reason, Scripture, or Tradition. Not that Johnson rejects outright Scripture and Tradition, but she considers them “historically ambiguous monuments to patriarchy's view of its own rightness.” Hence she relativizes them, placing alongside these traditional sources of faith “present faith experience.”

If God is worshiped as the guiding reality, the source and goal of all, then the truth is tested by the extent to which the idea of God

³⁰ E. Johnson, *She*, 30; Johnson apparently borrows the norm of flourishing from R. R. Ruether: cf. *Consider Jesus*, 103; she uses it also in *Women*, 25. The primacy of praxis over thought is affirmed in liberation theology: *Quest*, 83, 86–87.

currently available takes account of accessible reality and integrates the complexity of present experience into itself.³¹

The norm for judging a theology's value is clearly not its intellectual conformity with reality but its pragmatic effects, however they are defined. Right order, justice, and peace are relatively ambiguous terms, depending on the meanings attributed to them by each person. Certainly the traditional notion of justice bifurcates into commutative and distributive justice. The former demands that all be treated equally, the latter demands that the particular conditions of each individual be assessed and handled proportionately. That leaves much room for dispute, as do the notions of peace and order to which Fascists and Communists alike appealed. Even apart from such difficulties, does not the proper judgment of successful praxis depend not on praxis itself, which is concrete, dynamic, voluntary, and transitory, but upon intellectually established pragmatic norms? Truth is deeper than and adjudicative of all human praxis. If the "symbol of God" employed in theology has to be judged as adequate or inadequate in practice, the symbol must be grounded in truth perceptible to the human mind. A symbol that is not true cannot correctly guide conduct. One might also fear that such a position leads to atheism. If God's truth is judged by practice and women have been long oppressed by a patriarchal religion, as Johnson maintains, where has God been for the past two millennia? What reason is there for belief in a God so impotent according to feminist standards?

Misinterpretations and Exaggerations

Johnson rejects the bishops' statement that *Quest* "begins with a critique of the Church's faith, or, rather of what she terms traditional theology" for a double reason. First, she claims that the bishops conflate faith with theology. Second, she claims that she rejects not traditional faith but "modern theism," that is, an Enlightenment view of God which separates God from Christ; indeed "the Christian God is defined without Christ." To back her position she cites two theologians. Michael Buckley held that the theologians during the Enlightenment "bracketed religion in order to defend religion" and thus transmuted Christianity into theism. Karl Rahner "observed, if one were to remove the Trinity from theological treatises of this era, it would barely make a difference."

Johnson's criticism unfortunately falls into the same error of which she accuses the bishops. Their statement makes clear that *Quest* at times distinguishes modern theism from Catholic theology but at other times

³¹ Johnson, *She*, 17, 7, 15, 69, 270; idem, *Women*, 60.

seemingly equates the two since she accuses “traditional Christian doctrine” and “traditional preaching and theology” of the same deficiencies that encumber modern theism.³² Moreover, she identifies with the repudiated modern theism various characteristics of God, such as immutability, transcendence, and immanence, which traditional Catholic theology and ecumenical councils consistently have predicated of God (DS 800, 3001).³³ The bishops were much more nuanced and accurate in characterizing her position than she theirs. She is also somewhat careless in appealing to the authority of theologians without checking the accuracy of their accounts. Even good theologians can sometimes wildly exaggerate opponents’ positions or commit egregious blunders. Rahner did publish that ridiculous statement about the Trinity’s alleged irrelevance. But he also accused neo-Scholastic theology of supporting a Monophysite Christology under orthodox terminology.³⁴ How can the same theology which allegedly proclaimed the second person of the Trinity as God in the flesh be guilty of overlooking the Trinity? Since Rahner likewise contended that the mystery of the Trinity is open to us only through the Incarnation,³⁵ it seems that his polemic against conceptualist Thomism led to a propagandistic exaggeration. Similarly, Buckley’s clever quip plays on a double entendre regarding “religion.”³⁶ The Baroque Scholastics and their successors understood religion in two senses. There is a natural religion, available to all men by creation and reason, and there is supernatural religion revealed historically in Jesus Christ. This distinction was not uncritically adopted by Catholic theologians at the time of the Enlightenment. With Thomas Aquinas they presupposed a natural knowledge of God, which is insufficient for salvation, but is required at least for the coherent use of reason in theology. If it is not possible for men to know of God’s existence and something of His characteristics, how might they understand either Jesus’ words about His Father or the

³² Cf. Johnson, *Quest*, 73, 80; idem, *Women*, 17–18.

³³ Johnson, *Quest*, 15, 52, 54, 56–64. Johnson’s response (6) quotes theologians with regard to a suffering God and says that she is “inclined toward a both-and position on this question rather than an either-or.” Distressing, however, is the appeal to human experience instead of addressing the underlying metaphysical question. All apophatic theologians should hesitate long before supporting statements about God just based on human experience when conciliar documents apparently say the opposite.

³⁴ Karl Rahner, S.J., “Probleme der Christologie von heute,” *Schriften*, 4:176–82.

³⁵ Ibid., “Zur Theologie der Inkarnation,” *Schriften*, 4:137.

³⁶ Michael Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 345–46.

Church's proclamation of the gospel? Did not St. Paul presuppose a natural knowledge of the unseen God from the visible realities of creation (Rom 1:19–21)? And did not Vatican I follow him in defining solemnly the possibility of natural knowledge of God (DS 3004, 3026)? Without a “pre-understanding” of at least revelation's presuppositions, man could not freely affirm revelation; for freedom requires some understanding of what is chosen. Buckley conflated the two understandings of “religion” to support his polemic. His and Rahner's quips judge their opponents polemically, that is, negatively from the presuppositions of their own positions without seeking to enter into a real dialogue.

Doubtless Buckley wrote a whole book detailing his position, and Rahner spilled rivers of ink in explaining the natural-supernatural relation. To make one's point pointedly, polemical propaganda might be excusable, and theologians, like other human beings, like to confound opponents by emitting *bons mots*. But when a theologian's proper understanding of the faith is questioned by bishops, the time for propaganda is past. Admittedly there are problems with reconciling Paul's natural knowledge of God with his insistence on creation in Christ, the one through, for, and in whom all things were created (1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–17; also Jn 1:3, 10). A good theologian is conscious of those difficulties and does not excuse herself by implying that she and the bishops are just working with different theological models. The late Cardinal Dulles employed “models” in the chaotic pluralism after Vatican II, but, as Johnson herself admits, he at least sought to synthesize the models—more so, it seems, in *Models of Revelation* than in *Models of the Church*. In a catholic Church, whose founder gave His life with the prayer that all be one (Jn 17:20–23) and whose greatest preacher insisted on “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5), there has to be unity of faith, and that faith must somehow be expressible in intelligible words. Otherwise, not only will contrary practices arise and divergent creeds emerge but also the very intelligibility of the created order is undermined. Faith becomes an irrational leap into darkness.

As noted above, Johnson's “faith” seems to be fundamentally an experiential praxis of believers culminating in the Christ-event. Though it may be communicated through words, the praxis is primary and serves as the norm for judging a religion's validity. It seems that when she accuses the bishops of conflating theology and faith, she opposes faith and theology as praxis to theory. Abstract theory always falls short of concrete practice and hence is subject, like sociological theories, to perpetual reformulation. J. B. Benestad has rightly remarked that Johnson's paradigms of praxis encompass a rather limited constituency, ignoring the

broad majority of Catholic faithful.³⁷ How does anyone know that she or any other theologian claiming to speak for certain groups authentically represents those groups? Have they been elected or are they self-appointed? On a deeper level Johnson's insistence on the primacy of practice, which human beings experience, forces her to veer very close to Schleiermacher, who made religious experience the existential core of Christianity; such experience is only subsequently (ontologically) expressed in theological and dogmatic propositions, which consequently (logically) are capable of constant reinterpretation and revision. The fundamental question remains: what truth value do intellectual formulations of faith possess or can they possess? Are they just "theology"? Or are they statements of religious truth to which an intellectual assent must be demanded? Johnson owes the bishops a clearer reflection on her own understanding of the relation between faith and theology or between "faith" as lived experience and "faith" as intellectual truth.³⁸

Johnson appeals to theologians like Dulles, Rahner, and Buckley, but the appeal to authority is the weakest of arguments unless that authority be divine. Although Dulles's contribution was recognized by his elevation to the cardinalate, neither he nor Rahner nor Buckley has been officially recognized as a normative Catholic teacher. The bishops, however, have been promised Christ's continuing presence and the Holy Spirit's assistance in the transmission of the faith until the consummation of the age (Mt 28:19–20; Jn 14:26; 16:13–15). The bishops would seem, therefore, to require an answer that is more than an appeal to an authority less than theirs. Perhaps Johnson is not aware of the underlying tensions which Catholic theologians must confront and balance. Her own theology seems very one-sided, and she should not be surprised when it is placed into question. Since it has been questioned by bishops, who bear responsibility for the unity of the faith, the time of polemics should be past.

III. Analogy (5)

That Johnson is sincere in her protestations about remaining faithful to Catholic doctrine need not be questioned. Indeed, her understanding of

³⁷ J. Brian Benestad, "Review of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 34–35 (2011): 52–53.

³⁸ Johnson, *She*, 7, 15, proposes "present faith experience" alongside Scripture and tradition as a source for proper language about God. As the book develops, experience or hoped for experience, the flourishing of women, becomes the dominating source and criterion of religious language. "In and through women's conversion experience and its many articulations new language about God is arising, one that takes female reality in all its concreteness as a legitimate finite starting point for speaking about the mystery of God" (75).

the basic intellectual problem, that of analogy, reveals that her basic difficulty is not obstinacy or disloyalty but superficiality. In her response, in *Quest*, and in *She Who Is*, her God-language is described frequently with such terms as “images” and “thought forms” and “symbols.” What truth value do they possess? An answer to that basic question should be expected in her treatment of analogy. After saying that the theologies traced out in *Quest* are “attempting new articulations of the belief that ‘God is Love’ (1 Jn 4:8)” (4), Johnson spells out her understanding of analogy, “the theory guiding my work.” She summarizes *Quest*’s “ground rules for language about God” as “norms synthesized mainly from Aquinas’ writings but with backing in scripture”: “first, God is infinite holy Mystery who can never be fully comprehended by our human minds; second, no human language is adequate to express this divine reality; and third, there need to be many names for God, each one opening up a different angle of vision.” Articulating that further with a general reference to the thought of David Burrell, William Hill, Erich Przywara, and Herbert McCabe, she writes:

Aquinas positions analogy between univocity, where words have the exact same meaning for creatures and God, and equivocity, where they have no meaning at all in common. Since the creaturely world reflects something of its Creator, there is similarity but not identity in the same words used of creatures and God. Honoring this relationship of Creator and creation, Aquinas describes a supple movement of mind in which we first affirm a creaturely perfection of God; then negate the finite way we know that quality; and then reaffirm the creaturely perfection as belonging to God in a supereminent or excellent way.

Relying on the distinction between the *res significata* (the reality signified) and the finite *modus significandi* or “the limited way of knowing commensurate with our earthly experience,” she continues:

Our mode of representing what we are talking about, our concept of the perfection, does not match its mode of being in the reality of God. The concept is inadequate. And yet having used it, our minds arrive at insight via a judgment that this perfection is true of God superlatively. It is a judgment that breaks out of the finite mode of apprehension endemic to our creaturely way of knowing.

Thus analogical knowing is “a dynamic kind of relational knowing, pervaded with religious awareness. It intuitively opens up an unspeakably rich and vivifying reality by the intelligible content of the concept, even though at the same time God remains in essence conceptually inapprehensible.”

This explanation of analogy in Johnson's response to the bishops is more thorough and precise than what was offered in *Quest*. It is especially clearer in portraying the role of judgment in analogy. *She Who Is* also based analogy upon an ontology of participation whereby "every creature in some way shares in divine perfection, although in no way does God resemble creatures."³⁹ But by emphasizing the apophatic second step of analogy, the negating of the finite mode of the predicated perfection, Johnson falls back into the agnosticism for which the bishops rightly criticized *Quest*. For, insofar as, in Johnson's theory, "no human language is adequate to express this divine reality" and "the concept is inadequate," it is hard to see what meaning is conveyed to the human mind. Judgment indicates a movement of mind toward God's infinite reality, which it apparently has not reached, while the concept conveys an intelligible content. However much the concept must be stretched beyond its normal usage, some continuity must be maintained between its intelligible content and God's infinite reality. Human knowledge has to be more than an "imaginative construct" functioning as a symbol that can "bear divine presence and power" and give "an occasion for thinking."⁴⁰ Otherwise all finite knowing about God is destroyed.

