

## **Magi and Wise Men: A UU Perspective**

### **Phil Roudebush**

In August of 2018, I achieved one of my life-long bucket-list goals when I visited the Roman Catholic cathedral in Cologne, Germany, known officially as the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter. It is a renowned monument of German Catholicism and Gothic architecture and was declared a World Heritage Site in 1996. Construction of the Cologne Cathedral commenced in 1248 and was halted in 1473, leaving it unfinished. Work restarted in the 19th century and was completed, to the original plan, in 1880. The towers for its two huge spires give the cathedral the largest façade of any church in the world. Although the façade and interior of the cathedral were magnificent, I was not there to enjoy their splendor but to admire one of the treasures and work of art inside — the Shrine of the Three Kings. The shrine was commissioned by the archbishop of Cologne in the year 1190 and is traditionally believed to hold the remains of the three wise men, whose relics were moved to Cologne in the year 1164. More later about how the remains were found and moved over a period of more than a thousand years. The shrine takes the form of a large reliquary in the shape of a basilican church, made of bronze and silver, gilded and ornamented with architectural details, figurative sculpture, enamels and gemstones. I was thrilled to see the shrine and stand in the presence of the scholars.

This fascination with the wise men may seem strange coming from someone who is a third generation Unitarian Universalist but I have been enamored with the story of the magi from an early age and “*We Three Kings*” is still my favorite holiday hymn.

“We three kings of Orient are,  
bearing gifts we traverse afar,  
field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
following yonder star.”

As Robin Jensen said in the reading this morning — “The magi lend an exotic and mysterious air to the Christmas story. The sweet domesticity of mother and child and the bucolic atmosphere of shepherds and stable are disturbed by the arrival of these strangers from the East. The background music changes from major to minor. Sentiment gives way to awe, perhaps even fear.” I think that is one reason that I am attracted to the wise men’s story.

### **Original account**

The original account of the magi is found in **Matthew 2:1-18**, which was read earlier. It is the only one of the Canonical gospels to mention the scholars. Matthew makes no attempt to present a full chronological account of the events of Jesus’s birth and infancy. Herod the Great ruled over the Jewish people in Palestine from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. The refusal of the magi to cooperate following their ‘being warned in a dream’ coupled with a dream

of Joseph, caused the plot of Herod to fail. His death, which is chronologically linked to the birth of Jesus gives us the only clue as to the date of these events. The birth of Jesus would have taken place about 2 years earlier.

That is the simple, straight forward account of the magi but the story has changed and been embellished over centuries. While traditional nativity scenes often depict three ‘kings’ visiting the infant Jesus on the night of his birth, in a manger accompanied by the shepherds and angels, the Biblical account simply presents an unnumbered party of scholars, astrologers or wise men visiting much later after his birth, with Jesus described as a child, not a baby, and residing in a house, not a stable, with only ‘his mother present.’ Matthew does not even say if the house was in Bethlehem. Knowing this Biblical account, I find that traditional nativity scenes showing three men visiting the baby Jesus in a manger are un-nerving.

### **So what’s in a name?**

The Magi are popularly referred to as Wise Men, Three Wise Men, Kings or Three Kings — in Christian tradition, they were a group of distinguished foreigners who visited Jesus after his birth bearing gifts. *Magi* is the plural of the Latin word *Magus*, borrowed from the Greek *Magos (plural Magoi)* and derived from the Old Persian word *Maguš*, which comes from a word for the religious caste into which Zoroaster was born (Parthian Empire – large area east of the eastern edge of the Roman Empire). Thus, the term magi is thought to refer to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. As part of Zoroastrianism, priests paid attention to the stars and gained a widespread reputation for astrology / astronomy. They were also purportedly adept at interpreting dreams. Their religious practices and use of astrology and dream interpretations caused derivatives of the term Magi to be applied to the occult in general and led to the English word *Magic*. The King James version of the Bible, published in 1611, translates the term as *Wise Men*, while the same word in other parts of the Bible is translated as magician or sorcerer. Several translations refer to the men outright as astrologers or scholars. There is no conclusive evidence that they were kings, favorite Christmas carols and famous works of art notwithstanding. The first crowns were seen in paintings in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

### **How many magi were there?**

We don’t know – Matthew simply uses the plural and early Christian art shows various numbers of Magi, ranging from 2 to 8. The earliest extant portrayal of the magi, dated to the mid-third century, appears above an arch in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. The magi are shown as three men, identical in size, dress and race – each carries a gift. The traditional number of three is probably extrapolated from the number of gifts that were presented to the baby Jesus.

