

EPIPHANY — WALKING WITH THE THREE MAGIANS BETWEEN DOUBTFUL MAXIMAL BELIEF AND TOTAL SECULAR HUMANISM

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The Nativity Set in the Cambridge Unitarian Church
INTRODUCTION

[In my Christmas Day address](#) I explored with you the thought that when we read the nativity stories — and, today, the associated story of the visit of the Magians (see David Bentley Hart’s translation below)— we are not reading descriptions of actual events because thanks to a couple of centuries of good biblical scholarship we are sure as eggs is eggs that this is a piece of pious, poetic fiction; beautiful and compelling, yes, but fiction nonetheless. I suggested, instead, that what we have before us is a story written (or more probably borrowed and adapted) by Matthew which had allowed ‘something [to] well up in the inner reaches of [his] consciousness’ [Michael McGhee: Transformations of the Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice, CUP 2000, p. 17](#)) which the author then tried to communicate to us through means of ‘aesthetic ideas and images.’ In other words, Matthew ‘gave us an approximation of his experience and, in so doing, gave it the **semblance** of objective reality’ (McGhee p. 119 my emphasis) — one centred, of course, on a

child whom he believed was god now in the world with us which is, of course, the meaning of the title 'Emmanuel' which Matthew uses earlier on in the story. Today's service, connected with the Christian feast of what is known as the 'Epiphany', (i.e. 'manifestation' or 'striking appearance') considers the connected story concerning the arrival of a group of foreign Magians (traditionally numbered three and called 'kings' or 'wise men') whose role in Matthew's story is to put their imprimatur on this astonishing claim and so (symbolically) proclaim to the non-Jewish world Jesus' divine status and authority over all earthly powers.

Anyway, as on Christmas Day, I cannot emphasise enough that the point here is **'the state of mind'** that was in Matthew and not his apparent description of the nativity, the subsequent visit by the Magians or, indeed, the other stories associated with Jesus which Matthew recounts. Instead, I am suggesting Matthew's hope is that, if his story can help this state of mind achieve a certain reality for both him and we the readers/hearers, then we can all begin to talk with each other about **that** — i.e. the state of mind and it is the state of mind which counts.

But, before my address we must, of course hear Matthew's story. Just to be clear, as [David Bentley Hart](#) notes, the Magians were 'men of the Zoroastrian priestly caste of the Persians and Medes' and were 'largely associated in the Hellenistic mind with the interpretation of dreams foretelling the future ('oneiromancy') and astrology ([David Bentley Hart, 'New Testament', Yale University Press 2017, p. 2 n. a](#)). It's important also to know that the word 'Magi' 'never merely means "wise" or "learned" men' (ibid.).

READING: The visit of the Magians (Matthew 2:1-12) trans. by David Bentley Hart

Now, Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days when Herod was king, look: Magians arrived in Jerusalem from Eastern parts, Saying, "Where is the newborn King of the Judaeans? For we saw his star at its rising, and came to make obeisance to him." And, hearing this, King Herod was perturbed, and so was all of Jerusalem along with him; And, having assembled all of the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Anointed is to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judaea, for so it has been written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah. For from you will come forth a leader who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod, secretly summoning the Magians, ascertained from them the exact time of the star's appearance And, sending them to Bethlehem, said, "Go and inquire very precisely after the child; and when you find him send word to me, so that I too may come and make my obeisance to him." And, obeying the king, they departed. And look: The star, which they saw at its rising, preceded them until it came to the place where the child was and stood still above it. And, seeing the star, they were exultantly joyful. And, entering the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and, falling down, made obeisance to him; and, opening their treasure caskets, they proffered him

gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, however, they departed for their own country by another path.

ADDRESS

Epiphany — Walking with the three Magians between doubtful maximal belief and total secular humanism

Following on from my introduction to the reading from Matthew's gospel, the pressing question for me this morning speaking, as I am, amongst people and in a culture that is way more skeptical about the meaning and efficacy of religious myths than earlier generations were, is whether the nativity story and the associated visit of the Magians can still create in us the shared state of mind Matthew hoped to pass on — or, indeed, any shared state of mind — which we [in this Radical Enlightenment and Reformation inspired liberal Christian congregation] might think was important enough to talk about and act upon together?