In writing "[analogical knowing] intuit[s] an unspeakably rich and vivifying reality opened up by the intelligible content of the concept, even though at the same time God remains in essence conceptually inapprehensible," Johnson avoids the basic question concerning the valid application of concepts to God. Certainly no concept or judgment can comprehend God or exhaust His reality; He is infinite, our minds are finite. But an intuition is not a concept. Similarly, while God is conceptually incomprehensible inasmuch as no concept can circumscribe Him, He has to be apprehensible and somehow known in and through concepts. If the concept is completely inadequate, all thought breaks down and judgments about God and His perfections are rendered meaningless. Unfortunately Johnson never explains how conceptual content is predicated meaningfully of God; instead she constantly emphasizes the apophatic aspect of all knowledge of God. She quotes Thomas: "We cannot know of God what He is [*quid est*], and thus we are united to Him as to one unknown" (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1), but she neglects to note that Thomas is referring to knowledge "in this life through grace's revelation." Quidditative knowledge of God is reserved for the beatific vision. Of course Thomas recognizes that certain mysteries, like the Trinity, are supernatural and cannot in principle be known by man's natural intellect

³⁹ Johnson, *She*, 114.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

(q. 32, a. 1; cf. q. 1, aa. 7–8). Nonetheless, through faith we are joined to the Trinity, since the creed conveys knowledge of God: “The act of the believer ends not at propositions but at the reality [*non terminatur ad enuntiabilia, sed ad rem*]. For we form propositions only in order to have knowledge of the realities through them both in science and in faith” (II–II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2).⁴¹

In analogy the *via affirmationis* is not abandoned or rejected by the *via negationis*; otherwise analogy's foundation would be destroyed and the whole structure would come tumbling down. The affirmation is retained in order that the *via eminentiae* might reaffirm it beyond the negation, purging its limitations. Unless some similarity subsists between Creator and creature, it is impossible to argue to His existence from created effects. Rather than to imagine three sequential steps, it is more suitable to think of analogy as a constant referral between the created analogue and God, the ultimate term of reference. Human words and concepts about God convey truth about God, even if they do not comprehend or exhaust His reality. Hence statements about God can be judged true or false. But philosophers and theologians have offered various understandings of analogy. A look at the debate will help to illumine the points at issue between Johnson and the Doctrine Committee.

Thomistic Analogy

The notion of analogy, central as it is to all theology and to all human thinking, is not easy to grasp.⁴² God is infinitely beyond us, yet language about Him presupposes knowledge about Him from created effects.

⁴¹ Johnson's response (5) quotes CCC 170, which cites this Thomistic text, but whereas Thomas's context makes it clear that the creedal proposition gives knowledge of the reality known through the creed, Johnson would have the proposition serve merely as a temporary support for a transcendental negation. In *She*, 240, one finds: “Insofar as this constant negation invalidates nothing except the limits of the affirmations we make about being, it actually can give off a little light. For the not-knowing that comes at the end of thought pursued to its limits is actually a deeply religious form of knowing.” Nothing comes *per se* from a negation or denial of limits—darkness “emits” only darkness—and insofar as there is any light, it must come from the original affirmation of a conceptual content; but a conceptual content must have some limits, if it is to be humanly intelligible. Cf. St. Thomas, *In XII Libros Metaphysicorum* IV, lectio 8 (644): “A negative truth always depends upon the truth of some affirmation; hence no negative conclusion is drawn unless there is something affirmative in the premises.”

⁴² Joseph Owens, “Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God*, ed. J. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 30: “To mention analogy in a Thomistic context is to stir up a vipers' nest.”

Hence to go from effect to cause, creatures have to be like God; but, if God's transcendence is to be preserved, God cannot be like creatures (ST I q. 4, a. 3c et ad 4; ScG I, q. 29). That paradoxical relation provides the grist for theological mills. Conceptualist theologians distinguish analogy of proportion, or attribution, from analogy of (proper) proportionality. The analogy of proportion refers other terms to a prime analogate which alone realizes intrinsically a formal notion, or perfection, and upon which the other terms somehow depend. An extrinsic causal relation joins the terms, or secondary analogates, which manifest degrees of likeness, to the prime analogate. The perfection in question need not be intrinsic to all the analogates.⁴³ Aristotle's classic example points to bodily health, by which one might designate healthy its analogates such as medicine, food, climate, complexion, and urine.⁴⁴ These latter realities may cause or manifest health in the body, yet need not be healthy in themselves; e.g., the cow is dead, but because it contributes to a human body's health roast beef can, by extrinsic denomination, be designated "healthy." Appealing to the intentional realm, Maurilio Penido discovers "an ideal case" of the analogy of proportion in the doctrine of ontologists who hold that "the creatures can be known only in function of the Creator."⁴⁵ But this analogy fails to supply conceptualist theologians the requisite means for proper discourse about God.

Because an infinite distance separates God and His perfections from creatures, conceptualist theologians argue that no community of nature and no direct proportion between God and creature can be established. Nonetheless the infinite gap can be suppressed to a degree by the analogy of proportionality.⁴⁶ Penido cites Thomas's *De Veritate* q. 23, a.7, ad 9, to make his point:

⁴³ Gerald Phelan, *St. Thomas and Analogy* (Milwaukee: Marquette, 1941), 19, 28, 35–37; Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Revelatione* (Rome: Ferrari, 1945), 1:284–85.

⁴⁴ Phelan, *St. Thomas and Analogy*, 19; Ambroise Gardeil, O.P., *Le Donné révélé et la théologie*, 2nd ed. (Juvisy: Cerf, 1932), 207; idem, "La Réforme de la théologie catholique," *Revue Thomiste* 12 (1904): 71; Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *God: His Existence and Nature*, trans. B. Rose (St. Louis: Herder, 1934–36), 2:207; idem, *The One God*, trans. B. Rose (St. Louis: Herder, 1943), 396–97, 399.

⁴⁵ Maurilio Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie en théologie dogmatique* (Paris: Vrin, 1931), 36–40; Phelan, *St. Thomas and Analogy*, 29.

⁴⁶ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 178–79; Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 2:209–10; idem, *The One God*, 397, 400–401; idem, *De Revelatione*, 1:285–86, 294; Louis Billot, S.J., *De Deo Uno et Trino*, 7th ed. (Rome: Gregorian University, 1935), 88–89, 97–98, 105–7; Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. G. Phelan (New York: Scribner's, 1959), 229.

Although finite and infinite cannot be put in proportion (*proportionata*), they are nonetheless capable of being proportional (*proportionabilia*), for as the infinite is equal to the infinite, so the finite is equal to the finite; and *through this mode* there is a likeness between the creature and God because as God is related to what belongs to Him, so the creature is related to what is his own.⁴⁷

Thus a proportion is established among relations, each of which realizes a perfection intrinsically and diversely. By discovering a proportion between a known reality and its particular quality, or perfection, it is possible to postulate a similar proportion in another reality, specifically in God.⁴⁸ Though each realizes the perfection in a mode proper to itself, the creature finitely, God infinitely, the analogy of proportionality permits the predication of a pure, or simple, perfection of God.⁴⁹ “Pure perfections” are “infinite,” each in its own line; that is, the concepts need contain no intrinsic limitation.⁵⁰ Whereas corporeality, for example, involves intrinsic limitation, knowledge, or wisdom, involves nothing in its idea which necessarily limits it to the finite. So knowledge, or wisdom, is predicated of God by the following analogy: as knowledge (wisdom) is to a being in becoming, so knowledge (wisdom) is to the Being without becoming.⁵¹

A threefold difficulty undermines the conceptualist interpretation of analogy. First, whereas wisdom is an accident really distinct from a rational creature, God is His Wisdom; hence there are only three terms, not four, in the analogy. Second, although the finite and infinite realities compared contain their perfection intrinsically, the analogy of proportionality does not exclude, but presupposes an analogy of proportion.⁵²

⁴⁷ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 144, 178; Billot, *De Deo Uno*, 178; Garrigou-Lagrange, *One God*, 400.

⁴⁸ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 42; Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 2:210.

⁴⁹ Penido, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 114–15; Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 2:203–4; Maritain, *Degrees*, 226–27, 236; Billot, *De Deo Uno*, 96, 178–79, 185; Phelan, *St. Thomas and Analogy*, 8, 23, 41; Gardeil, *Donné révélé*, 124, 132.

⁵¹ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 24; Garrigou-Lagrange, *One God*, 399, 406.

⁵² Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 57; Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 2:207, 216–17 n. 19; *idem*, *One God*, 398; Billot, *De Deo Uno*, 183. James Anderson, *Reflections on the Analogy of Being* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967), 52–54, reverses the relation, making analogy of attribution depend on analogy of proper proportionality. His difficulty comes when he tries to define cause in a way applicable to God and creatures: 18, 27–28, 52, 54, 57. For a notion of cause applicable to God and creature would seem to involve analogy of attribution. Anderson, 55–57, allows ultimately for a “virtual analogy of attribution” to account for a causal analogy. This position seems closer to Cajetan’s position than does Penido’s expansion of Cajetan: Cf. Bernard Montagnes, O.P., *The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas*

Were God's existence not known, the use of proportionality would be only a hypothetical exercise. Only after God's existence is known can analogous perfections be truly predicated of Him and the analogy of proportionality find proper employment. But Thomas's five ways argue from this world's insufficiencies to a First Cause. Clearly a dependence of creatures upon God is established, the relation basic to the analogy of proportion. Indeed, this analogy is implicit in all the proofs, for it is contained in the laws of being and metaphysics. Since God created finite beings, their perfection must pre-exist either virtually or formally eminently in Him; these perfections belong intrinsically to His very being. Thus the task of intelligence changes from proving that God exists to accurately describing God's nature, who or what He is.⁵³

Third, Bernard Montagnes's research indicates that Thomas developed his full theory of analogy gradually. *De Veritate's* analogy of proportionality was only a provisional statement of his position, which he soon left behind. Alongside the predicamental analogy of being between substance and accidents, Thomas was continually seeking to ground a vertical or "transcendental" hierarchy of substances understood as a gradation of the common perfection of being, which God possesses in plenitude. At first he tried participation by deficient likeness or by imitation, which, though rooted in creation, stresses exemplarity: though God is creation's efficient cause, He operates as an extrinsic formal cause. Thomas apparently leaves this position because he suspects that the community of relation between God and the creature does not respect the divine transcendence. That transcendence can apparently be preserved only with the analogy of proportionality. Only with the *Contra Gentes* does the primacy of the *actus essendi* replace formal causality as the basis of an intrinsic participation in God's perfection. The relation of act to potency grounds the distinction between Creator and creature, yet the axiom, *omne ens agit sibi simile*, guarantees a basic similarity. This allows the unification of predicamental analogy with transcendental analogy inasmuch as the same act of creation gives the creature his existence and, through his essence (substance), his distinct determination or degree of participating in God's *esse*. Creatures are understood in relation to God (*unius ad alterum*), without need of recourse to a third reality, being, common to God and crea-

Aquinas, trans. E. Macierowski (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 126–34. This juncture of analogies obviously marks a difficulty in the conceptualist theory of analogy.