### **Who were the magi?**

The phrase *from the east* (more literally, *from the rising* [of the sun]) is the only information we are given about the region from which the magi came. Western Christian church tradition dating from the sixth century gives them names: Balthasar of Arabia/Africa (young), Melchior of Persia/Europe (middle age), and Gaspar of India/Orient (old). A model for the story of the Magi might have been provided by the journey to Rome of King Tiridates I of Armenia, with his magi, to pay homage to the Emperor Nero in 66AD, a few years before the date assigned to the composition of the Gospel Matthew.

So my favorite Christmas hymn, ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are...’ should probably be renamed “We Unnumbered Astrologers or Scholars from the Parthian Empire or Somewhere Else Are...” but that does not sound very good.

### **How old was Jesus when the magi visited?**

Several biblical passages may allow an educated guess – the gospel of Luke says that Jesus was circumcised at 8 days old; and Luke also states that when the 40 days of Mary’s ‘uncleanness’ had passed, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem (sacrifice of pair turtle doves). The Magi came during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 BC and according to the passages we read in Matthew, Herod asked the Magi when they first saw the star and then later killed all the male children in Bethlehem age two and under. The Magi probably came after Jesus’ presentation in the temple, that is, after Jesus was 40 days old and before two years of age. So, the tradition of showing the foreign magi presenting their gifts to the newborn Jesus in the manger is not supported by the sparse information available in Matthew or the other gospels.

### **What about the gifts**

Three gifts are explicitly identified in Matthew – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Many different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been brought forward (gold a valuable commodity and symbol of virtue and kingship on earth; frankincense burned as incense and a symbol of deity and prayer; myrrh an anointing oil and symbol of death, suffering and one who is mortal). An interesting historical note — the Syrian King Callinicus is recorded to have offered these three gifts to Apollo in his temple at Miletus in 243BC and may have been the precedent for the magi gifts.

### **What happened to the Magi**

Matthew states that they returned home by a different route than they arrived. An Arian writer in the sixth century tells the story of the Magi being baptized by St. Thomas upon their return home, which helped to spread the Christian faith. Some have said the admonition was to forsake their former idolatrous habits and practices.

More about the relics of the magi. Saint Helena, mother of Constantine the Great (namesake of Constantinople) was very religious and traveled widely in the Middle East in 326 to 328A.D. collecting relics and other religious materials. She is reported to have returned to Constantinople after this trip with relics from all three wise men — they were kept in her palace’s private chapel. About fifteen years later, Saint Eustorgius traveled to Constantinople to have his election as bishop of Milan confirmed by the Emperor. The wise men’s relics were given to Eustorgius and he transported them in a marble sarcophagus via oxcart to Milan where they were housed in several different churches. Eight hundred years later, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I conquered Milan in 1164 and gave a gift of the relics to the archbishop of Cologne. The relics had great religious significance and were counted upon to draw pilgrims from all over Christendom. As mentioned earlier, construction of the Cologne Cathedral commenced in 1248 and was primarily built to house the relics and other religious treasures. One reference states that the reliquary was opened in 1864 and found to contain bones and garments.

### **What about the holiday of epiphany**

For most Christians around the world, the official end to the Christmas holiday occurs on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Known as Epiphany or the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, it commemorates how a star led the magi to the baby Jesus. Countries celebrate on the evening before and on the actual day with parades, costumes, light and music shows, gift giving, mass swims in frigid waters, and many other traditions. In his homily on Epiphany in 2018, Pope Frances called on the faithful to be like the Magi, who, he said, continued to look to the sky for inspiration, took risks and set out bearing gifts for Christ. “If we want to find Jesus, we have to overcome our fear of taking risks, our self-satisfaction and our indolent refusal to ask anything more of life. We need to take risks simply to meet a child. Those risks are immensely worth the effort, since in finding that child, in discovering his tenderness and love, we discover ourselves.” Not bad words from a modern day Pope.

### **UU Perspective on the Wise Men**

So how should Unitarian Universalists better understand this well-known part of the traditional Christmas story. One of the interpretations that I have come to embrace is by storyteller David Clark from Cochran, Georgia. David gave a holiday program at the UU Fellowship of Topeka, Kansas over 25 years ago. I found the following story very meaningful and read the story every Christmas season — it has become my favorite interpretation of the magi’s story. David Clark always uses fictional characters from his home town of Cochran, Georgia to tell the stories and this is titled “The Christmas Gospel According to Hezekiah Pepchek.”

