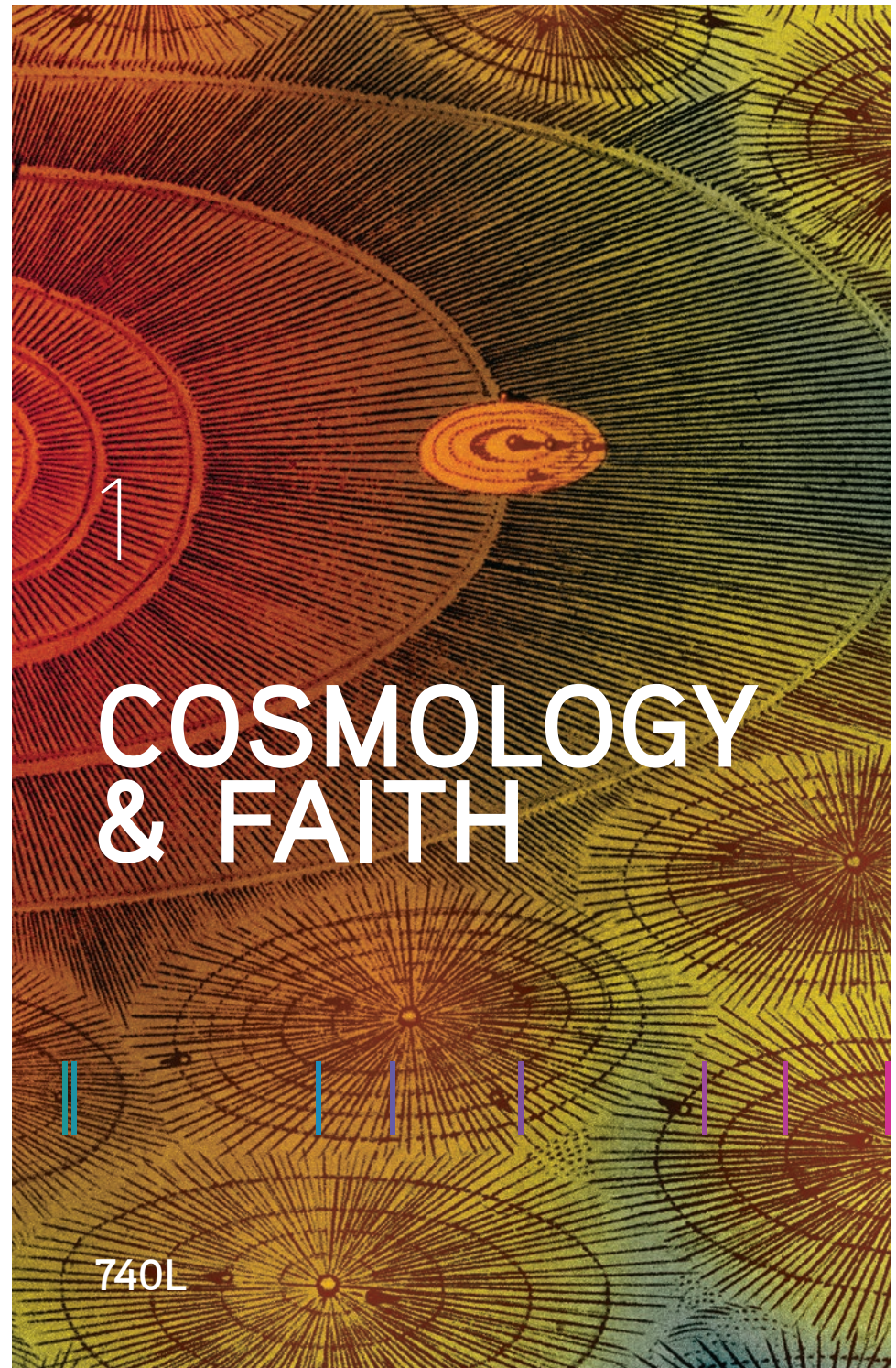




BIG HISTORY PROJECT



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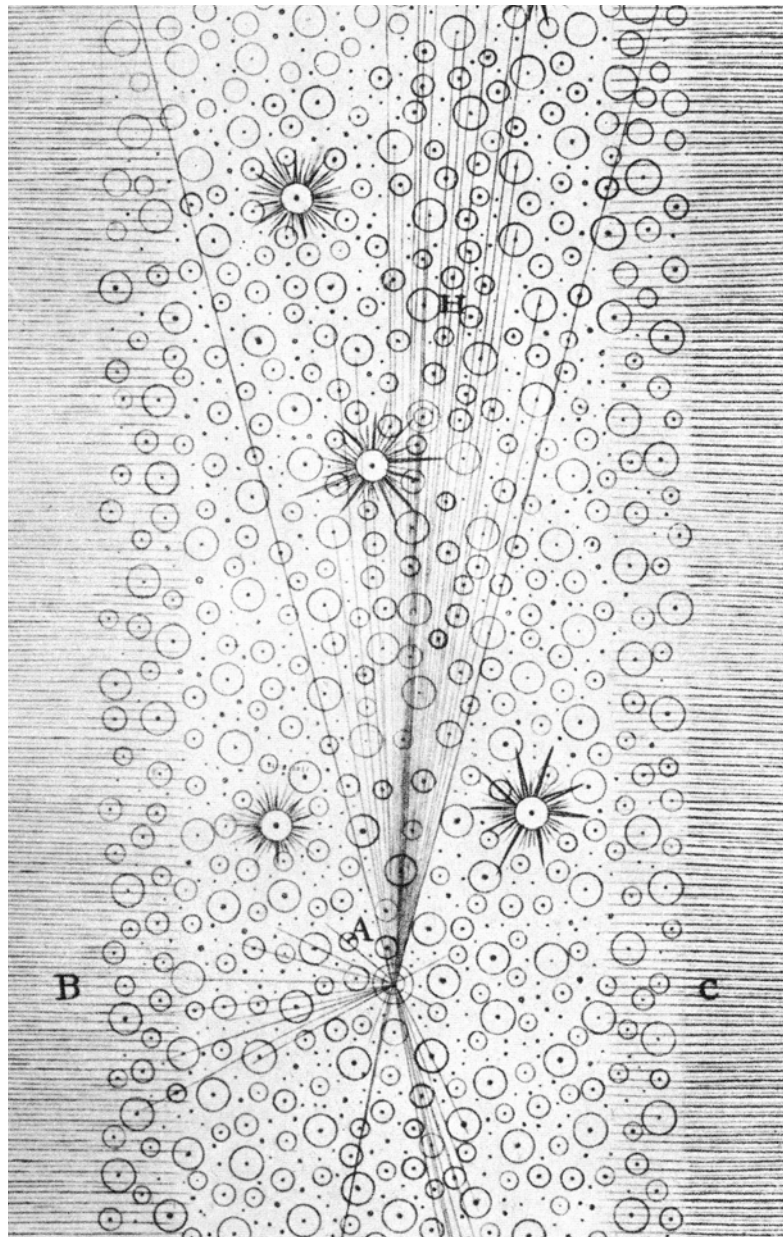
COSMOLOGY & FAITH

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COSMOLOGY & FAITH

By John F. Haught, adapted by Newsela

Since the beginning of human existence on our planet, people have asked questions of a religious nature. For example, what happens to the dead?



A 1784 diagram of the Milky Way by astronomer William Herschel

Human beings have always wondered how things “hang together.” Our minds naturally look for connections. We remain restless until we find them. Nothing really makes sense unless we can relate it to other things.

This is why science is so satisfying. Its principles bring together everything that goes on in the cosmos. Every event must obey the same physical laws everywhere. If you could travel to another galaxy in our Universe, you would find that the same laws of physics and chemistry work there as on Earth. The Universe is complex. It’s different from place to place. Yet, it’s all based on the same rules of science.