⁵³ Penido, *Le Rôle de l'analogie*, 57, 85–86, 88–90, 122, 131–34, 138, 140–41, 146, 180, 225; Phelan, *St. Thomas and Analogy*, 37–38, 41; Gardeil, "Réforme," 62, 64; Billot, *De Deo Uno*, 88–89, 95–97; Garrigou-Lagrange, *One God*, 405, 409.

ture (*duorum ad unum*). For they participate in His *esse*. This participation preserves both similarity, based on the relation between cause and effect, and diversity, which follows from the full actuality of God's *esse* as efficient cause. He possesses the perfection of *esse* in an eminent way. Since creatures are known first by us, the distinction between *res significata*, the *ratio* of the perfection, and the *modus significandi* is attained through a judgment which discerns "within the reality that we immediately grasp that which belongs to the perfection as such and could be found again elsewhere, from that which depends upon the particular conditions under which we attain it." For in the creature composed of essence and *esse*, the essence "determines *esse* by limiting it and it limits it by receiving it."⁵⁴

Without doubt Montagnes upholds a clear, essential order with finite intelligibility alongside an existential order manifested in judgment. He affirms a concept of being as the basis of conceptual unity.⁵⁵ Therefore, if essences come from God and participate in His reality, there are valid conceptual abstractions whose perfections can be applied to God. On a point not explicitly stated by Montagnes, two eminent Thomists following in his wake, Joseph de Finance and W. Norris Clarke, affirm that analogy is dependent upon the existential judgment, which grounds the concept of being, and maintain the necessary complementarity of the analogy of proportion and the analogy of proportionality.⁵⁶ Before Montagnes, Étienne Gilson and Joseph Owens were promoting an existential Thomism that has access to being through judgment yet allows for a concept of being; hence they insist on positive predications about God. "What St.

⁵⁴ Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 23–111; citations from 84 and 88. Montagnes's language can be a bit confusing, since he calls the traditional analogy of proportion an analogy of relation and the traditional analogy of proportionality an analogy of proportion (16, 69, 159, 96–97 n. 23). John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 73–93, 501–75, basically follows Montagnes, though in more ponderous detail. He diverges from Montagnes insofar as he has being participate not in God's *esse* but in *esse commune* (94–131), a term which appears only once in the *Summa theologiae* (I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1), apparently as a holdover from *In Dionysii de nominibus divinis*. He interprets Thomas as maintaining positive knowledge of the divine perfections beyond all negation: e.g., "As regards what they signify, such names are properly applied to God; but as regards the way in which they signify, they are not properly said of God" (539). "While Thomas continues to deny that we can ever reach quidditative knowledge of God in this life, he defends our ability to predicate certain names of him in positive fashion" (543).

⁵⁵ Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 81, 84–88.

⁵⁶ Joseph de Finance, S.J., *Connaissance de l'être* (Paris: Desclée, 1966), 55–75; W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 43–57.

Thomas calls our knowledge of God consists ultimately in our capacity to form affirmative propositions in His regard.” Though we do not know how God’s attributes are one with His essence, “the conceptual content of these terms [perfections] does not change when we apply them to God.”⁵⁷ In a recent retrieval of Montagnes’s thesis Victor Salas argues persuasively that Thomas never rejects the analogy of proportionality, since God acts as efficient cause in both essential and existential orders and the form of creatures refers back to Him also as exemplary cause: “Even with his later emphasis upon efficient causality, Aquinas still holds fast to ‘form’ since it is an essential facet of created being.”⁵⁸

Johnson’s Authorities?

In the justification of her apophatic interpretation of Thomistic analogy, Johnson appeals in *She Who Is* to Maimonides’s presentation of analogy whereby knowledge of God is by negation.⁵⁹ Unfortunately she overlooks the fact that on the question of analogy Thomas explicitly considers “Rabbi Moses” his adversary and rejects his view in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 2, and *De Potentia* q. 7, aa. 5 and 7. She similarly appeals to Burrell, Przywara, McCabe, and Hill. Despite divergences among themselves, all seem to disagree with her. Burrell, Hill, and McCabe contrast Maimonides’s agnosticism or mere symbolism with Thomas’s valid analogy.⁶⁰ Moreover, all affirm some positive knowledge of God in and through concepts. While acknowledging Thomas’s profession of not knowing what God is, Burrell notes his balancing statement: “Knowing that God *is* entails knowing ‘what

⁵⁷ Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 5th ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1948), 153–59 (citing 157 and 159); Joseph Owens, C.Ss.R., *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1963), 85–97. In *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: PIMS, 1949), 3, 190–93, 196, 202, 204–5, 209, 214–15, Gilson held that “existence cannot be conceived” and “existence lies beyond abstract representation.” But he accepted correction on the basis of Thomas’s texts produced by L.-M. Regis, O.P., “Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers*,” *The Modern Schoolman* 28 (1950–51): 121–27; cf. *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (1952), 216–32.

⁵⁸ Victor Salas, “The Twofold Character of Thomas Aquinas’s Analogy of Being,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (2009): 295–315; citation from 314.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *She*, 115.

⁶⁰ David Burrell, C.S.C., *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 132; William Hill, O.P., *Knowing the Unknown God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 31–34; Herbert McCabe, O.P., (ed.) of vol. 3 in the Blackfriars’ translation of the *Summa Theologiae*, *Knowing and Naming God (1a 12–13)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 53, 64–65; and cf. Thomas Gilby, O.P., *ibid.*, xxxii–xxxiv. In “The Right Way to Speak about God? Pannenberg on Analogy,” *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673 n. 2, Johnson recognizes the vast difference between Burrell’s and Hill’s retrievals of Thomas.

necessarily befits Him as first cause of all and beyond all causes' (I 12 12).” “We will never be able to settle for the mere fact that he [God] exists.” Although analogy rejects univocity and distinguishes the thing signified from the mode of signifying, “some residual core of meaning seems to result from a straightforward use of the *res/modus* distinction. So Aquinas must insist that the names we use to attribute something to God signify in the manner we understand them.”⁶¹

Przywara's ontology does not readily accord with the other three thinkers cited by Johnson. For him analogy stands in a whole series of polar tensions both within the world's finite structure and between the world and God, who is both in and over the world. This enables him to affirm and unite both analogies, of proportion and of proportionality. From below, there is an upward movement to God's “Is” as principle and goal of the creature's striving, which can never be completed on its own due to the infinite gap separating God and creature. Beyond an initial affirmation, a negation must be expressed. The analogy of proportion, the direct reference to God, is insufficient. But the negation cannot be final lest it limit God. *De Veritate's* analogy of proportionality, an “oscillating analogy,” must be introduced to maintain a structure of coherence between inner-worldly proportions and God. This in turn allows for a new analogy of proportion established from on high, so that there both the creature's relative independence and the similarity between creature and God are preserved.⁶² Finite intelligibility is preserved under God's infinite providence; otherwise the affirmation in the *via affirmativa* would have been rendered sterile and contradictory.

McCabe holds that “words can point beyond their ordinary meanings. . . . We can use words to mean more than we can understand.” But this does not evacuate their meaning. Analogy is more than metaphor. Though metaphor is at the heart of religious language, it needs to be underpinned by such non-metaphorical, literal, yet analogous assertions as “God exists and is good.” Calling God good does not just mean that He is the cause of goodness; rather, “there is something we can only call goodness in God—goodness is the best word available for signifying this although it does so imperfectly.” The imperfection is clear when we

⁶¹ Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 124–41; quotes from 128, 131, 138.

⁶² Erich Przywara, S.J., *Analogia Entis*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1962), 135–41, 199–210. If Johnson took Przywara's thought seriously, she would not have professed sexual egalitarianism. The male-female relation as *imago Dei* is a basic inner-world polarity whose tension has to be maintained and is the presupposition for redemption in the Christ-Mary (Church) relation: cf. *ibid.*, 482–86, 492–93, and *Deus Semper Major* (Freiburg: Herder, 1938), 1:54–61, 70.

attribute various perfections to God. There is no plurality of aspects in God. "What these words mean in God is entirely one, nevertheless they have different meanings. This because the meaning of the words—what controls our use of them—is their meaning in application to creatures. When we use them of God we are trying to mean more than this."⁶³

Hill deserves greater consideration inasmuch as he taught at Catholic University when Johnson was accomplishing her doctoral work there, and at one time she identified her position with his.⁶⁴ From the beginning of his book on analogy, he rejects Cajetan's "limited conceptualism" with its analogy of proportionality and emphasizes the role of existential judgment in providing an analogous concept of being and attaining knowledge of God. The stress on judgment lets some statements taken out of context appear to deny conceptual knowledge of God. The act of existence is said to "resist conceptualization." Analogous knowing happens "through the concept" of a divine attribute, which judgment refers to God. The concept's content, its *ratio*, is first taken from created realities and applied to God. Because the mode of a created perfection's existence differs from God's existence, "the concept in no way represents the manner in which God is this perfection, so the judgment is not one of identifying God with the *ratio* in its modelessness but rather of understanding him as lying in the direction of the pure perfections it bespeaks." As a result, he writes, "The knowing itself is accomplished in a judgment which affirms God as an infinitely removed and unconceptualizable term, but within a perspective opened up by the intelligible contents of a concept." The analogous character of the concepts employed "means that while *signifying* God they necessarily fail to represent him; with them we know God relationally, i.e., in virtue of that relationship whereby God super-exceeds in an unknown way the participated creaturely perfection that we do know directly." Hence, "God lies beyond what is thought and said."⁶⁵

Simultaneously Hill composes parallel texts upholding the value of analogous concepts as necessary and proper for speaking about God. The analogous concept of being can "represent" God: "the 'representing' of course is only that of an analogical extrapolation but it does convey and express something of what God is formally." The concepts of divine perfections are "deriving from, imitating and thus revealing God; the *ratio* within the concept does have a real rapport to the Divine *ratio*, a rapport that (in the case of the transcendentals) is formal. . . . Our concepts retain a modality of

⁶³ McCabe, Commentary on *Summa Theologiae* 1a12–13, 104–7; idem, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), 27–28; cf. also Gilby, xxx, xxxiii, xxxv–xxxvii, xl.

⁶⁴ Johnson, "Right Way," 690, n. 51.

⁶⁵ Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God*, 116, 122–24, 138, 142–43, 151–52.

finiteness that must be explicitly denied to God when the *ratio significata* is projected onto Him.” Exemplary causality lies within efficient causality, which establishes a relation of participation whereby every being participates in God’s being. “If there be one supreme Exemplar, then each being communes with every other being in a resemblance that lies at the deepest core of its being.” Thus is established an analogy of proportion, and through the dynamism of intellection “the original concept is enabled to undergo a process of expansion and projection onto other subjects.” For “every effect precisely as such must be somehow like its cause.” This holds for natural concepts as well as revealed concepts in human words. Analogous names therefore “signify *substantialiter*, i.e., naming directly what God is in himself.” They are more than metaphors. In the dynamic relational knowing that is analogy “the *ratio* that remains is not then a proper concept of the divine prerogative it designates because it leaves unexpressed the incomprehensible divine *modus essendi*. What is signified is a divine attribute that remains beyond conceptualization, yet knowable in a partial though authentic way in terms of a proportion to the objective contents of a creaturely concept.” In brief, this relational way of knowing does not allow any grasp of God’s proper *ratio*, but the concepts employed naturally and in faith “render possible an authentic knowledge of God” and provide “an authentic *point de départ*, an objective perspective out of which to designate God.” Their meaning, though inadequate, is “proper and literal rather than metaphorical and symbolic.” Thus judgments of truth are possible; in dogmatic statements the concepts employed, however open-ended and capable of being “expanded, enriched, and surpassed,” are “irreversible.”⁶⁶

Hill is balancing our inability in this life to know God in Himself, His own infinite *ratio* of perfection, against our present ability to talk truly and coherently about Him. Although “we do not have proper concepts of God, and our concepts as such lack actual existential reference, . . . the very substance of the Deity is cognitively attained . . . in virtue of concepts whose intelligible contents are directly representative of the creaturely.” The perfection is predicated of God intrinsically and formally. “A formal convenience is being acknowledged between a finite and an infinite perfection, but a convenience that while formal is only by analogy understood as a proportion, and radicated in the causal derivation of one from the other.” Basically “the idea retains its positive value, functioning as the objective focal point of a judgmental affirmation of God.” After Hill establishes an ontological analogy of proportion between God and the world, he introduces an analogy of proportionality:

⁶⁶ Ibid., iii, 123–25, 133–36, 138–39, 141–44, 149, 151, 155, 169.

Once it is understood that the relationship of God to man is one of an unreciprocal imitation, a proportion of the Uncreated to the created, then the unmeasurable character of the proportion can be more clearly articulated and formulated in the form of a proportionality. But the proportionality here is one that lives within and is sustained by a prior analogy of attribution.

