

**Interview with John Haught**  
**Tuesday, October 9 - 1:00 PM EST**

1. **Since this issue of *Occasional Papers* focuses on compassion and love, let's talk first about your idea that "theology must first ask what the world must be like if love is to make any real difference. Before love can be actualized, it needs a world open to yet unrealized possibilities." Would you say more about how the reality that we live in an unfinished universe impacts our understanding of God, human nature, and love?**

Jürgen Moltmann and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin are my guides here. For both of them love means looking for ways in which the beloved may become something *more* or attain "fuller being." But fuller being cannot become actual unless the universe, of which each of us is a part, is open to yet unrealized possibilities. The opportunities for such a realization may often seem absent, but love, when animated by hope, earnestly scans the horizon in search of new possibilities for the other. But if the universe were already fully actualized, there would be no future, and hence no realm of unrealized possibilities. Hence no place for love.

It is of great interest to Christian ethics, spirituality and theology, therefore, that science has demonstrated that we live in a universe that is unfinished, still awakening, and therefore open to new possibilities of being. Each of us can find meaning by participating in and fostering this awakening. The awakening of our universe still flickers uncertainly, but in the light of geology, biology and cosmology we may now ascertain, with a certainty that our religious ancestors lacked, that the universe has at least the *capacity* for deeper awakening and hence for the ongoing enhancement of its being. By locating another person's life within this mysteriously emerging universe, we see that ample room remains for the other to become *more* since the universe itself can become more.

Yet what does it mean to become *more*? There are many ways of answering this question, but one comes from ecology. An ecological axiom states that "to *be* is to be related." Consequently, to *be more* is to be *more* related. And to be *perfect* – that is, to be God – is to be related without restriction. If so, love means enhancing opportunities for the beloved to be ever more connected to others, to life, to the cosmos, and to God.

2. **You wrote if we believe that the universe is evolving and may still be far from its final act, "there is room left for the meaning of things to emerge gradually and in a manner that will remain obscure to human understanding at any present moment.... For all we know, the cosmic drama may be the carrier of meanings that can be registered only in the compassionate life of God and that now remain inaccessible to scientific investigation and prediction." How might this understanding inform our concepts of who God is?**

In prescientific theology the universe was largely a stage for the human drama, or perhaps a neutral and sometimes even hostile setting for the working out of one's personal salvation. For modern skeptics the universe is a pointless reshuffling of atoms in the emptiness of space and deep time. But a third perspective is possible. Now that science has shown us that the universe is still emerging, it has become possible for the first time in human history to view this universe as *dramatic* rather than static. More specifically, we may now look at the cosmos as a drama of awakening – to life, consciousness, freedom, faith, and love. We may now think of God not so much as the governor but as the goal of this ongoing cosmic awakening.

Yet, if the universe is a drama of awakening, then the kind of intelligibility we humans may look for in it is that of "narrative coherence." The kind of meaning a dramatic cosmos carries is analogous to the kind of intelligibility you look for when you attend a play or read a novel. You don't make up your mind immediately after the first act what the play is all about, and you don't stop reading a novel after the first two or three chapters just because it does not yet make sense. Instead you wait patiently, with a disposition of bridled expectation, to see if meaning – or narrative coherence – might show up as you attend to how the play is unfolding, or as you follow the novel all the way through.

The analogy is not perfect, but if the cosmos were merely a machine, as scientists, philosophers and theologians sometimes pictured it throughout much of modern history, it begs to be understood mostly in terms of mathematical elegance, exquisite engineering, or architectural design. Indeed, prior to Darwin the search for nature's meaning was often reduced to the search for "design," a quest that still lives on in the anti-Darwinian obsession by many Christians with "intelligent design" as the main evidence for the existence of God. I have argued, however, that the real issue in science and religion after Darwin and Einstein is not whether living complexity points to a designing deity but whether the cosmic *drama* carries a meaning.

I suggest that the outside story that science tells about the universe is accompanied by an inside drama, a trail of events that we can link up with only in nonscientific ways, including that of religious faith and wayfaring hope. Accordingly, we may think of God as the ultimate recipient and savior of the whole inside story of nature, a drama that includes the vitality, interior experiences, successes, failures, sufferings and dyings not just of humans but of all of life.

**3. Writing about God being already in the future, you say, "... only the love emanating from a God of promise, a God who creates the universe from out of the future, can make the world one, intelligible, good, and real.... It is the world's being drawn toward deeper union and communion up ahead - that is, its anticipation of future coherence ... that gives the world its consistency and presently opens it toward more being." Would you speak more about why you believe the movement of the world is toward deeper communion? Where do you see this happening?**

To understand the universe we cannot leave out the inside story that has been going on for millions of years silently in living subjects both human and nonhuman. For people of faith the way to search for the meaning of nature is to keep looking inside and waiting (actively, attentively and not passively) for threads of the story to come together up ahead in a coherence not yet actualized. This waiting means hoping not just for ourselves but for the whole universe.