On the surface it seems unlikely because Matthew's stories seem to be utterly dependent upon a firm belief in the existence of a transcendent, interventionist, supernatural god who comes from outside our world into a our own in the form of a small child and who calls upon us, whomsoever we are, to kneel before this child — the messiah, god's anointed — to pay obeisance to it by offering gifts and then loyally committing to living a certain kind of ethical life doing certain kinds of things 'in his name' or, as we say in this church 'in the spirit of Jesus'.

Hmmm . . . Given our general scepticism about this kind of supernatural world-view and associated language it's a story unlikely to set up a resonance that will result in a shared state of mind about this except, perhaps, simply as a piece of pleasant nostalgia from our childhoods or, when we are in our more critical moments anyway, a shared dislike and even sense of incredulity about the whole thing.

I don't think the situation can be ameliorated if we continue to think — as we mostly do — that transcendence can only be understood in a 'vertical sense' — i.e. an understanding that is dependent on a divine being above (or outside) and a natural world below.

However, the contemporary Unitarian philosopher [Jerome A. Stone](#) suggests we sceptics are not cut off from what he calls 'horizontal transcendence' — a natural, this worldly, situational and relative transcendence.

Today, using Stone's basic minimalist liberal religious model of transcendence (found in [The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion, SUNY Press, 1992](#)) I want to illustrate how we may interpret the Epiphany story, not vertically, but horizontally. This, in turn, can I think, resonate with us in a way that brings about a shared state of mind that opens us up to this worldly sources of help, healing and salvation which, even if they are not identical with

the state of mind Matthew felt, may be sufficiently analogous to them.

So, Stone points out that in all traditional monotheisms there is in play a basic triadic model of how the transcendent is known and experienced by us. The apex of their triangle — the dimension of the transcendent — is labeled ‘God’, the bottom left angle is labeled ‘grace’ and the bottom right angle, ‘law’. The idea is that a transcendent God is experienced (and known) in the world in (at least) two major ways: sometimes gracefully — giving to us freely, unexpected, and to some extent, unearned, gifts — and sometimes through the demand of divine law in the form of, for example, the Ten Commandments, or in the forms of some other kind of divine call or command such as was heard and expressed by the Israelite prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea etc..

Before moving directly to Stone’s own minimalist, secular version of this triadic model I think it’s important to say something about why there is a need for such a minimalist and secular version of this triadic way of experiencing or knowing God.

Stone points out that there have always been plenty of people in religious circles who are prepared to make very bold, maximal assertions about the transcendent. However, here in a church like this there is considerable scepticism about such maximal assertions and Stone feels (and I agree with him) that:

‘In between [such bold assertions on the one hand and great skepticism on the other] there is room for an affirmation of a minimal degree of transcendence. If a strong assertion is hard to defend, then perhaps a more cautious and more restrained model will be better able to answer the doubts of our age while providing the support and prophetic criticism which the [generally monotheistic] traditions have offered. Perhaps a minimal model of transcendence can provide a genuine alternative to the choice between a doubtful maximal model and total secular humanism. If belief in God is abandoned, we are not left to our own resources. It is not true, as Nietzsche claimed, that if the absence of God is recognised we would be as if unhooked from our sun, condemned to plunge aimlessly in a meaningless universe’ (ibid. p. 10).

Stone acknowledges that such a minimal, cautious and more restrained model ‘may not provide a permanently satisfying standpoint for many people’ and that, ‘[p]erhaps it takes a type of maturity to accept the fact that we see as if in a glass darkly.’ Yet, for all this, I’m in agreement with Stone when he says that for some of us who are labouring to recover or keep from losing the sense of the transcendent dimension of life [such a] minimal model may provide some measure of meaning in the universe in the form of ‘a temporary campsite in the ascent of the spiritual mountain’ and even, for some of us perhaps, ‘a more permanent, if restrained, way of thinking about the transcendent factors in our life’ (ibid. p. 10).

Now, in the light of this insight Stone places at the apex of the triangle, not the word god (which brings with it too many maximal theologies) but, instead, the more open and allusive word, 'transcendence'. For him the most minimal understanding of transcendence is a situational or relative one and he offers two personal stories of how (horizontal) transcendence is also experienced as being analogous to law and grace.