Hence, thanks to Thomas's "subtle balance," "through our own distinct ideas we are obscurely oriented towards the God of Reality, known in an unknowing."⁶⁷

By choosing to acknowledge only one aspect of the balance inherent in analogy, Johnson fundamentally misunderstands Hill and the other Thomistic authorities to whom she appeals. All try to maintain analogy of proportionality alongside or within analogy of proportion, or at least to preserve the meaning of concepts. One may wish that the theory of analogy be elaborated more clearly with less disagreement among Thomists, but, like Thomas, all seek to preserve the meaning of human words predicated of God. Without the equilibrium between infinite and finite, mode and signification, existence and essence, judgment and concept, all theology collapses into meaningless babble or rationalist anthropomorphism.

Johnson also relies on Karl Rahner, but without proper comprehension. In *Geist* he holds that "the analogous is the basis (*Grund*) of the univocal"—the opposite of conceptualist Thomists—and he repeats the same position in *Grundkurs*, which Johnson quotes.⁶⁸ If that alone were Rahner's position, Johnson might rightly call on him as an ally. All finite reality would be referred for its intelligibility to an infinite Ground which is itself unintelligible to finite intellects. Thus all finite intelligibility would be absorbed into unintelligibility. Concepts would be deprived of an inherent meaning. But Rahner also insists on a basic, analogous concept of being. This concept is paradoxical inasmuch as it has to contain everything from which it abstracts, a plurality within its unity. Rahner's concept is particularly paradoxical inasmuch as it is an "oscillating concept," whose essential content cannot be pinned down (*wesentliche Infixierbarkeit*). It oscillates from the non-being of matter to the infinite horizon of being.⁶⁹ It manifests the same structure as judgment. This allows all being as affirmed in judgment, God included, to be designated in and through a concept. This in turn permits "ontic" language, the traditional concept-

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 182–88.

⁶⁸ Karl Rahner, S.J., *Geist in Welt* (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1939), 292; *idem*, *Grundkurs*, 79–81; Johnson, *She*, 116.

⁶⁹ Rahner, *Geist*, 292, 113–14, 123–27, 142; *idem*, *Hörer des Wortes*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Metz (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 67.

alist theology, to be translated into Rahner's more dynamic, existential "ontological" language, and vice versa. So Rahner abides by the Church's traditional dogmatic formulations even while interpreting them in a novel way. He does not abandon concepts as incompatible with the "holy Mystery" but thinks that the Mystery is revealed through them without being exhaustively comprehended.⁷⁰

Analogy in Faith?

Basic to Catholic theology has been the distinction between nature and grace, the natural and supernatural orders. The distinction is necessary to preserve the salvific novelty of historical revelation, the justice and freedom of God with regard to redemption, and man's freedom in response to revelation. If the natural order makes no sense in itself, man has no reason for accepting revelation, which is unintelligible. Without a reason for choice, a rational animal cannot be free but must be subject to subhuman impulses. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Thomistic interpreters to whom Johnson appeals all make reference to a natural analogy of being and a natural theology as presuppositions for grace and revelation. For "through grace we possess a more perfect knowledge of God than through natural reason" (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 13). Some even allow for a supernatural analogy of faith.⁷¹ Johnson never acknowledges such distinctions. In her response (5), as we saw above, she applies what Thomas wrote about faith to the possibility of natural knowledge. In *Quest* she first writes that in speaking of God's goodness "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

⁷⁰ For this "dialectical-analogous" structure cf. John McDermott, S.J., "The Analogy of Knowing in Karl Rahner," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1996): 201–16, and "Dialectical Analogy: The Oscillating Center of Rahner's Theology," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994): 675–703. (The order of publication reverses the order of composition.) Cf. also "Rahner in Tradition" to illustrate the working out of dialectical analogy in Rahner's theology.

⁷¹ Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 144–47; Przywara, *Analogia*, 72–96, 138, 173–74, 181, 207–9; Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1987), 42; Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God*, 136–44, 148–49, 150–53. On faith's "superanalogy," cf. Charles Journet, *Introduction à la théologie* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947), 35–50; Maritain, *Degrees*, 243, 251–52; Gardeil, *Donné révélé*, 60–69, 139–45, 150; Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God*, 142–43. But how can any revealed reality be beyond being and the analogy of being? Although Rahner, as far as I know, does not elaborate the relation between the analogies of proportion and proportionality, he defended the natural-supernatural distinction in various works, esp. "Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade," *Schriften*, 1:323–45, and "Natur und Gnade," *ibid.*, 4:209–36.

goodness." Thereafter she treats "theology done with the dialectical imagination of Protestantism," which "more typically explains God-language by the working of metaphor," whose "working is in the active tension between similarity and dissimilarity, between the 'is' and the 'is not' of the two terms." She finds helpful Tillich's theory of symbol, where "God" is "the symbol of our ultimate concern." Despite Hill's telling criticism of Tillich, nowhere does Johnson discriminate among Catholic and Protestant theories of analogy, dialectic, and symbol. Rather they are conflated: "Whatever theory is used, whether analogy, metaphor, symbol, or some combination thereof, the wisdom of this second ground rule is that we are always naming toward God, using good, true, and beautiful fragments experienced in the world to point to the infinite mystery who dwells within and embraces the world but always exceeds our grasp."⁷²

Basic to modern Protestant theology is the denial of the natural analogy of being to make room for the analogy of faith alone. Finite words and symbols have no inherent meaning, lest God's freedom be circumscribed. As Johnson writes of Tillich's theory: "We cannot create symbols at will: they emerge from a deep level of consciousness. Finally symbols can grow old and die, losing their affective power in changing cultural situations." Actually Tillich places symbols in the realm of the mythical and affirms that existential fallen man has lost contact with the depth of his own consciousness. This equivalently renders his depth an unconscious out of which symbols rise without his free cooperation: thus "the symbol has necessity" and its intelligibility is lost in infinite mystery. For Tillich, God is "ultimate, unlimited power"; He is "entirely other," and "there is no finite way of reaching the infinite." He "can never become an object for man's knowledge or action." Throughout his writings Tillich stresses "the inadequacy of the finite . . . to express what is of ultimate concern."⁷³

In her response (5) Johnson writes that she claims neither analogy nor the Protestant, metaphorical position as her own in *Quest*. "The point was not to argue one theory of religious language over against another, but to

⁷² Johnson, *Quest*, 19–20; idem, *She*, 37, 46–47, 117: "Whether expressed by metaphorical, symbolic, or analogical theology, there is basic agreement that the mystery of God is fundamentally unlike anything else we know of, and so is beyond the grasp of all our naming." For the criticism of Tillich cf. Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God*, 49–55 and passim, and Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 132.

⁷³ Paul Tillich, *Religiöse Verwirklichung* (Berlin: Furche, 1930), 89, 101–2; idem, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:64, 79–81, 84–85, 110, 271–74; idem, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 14, 44–45, 48, 59; idem, *Theology of Culture*, ed. R. Kimball (1959; rpt. London: Oxford, 1972), 7–9, 25–26, 32, 155–56.

explain how all theories converge in affirming the limited nature of human language about God.” Actually, all theories do not converge. Catholics have long maintained that the metaphorical theory, whether of Maimonides or of modern Protestant theology, disagrees fundamentally with Catholic analogy. The Protestant position allows no formal intellectual content to human language about God, whereas Catholics insist that concepts convey authentic knowledge of God and His perfections. Catholics realize that a merely metaphorical usage is contradictory since metaphorical use presupposes proper usage. Hence they balance an analogy of proportion and an analogy of proportionality. Protestants emphasize the infinite abyss between God and man that prevents any natural commonality. They do not worry about rational contradictions, because fallen human reason is incapable of grasping God; they only seek to make God’s word somehow relevant to man through dialectical or paradoxical reasoning.⁷⁴ Some Catholics, as we saw, in their recent reaction against the Cajetanian analogy of proportionality which long dominated Catholic thought, make the analogy of proportion primary while affirming, however, the truth of concepts predicated of God. Unfortunately Johnson overlooks the difficulty inherent in the analogy of proportion, a difficulty that doubtless moved St. Thomas to preserve the analogy of proportionality. If he distanced himself in *De Veritate* from his original understanding of analogy because it failed to do justice to God’s transcendence, he would hardly abandon proportionality to fall into the opposite extreme, whereby finite intelligibility is absorbed into infinite unintelligibility. Neither explanation of analogy alone suffices; they balance each other. Without a basic similarity or proportion between God and the world due to God’s causality, which Thomas constantly upholds in his late works (*ScG I*, c. 29; *De Pot.* q. 7, aa. 5 et 7; *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4; q. 13, a. 5 et ad 1; q. 19, a. 4), no analogy at all is possible. But the basic similarity allows positive perfections, for example, goodness and wisdom, to be predicted of God (*ScG I*, cc. 43–44; *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 4 ad 2 et 9, a. 5; *ST I*, qq. 4 et 14). The theological implications of Johnson’s assimilation of Catholic analogy to Protestant “symbolism” are immense, and it is surprising that she should have ignored them.⁷⁵ For the thesis of *Quest* rests on the amalgamation of analogy and metaphor, as does her argument for female divine images in *She Who Is*. Insofar as Johnson’s interpretation has Thomas agree with Tillich, she prepares the way for her recasting of God.

⁷⁴ Cf. McDermott, “Jesus: Parable,” 545–51, for Barth, Bultmann, and Schweizer.

⁷⁵ In “Right Use,” 683–85, 687–88, Johnson recognized the limitations of Pannenberg’s Protestant criticism of Catholic analogy; he held that it compromises God’s transcendence and freedom by insisting on a common logos between God and

IV. God's Fatherhood and Female Images (7)

The Case for Female Images

Given God's utterly transcendent mystery—He is “totally other”—and the inadequacy of all human concepts, Johnson considers herself free to apply female images to God; inasmuch as human beings are created in God's image, male or female images seem equally appropriate. Actually they are, according to her, equally inappropriate, since God is “beyond all human comprehension.” As she writes in *She Who Is*, “The referent of the word God [is] utterly incomprehensible.” Indeed, “God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total. Hence human beings simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God who is ineffable.” That has consequences for language about God. “The mystery of God is properly understood as neither male nor female but transcends both in an unimaginable way.” From such a perspective it is equally coherent or incoherent to write, “The incomprehensibility of God makes it entirely appropriate, at times even preferable, to speak about God in nonpersonal or suprapersonal terms . . . [also] at times even preferable, to speak about God in personal symbols.”⁷⁶ Words so break down in “attempting to express the inexpressible fullness of Holy Wisdom's [God's] nature, pointing to eternal mystery so profound and absolute that some mystics can even name being eternal Nothingness. Being itself does not define divine being, which is always and everywhere beyond definition.” Clearly, for Johnson it seems indifferent to truth whether God is referred to as He, She, or It.⁷⁷ Who is to say that sincere Buddhists or idol-worshipping Hindus are incorrect?⁷⁸ For Johnson,

creation. Yet she later rejects any common logos between the inconceivable God and the world.

⁷⁶ Johnson, *She*, 33, 45, 55, 105.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 240. In *Quest*, 45, Johnson refers to theologians who call God the holy mystery, the ground of being, power of the future, matrix surrounding and sustaining all life. But these neuters are theological abstractions. Jesus did not so refer to His Father, and the Church wisely never prays to such impersonal human concoctions. Even Rahner, *Grundkurs*, 69, despite all his distinctions about the meaning of “God,” admits that “Father” was the “word in which Jesus dared to express His ultimate understanding of God and His ultimate relation to God” (cf. also “Theos im Neuen Testament,” *Schriften*, 1:130). Johnson apparently takes speculation more seriously than the biblical witness to the real God in whom the Church believes. Do Christians prefer theologians to Jesus?

⁷⁸ Cf. Johnson, *Quest*, 169–72, where she approves Hindu experience of God as God's way of adapting to them.

much more important is how the symbol of God functions, whether or not it is liberating according to her pragmatic standards.