Anyway, I prefer not to say that God is "already" in the future, but (with theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg) that, in a carefully qualified sense, God is somehow "not-yet." If God were fully present spatially and temporally here and now – as we in our anxiety may (idolatrously) wish for – divinity would so overwhelm the cosmos that it would be dissolved into the Godhead and lose its distinct identity. Blending the world into God may appeal to our pantheistic impulses, but I consider pantheism – the belief that nature is God – to be an extreme form of religious impatience. I think that the basic Christian instinct instead is to insist that God seeks communion with a world that is clearly *distinct* from its Creator. God's will is to free the world up to be itself rather than to absorb it into Godself. Such a world takes time, and it asks for patience rather than the premature closure of pantheism.

So the deeper communion of the world with God is a *differentiating* union, one in which the world remains world and God remains God, but in which they can be unified all the more intimately by mutual love. As Teilhard puts it, in an idiom that reflects both Trinitarian and Chalcedonian theology, "true union differentiates."

When I refer to the *consistency* of the cosmos I am thinking of what holds the universe together and keeps it from falling back into primordial atomic dispersal. I mean (with Teilhard) that "the world rests on the future" and not on the past. It is not in the cosmic past or in an Eternal Present, but in the *not-yet*, that the universe comes together. If, in search of what holds nature together, we go all the way back to the cosmic past we end up in a pre-atomic fog in which the primal elements are scattered and diffused. The remote subatomic cosmic past, on which contemporary scientific thought seeks to ground its sense of the coherence of the cosmos, in fact consists of a state of de-coherence. No universe can steady itself in such sandy soil. On the other hand, if we look directly and solely to an Eternal Present as the steadying factor in nature we are likely to ignore the long dramatic journey that is leading the cosmos from primordial multiplicity toward increasingly intense forms of

differentiated unity. As I have pointed out at length in *The New Cosmic Story*, both the atomistic/materialist and the Platonic (otherworldly) ways of looking at the cosmos are unsatisfactory. They refuse to *wait* for the cosmos to come into being and for universe's (now hidden) meaning to manifest itself at God's pace rather than ours.

In our new dramatic cosmic context faith is a patient *anticipation* of a Fullness that generously allows itself to be "not-yet" so that the world is given time to become itself, and so that our own lives are liberated to have unpredictable dramatic meaning – and thus make a real difference – within the larger story. This kind of faith, inconceivable prior to our new scientific sense that the universe is an unfinished narrative, hopes not for solitary salvation of souls, but for the eventual fulfillment of the entire universe. In the cosmic drama each of our own life-stories can have unrepeatability and, we may hope, everlasting significance – including subjective survival of death. An anticipatory cosmic vision, however, cannot conceive of personal salvation apart from the fulfillment of an entire universe.

**4. While most US women religious probably don't view suffering as an expiation for original sin nor connect it to guilt and punishment, we may not necessarily have considered suffering in the context of an anticipatory universe. You write about the possibility of suffering being interpreted as part of the process of ongoing creation. Would you speak more about this interpretation of suffering?**

The problem of suffering, in my opinion, coincides with the more fundamental question of why the universe remains unfinished, why it is not fully intelligible at present, and why God is in some sense not-yet. Suffering gains a foothold in the dark side of a presently unperfected universe. Why, then, you might ask, wasn't the universe rounded off and completed in an initial divine act of creation? I have no good answer to this question – my own thoughts are quite unfinished – but it seems to me that insisting on an initially perfected cosmos amounts in effect to demanding that the universe not be allowed to unfold narratively and dramatically. It is an implicit demand that the universe not be permitted to be itself, to be really distinct from God.

Darwin (by showing that life is a story) and Einstein (by proving that the entire cosmos is inseparable from time) have destroyed once and for all the literalist belief that the world in the beginning was fully complete. Both the religious fundamentalist and the New Atheist, of course, protest the idea of an initially unfinished universe. Their job description of an acceptable deity is for God to be a magician. Both cosmic pessimism and the religious obsession with certitude, however, are symptomatic of a perfectionism and impatience that cannot tolerate the idea that the universe may still be coming into being. Both religious and atheistic impatience demand that the universe not take time to unfold. They object to the fact that it journeys dramatically down blind alleys and strange experiments with so many dead ends. In their perfectionist impatience they seek a universe that is architecturally impeccable, but one that is devoid of drama.

**5. When talking about the universe being in the process of becoming, you raise the question: Why would God call into being an unfinished, imperfect, evolutionary universe, rather than forcing it to be complete and perfect – and therefore devoid of suffering – from the start? Would you speak about that question and what you see as possible answers for us to consider?**

I like to answer this question by having listeners and readers consider what the alternative to an initially unfinished universe would be like. Perhaps they want a universe perfected and polished from the start. But such a world could hardly be distinct from its Maker. Instead it would be a mere appendage to God or an undifferentiated extension of the divine will. In other words it would not be truly distinct from God, as the Christian doctrine of creation entails. Indeed Judaism and Islam also insist that the world is *not* God and that God radically transcends the world. All three Abrahamic traditions reject pantheism, even though the longing to merge the world with God has been a constant temptation of religions, including early Christological experiments that sought to absorb the human nature of Christ without distinction into the divine nature.

