THE BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS

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ELIZABETH JOHNSON, C.S.J. is Distinguised Professor (Emerita) of Theology at Fordham University. She spoke with Boisi Center interim assistant to the director Jack Nuelle and Boisi Center graduate research assistant Mary Elliot preceding the 18th annual Prophetic Voices Lecture. The resulting interview touches on a reframed theological and ethical understanding of creation and our renewed responsibility toward the environment in light of our current ecological crisis. It has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

NUELLE: I'd like to start by asking, can you explain the title of your talk, "The Challenge of 'Us' in Ecological Times?"

JOHNSON: I'm trying to challenge myself and my hearers to expand our understanding of ourselves as human beings. After two thousand years of Western theology and classical tradition, 'us' has come to mean we human beings situated at the apex of the hierarchy of being. At this time of ecological crisis, this is no longer a viable anthropology. We are inhabiting this planet with other creatures who have consciousness, emotion, and feelings; they have lives with birth and death and a measure of satisfaction. Springing off from *Laudato si,'* I am arguing that if we don't redefine our identity within the whole community of creation, then efforts to care for the world ecologically will be like band-aids. We need to rethink from the ground up the meaning of human identity on this planet along with millions of other species that God loves. Hence, the challenge of 'us.'

I have been working on this issue for a number of years, writing, in the process, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and more recently *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Orbis, 2018). I know firsthand how hard it is to think differently. Western culture generally, including the Christian community, is deeply imbued with a hierarchical, patriarchal

notion of human superiority and rule over other creatures. If you are a churchgoer, liturgies reinforce this idea. "We praise you;" "we bless you." Who is "we"? The human group. We've completely neglected that the whole Bible is filled with calls for other creatures to praise God: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps…Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!" (Ps 148:7-10); "O let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Ps 150:6). That's what I'm going to explore tonight: the theological move to expand 'us' so that human identity begins with human embeddedness in the community of creation.

NUELLE: You sense a resistance to embracing that?

JOHNSON: Indeed yes.

NUELLE: What do you think the reason for that is, just pure anthropocentrism?

JOHNSON: Someone once said what is needed for a new idea to take hold in academia is a few funerals! Because generations have been trained in a certain way of thinking and are writing, doing research, and teaching others out of a paradigm of human superiority. I say this as myself an elder. The word conversion is used by the last three popes to underscore how hard it is to turn things around. I think it's not only that we are so dazzled by our own prowess, though we are, but habit and also fear impel people to hold onto the old paradigm.

Once in a lecture I referred to the cosmic walk, a structure in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. You start near the rotunda ceiling with a re-enactment of the Big Bang, and then walk down a spiral path along the wall to ground level. Every step you take covers millions of years of time. At the end, you step over all of human history in a line that's as thin as a human hair.

I suggested that we humans need to imagine ourselves in that cosmic context. Instead of seeing ourselves as king of the world, standing at the tip of the pyramid of being, we need to see ourselves first of all as creatures within the circle of life. One man in the audience gave a poignant response. He said, "All my life, I knew that's where I belonged, at the top. If you take away that triangle structure, I don't know where I am anymore." Clearly this is a very existential, deep down issue. It's not a simple thing but a question of identity.

ELLIOT: I read some of Bernard Lonergan, and he uses the phrase 'intellectual conversion.' You argue that we need an ecological conversion. Could you talk a little bit more about what that would look like?

JOHNSON: Pope John Paul II was the first pope to use that phrase, calling the church to ecological conversion. Pope Benedict XVI followed suit, and the term is all through Pope Francis' work, especially in *Laudato si*.' In the New Testament the Greek term for conversion is *metanoia*, which means a turning around. If you are going in one direction and realize it's detrimental or harmful to yourself or others, conversion means swiveling or turning around to go in a different direction.

Bernard Lonergan wrote brilliantly of conversion in intellectual, moral, and religious senses as ultimately falling in love with God. The destruction of the Earth in our day is profoundly sinful. We human beings need a change of direction, or as Lonergan wrote, a conversion on the intellectual, moral, and religious levels. We need to fall in love with God ... who loves the Earth, and allow this love to spark our own love accordingly, to practical and critical effect. This is a deeply spiritual move.

