

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES RAISED BY ELIZABETH JOHNSON'S
*ASK THE BEASTS: DARWIN AND THE GOD OF
LOVE*—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Paul Crowley, S.J., Santa Clara University
Moderator: Paul Crowley, S.J., Santa Clara University
Presenters: Marybeth Ingham, C.S.J., Franciscan School of Theology
Roger Haight, S.J., Union Theological Seminary
Brian Robinette, Boston College

Elizabeth Johnson's significant new book puts Darwin's *Origin of Species* into conversation with the triune God professed in the Nicene Creed. The book focuses on the evolution of the natural world of plants and animals that precedes the emergence of the human in the evolutionary processes—a part of creation that traditional anthropocentric theologies have tended to bracket if not dismiss. Johnson holds that an ecological theology requires that this natural world be considered in its own right, and human beings in relation to that world. The discussion was tied to the convention theme in that the *sensus fidelium* is at work today in the Church's ongoing thinking about and formulation of a theology of nature. Many people today take for granted, for example, that animals are included in the saving work of Christ, and that the incarnation and redemption drive deeply and widely into the expanse of creation. Much attention has been given to how the theory of evolution, in particular, comports with long-standing understandings of God and divine action. These and other important questions are raised in *Ask the Beasts*.

Marybeth Ingham began the discussion by observing Johnson's selection of Thomas Aquinas as well as the neo-Platonic and Augustinian sources on which he relied as the primary lens through which Johnson bridges *Origin* with theological motifs of the Creed. Building on Aquinas, especially his treatment of secondary causality, the book asks what theology might venture today. In response, Ingham proposed the "Franciscan" paradigm limned by Duns Scotus as an alternative to the Thomistic model, and one more hospitable to evolution. The latter, she argued, rests on a dichotomy between creation and redemption, and a diminishment of the importance of creation in light of human dominion over it. The Scotist model, by contrast, ties creation to the incarnation in a single moment of divine intentionality. This model frees the incarnation from exclusive ties to atonement theology and asks, by implication, whether nature is in need of redemption. In later discussion, Johnson suggested that "redemption" cannot be limited to freedom from sin. It includes, both historical liberation and, in an Orthodox sense, creative restoration. "In the face of what is happening today, creation does need redemption." Johnson also noted that Aquinas's thought offers tremendous hospitality to evolution, especially through his doctrine of secondary causality.

Roger Haight responded to Johnson's project by focusing his attention on the Christological implications of the issues Johnson raises in *Ask the Beasts*. His proposal, a "Grace-Filled Naturalism," starts by noting Johnson's description of creation as participation in the power of God as Spirit, along with an incarnational Word Christology that proposes a deep structure of incarnation and resurrection, but with language that "sounds" interventionist. If Johnson does not intend an

interventionist theology of divine action, then, Haight asks, is a theology of divine action not redundant relative to work of the Spirit? Haight then proposes another project with a comparable structure, which she calls a “comprehensible Christian vision in a secular scientific age.” God’s primary causality and God as Spirit speak of one reality in two languages (pace Schillebeeckx). There is no need for a supernaturalism (or interventionist doctrine) in this schema. This comports with a Christology from below, emphasizing a Pauline “Second Adam” Christology over a Word Christology. Jesus is in the power of the same Spirit that has brought about creation in an evolutionary mode, and stands as the prototype for all human beings within the order of creation. Johnson responded that she was not arguing for interventionism in evolution, and that demoting Word Christology overlooks the fact that in John the Word indicates a power of God that is already operative in creation and that incarnation language is already second-order language. A Spirit Christology that focuses on the human does not consider Johnson’s larger question: How can Jesus be relevant to all of creation, including non-human creation?

Drawing on the implications of the tension between Christ as “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15) and “Christ is the firstborn of the dead” (Rev 1:4), Brian Robinette placed the discussion within the larger framework of the doctrines of resurrection (eschatology) and creation (protology). Resurrection doctrine puts a Christian theological approach to evolution in a position of creative tension, for at the heart of Christian faith lies not continuity, but a break, a “caesura,” indicated by what is contained within the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead. The resurrection is a radically eschatological (and apocalyptically-laced) proclamation of God’s sovereign and creative power. The doctrine of creation, in turn, is a protological framing of what is proclaimed in the resurrection. The two doctrines are integrally related to each other as expressions of the single act of a God whose goodness and love are both original and final (and, Johnson notes, not only with respect to humans, but also animals and plants). But the problem of suffering, including Jesus’s own suffering, provokes a “sober assessment,” and thus there emerges the problems of theodicy. But, in light of such an understanding of God’s power, pain, suffering, and death must be seen not as evils, for they are morally neutral and intrinsic to the unfolding of life processes. Johnson agrees: The linkage between Christ as first born of both the dead and first born of creation implies such a response to this classic problem.

PAUL CROWLEY, S.J.
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, California