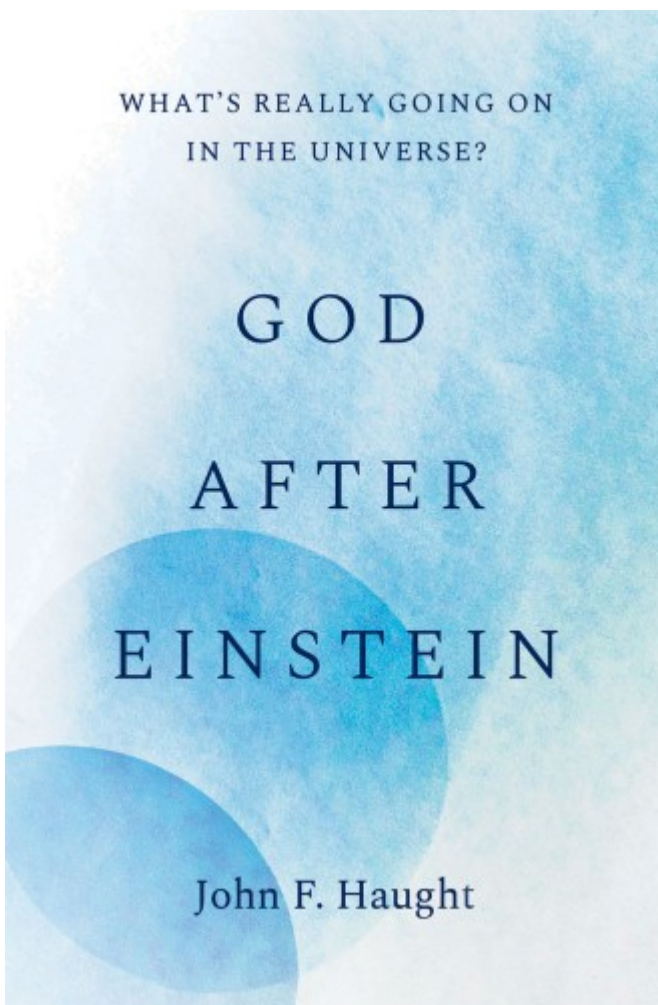


An unfolding drama of awakening

John Haught dismantles the impoverished reasoning of most contemporary cosmology.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

In Review



God after Einstein

What's Really Going on in the Universe?

By John Haught

Yale University Press

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Take time seriously! This is John Haught's impassioned plea to scientists and theologians alike. He sets out a carefully reasoned case for a sense of meaning that resides in "contributing to the drama of cosmic awakening." His exemplary argument, built by fresh insight laid upon insistent repetition, offers a dynamic and assertive response to religion's scientific despisers—but throws down a gauntlet for conventional theology also.

Haught's initial dialogue partner is Albert Einstein. His central thesis is that Einstein failed to follow the logic of his theory of relativity, which should have pointed him to time as an unfolding drama of awakening. Instead, captivated by Baruch Spinoza's pantheism, Einstein assigned no significance to time.

The majority of cosmologists today similarly fail to take time seriously, Haught asserts. He calls them *archaeonomists*—those who believe that "the only reliable way to understand the world around us is to trace everything back analytically to how things were in the beginning." Such thinkers are the main targets of Haught's withering ire. Their fundamental flaw is that they claim "all minds are reducible to insensate physical stuff and the impersonal laws of nature," but to make their assertions, they "exempt themselves from being part of the atomized unconsciousness into which their worldview has decomposed the universe." More subtly yet fundamentally, such reasoning is impatient: its pessimism "fails to allow that time carries with it emergent outcomes that were not implicit in the cosmic past."

What Haught seeks to put in place of archaeonomy is anticipation. That's where the meaning of the universe lies: "What is most real is not the past or the present but what is yet to come." Things become real to us as we wait to see how they fit into "future unifying syntheses." The universe is "an unfolding temporal drama for whose meaning we can only wait with active attentiveness," which means we have to withhold final judgments about what exactly is going on.

To be people of anticipation requires us to understand mystery, which is not the "eternal present that rescues us from the flow of time" but rather "the inexhaustible future into which all of time streams." It is to be people of patience, since love does not force:

It is not by dictating, but by attracting and letting be, that divine love allows creation to happen. That the ultimate source of cosmic existence and coherence is somehow not-yet is not a sign of divine weakness or deistic abdication. It is the trace of a unique kind of power—the power to let something other than itself come into existence and then to become even more.

And it is to open ourselves to divine superabundance, which, as Paul Ricoeur noted, exceeds the world's logic of equivalence. The triple immensity of time, space, and complexity expands the imagination—and the soul. “While equivalence rules the universe mathematically,” writes Haught, “superabundance rules it dramatically.”

This is an intriguing, compelling, sometimes inspiring vision. No doubt fostered in the soil of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead, it convincingly out-narrates the narrowness of a cosmology obsessed with origins. It rests on a disarming confidence that beyond death, suffering, and evil is an “indestructible rightness” more persistent, important, real, and healing than any other phenomenon. Haught writes with a thrilling combination of formidable intelligence, profound wisdom, and elegant prose.

Yet I have several reservations. Haught's counterpoint to archaeonomy is analogy. Analogy, which traces back to Plato, argues that reality is not here but elsewhere and that time is only meaningful to the extent that it offers sacramental insight into eternity. With relentless insistence, Haught takes on themes such as origins, life, thought, and freedom, finding fault first with the archaeonomists and then with the analogists. The analogists represent almost all Christian theologians, in his view. Yet while he dialogues with the most notable contemporary cosmologists, his views of contemporary theological understandings of time seem taken from popular faith.

Which creates a second issue: Where is God, for Haught? It's fascinating to read that God is “creating the world not from out of the past but from out of the future.” But here and elsewhere Haught seems to regard God and the future as synonyms. In the final chapter, he follows Karl Rahner in speaking of the absolute future in quasi-divine terms. He dismisses the notion that God dwells in an eternal elsewhere, because that would disempower time. He's aware that the doctrine of the incarnation sacralizes time: he argues that the incarnation is much deeper than theologians have assumed and the resurrection more cosmic than they have

imagined. But we never meet the theologians whose deep and cosmic reflection might counterweigh his sweeping dismissals. Instead we get key terms—*dramatic, awakening, future, story*, let alone *God*—all with impressive theological histories. Haught repeats them often, heavily freighted but unexamined.

Which yields a third difficulty. Anyone preaching in Advent or writing about the last things encounters the problem that the more weight you give to Christ's second coming, the less centrality you inevitably assign to his first. Haught is like the theologians who put all their eggs in the eschatological basket. The result is that Christ's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection are downgraded from normative to illustrative—only of significance to the extent that they herald the larger project of awakening to the cosmic future. Haught insists, "What the universe is really all about has yet to be fully revealed." So much for incarnation and resurrection, then.

I applaud Haught's dismantling of the impoverished reasoning of most contemporary cosmology. I'm delighted to read his eloquent articulation of the centrality of time to faith. But instead of seeking a renewal of Christian theology, in which task he would find many fellow travelers, he sets up a fragile alternative with no significant place for Jesus and no clear role for God. Surely a more conciliatory approach to a theology of patience and hope would be more fruitful.