At stake is the fundamental issue of who we believe God to be. Conversion to the Earth is actually a theocentric option. Like the option for the poor, it takes a stand where the heart of God is to be found. If you look upon all of creation with the eyes of God, you're going to see a very different position for humans than that of classical anthropology. Who is your God? That has been a question that has impelled my theological work from the beginning, and is very much at stake in ecological theology.

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NUELLE: How does one put themselves in that position of staring through the eyes of God without tending towards a kind of immanentizing or projection?

JOHNSON: That's a great question to ask, because in recent centuries theology emphasized divine transcendence to such an extent that divine immanence tended to slip from view. Making God close now, such as emphasizing the immanent presence of God indwelling the world, somehow seems to compromise divinity. However, rich resources in the Christian religious tradition can help restore the balance. The Bible, many thinkers of the early church, the Eastern tradition, Celtic spirituality and the Franciscan tradition in the West are some key resources that see deeply into the cosmic presence of God.

Part of the work of theology in our day is to bring forth these and other largely untapped resources to help the church, both people and institution, to change direction toward ecological conversion. A living tradition is one that is able to grow with the signs of the times. True, one must be careful about going off on another wrong track. But this kind of theology is akin to humble searching. It proceeds along the lines of Ignatian discernment, asking what God is calling us to at this point, and how we might know that. Then it expresses the result in language.

NUELLE: Or else just be silent before nature, which is an avenue to knowing, too, as I understand.

JOHNSON: It surely is. In *Laudato si'* Pope Francis urges us to stand still and appreciate the living world. He speaks of "the mysticism of a leaf," and uses many other such beautiful terms that evoke a kind of contemplative appreciation of creation.

NUELLE: It seems like especially in *Laudato si'*, the model for ecological reform is an intersectional model. Francis emphasizes how the people who are suffering most because of climate change are the poor. So it seems maybe that if you were able to look at the light of God shining through creation, you can maybe reorient yourself towards their plight.

JOHNSON: Over and over again, the encyclical refers to the cry of the Earth, the cry of the poor, because it is the poor who suffer most from ecological degradation. When migration of certain animals doesn't happen because of climate change, then the indigenous people who depend on that migration for sustenance themselves become refugees. To deepen analysis of the many anecdotal examples of the cry of the poor being connected with the cry of the Earth, I think we look to the heart of God, whose mercy is over all creation. Jesus' teaching to love God with all your heart and soul and your neighbor as yourself brings us to that place. Because who is my neighbor? Today we need to answer that besides the traveler beaten up and left by the side of the road, my neighbor is the migratory bird looking for water, my neighbor is the whole community of life.

ELLIOT: Could you talk more about suffering and how that relates to this question of the poor, as well as the difference between a scientific understanding of suffering in evolutionary theory versus a theological understanding?

JOHNSON: In evolutionary perspective, death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life. Once creatures with sensitive nervous systems evolved, suffering entered into the world as well. This is a given in the way the natural world on our planet actually works. Why has all life evolved in order to die? I don't know, but it does have benefits. Predation allows the life of one creature to become a source of life for another. Death makes room for future generations to evolve.

Theologically, we ask the question - how does God relate to this suffering and death? In my earlier work I tried to go down the route of theodicy, or justifying the ways of God in the face of evil. It never felt totally truthful or convincing. At this point I have stopped trying to do a theodicy. I acknowledge the *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of iniquity), the depths of which cannot be plumbed. And turn to the cross.

The Danish theologian Niels Gregersen coined the phrase "deep incarnation" to signify that when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), a solidarity was forged between God in Christ not only with human beings but with all creatures of flesh who suffer and die. The incarnation reaches down into the very tissue of biological existence itself, and the cosmic dust of which all earthly matter is composed. With this connection in view, the cross of Christ becomes an icon or sacrament of God's presence and care for every suffering creature. No animal dies alone.

What difference does this make? In one sense, none. Animals die anyway. Christopher Southgate is a British theologian who's struggled with this question, arguing that it makes all the difference in the world that an animal is not alone in its suffering, just as it does with us humans. In Christ God is present with that creature, with deep love and the promise of something more. Since the risen Christ is also "the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15), there is a future for all the struggling and the dead. From a faith perspective the situation can be biologically wretched, but still hopeful.