A world fully finished from the start, then, would be indistinguishable from God. Logically speaking, it would be so fixed and finalized that it could not have a future or a distinct identity. And it would have no room for freedom. It would not even have room for life since life anticipates the generous horizon of what is not-yet as it struggles to transcend itself. An initially completed creation would be devoid of suffering, of course, but it would be dead on delivery.

**6. You speak of God's exercising divine providential care by providing a vision of how the world may become new. How might that vision help us cope with the suffering we see in the world and experience in our own lives?**

I'm not sure that anything we write about the problem of suffering will be of immediate help. Suffering calls out not for reason but for redemption. But perhaps the realization that all of our sufferings and dyings are part of a cosmic drama can make some difference even here and now. I believe it was the novelist Isak Dinesen who said that "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." Thus we have the Passion Narratives in the Gospels, and maybe the whole cosmic story is a kind of extended Passion Narrative whose "inside" meaning may be brought out by our Gospels' hope for resurrection.

We may be grateful to science then for allowing us now to intertwine the cosmic drama with the biblical sense of anticipation. This linkage is plausible, however, only if we first see the universe not as a mere stage but instead as a still unsettled drama.

**7. How have you been able to apply your own understandings of God and suffering into your own life? How have these insights about an evolutionary universe made a difference in the way you find meaning in what you have experienced in life?**

I started becoming convinced of the dramatic character of the universe starting way back in my 20s, and this impression has continued in my many years of teaching courses, lecturing, and writing books on science and religion. As a result I can no longer separate *anything* in my faith and theology from a sense that something new and unpredictable may be dawning up ahead. A periodic arrival of what is new and unpredictable has always been the case in cosmic history since the beginning, so why should we not, right now, anticipate something more in the future? In my book *Resting on the Future*, which I subtitled *Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, I have tried to express how a dramatic, anticipatory understanding of the cosmos can transform, and render more hopeful, our understanding and appreciation of nature, God, faith, spirituality, life, evolution, suffering, dignity, destiny, consciousness, death, and meaning. I have tried to transplant all of these themes from their conventional prescientific – often Platonic and Aristotelian – subsoil to a more scientifically sensitive understanding of the cosmos combined with the ancient Abrahamic sense of anticipation and futurity.

**8. In your writings you invite us into an exciting way of viewing our spiritual journey. You say, "The recurrent pattern of evolutionary advance ... gives us every reason to suppose that the universe's appetite for more being and deeper interiority has not yet been fully satisfied and that the world is still being invited to become more by organizing itself inwardly as well as outwardly around an always new and higher center.... At present, through our own longing for truth, goodness, and beauty, the universe demonstrates that it is still restless for more being. Surely this must all mean something momentous for our spiritual lives." Would you speak more about what you think this momentous invitation may be? How might we stay attuned to this invitation?**

I believe with Teilhard that God creates the universe by drawing it toward *more being* from up ahead rather than compelling it to take a definite shape from an already settled past. The way in which the universe has recurrently made its emergent leaps – or how it has become *more* over the course of time – requires that the

units dominant in the cosmos at each new stage of its growth organize themselves around a new and higher *center*. On Earth at present, therefore, we humans would show our fidelity to cosmic process by discovering and intensifying our relationship to a new and higher center that might unify and lift up the entire human phenomenon – and by implication the rest of creation – to a new and higher mode of being. For Christians, of course, this center is Christ.

In cosmic history it is only when higher emergent unities come onto the scene that we can understand the meaning of the earlier units and stages that they synthesize. As we follow the history of the universe from the remote past into the present, we realize that we cannot adequately understand what early atoms are until we wait and see what they can do later on in cosmic history when they combine into large organic molecules. And we cannot understand what an organic molecule is until we wait and see what it can do when it joins up with others in a living cell; or what a cell is until we watch what it does in relationship to others inside complex organisms. In other words, it is only by waiting and scanning the horizon up ahead that we can begin to make sense of anything, including ourselves.

As Christians, we wait in faith and hope to discover who we are by praying here and now for the full coming of Christ, the new and higher center around which a new humanity (the kingdom of God, the body of Christ) begs to be formed. So (with Luke Timothy Johnson) we look for the *real* Jesus not so much in the fragments we dig up archaeologically from past history, but in our anticipation of the Christ who is coming from out of the future. Finally it is in the full manifestation of the coming Christ that we look for the narrative coherence of the cosmic drama to become actualized and its true meaning revealed. Both our *maranatha* (“Come, Lord”) and our new sense of an anticipatory universe may converge in our celebration of the Eucharist.