In all of this, Johnson's theology is not completely consistent. She uses the biblical text to affirm that both men and women are created in God's image and interprets that image in terms of late twentieth-century egalitarianism.⁷⁹ Actually the Bible never proclaims the Enlightenment dogma that all men are equal. It refutes egalitarianism. The one who was equal to the Father "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped at but emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave" (Phil 2:6–7). Indeed He was "humble of heart" (Mt 11:29), always obeying His Father (Phil 2:8; Mk 14:36; Jn 5:30; 6:38; Heb 5:8; 10:7–10), whom He confessed as greater than Himself (Jn 14:28). Love does not insist on rights but is self-sacrificing. Having created so many different human beings in His image, God is just too intelligent to consider them all the same (equal). He loves and treats everyone differently according to his or her individual talents and needs. His infinite love for each allows Him to treat everyone as an individual in community (cf. 1 Cor 12:12–31). But, on a more fundamental level, if God is really beyond all likeness with human beings, how can man be created in His (Her, Its) image? The image of the Incomprehensible can only be incomprehensible.⁸⁰ How then can men be judged equal or possessed of a common nature, if human nature is incomprehensible? Man is as much inconceivable as is God. Hence, it is inconsistent to see in God a "model for human interaction, pointing to a community without supremacy or subjection where differences flourish in the matrix of a relationship of equals."⁸¹ Such a God is Feuerbach's God, a human projection into infinite perfection, an unreal god, a false god.

In seeking to justify female images for God, Johnson not only appeals to certain New Testament metaphors comparing God to women (Lk 15:8–10; Is 49:15; Mt 23:37) or "acting womanish" (Lk 13:18; Ps. 17:8; 139:15; Song of Songs) but also refers principally to the Old Testament figures of Spirit (*ruah*) and Wisdom, which allegedly "represent" God. While she considers this use of Scripture a proof of fidelity to biblical revelation, it actually reveals her liberal presuppositions. Instead of letting the Church's creed, its *regula*

⁷⁹ Johnson, *She*, 54–55, 70–75, 158, 242–43.

⁸⁰ Johnson, *She*, 36, says that she realizes that the image of God is only a metaphor. But if knowledge about God is mediated by "imaginative constructs," so too is knowledge about the world (46). "Human nature as a definable concept cannot be totally grasped. Our own mystery goes deeper than that. We are a question more than we are an answer" (*Consider Jesus*, 25). There is no proper usage on which metaphors may build. Language is a house of cards come tumbling down.

⁸¹ Johnson, *She*, 209, 223.

fidei, and Scripture guide her thought, she employs the Bible as a type of grab bag out of which various proof texts are pulled to support theories founded on present experience. Liberal theology is recognized by its starting point, the employment of experience to excogitate the revealed God.

Throughout the Bible, God is regularly and consistently referred to as masculine. Even the OT plural form for God, *Elohim*, merits a masculine pronoun. To overcome that obvious contradiction of her thesis, Johnson relies on Wisdom and Spirit, seeing them as two female symbols of God. When she writes that “Sophia represents Israel’s robust God in active, redeeming engagement with the world,”⁸² the word “represents” entails ambiguity. According to her own epistemology, no term is adequate for representing God. Hence no argument about God can be made from the gender of any words used to express God. Moreover, it is clear from the Old Testament that Wisdom, characterized by feminine gender in both Hebrew and Greek, is a creature: “The Lord created me at the beginning of His way, the first of His acts of old” (Pr 8:22). The Book of Wisdom also manifests her difference from God. “She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of His goodness. . . . She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her” (7:26; 8:3). Although God’s Spirit, or Breath, or Wind—*ruah* (feminine gender in Hebrew) designates all three realities—manifests various creative and illuminating aspects of God in the Old Testament, it is distinct from Him. God’s breath is given to men and animals as their own life (Gn 2:7; 6:17; 7:15, 22; Ps 104:29–39; Eccl 12:7), yet it is differentiated from God in Ezekiel’s great vision of the Lord’s Breath revivifying dead bones: “Then [God] said to me, ‘Prophesy to the Breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the Breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.’ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host” (37:9–10; cf. also Is 48:16). Johnson readily acknowledges Wisdom’s creaturely status: “She is a beneficent, right-ordering power in whom God delights and by whom God creates.”⁸³ A creature cannot in the full sense represent God unless the hypostatic union has made the creature God the Son’s own self-revelation.

⁸² Johnson, *Quest*, 104.

⁸³ Johnson, *She*, 88. Johnson also claims that in the Bible, Sophia at times “transcends created limitations and exercises divine power in creative and saving deeds” (90). Who can blame the Bible for slipping a bit from monotheism when everything is in metaphors? In *Quest*, 104–5, 109, Sophia has grown to be Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.

The God of the Bible

One would expect the force of Johnson's feminist argument to come from the reality of New Testament revelation in which God's Spirit is divine and Jesus, God's Son, is identified with God's Wisdom (1 Cor 1:30). Yet, as we saw, Johnson does not follow St. Paul in identifying Jesus simply with Wisdom. Rather Sophia is "a personification of God's own self" and Jesus is "the prophet and child of Sophia"; He is designated "Jesus-Sophia" to indicate that God is acting in Him.⁸⁴ Though Sophia was a creature in the Old Testament, somehow Sophia has become God, and then brings forth a child. Johnson's reading of Scripture seemingly recognizes no development in God's revelation from Old Testament to New Testament. Paul considered the Law, Old Testament revelation, a pedagogue leading to Christ (Gal 3:24–25), and Jesus Himself changed O. T. revelation (Mt 5:21–48; 19:3–11; Jn 2:13–22; 4:20–24). Since the Old Testament is preparation for Christ, it cannot be revelation's perfection. Jesus Christ is the fullness of revelation, of God's grace and truth, come in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4; Col 1:19; 2:9; Eph 1:10, 23; 3:19; 4:13; Jn 1:16–17); in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). Consequently Christians read the Old Testament from the fullness of the New. In the New Testament, even though *pneuma*, the Greek word for spirit, wind, and breath, is neuter in gender, the divine Spirit is clearly referred to with the masculine demonstrative pronoun, *ekeinos* (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13)—a point which John Paul II made in *Dominum et Vivificantem* 8 to indicate that the Spirit is personal, indeed, a Person. Hence, if any argument regarding the gender of the Holy Spirit is to be allowed on the basis of linguistic gender, He is decidedly masculine.

Linguistic data must always be interpreted in their proper context. Even though wisdom is clearly feminine in Hebrew and Greek, Jesus Christ is obviously masculine. Human beings must be of one sex or the other, and of His gender there can be no question. The Wisdom of God must be interpreted from Him. Inasmuch as He is the second person of the Blessed Trinity become incarnate and His assumed nature reflects His person—some modern theologians would even call His nature a sacrament of His person—must not His human maleness reflect His personal masculinity? It would be a schizophrenic person who has to consider his person of different gender than his body. If Jesus' humanity reveals His personality, perhaps masculinity characterizes His eternal person. Johnson attempts to avoid that conclusion by claiming that God could "have

⁸⁴ Johnson, *She*, 91–95, 154, 157, 160–61, 213, 217.

become a human being as a woman.” That is an ungrounded abstraction; ignoring apophatic theology, she judges as if she knows God apart from and contrary to His revelation.⁸⁵ Whereas Christian theologians start from the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Johnson, as we saw, starts from her own experience and highlights whatever advances her theory. Admittedly she is not clear on the meaning of person and understands Jesus’ person not as preexistent but as the historical “sacrament” mediating divine and human natures. Thus Sophia, a “female personification of God,” is said to be incarnate in Jesus: “As Sophia incarnate Jesus can be discerned as a coincidence of opposites in every respect: . . . a man yet the prophet and very presence of Sophia herself.” It is thus possible “to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbol.”⁸⁶ Perhaps Johnson thinks to avoid Jesus’ schizophrenia or confused sexual identity by neutering God. She quotes John Paul II to the effect that “God is spirit and possesses no property typical of the body, neither feminine or masculine”; so the eternal generation can be said to “have neither masculine nor feminine qualities” (5). How then would a neutered God identify Itself with a sexual “person”? Or is “God” androgynous? But then Jesus’ human nature would not be a full revelation of God and would mislead those who do perceive His-Her femininity. Why did He-She fear to come out of the closet?

There must be an exit from Johnson’s theological impasse. God has no body, but the contrast between spirit and body should not be read as the opposition found in human beings, who are composed of spirit and matter. We contrast spirit and matter as abstract form and concrete individuality—such is the limitation of our knowing—but God does not think in abstractions.⁸⁷ As He knows individuals directly, so He creates spirit and matter from His own plenitude. Must there not be something corresponding to matter, or corporality, in God who is beyond the

⁸⁵ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 107. Karl Rahner, S.J., “Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte,” in *Mysterium Salutis*, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965–76), 2:330–36, criticizes conceptualist theologians for abstractness in their thesis that any divine person could have become incarnate; that would contradict his axiom of the identity of the immanent and the economic Trinity, which Johnson elsewhere accepts without question (e.g., *She*, 199–201, 227; *Quest*, 210).

⁸⁶ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 111–12; idem, *She*, 99.

⁸⁷ In Rahner’s dynamic view the unity between matter and spirit is deeper than the distinction. He considers matter “frozen spirit”: “Die Einheit von Geist und Materie im christlichen Glauben,” *Schriften*, 6:185–214, esp. 213–14; *Grundkurs*, 182–85, 187–88; Karl Rahner and Paul Overhage, S.J., *Das Problem der Homination* (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), 49–52, 78.

matter-spirit distinction in a way that does not destroy but preserves the distinction? He is the fullness of spirit and matter. Is it not possible that masculinity and femininity are also spiritual qualities that find an expression in the body? Will not the saints, even though they shall be like angels in not reproducing (Mk 12:25), remain masculine and feminine for eternity? How would they otherwise recognize themselves as individuals in continuity with their previous earthly existence? Perhaps Johnson might reflect more deeply upon the mystery of masculinity and femininity.⁸⁸ Maybe the "myth" of Genesis 2, where Eve is taken from Adam's rib, might illuminate the theological darkness. But first the analysis of sexuality in terms of power and opposition might have to be jettisoned.

The Primacy of Revelation

The role of gender in religion has become a theme in recent decades as feminists reject "androcentrism" in religion because "in societies in which males dominate and women are relegated to a subordinate role in both sacred and secular domains, there is emphasis on a male godhead."⁸⁹ Johnson shares the feminist critique of patriarchy that oppresses women and blames it on the maleness of God.⁹⁰ But despite myths of Amazons and other viragoes, no research has instantiated a case of a dominant female deity producing or reflecting a society dominated by women. Life and religion are more complex than ideologies. Nonetheless Theodore Ludwig seemingly utters a truism that "the symbolic order and institutional structure created by religions have deeply affected and inspired human existence over millennia." Sexuality doubtless influences and is influenced by religion. Characteristics of female deities influence their cults, distinguishing them from the cults of male deities.⁹¹ Some symbolism seems strongly

⁸⁸ Johnson quotes John Paul I: "God is our father. Even more God is our mother." One might wish that the pontiff had expressed himself more carefully. Perhaps he just wished to indicate the transcendent quality of God's love for His creatures, surpassing a human mother's as well as a human father's love (cf. Lk 11:13). More probably, like Honorius I, he was not aware of the discussion in which his language would embroil him. In any case, he expressed himself in neither an infallible declaration nor an encyclical nor an apostolic letter but only in a talk on a political issue; even popes can err on such matters.

⁸⁹ Fiona Bowie, "Gender Roles," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. L. Jones (Detroit: Thomson-Gale, 2005), 5:3421, reporting the views of Peggy Sanday with whom she agrees. Cf. also Ursula King, "Gender and Religion: An Overview," in *ibid.*, 5:3296–305, and Rosemary Ruether, "Androcentrism," in *ibid.*, 1:334–36.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *She*, 33–41.

⁹¹ Theodore Ludwig, "God and Goddesses," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6:3616–23 (citation: 3617); James Preston, "Goddess Worship," in *ibid.*, 6:3588–91, 3611–15.

rooted in nature. Almost everywhere, the sky and the sun have been identified with male deities, and the earth with a female deity.⁹² But the current nominalist fad in academe that elevates history over nature, uniqueness over universality, and culture over nature encourages the reinterpretation and reformation of religion.⁹³ So much of “religious studies” presupposes that religion is a human construct, not based on divine revelation, that all is revisable. In any case, given the emotion unleashed by the current debates, Johnson should hardly be surprised if theologians may take umbrage at her indiscriminating use of “images,” indifferently male or female, for conveying somehow something of God.⁹⁴

Christian theologians, who consider Jesus the definitive revelation of God, are all the more upset when, despite Jesus’ language, Johnson insists on calling God “mother.” The mental confusion is manifested in her affirmation about Jesus’ use of *Abba*, the Aramaic charitative used by Jesus of His Father. After assimilating God to Wisdom (Sophia), she writes of Jesus: “He addresses her, in all trust, as *Abba*.”⁹⁵ Actually, as various studies have shown, Jesus’ use of *Abba* was ground-breaking for Jewish piety.

