

HEIDI SCHLUMPF

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

*Questing
for God*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



About the Book

Who is God? That is the question Elizabeth A. Johnson has spent her life exploring. As a Catholic theologian, writer, teacher, and religious woman, Johnson has searched for “the Living God” and ways to understand God that make sense for our time, perhaps most famously in her groundbreaking book *She Who Is*. Her work is firmly grounded in the Catholic tradition while it explores the edges of that tradition, pushing it to be more inclusive—a project that has caught the attention of other scholars, everyday Catholics, and sometimes critics.

Johnson’s own relationship with God as Holy Mystery has helped her to navigate her life’s challenges, including finding herself thrust into the spotlight as a headline-making symbol of religious women facing challenges from the church leadership. With this first biography of one of the preeminent Catholic theologians of our time, those who have been enriched by Johnson’s work will now find themselves inspired by her remarkable life story.

About the Author

Heidi Schlumpf is a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter* and freelance writer for CNN Opinion, *U.S. Catholic*, and other publications. The author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt*, she served as the editor and a contributor to *The Notre Dame Book of Prayer*. She teaches journalism as an associate professor of communication at Aurora University outside of Chicago. She and her husband, Edmund, have two children.



Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. How might thinking of theology as “love seeking understanding” (in addition to the classical definition of “faith seeking understanding,” as Johnson suggests) affect our approach to theology?
2. In this chapter, we get some insight into Elizabeth Johnson’s prayer life. What were your thoughts on it? How does it resemble (or not resemble) your own?
3. Johnson points to a passage from the writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as being important to her: “Before God and with God we live without God.” Reflect on it, perhaps with the help of a few sentences on page 7, and consider what meaning you might draw from it.
4. What does it say about Elizabeth Johnson, her spirituality, and her way of thinking about God that “her deepest experience of God,” as Schlumpf writes, “is as ‘Infinite Holy Mystery’ ”?
5. Consider Johnson’s question, offered by Schlumpf: “Is God a mystery beyond all comprehension, and if so, what is the nature of our language about that?” In what direction would you take an answer to that question?
6. What do you make of the tombstone epigraph Johnson suggests for herself?

Chapter One

1. In what ways might Johnson's early family life have impacted her personality, her ways of thinking about and relating to God, and how she lived?
2. What about Johnson's early religious formation in particular do you see reflected in her later life and work?
3. Is there anything in particular about her early life experience that you admire or envy, and might even wish to make a part of your own family life, and anything that you particularly do not?
4. The story of young Beth Johnson's trip to church on All Souls' Day with her siblings, and the reason for it, is striking. In what ways are we poorer for having largely lost such practices, and in what ways does it seem okay to see them go?

Chapter Two

1. Schlumpf reports Johnson's observation that not having women as priests is "impoverishing for the whole church." One needn't be an advocate of the ordination of women to recognize that there is some truth to this observation. How might it be so?
2. Johnson remembers the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) as significant in her experience of her call to religious life. How might this be significant? What has been your own experience of praying the Magnificat?
3. Were women religious a part of your own childhood experience? What impact did that have on you?
4. What do you find interesting, inspiring, or troubling about the early formation Johnson and her fellow sisters experienced in the novitiate? Does it reflect any of your own religious formation or education at any point in life?
5. What are your impressions of Johnson's early clashes with her superiors in religious life and the role that conscience and obedience played in them?

Chapter Three

1. What an interesting conversation is recounted at the top of page 35 between Johnson and her superior, Mother Immaculata Maria, on the topic of her studying theology. What is your own experience of the role of questioning when it comes to faith?
2. What kind of thoughts about the relationship between engagement with the world on one hand and attentiveness to prayer and faithfulness to religious commitments on the other does this chapter prompt in you?
3. In what ways was Johnson was drawing connections between her theological studies and the world around her, as well as between her studies and her own life?
4. Johnson recalls the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on non-Catholic Christians being “mind-blowing” to her. Have you ever had your own experience of theology or church teaching seeming a bit “mind-blowing”?

Chapter Four

1. What is your reaction to the comments offered publicly on October 7, 1979, to Pope John Paul II by Sr. Theresa Kane?
2. What does Johnson mean when she speaks of coming to recognize her theological work as a “vocation within a vocation”?
3. What are your impressions of the difficult process that Johnson was forced to go through before her tenure application at the Catholic University of America was approved?
4. Why might Johnson choose to keep the letter of encouragement she received from Sr. John Raymond in her Bible?
5. What does Johnson mean when she says, “They radicalized me.” Who is “they” and what is the “radicalization” she is referring to?
6. Have you seen “the evil of patriarchy . . . threatened by smart women saying challenging things”? If so, how?

Chapter Five

1. Have you read Johnson's *She Who Is*? If so, what was the experience of reading it like for you?
2. Have you read any of the works of the other feminist theologians Schlumpf mentions—Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, or Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza? Have any of these works shaped your own understand of and relationship with God? How is Elizabeth Johnson's work different?
3. Consider one of the questions that motivated Johnson to write *She Who Is*. What would be the effects if we, the church, were able to envision God in feminine images?
4. What is said in this chapter about *She Who Is* also describes all of Johnson's other books: she relies strongly on the classical Catholic tradition to do her theology. This sets her apart from many other feminist theologians. How might this aspect of her work be a strength, and how a weakness?
5. What does Johnson's move from Catholic University to Fordham, and the reasons for it, say about her as a scholar and a theologian?

Chapter Six

1. Should you pray for sunshine on the day of the church picnic? Why or why not?
2. How might an emphasis on self-emptying and self-sacrifice reinforce women's submission to men? How might distrust of these same concepts erode Christian faith and living? Where does the balance lie?
3. What does it say about Johnson's theology and her teaching methods that a student might emerge from a class session feeling like, as one student said, he'd "just prayed for two and half hours" or like, as another said, she'd "just went to church"?
4. What would the experience of being Elizabeth Johnson's student be like?
5. Consider theologian Christine Firer Hinze's comment: "She's really an example of how you can embrace feminist sensibilities and still be at the heart of the church." What value does this offer to her students? To the broader church?
6. What do you make of Johnson's defense of the production of the play *The Vagina Monologues* on Fordham's campus?

Chapter Seven

1. Why do you suppose the role of “public intellectual” is important to Catholics outside the world of academia?
2. What are your impressions of the process leading to the public criticism of Johnson by the U.S. bishops’ conference?
3. Given what you have learned of Johnson’s work in this biography, or from your own experience reading her actual books or articles, is the criticism voiced by the U.S. bishops’ conference valid? In what ways might you say it is accurate, and in what ways not?
4. Would you have wished to see Johnson respond to the criticism any differently than she did?

Epilogue

1. What are your impressions of the conversation that (sort of) continued between Johnson and the U.S. bishops' conference in the months and years following publication of the formal criticism?
2. What do you think of the tugboat metaphor Johnson offers regarding her work as a theologian?
3. Is the image of a leader who "courageously stands up for what is right, but does so in a collaborative, nonadversarial way" a realistic one? Have you seen it lived effectively? Is it possible? Why or why not?