Our ancestors were just as interested in finding connections as we are. The main way in which they made sense of their experiences was to tell stories about them. These stories were often told as myths about from where we came. Understanding the origin of things helped make the unknown less scary.

We still need stories. Big History is a good example of the human longing for stories. Like creation stories, it holds our experiences together. We want to understand, for example, how the history of human beings is bonded to nature. Science now allows us to tell a whole new story about our connection to nature. Remarkably, over the last two centuries, science has shown that the Universe itself has a history. Human life is just a relatively new chapter in the cosmic story. We did not float in from some other world. We grew from roots that extend all the way back to the Big Bang.

It is very satisfying now to be able to tell this story. Science is the story of how atoms, stars, planets, cells, organisms, and minds all came to be.

What about religion?

Science and history both try to understand how things hang together. Religions do as well. Since the beginning of human existence, most people have asked religious questions. For example, what happens to the dead? Are they still connected to the world of the living?

In the book *The Broken Connection*, author Robert Jay Lifton discusses the bonds our ancestors felt between the living and dead. He observes that science has weakened those bonds. In some cases, they've been completely broken. Religions make a connection between our present life and a wider world of sacred mystery. Yet people who have studied science now often question that connection.

Nevertheless, many of us still ask religious questions. Why, for example, does anything exist at all? Why do living beings suffer? What happens when we die? Why do human beings have a sense of right and wrong? How can we find a meaning for our lives? What is really going on in the Universe?

These religious questions have usually been explained by myths and stories. To most religions, the "really real" world is infinite. It dwarfs the world studied by scientists. Religions try to connect people to this wider world. Ever since early times, most people have believed that the world includes spirits, gods, and long-departed ancestors. Religions strive to break through the physical limits that cut human existence off from these mysterious worlds. Religions seek to overcome feelings of meaninglessness, pain, and death.

Most people on Earth follow the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions still promise to save us from everything that holds us down. They each have answers to the toughest human realities. And the toughest may be that everything eventually dies. It is easy to understand why religions have been so important to people throughout history.



Religions are central to the history of human existence on our planet. As such, they rightly attract the interest of scientists. Religions have shaped the consciousness of most people who have ever lived. Any summary of big history, therefore, cannot ignore that.

The question of science and faith

In the age of science, however, what are we to make of religions? Hasn't science made religion hard to believe in?

For the sake of simplicity, let us refer to everything religious as "faith." This includes all religion's hopes, stories, prayers, and ceremonies.

The traditions of faith come from a time before science. Can human minds shaped by faith honestly take science seriously? Or, if you develop a sense of big history, can you still honestly accept religion? Does belief in God, for example, go against science? Isn't it hard to be both a scientist and a person of faith? Or can there be a connection between science and faith?

It is not my job to answer that question. However, it is appropriate to take note of it. It raises questions about what it means to be human. Why has the Universe given birth to humans who want to connect their lives to worlds that science cannot see?

Many scientists wish that religious faith would just go away. They'd prefer that only science would remain to fill our minds. Others, however, think that scientific discoveries raise questions that science alone cannot answer. For example, why does the Universe exist in the first place? What is the point of the 13.8-billion-year-old cosmic story? What are we supposed to be doing with our lives? Is there any reason for hope in the future?

Here are three ways that science could be understood by people of faith.

CONFLICT	Science and religious faith are incompatible
CONTRAST	Science and faith answer different kinds of questions
CONVERGENCE	Science and faith can work with each other

Shape your own answers. Make your own connections. Find your own way of understanding the beginning and how things "hang together." For most people, these are questions that will not just slip quietly away.

John F. Haught

John F. Haught is a Roman Catholic theologian and senior research fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C. He established the Georgetown Center for the Study of Science and Religion and is the author of numerous books, including *Science and Faith: A New Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012).

Image credits

An illustration of multiple worlds by 18th-century mathematician Leonhard Euler

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A 1784 diagram of the Milky Way by William Herschel

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Young Buddhist monks praying

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