These less androphobic articles were reprinted from the first edition edited by M. Eliade.

⁹² Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 30–33, 38–151, 239–62. Cf. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. Turner (1938; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1:91–100, 177–87 (esp. 178–79), 206–8, 253–54. Of course the realm of religious studies is replete with speculation and ungrounded a priori: cf. John McDermott, S.J. “The Twentieth Century’s Quest of the Holy,” to be published in *Divinitas*. Even in the references cited above, in identifying basic patterns in religion Eliade distinguishes Earth-Mother from Demeter, whereas van der Leeuw equates them. If more recent students of religion eschew wide-ranging, speculative hypotheses, this does not guarantee that their collection and explanation of “facts” are objective. The posing of questions presupposes a worldview and its presuppositions. Such “objectivity” is really based on unspecified speculative presuppositions.

⁹³ E.g., Lucien Malson, *Wolf Children*, trans. E. Fawcett (London: New Left Books 1972), 9: “The idea that man has no nature is beyond dispute. He has or rather is a history.” Yet the rest of his book seeks to show that environment is responsible for the development of intelligence in wolf children. If the capacity to think were not natural, how could it later be developed in children who had been isolated in the wild? The arrogance of intellectuals would be boundless if it were not so myopic.

⁹⁴ Given that God, à la Johnson, is entirely incomprehensible, there is no basis in reality for preferring male or female images. Thus they are employed “indiscriminately.” But the very fact that she insists on employing female images in order to further the flourishing of women indicates that the gender of the divinity must somehow matter. If God wants us to respond to Him properly, it matters that He is Father.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *She*, 157.

Although the Old Testament designated God the Father of angels, of Israel, of the king, and of just individuals, by Jesus' time emphasis on divine transcendence had prohibited pronouncing the revealed Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Jesus dared to call God *Abba*, that is, Dad or Daddy, the word employed by small children or even grown sons to show filial respect and love to their father. As far as the evidence goes, no Palestinian Jew ever addressed God in prayer as "Father." Diaspora Jews, doubtless influenced by Hellenistic culture, sometimes addressed God as "Father." No Jew anywhere dared call Him "Dad." Such intimacy was Jesus' novelty, and, though He always distinguished "my Father" from "your Father," He introduced His disciples into His filial relation to the Father by teaching them to pray "Our Father." In His wake, His disciples, moved by His Spirit, employed *Abba* in their prayers (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15).⁹⁶ Since divine sonship entails sharing in Jesus' own life, which is salvation, at least prudence recommends that believers stay as close to His mind and heart as possible. To separate oneself from the Lord's usage in the Lord's Prayer seems tantamount to no longer following in Jesus' steps as a disciple. For we are sons only in the Son, receiving adoptive sonship through Him (Eph 1:3–7; Gal 4:4–6; Rom 8:15–17, 29–30; Jn 1:12).

Mistaken Principles

Most probably Johnson falls into the error of characterizing the Father as feminine on account of a deficient epistemology tied to her inadequate notion of analogy, which reduces to metaphor. She calls God the Father "an overliteralized metaphor." The name is not to be taken "in a literal or ontological sense, as if fatherhood constituted the divine essence."⁹⁷ She assumes that God's fatherhood is a perfection predicated of Him in the way that other abstract characteristics, like good, just, wise, are. But "Father" is not an analogous perfection, much less a metaphor. The word indicates a concrete person. In fact it is what Germans call an *Urwort*, a

⁹⁶ Witold Marchal, *Abba, Père!* 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1971); Joachim Jeremias, "Abba," in *Abba* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 15–67; Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., "Abba and Jesus' Relation to God," in *Accord-ing to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 47–63; John McDermott, S.J., "Jesus and the Son of God Title," *Gregorianum* 62 (1981): 277–318.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *She*, 173. Actually Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together constitute the divine essence. But this is not so for Johnson, *Quest*, 208: the identity of economic and immanent Trinity results in the denial of the latter as "a literal description of a self-contained Trinity of three divine persons knowing and loving each other" (also 206–7, 215). After all, Father, Son, and Spirit are just "manners of self-subsistence" (212–13), one God experienced "in a threefold way" (204).

primordial word which orients a person profoundly in life. No child calls his or her father “daddy” or “father” because he or she has abstracted the word while observing the behavior and language of other fathers and children. Rather, like “mother” or “mama,” “daddy” is a primary sound giving a child a basic orientation in life. A sense of meaning is mediated in the perception of a mother’s and a father’s love. Precisely because the words “daddy” and “mama” become associated with definite persons, the child’s world becomes intellectually distinguished and other sounds repeated can be linked to material objects. Such a basic insight resolves a basic conundrum in Aristotelian realism: how and why does the intellect abstract precisely those aspects of a reality that are essential instead of accidental? Bergson formulated the paradox: “To generalize, it is first of all necessary to abstract, but to abstract to any purpose we must already know how to generalize.” The self-referential circle is broken by primordial language. Daddy refers not to an abstract universal, but to the person primordially encountered as one’s male parent. Only later does the universal “father” emerge from the comparisons with other male parent-child relations.⁹⁸

Besides these oversights, Johnson mistakenly adopts as her own Piet Schonenberg’s erroneous theological principle, “All our thinking moves from the world to God, and can never move in the opposite direction.” By applying that to theology, she implicitly excludes revelation from above.⁹⁹ By forbidding God to communicate directly with men, she would also reduce prayer to psychological self-manipulation. How would Jesus have recognized God as *Abba* if all thinking starts from the material world? How could He have recognized His true Father if He were limited to earthly experience? Would He not have been confusing Joseph with God the Father unless He had a unique access to the Father? Must there not have been a perception of His invisible Father in the depths of His personal being? St. Paul explicitly contradicts Schonenberg and John-

⁹⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. Paul and W. Palmer (1912; rpt. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 202. Bergson’s own answer, 30–49, 202–25, relies on preconscious tendencies in human nature whose patterns are repeated and thus subject to recognition and abstraction as the mind oscillates between past and present experience, memory and action. This view is easily reconcilable with the primordial verbal recognition of parents. Cf. Katherine Nelson, *Structure and Strategy in Learning to Talk*, in *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, n. 149, vol. 38, nos. 1–2 (February–April, 1973): 14 and n. 1, 16 n. 2, 20–21, 25.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *She*, 199; idem, *Quest*, 191–92; the citation is from Piet Schonenberg, S.J., “Trinity: the Consummated Covenant: Theses on the Doctrine of the Trinitarian God,” *Studies in Religion* 5 (1975–76): 111.

son: "I bow my knees to the Father (*pater*) from whom all *patria* in the heavens and on earth is named" (Eph 3:14–15). Obviously Paul thinks from above, from revelation, not vice versa. Revelation illumines all earthly realities. How might men know of God's love in a fallen, concupiscent world without revelation from above, without God's new initiative that ends in the cross and resurrection? Without revelation we reduce God to our measure. Revelation demands that we stretch out minds beyond ourselves, to put on the mind of Jesus Christ in order to perceive "what eye has not seen nor has ear heard" (1 Cor 2:9–16; Phil 2:5). Precisely because human experience is so concupiscent and men are perpetually seeking to create gods of their own fashioning, it is necessary to have an access to God that is not encumbered by sinful distortions. Jesus, the sinless one (Heb 4:15; 1 Pt 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5), indeed the Father's eternal Son, alone is capable of supplying accurate knowledge of God. He, the summit of revelation, reveals God to be Father.

Implications of Fatherhood

God's Fatherhood is not an arbitrary construct. The name has profound repercussions. Unless "Father" really names God, the Church's faith cannot be Trinitarian. In the great Arian crisis, both Athanasius's and Hilary's central argument depended upon the divine Father-Son relation. Precisely because God is Father, He has a Son. Sonship implies being born of a Father. Since the notion of nature in both Greek and Latin derives from the basic root "to be born"—*physis* from *phyesthai* and *natura* from *nasci*—the Son must have the same nature as the Father. This insistence is all the more impressive in St. Hilary since it was he who first introduced the notion of divine infinity into Catholic theology. That insight served to refute the Arians: precisely because God's infinity surpasses man's ability to comprehend it, man must listen to God to discover who He is; revelation assures us that He is Father.¹⁰⁰

Precisely by accepting Scripture as God's revelation, the great orthodox Fathers refuted the Arian heresy, which relied too much on the current philosophy. Thereby they opened new vistas to Catholic theology. A strong Platonic influence had entered Catholic theology almost

¹⁰⁰ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* I:14–15, 27–29, 33–34; III:4–5, 9, 20, 62, 66–67; *De Synodis*, 34–36, 41–42, 45, 48, 50–51; Hilary, *De Trinitate* VI: 9–14, 16; VII:11–16; cf. John McDermott, S.J., "Hilary of Poitiers: The Infinite Nature of God," *Vigiliae Christianae* 27 (1973): 172–202. Hilary argues from God's infinity to the necessity of revelation for men to know who God is: *De Trinitate*, I:13–15, 18–19; II:10–13; II:1–2; IV:14; VI:8, 23–26; X:53–54, 67–70; XI:45–49; XII:25–28, 52–57. Mark Weedman, "The Polemical Context of Gregory of

from the beginning. Clement of Rome interpreted God's Fatherhood in terms of creation, a notion universally accessible since Plato's *Timaeus* 28c.¹⁰¹ Many early writers followed him. They also tended to adopt Theophilus's distinction between the immanent *logos endiathetos* and the uttered *logos prophorikos*. Many attributed the Logos's emergence at the time of creation to the Father's will. Hence the facile restriction of the Logos-Son to the work of creation offered itself. He seemed to fit readily into the niche Platonists had reserved for the Logos, the place of the ideas and the cosmic mediator between the One and the material universe. When the pious Arius insisted on God's perfect oneness and judged Jesus' sufferings contrary to divine immutability, the denial of the Logos's divinity lay ready to hand for those relying on philosophies that both reflected and formed the human experience of the times. So Nicaea and Constantinople, preferring biblical witness, affirmed the superiority of God's wisdom over human wisdom and broke through the limitations of classical philosophy in the defense of God's truth and for the enrichment of philosophy.¹⁰²

By contrast, Johnson explicitly relies primarily on human experience and, because she rejects any real knowledge of God mediated through words, she refuses to accept the Father-Son language as revelatory of

Nyssa's Doctrine of Divine Infinity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010): 92–96, maintains that in *De Trinitate* XII "Hilary begins to distance himself from the Father-Son analogy" and to argue only from the mystery of God's infinity. Weedman ignores the unified argument of Books IV–XII, the anticipations of the infinity argument in the early books, and especially Hilary's later *De Synodis*, which relies more strongly on the Father-Son *natura-nativitas* argument than on divine infinity. For example, *nativitas omnis, quaecumque est, in naturam suam ex natura gignante consistit* (17); *nativitas perfecta non habeat dissidentem originalis substantiae diversitatem* (20); *natura Filii nisi ex nativitate non exstat* (37).

¹⁰¹ Gottlob Schrenk, "pater," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:951–59.

¹⁰² God is identified as Father of the universe by Clement, Justin, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Novatian, Dionysius of Rome, and Origin; the Son's emission by the Father's will was affirmed by Justin, Tatian, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Novatian, and Eusebius of Caesarea (apparently to avoid having the Son forced upon the Father): references can be found in Luis Ladaria, S.J., *The Living and True God*, rev. translation, trans. M. Reyna and L. Kelly, ed. R. Luciani (Miami: Continuum, 2010), 157–219. Cf. also idem, "La Fede in Dio Padre nella Tradizione Cattolica," *Lateranum* 64 (2000): 107–20; Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origin to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), esp. 63–92, 119–20, 128–222, 250–61; Friedo Ricken, S.J., "Das Homousios von Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus," in *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie*, ed. Bernard Welte (Freiburg: Herder, 1970), 74–99. In *Christ in Christian Tradition: I. From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Bowden (Knox: Atlanta, 1975), 555–57, Alois Grillmeier, S.J., stresses the Fathers' continuity, explicitly intended, with the biblical picture of Christ.