So firstly, law; Stone tells us:

'After Martin Luther King was murdered, some residents both black and white, of the city of Evanston, Illinois [where Stone and his family were living] organized marches to put pressure on the city council to pass an open housing ordinance. At that time it was perfectly legal in that place to refuse to rent or sell a house to anyone, including Blacks and Jews, because of their race or ethnic origin. Now I was quite busy as a father, breadwinner and graduate student. Yet I felt that this was the right moment to pressure the city council. Also my wife and I felt that this was a way to educate our two children by direct participation in values that we held dear' ([What is religious naturalism? p.4-5](#)).

And secondly, grace; Stone tells us:

'I remember the day my father died. I was sitting in my apartment feeling rather sad when my daughter, at that time about eight years old, came home from school. When I told her what had happened, she said, "Oh, Dad" and put her arm around me. It was one of the most comforting and supportive moments of my life' ([What is religious naturalism? p.4-5](#)).

[\[You can hear Stone himself recount the two events mentioned above in the short video found at this link.\]](#)

With this secular model of transcendence in place we can now briefly turn to the story of the nativity and the visit of the Magians and give it a secular interpretation that can still connect meaningfully with traditional, (mono)theistic interpretations and yet which still stands a chance of setting our more sceptical minds resonating and bringing about a shared state of mind about which we can talk together. Remember, Matthew is here not describing an event but trying to communicate his experience to us through means of 'aesthetic ideas and images' and, to do this he gives 'us an approximation of his experience and, in so doing, gave it the semblance of objective reality'.

In the story we are presented with a picture of the Magians who receive a call from outside their own immediate situation in the form of a new 'star' in the heavens. This star, they discover (Matthew does not tell us how), is related to two old Hebrew prophecies (Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2) which, when combined, say, 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my

people Israel' (Matthew 2:6). This call, to another land to pay such homage to a marginalized, foreign child rather than to their own ruler, is felt by the Magians as a command to enlarge their vision of who might be for them relevant and worthy of the greatest respect. It's a radical enlargement of perspective that reverses the polarity of their world from obvious kingly, adult power to the less obvious, weak power of an illegitimate child born in poverty. Now, does not this call to the Magi to respect the marginalized foreigner, the poor and the weak over those who currently hold all the power strongly echo Stone's call to racial justice in Evanston where a concatenation of wholly natural, human events also served to call Stone and his family into action?

Let's turn next to Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Matthew does not tell us how or why they are in Bethlehem only that they are in a house (there is no mention of a census, nor of a manger and so, by implication, nor a stable) but we do, however, get the impression that they are a distressed, vulnerable family in considerable need of comfort and support. Then, suddenly, and from outside their own immediate situation, this support and comfort comes in the form of the Magians who symbolically validate and empower this family in an utterly unexpected and unmerited way through their three gifts. Does not this act of the Magians echo Stone's own daughter's act of graceful comfort as she put her arms around him after his father's death?

Of course, I realise that to some of you this way of using and learning from the story may be either pointless or, at least utterly insufficient, as it simply refuses to make any maximal claims about a transcendent god; instead, it simply asserts that we can, and do, find (horizontal) transcendent help, healing and salvation in wholly human and natural, acts and events. (Though, remember, of course, that the human is the natural, and the natural, human.)

However, speaking personally I have to say that when, 'out of the blue', I have been gracefully touched by another person's love and care I have experienced something transcendent that seems analogous to what people mean when they talk about the miracle and wonder of God's grace.

Also, when I have suddenly been called forth out of my own closed world into some kind of proactive, ethical action, I have found a kind of transcendent meaning and value in something that seems analogous to what people mean when they talk about receiving a 'call from god' to act on behalf of a just and worthy cause.

In the end my point today is, I think, fairly simple. Transcendence experienced as grace and law remains available to someone like me (and perhaps you) who can no longer believe in the old model and understanding of god as some kind of interventionist, supernatural being, 'up' or 'out there' in another world. I find that, miracle of miracles, transcendent sources of help, healing and salvation are still available to me even as I try my level best to walk the fine line between

doubtful maximal models of belief and a total secular humanism, neither of which have any attraction to me.

The signs are already that this will be a decade when we will all be in need of transcendent sources of help, healing and salvation and for their continued (horizontal) availability to us in this world, as if it were possible for a [Christian atheist \[or religious naturalist\]](#) like me, I'm minded to give thanks to 'god'.