Some nowadays are using the word "cruciform" to describe nature in its continual suffering among sentient creatures. Deep incarnation forges a profound link between the crucified God and the suffering world. The idea carries into the evolving world an insight of Karl Rahner that the most radical thing Christians believe is that God became material.

But we keep slipping away. Christ is risen, He's divine, He's the son of God, but what is at the essence of what we're saying about Christ? That comes back

to my mind as we do all of this, because it's bringing God just back into solidarity through Christ with all the living and dying throughout the ages.

NUELLE: Are people arguing that the world is supposed to degrade, that the world is supposed to be used up, that it doesn't matter because it will all be remade at the end of time?

JOHNSON: Such an apocalyptic view is abroad in some fundamentalist Christian groups. I recall the Secretary of the Interior James Watt, who served in the Reagan administration. His responsibility was to protect public lands, but let many tracts of forest out for logging. When questioned before Congress, he defended his actions by arguing that when the last tree falls, Christ will come again. Shocking.

If you see that creation is a gift of God, something good that is meant to flourish, then taking responsible care of it is a moral urgency of faith. You don't go out and murder people because there's going to be a future for them in heaven. You take care of them. That is why this question of 'us' is so important. Living beings deserve our loving care.

Before humans evolved, the natural background rate of extinction of species was roughly one to five a year. The annual rate now is over 1,000 a year. You can Google it and see what creatures went extinct in 2018. Horrifying. One might say, "well, things go extinct. It's natural." But no, it's not. This is human-created havoc in the natural world. Species are disappearing at a rapid rate, and they will never come back again.

ELLIOT: Can you talk about what got you interested in these ecological questions and maybe how they relate to your previous work?

JOHNSON: In the 1970's at the beginning of feminist theological thinking, Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote a short essay on women and the Earth. She made a connection between the two, philosophically, culturally, and symbolically, seeing that they are both on the underside of the matter/spirit dualism. Men endowed with spirit are rational and able to lead. Women with their changeable bodies and their emotions are affiliated with the material world of nature. Both women and nature are subordinate to men, meant to serve and obey. Ruether opened my eyes to this link. As I developed more feminist thinking, ecology was an ever-present concern.

Much early feminist writing also made this connection. Meanwhile, from the ecological side, the first global Earth Day in 1970 brought this subject to the fore, and the increasingly critical problems of pollution, global warming, species extinction, and so on, made it more urgent. In 2009, on the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the Dean of Fordham College sponsored a group of faculty who read and discussed that book from beginning to end. I became absolutely riveted by how gorgeous the story of life is. So my own interest in the natural world came to the fore more explicitly in teaching, research, and writing.

NUELLE: What is the role of theology in engaging environmental questions?

JOHNSON: Religious convictions have practical consequences. How we behave in the world if we're actually serious about wanting to live out our faith is very much influenced by what we believe. That is at the heart of this lecture tonight. If we believe that "us" is all of us, then practical moral consequences will flow in the way that we live not only as individuals, but as whole communities, as churches.

ELLIOT: That's a point that I feel is being raised by a lot of different major religious traditions right now, even engaging the resources of science to educate their own. Even in our parishes, new classes on evolution are appearing. Not just speaking about how we understand science, but letting it come into the parish seems important, too.

JOHNSON: Very true. One of our Ph.D. students at Fordham University, Erin Lothes Biviano, did her postdoc research on what impelled religious communities to be ecologically active. After interviewing Catholic, Protestant, evangelical, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish communities in New Jersey, she concluded that the very first characteristic of faith groups dedicated to ecological care is scientific literacy. If you have no clue that this creek flowing through your backyard is coming from somewhere and going somewhere, you can just dump your junk in and it wouldn't matter. But if you understand the connections of all these creeks and the creatures that lived in them, then it becomes a different story. What you do with the creek would matter. Her book, *Inspired Sustainability* (Orbis, 2016), argues that one could hear all the sermons in the world, but until people know how the world actually worked, it wasn't going to have any effect. Once folks have some scientific literacy, however, they engage environmental questions as intrinsic to faith, not just as an add-on.

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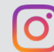 boisi_center

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