God's reality: "This language is not a literal description of the inner being of God who is in any event beyond human understanding." Father, Son, and Spirit are only "metaphors." Consequently, belief in the Trinity depends upon one's subjective "option":

At its most basic the symbol of the Trinity evokes a livingness in God, a dynamic coming and going with the world that points to an inner divine circling around in unimaginable relation. God's relatedness to the world in creating, redeeming, and renewing activity suggests to the Christian mind that God's own being is somehow similarly differentiated. Not an isolated, static ruling monarch but a relational, dynamic, tripersonal mystery of love—who would not opt for the latter?¹⁰³

It hardly needs to be mentioned that "God," like "Father," is not a word humanly constructed as an abstract concept. There is only one God, who is implied in all thinking and willing, in all human experience. Strictly speaking, "God" cannot be an abstraction, inasmuch as there is only one God (cf. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 10). "God" can only point to a mystery that is knowable as mystery. Paul prays that the Ephesians "be strengthened to grasp with all the saints what is the width and breath and height and depth, to know Christ's love which surpasses all knowledge" in order that they "be filled unto the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18–19). God is a mystery not least because human beings are mysteries. As we can fully understand neither why we should exist at all, a pure gift of beneficence, nor why we were redeemed, pure mercy in addition, knowledge of this world can never banish mystery from God. His infinite Love surpasses our grasp. Yet He has freely made Himself known in His own Son (Mt 11:25–27; Jn 1:18; 17:3, 24–26; etc.) So "God" must have a name distinguishing Him from all false gods, wretched imitations, which human beings construct. The Jewish Law proscribed all idolatry because God's free, transcendent reality cannot be circumscribed. Yet at the burning bush He gave a name to Moses to reveal Himself and distinguish Himself from all counterfeits. However mysterious that name may be, inasmuch as He bears a personal name, men can enter into a living, loving relationship with Him.¹⁰⁴ With Jesus Christ, the mysteriousness of the name

¹⁰³ Johnson, *She*, 192, 200, 212.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Bernard Anderson, "God, Names of," in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:408–11; Martin Rose, "Names of God in the OT," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:102–4, 106–7; David Freedman and M. P. O'Connor, "YHWH," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 5:513–17; Boman, *Hebrew Thought*, 46–49; William Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Garden

gives way to the more mysterious Father, the reality whose mercy knows no bounds and has been revealed to us.

V. Conclusion and Challenge

A number of times in her response Johnson asks the bishops on the Doctrine Committee if they are employing a theology or theological method other than her own. It seems obvious that they are. They seem convinced that words about God really mean something, that they have an ontological content. Consequently, they read Scripture according to the Church's tradition, especially as expressed in her creeds, and disapprove of divergences from that tradition. Their primary responsibility is for the defense and propagation of the Church's faith. Since Christ Himself imposed that office on them, it would seem that any theologian verbally deviating from that tradition bears the burden of proving how his or her reinterpretation of the Christian mystery is in accord with the Church's ancient belief. The mere appeal to a different method does not suffice.

Karl Rahner once wrote that any theologian worth his or her salt must have the courage to do metaphysics.¹⁰⁵ Certainly not every theologian has to equal Thomas Aquinas in constructing a new synthesis or even emulate Rahner in retrieving hidden aspects of Thomas's thought. Nonetheless, the theologian has to stand by a metaphysics. If there are disputes about the meaning of divine revelation, the fault cannot be with God. He is a God of peace, not of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). The fault must lie with the human thought employed to expound revelation. Insofar as thought seeks to be consistent, it must presuppose a metaphysics and must answer metaphysical questions. As far as I know, Johnson has not produced a free-standing ontology or epistemology. She claims to borrow from such speculative theologians as Rahner, Hill, McCabe, Burrell, and Przywara. As they recognized, the notion of analogy is central to metaphysics. In her borrowing she also emphasizes the role of judgment in pointing to the infinite God. There is a basis for that in St. Thomas as well as in Rahner, Hill, McCabe, and Burrell.¹⁰⁶

Starting from judgment, one can unify the various themes in this essay. A judgment is a dynamic movement of the mind synthesizing subject and predicate. As an intellectual action it seeks the truth, which will fulfill its quest. Since whatever satisfies a desire is considered a good, the judgment

City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 258–61; Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1960), 1:193–200.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Rahner, S.J., "Bemerkungen zur Gotteslehre der katholischen Dogmatik," *Schriften*, 8:178–79.

¹⁰⁶ I do not find much emphasis on existential judgment in Przywara.

goes to the true as its good. Insofar as the intellect and will are characterized by their formal objects, the true and the good, intellect and will coincide. The good has to be done if the true is to be perceived. This is the basis for liberationist theologies and undergirds Johnson's pragmatic norm of truth. Furthermore, since the judgment joins sensibility to abstraction and affirmation, the sensible emotions are involved in the quest for the true and the good. This explains Johnson's emphasis on flourishing in this world as a pragmatic norm. When one asks about the term of this material-spiritual dynamism, the answer cannot be any finite reality. The infinite God alone, not a finite concept of God, can satisfy the demand implicit in every judgment and voluntary act. This means that the direct possession of God in the beatific vision is implied with every intellectual and voluntary act of human nature. Here theologians generally appeal to St. Thomas's doctrine of the natural desire for the beatific vision, a supernatural gift (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; etc.). This explains why Johnson does not develop any clear distinction between natural and supernatural orders; all natural distinctions, which depend upon concepts, are surpassed by the dynamic judgment on its way to the supernatural vision.

Since the term of any dynamism already affects, indeed effects as final cause, whatever is oriented to it, human nature is proleptically supernaturalized. Already perceiving "pre-thematically" its supernatural goal, the dynamic nature must have access to supernatural knowledge, that is, revelation. Precisely because knowledge transcends concepts, which are only a part of judgment, supernatural knowledge cannot be limited to concepts; indeed, concepts are inadequate to the infinite mystery that lies beyond their finitude. Hence dogmatic formulae and even the words of Scripture can be reformulated in view of a broader supernatural experience. A theological pluralism results which in principle cannot be reduced to formulaic unity. Indeed, since the will influences the intellectual judgment and people will see things differently according to their diverse voluntary choices, there is no objectivity in itself apart from the knowing subject. So Johnson appeals to theological pluralism to reformulate the Church's multiple creeds which confess belief in God, the Father almighty.

Finally, since by nature all human beings are oriented to the supernatural vision, grace must be given to all with their nature. Jesus Christ is unique only insofar as He represents the highest acceptance of grace in history. But since Jesus, the historical person, is limited, whereas grace is offered to all, the distinction between Christ and Jesus is drawn in order that Christ may be the event that encompasses all those believing in God. His death and resurrection do not provide any new access to God, since that access is already given to all along with a graced nature.

Before challenging the American bishops' interpretation of the Church's faith, Johnson should be very sure of her theology. Unfortunately, there are many internal contradictions within her philosophical-theological system. First, a judgment of truth has to contain a valid concept in order to come about; some finite intelligibility must be affirmed. If concepts are perpetually relativizable, a firm *point de départ* is denied to the judgmental dynamism. Second, the judgment's goal is unattainable, since the finite can never reach the infinite, no matter how long or hard one may try. This is why Heidegger refused to make a definitive judgment about meaning and Sartre denied all meaning, declaring man a useless passion. Third, if God is really infinite, why would the judgment seek Him at the end of a quest? Is He not everywhere present and therefore capable of being found? Indeed, since a judgment is a reflexive act which consciously affirms the synthesis of subject and predicate, the knowing subject is immediately self-conscious as well as aware of the sensible object affirmed. If God is everywhere, even in the self-conscious human subject, should not the conscious subject perceive Him in a "pre-thematic" manner? But such pre-thematic, that is, intuitive, knowledge of God is what constitutes the beatific vision. That seems to contradict everyone's experience, especially that of theologians who suffer from being misunderstood by the Magisterium.¹⁰⁷

Fourth, it is very hard to see how any serious sin could be committed. Sin involves a refusal of God and His will. But in every act of the will as well as in every judgment, God is implicitly affirmed and chosen. What then is the challenge to freedom? Jesus called all to conversion and belief in the gospel which He was preaching (Mk 1:14–15), and St. Paul wrote that all have sinned and lack God's glory (Rom 3:10–12, 22; 5:12, 19). Fifth, the role of Jesus is relativized. By imagining Jesus as the finite culmination of a universal openness to grace, is He not reduced to the mere instantiation of a general law of being or grace? Despite Scripture, He no longer functions as the sole Savior of humanity (Acts 4:12), the sole mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5–6). Although Johnson calls Him *the* sacrament of God "in Christian faith," she has difficulty explaining how any finite nature can be God's definitive revelation. Sixth, the Church likewise loses her special position as "column and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). Instead, a Protestant view of the Church as *congregatio fidelium* results. Believers, acting under the impulse of a grace already interiorly received, come together to form the Body of Christ.

Finally, the basic problem concerns the natural desire for the beatific vision. Without careful and complex distinctions it allows two contrary

¹⁰⁷ The Scholastic interpretation of the beatific vision involves certain rational conundrums: cf. McDermott, "How Did Jesus," 283–94.

interpretations, both Protestant. Either pure nature cannot attain the vision, its goal, without grace; or there is a continuity between nature and its terminal, supernatural vision. The first alternative means that nature is frustrated in itself and cannot find meaning without grace, which overcomes a corrupt nature; faith becomes a leap contrary to reason. The second alternative posits a continuity between one's natural internal experience and God, thus repeating classical liberalism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹⁰⁸

Unless Johnson can provide metaphysical answers to fundamental questions underlying her theological position, her defense of her position must be judged insufficient. One sees also why, following St. Thomas's lead, Hill, Burrell, McCabe, Przywara, Rahner, and all the leading Thomists uphold the value of concepts. Concepts ground finite intelligibility and thus permit distinctions between God and world, nature and grace, form and matter, essence and existence, intellect and will, finite and infinite, etc. Certainly they do not suffice; judgment is needed to reflect reality's dynamic unities. It is not easy to find the philosophical justification for the balance that preserves in vital tension both unity and diversity. This is the reason for philosophical and theological pluralism even within Thomism. But losing the equilibrium issues in speculative insanity. It also destroys human freedom. For freedom presupposes deliberation of reasons for a choice; it necessarily involves finite intelligibility. But the reasons cannot be strictly determining; the infinite, be it prime matter or God, prevents reality from being reduced to a rational system. This tension between finite intelligibility and infinite mystery is reflected in the whole sacramental structure of Catholicism: finite realities have enough meaning to serve as signs, or symbols, of God, but they remain open to His free intervention in the world in and through them.¹⁰⁹

Christian truth does not need a speculative grounding. Jesus died and rose once for all in history, and witness was given at the proper time (1 Tm 2:6; Acts 2:14–40; etc.) and throughout history. All types of philosophies

¹⁰⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 193. As noted above in n. 2, the better transcendental Thomists postulate a paradox in the natural-supernatural relation. Unfortunately they fail to explain why the apparent contradiction is only apparent. Moreover, the notion of paradox is central to many modern Protestant thinkers; while this confluence of thought may foster ecumenical dialogue, it can also lead to immense confusion in Catholic thought.

