

Book Review: *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* by Elizabeth A. Johnson

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T430 – God, Suffering and Evil – Fall II 2024

Elizabeth A. Johnson's *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* offers a theologically rich and scientifically informed reflection on the relationship between Christian doctrine and the theory of evolution. Drawing inspiration from Job 12:7–10, Johnson centers her theological inquiry on the voices of the non-human world—beasts, birds, plants, and fish—arguing that creation itself testifies to the divine. Her central thesis is that evolutionary biology and Christian theology, rather than being adversarial, can be deeply complementary in revealing the grandeur of God's ongoing creative love.

Johnson, a distinguished Roman Catholic feminist theologian and member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, serves as Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University. Her career has been marked by an unwavering commitment to integrating faith with ecological and feminist concerns. Her many accolades—including fifteen honorary doctorates and the John Courtney Murray Award—attest to her influence within contemporary theological discourse (Fordham University, n.d.).

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson offers a theological interpretation of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, emphasizing that Darwin himself did not see evolution as incompatible with belief in God. Rather than viewing evolution as undermining divine agency, Johnson reframes it as a lens through which to witness God's continuous, immanent activity in creation. She

writes, “the divine creative power was operational not just once, ‘in the beginning’ as told in the Genesis narrative, but continuously over time as the need arose” (Johnson, 2014, p. 32). This view challenges static conceptions of creation and instead affirms an evolutionary cosmos in which divine creativity is dynamic and unfolding.

One of the most significant contributions of the book is Johnson’s ecological theology. By interpreting Genesis 1:28 not as a license for human domination but as a mandate for stewardship, Johnson places humanity within a broader “community of creation.” She insists that all creatures are interconnected, and that Christians have an ethical obligation to care for Earth’s ecosystems as part of their spiritual practice. Johnson draws upon the theology of “deep incarnation” and introduces the notion of “deep resurrection,” suggesting that the risen Christ is in solidarity not only with humanity but with all of creation: “Christ is the firstborn of all the dead of Darwin’s tree of life” (Johnson, 2014, p. 209).

A recurring theological tension in the book is the problem of suffering and death inherent in natural selection. Johnson does not evade this question. Instead, she reframes it through the lens of the crucified Christ. “The pain of God in Christ crucified,” she writes, “places the living God in solidarity with all creatures that suffer in the struggle of life’s evolution”

(Johnson, 2014, p. 210). Though suffering is not eliminated, its theological significance is transformed: God’s presence accompanies all creation in its groaning toward redemption.

For this reviewer, *Ask the Beasts* is not only a scholarly achievement but a pastoral and prophetic call to integrate ecological consciousness into Christian theology and practice.

Having been educated in Catholic schools where Darwin’s theory was often ignored or

outright rejected, this work offered a transformative reimagining of how science and faith might coexist—not as rivals, but as partners in revealing divine truth. Johnson’s courageous vision bridges long-standing divides and models a theology that is both intellectually honest and ecologically faithful.

Ultimately, *Ask the Beasts* invites the church to listen more deeply to the witness of creation and to embody more fully its vocation as caretaker of God’s Earth. If taken seriously, her work could pave the way for a more reconciled, responsible, and reverent relationship between humanity, nature, and the God who holds all life in divine breath.

References

Fordham University. n.d. “Biography - Elizabeth A. Johnson CSJ.”
<https://www.fordham.edu/academics/departments/theology/faculty/elizabeth-a-johnson>
(accessed November 13, 2024).

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.