### **The Christmas Gospel According to Hezekiah Pepchek**

Written by David Scott of Cochran, Georgia

“You know, another thing about that old Christmas story, is the part about the three wise fellers. People don’t usually put too much stock in that part of the story but I’ve always liked it. The story goes that these wise fellers came over from the east — now they don’t say if they came from the east part of the county, or from a couple of counties over, or where. I heard tell once that those wise fellers probably came all the way over from India, which certainly makes for a better story. Supposedly, these fellers gathered up all the smart folks in the land, and between the star gazers and the astrological and fortune teller types, and the Ouija board readers, they came to the conclusion that something great was going to happen over to the west of them, and so they set out to find it. Now you think about that — bouncing over from India all the way to Bethlehem riding the whole way on an old hump-backed mule — they couldn’t have made no more than about 20 miles a day. That means they must have bumped along there for better part of a year, if not more. They couldn’t have really known where they were going, but in the end they relied on a special star to find their way to that special something they were looking for. If you was to tell anyone you were going to walk out across the desert for the better part of a year or more, following a star to some place you didn’t even know the name of, they would see about having you put away before you could get across the county line. But these three fellers set out following the advice of sages and seers and fools.

You know there are a lot of folks who call these fellers and their advice givers heathens even though they understood something most of us kindly lost sight of. See, they set out with something called hope. Now you know it took a pile of hope in what they were looking for to make them go that far to find it — and you think of the faith those boys must have had to keep a going mile after mile, day after day, week after week, all on account of seeing some special something in a land far away. Now you noticed that were wasn’t a whole passel of wise fellers, it was just the three of them. I bet you that most of their friends were looking up the local mental health experts and these three fellers probably gave ‘em the slip by leaving at night.

So now your saying, Hezekiah, what is the point of this story. Well, these three wise fellers had a hope in something they couldn’t quite get their hands on, and they had the faith to set out looking for it believing they would find it if they just made the journey. Of course you have to add in that they must have been right stubborn to keep after it all that time until they got there. But shoot, we’re hard pressed to have much hope in anything anymore. There is any number of things about life and living that beats the hope and faith clear out of us. Maybe the reason we don’t find more special things about life is cause we’ve forgotten how to hope for it — and we ain’t laid in the faith it takes to pursue it — and even if we had those qualities, we might not be willing to make the journey it takes to get us there. And I don’t mean we have to go trotting off on some funny looking donkey to go on this trip I’m talking about — the hardest journeys to take are the ones that are right inside. And I don’t necessarily think that doing something that everybody says is crazy will make us a wise feller either — but I’m not so sure but that the most important journeys we can make wouldn’t be viewed as plain nuts by most folks.

Somewhere there is a great thing for everybody — study on it, hope for it, have faith you'll find it, and set out after it. And if the thing you're hunting for is great enough, then you'll be a wise feller in the end for finding it. Don't forget that out of all the folks who probably talked about the idea of setting out on that journey of following the star to see that little child, the ones we remember and ones we talk about are the three wise fellers who made the trip.”

### **The Enriched Moment**

Marion Mack Kinneman (Phil Roudebush's Grandmother.)

There will be moments during every day when  
my opportunity will come to show high courage:  
Not sometime in the future when I am a little  
better entrenched in my position,  
Nor when I have a feeling of greater security,  
Nor when I have more poise,  
But now.

There will be not one moment but innumerable moments  
during the day when I exercise divine patience:  
Not sometime in the future when I am less tired,  
Nor when there are fewer annoying things to disturb me,  
But now in this moment,  
which is the only one that I can fully know.

Sometimes during the day there will be an opportunity  
to see some mood of nature which has beauty:  
Not in the future when I have time to look for it,  
Nor when it will be so obvious that I need exert no effort to find it,  
Not in the future when I shall find it in some far-off clime,  
But here and now.

And surely there is not a day, when, if I choose,  
I cannot create for those about me moments of beauty:  
Not in the future when I shall feel happier and can do it more easily,  
Nor when I shall have more money to fashion things of beauty,

Nor when I have developed skills for expressing beauty,  
But now, from the meager materials at hand.

And there is ever the opportunity for tolerance,  
for charitableness and fellow-feeling:

Not in the future when the present bitterness is allayed,  
Nor when I have withdrawn from the complexities of life,  
But in the now,  
when I am in the mid-stream of a turbulent, surging and, at times,  
almost engulfing life.