¹⁰⁹ The understanding of freedom is complex: cf. John McDermott, S.J., "The Mystery of Freedom," *Lateranum* 74 (2008): 493–542, and "Nature, Freedom, and Person in Aquinas and Beyond," *Nova et Vetera* 9 (2011): 791–824.

can be employed to explain that fact and further its acceptance, but the fact itself cannot be denied by philosophies too narrow to grasp it. The fact is singular, and therefore its reality can never be completely subsumed under any rational system, especially if God is actively present in the fact. Yet simultaneously the fact contains a meaning; otherwise it would have been forgotten. And the meaning was announced with the fact: Jesus died and rose to save sinners (Rom 4:25; 1 Tm 1:15; etc.). Scripture and tradition unanimously testify to that. That is why the Church maintains continuity in belief with her Tradition and demands that believers acknowledge that Tradition. Jesus Christ is not subordinate to any system of thought. He is the truth (Jn 14:6) and the light of the world (Jn 1:4; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). He is the judge of the cosmos (Mt 25:31–46; Jn 5:22–30; 8:16; 9:39; 12:31; 19:13), and there is nothing outside His dominion (Jn 1:3; 1 Cor 15:24–28; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2; Rv 1:17–18). He provides the standard by which philosophies and theologies are judged. Surely His standard is the cross, which overcomes the world's wisdom, that is, any philosophy that would presume to judge Him. As John Paul II noted in *Fides et Ratio* 23, before the fact and scandal of evil, exemplified in the cross, “every attempt to reduce the Father's saving plan to purely human logic is doomed to failure.” The foolishness of the cross is “the authentic critique of those who delude themselves that they possess the truth, when in fact they run it aground on the shoals of a system of their own devising.” Evil, however real, cannot be explained by reason, much less overcome by finite creatures. “The mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thes 2:7) can be vanquished only by the greater mystery of love. Christian faith proclaims that an infinite love manifested itself in a finite human nature in order that men might perceive in the flesh and grasp a mystery infinitely beyond them, yet infinitely close. Such faith demands obedience (Rom 1:5), but it is not blind since it preserves an intelligible structure in the tension between God and man that is necessary for freedom and love. Thereby finite reason surrenders its arrogant claim to absolute jurisdiction and finds its rightful place within faith's greater mystery.¹¹⁰

The Challenge

After the Doctrine Committee's judgment was delivered, Prof. Johnson became a *cause célèbre*. The Catholic Theological Society of America, the College Theology Society, and various theologians weighed in, protesting against the decision. The reason for the protest universally lay in the process employed by the Committee in reaching its decision, or rather in

¹¹⁰ That structure is expounded in “Faith, Reason, and Freedom,” cited above in n. 11.

its alleged lack of process. Appeal was made to *Doctrinal Responsibilities*, the suggested guidelines worked out in 1989 among the American bishops, the CTSA, and the Canon Law Society of America as a help in resolving disputes between a theologian and his local ordinary through a process of dialogue.¹¹¹ Those were times of dissent, when the CTSA regularly passed motions condemning actions of various Roman congregations, while the bishops, somewhat confused about theological changes, were more involved in composing pastoral letters about nuclear war and the national economy. It was a rare bishop who, educated before Vatican II, would take on a theologian claiming to represent the new theology supported by the council. In the days before the council, theologians were expected only to defend and explain what the Magisterium had defined and to prepare material for new definitions, not to question decisions or reformulate dogmas. Their new role of adapting dogma to the needs of the time was perplexing many bishops, whose governance in tumultuous times did not leave them much leisure for reading and proper updating on the theological changes. But situations change. Since that time pluralism in theology has proliferated, whereas bishops and a younger generation of priests seek a clear, stable presentation of the faith for the sake of properly catechizing believers. When one bishop, worried about the doctrinal import of *Quest*, a widely used college text, wrote to the Doctrine Committee for its opinion, he was trusting its expertise more than his own. He was not Prof. Johnson's ordinary, and she was a renowned theologian. The Doctrine Committee responded to his request and made its judgment public in order to assist other bishops, who are the ultimate authority in union with the pope on doctrinal questions. The issue far exceeded the local parameters intended by *Doctrinal Responsibilities*.

At first it seemed to me ironic that the protesting theologians should appeal to procedural issues. The conceptualist theology, which ruled before Vatican II, was usually criticized for being too juridical. Now here were the new theologians appealing to procedures. Certainly when one is not pleased with the product but cannot directly attack it, one attacks the process. There has been, as far as I know, no theological defense of Johnson's position offered by the protesters. The appeal to juridical norms often signals the proximate demise of a class or ideological position, inasmuch as only entrenched law supports it. Yet the appeal is weak on two counts: first, *Doctrinal Responsibilities* was never promulgated as law; second, it does not cover a decision of the Doctrine Committee. Nonetheless the appeal

¹¹¹ *Doctrinal Responsibilities* can be found in *Origins* 19 (1989): 97–110.

to legal technicalities reflects the condition of Catholic theology in the United States today. If any theologians refuse to acknowledge intellectual standards of truth by which propositions may be recognized as orthodox or heretical, they must, of course, interpret all theological disputes in terms of power. Therein they succumb to the intellectual climate of most American universities, where post-modernism reigns. But Christ's Church is not subject to transient academic fads. Post-modernism revives medieval nominalism in a new guise. Both exhibit a strong distrust of abstractions, concepts as well as ideological superstructures. The main difference between them lies in the fact that the latter was more pious than the former. Medieval nominalism accepted God's existence and recognized His word as objective truth. Indeed, precisely because it adhered to an infinite God, it relativized conceptual abstractions: God knows individuals directly and His mind is the norm of reality, while humans are forced to abstract from material instances. Post-modernism has put everything in question, God included, and it analyzes all structures and their justifying ideologies in terms of power. The only thing not questioned is post-modernism. It absolutizes its own critical position, and from there it judges the rest of reality. All positions are perspectival and no objective truth can be claimed. Of course it finds the Catholic Church totalitarian in its claim to know truth, the ultimate meaning of reality. That is to be expected from the wisdom of the world. What is distressing is that so much of post-modernism has corroded Catholic theology in America.¹¹²

Five years after Vatican II, Rahner was lamenting the lack of criticism necessary for theology's well-being. Nine years later he noted the "the interdisciplinary decadence of theology" as it stood before the pluralism of philosophies and the multitude of other discordant natural and humanistic sciences.¹¹³ Needless to say, neither academe nor theology has yet reached agreement about truth. The Church should not hope for consensus by spontaneous generation. But the Church has to proclaim the same gospel that was committed to writing by the inspired New Testament writers. She does so relying on Scripture and the Holy Spirit

¹¹² Johnson welcomes post-modernism in the Church and religious life in "Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God," *Review for Religious* 53 (Jan.-Feb., 1994): 16-24.

¹¹³ K. Rahner, S.J., "Kirchliches Lehramt und Theologie nach dem Konzil," *Schriften*, 8:125; idem, *Grundkurs*, 19. *Grundkurs* attempts to create some unity, but its starting point, transcendental experience, vitiates the endeavor. From unthematic experience of the Holy Mystery, Rahner explicates Catholic doctrine. He knows and accepts Catholic Tradition. But unthematic experience lets itself be explicated in myriad ways, and his "disciples" employ his starting point to deduce whatever they wish.

who guided the Church through history and who finds voice in magisterial definitions and documents. I remember Rahner in the early 1970s announcing at the beginning of his course on grace that he presumed that his audience knew their Ott, since it contained the Church's faith which all believe, whereas he was only concerned with attempting to make it more intelligible to his hearers.¹¹⁴ He accepted Tradition as divinely given and never contradicted any magisterial pronouncement. Unfortunately, Johnson and others consider themselves empowered to rethink and reformulate Catholic theology, putting in question basic teachings. For that they employ a philosophy poorly masticated and digested, and they merely adapt "theology" to current academic fads. Appealing to one aspect of transcendental Thomism, they postulate a universal, democratic bestowal of grace calling all to the same fulfilling goal. The call for self-fulfillment, or "flourishing," appeals to everyone, but no one ever finds perfect satisfaction on this earth. Moreover, the Catholic Church knows that concupiscence still survives after baptism (DS 1515; Rom 7:14–25). All desires cannot and should not be fulfilled. The Church rightly imposes a discipline upon concupiscence. It takes a good while before individuals attain full conversion to Christ. Hence it is misleading to propose self-fulfillment as the goal of Christian life before a profound conversion has taken place. Otherwise, needs derived from worldly standards will surreptitiously infiltrate themselves into the consciousness of Christians. Then wounded, frustrated subjectivities will proliferate, inasmuch as they expect from the Church fulfillment of their needs. They will be tempted to twist Tradition to reformulate the faith and justify their complaints. But the Church is not intended to fulfill all human needs on earth. Jesus Christ founded the Church to continue offering salvation, that is, Himself, to all mankind. That involves conformity to the crucified Christ (Mk 8:34–35; Phil 3:10–11; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pt 4:13). Salvation is a gift that we sinners do not deserve. The Church herself is a gift, because she makes Christ present for us in the Eucharist. Believers who know the great gift that the Church is readily accept the cross and therein find joy, since they are being conformed to Christ. By their self-emptying they open themselves to God's grace and anticipate in a small way the joys of heaven.

Let Johnson and her advocates set up clear standards of belief if dialogue between them and the bishops is to occur. The amorphous post-modern philosophy underlying Johnson's theology renders dialogue impossible,

¹¹⁴ "Ott" is shorthand for the outline of Church teaching presented in neo-Scholastic form by Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. in English by J. Bastible, trans. P. Lynch (St. Louis: Herder, 1952).

since it acknowledges no objective standards of judgment. A vague “faith” is always in danger of reformulating itself, like Proteus, to an ever-changing world in the search for relevance, and it is usually one mutation behind the times. Why should anyone heed the new formulations of religion concocted by post-modern theologians? They are only human. Besides, their relativistic presuppositions would demythologize the Christian gospel. They fail to realize that Rudolf Bultmann, the master of demythologization, employs a myth to evacuate the gospel of historical content. Following the “wizardry” of Heidegger, he refuses to admit God’s incarnation in history—the self-conscious subject is the measure of truth and grace is a purely interior event on the occasion of the kerygma—yet he insists that human reason cannot grasp reality, lest a natural theology develop and man be free to choose before the offer of grace. On what basis can Bultmann’s fragmentary reason exclude natural knowledge of God and God’s intervention? In truth, all philosophies and theologies are “myths,” that is, human inventions circumventing God’s freedom, unless they start from and end with Jesus Christ as believed in the Church.¹¹⁵ For “He is before all things and in Him all things have their consistency” (Col 1:17). In Him, who is the Infinite in the finite, the finite world finds its ultimate consistency and intelligibility. Hence Catholic theology demands first a conversion to a standard beyond man. One has to accept an historical revelation from above and obey in faith a divinely established authority preserving and interpreting that revelation. Authority should not be misunderstood—à la Kantian, modern, and post-modern philosophies—as an imposition restricting freedom and frustrating autonomy. Authentic authority means that power stands at the service of love. *Auctoritas* derives from the Latin root *augere* (perfect passive participle *auctus*), which means “to increase, augment, strengthen; to enrich, endow, bless; to grow, increase.” Parents have *auctoritas* over their children because they give and nourish their children’s life. Laws also possess authority because they bring nurturing order to a state. Scripture, Tradition, and bishops have authority because they mediate God’s supernatural life to believers.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ McDermott, “Jesus: Parable,” 543–51, 558–60; idem, “What Went Wrong with Catholic (NT) Exegesis and Christology?” *Angelicum* 86 (2009): 795–833. Cf. Karl Prümmer, S.J., *Gnosis an der Wurzel des Christentums* (Salzburg: Müller, 1972) for the gnostic tendency of Bultmann’s thought.

¹¹⁶ H. Wagenvoort and G. Tellenbach, “Auctoritas,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. T. Klauser (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950), 1:902–9; Christian Gizewski and Reinhard Willvonseder, “Auctoritas,” in *Der Neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike*, ed. H. Cancik and H. Schneider (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), 2:266–67.

Bishops have a responsibility to Christ for the little ones who believe in Him, those who have too often been confused by a vague, shifting catechesis more intent on adaptation to the world than in presenting the gospel's authentic demands (cp. Rom 12:2). Simple people recognize that unless God challenges them to become more than themselves, He cannot be truly God. The bishops uphold the challenge and apply the challenge also to theologians, who are merely human. "Knowledge puffs up, charity builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). Theologians should stand at the service of the hierarchical Church, because the Church, Christ's Body, makes the gospel's demands concrete. Unless they stand with the bishops on the rock of Peter, their words are writ on water and shall be flushed away with the next tide of academic faddism.¹¹⁷ So, if they would dialogue with the bishops, let them justify the meaning of words and establish standards of orthodoxy. Let them not deny what Christ and His Church teach. For theologians, like all men, must have their works pass through fire and themselves stand before Christ's judgment seat (1 Cor 3:12–25; 2 Cor 5:10; Jas 3:1). Christ, have mercy on us all. **N.V.**

¹¹⁷ This is not to deny theology's critical role within the Church vis-à-vis authority, but it should always be exercised with charity and avoid giving scandal to believers and to those seeking Christ.