

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

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Yesterday was the winter solstice – our shortest day and longest night. But astronomy assures us that today the sun begins its return, and our portion of the world will begin its rebirth.

It suggests a story that James Nelson tells about a friend of his who is also a theologian. He was seated next to a stranger on an airplane and soon the two of them began to chat. Immediately, the other asked him that predictable man-type question, “What do you do for a living?” My friend replied: “I teach Christian ethics.”

“That must be pretty simple” the other man replied, “Love your neighbor as yourself – I suppose that’s about all there is to it, isn’t that right?”

My friend thought for a moment and replied, “Well, yes, I guess that’s true. And what do you do for a living?” The other rather proudly said, “I am an astronomer.” To which my friend responded in one of his finer moments, “You are an astronomer. That must be rather simple. Twinkle, twinkle, little star – I suppose that’s about all there is to it?”

Well, nothing is simple – ethics or astronomy – even though people have always tried to connect behavior with the stars.

But since it is also the season of love and good will to all, and a time for candle lighting and stargazing, I thought to share some very brief remarks regarding the most popularized star gazers in all history. That would be the Magi whose star gazing led them to the little town of Bethlehem.

We urban dwellers are not great star watchers. At night we have too many other lights in the way, dimming the darkness of the sky and the gems in it. The stars have also lost their necessity as a map. Even the U.S. Navy has stopped teaching celestial navigation. Satellites and global positioning systems have replaced the Northern Star.

But this was not the case when Matthew wrote of Jesus’ birth. In his gospel he tells of the Magi, astrological seers from the East, who came to Bethlehem led only by a westward leading star. There they found the babe they thought was to be a new ruler, a benevolent king, who would bring peace to what seemed was their God forsaken world. And so they worshipped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Then, afraid their presence might reveal Jesus’ location to the Judean King Herod, they secretly left for their own country. And rightly so because King Herod, a notorious serial killer, squashed all who were a threat to his throne – and for 36 years he was very successful at it.

Only Matthew tells this story. There is no other mention of the Magi anywhere else in the Bible. But it is a lovely story even though quite unbelievable to the modern mind.

As to the star, it has been described as a meteor, or a comet, or a nova, or perhaps a conjunction of planets. My astronomer friend, Dean Regas of Cincinnati's Observatory, tells me that the star could not have been a supernova or a comet because there was no record of either at that time. He adds, "While there are those who would justify the bright star as a conjunction of two planets which would appear as one star, the Magi of that day were smart enough to know the difference." Regas concludes, "The star remains a mystery – a UFO. And maybe it's better that way." Perhaps he is right.

Today we make a clear distinction between astrology and astronomy but until the 17th century they were hardly differentiated. Astronomy is the scientific understanding of the physics of the universe, while astrology is a pseudo-science – believing that the stars affect earthly events and especially our individual fate. Its creed is "As above, so below." And so thought the Magi.

The earliest Magi were also priests but at the time of Matthew's story, the Magi were simply known as wise men, possessed of cosmic knowledge that foretold of both dangers and opportunities. They were often employed as consultants by those in power, such as has been done in our own White House.

As to our human lot in life, even though we know luck happens, and bad things happen to even good people, most of us agree with Shakespeare's Cassius that the fault of our personal destiny is not in the stars but in ourselves.

Regardless, astrology persists today, and every day our newspapers print its findings for the many who still believe "As above, so below."

Most theologians understand that Matthew's Magi story, written some 70 years after the birth of Jesus, is largely fictionalized. It probably was Matthew's attempt to assure others that Jesus' birth, like the lives of all great persons of that era, was not by happenstance, but had a more supernatural and cosmic causation.

Matthew, awed as he was by Jesus' life, contributed his own gift to him – a creative cosmic account of his birth.

But the idea that there were Magi throughout the Mid-east looking for signs, seeking directions from the heavens, and following where they pointed to, is not a fiction.

Matthew tells us very little about the Magi except that they are not Jews, as Jesus was, but from some other country and of another faith – gentiles. They simply came from afar, completed their quest, and went home.

But what is most fascinating to me as I sought to re-visit this story, is what happened to the Magi after Matthew first told of them – they take on a life of their own.

First, we know that, other than Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the Magi became the earliest and most popular icons in Christianity. The first century catacombs are filled with their pictures. The shepherds, who allegedly had first heard the angels' announcement of the birth, were rarely described in iconic art until some 1400 hundred years later.

Also, there were early reports that the wise men, who continued to be a part of a secret Gnostic society, actually returned to the Holy Land to tutor the now teenaged Jesus with their esoteric knowledge.

Fairly soon, the Three Wise Men were understood to be really three Kings. This was probably due to an ancient biblical prophecy that even Kings would come and bring gifts to the future King of Israel because he would be a just and compassionate King, and have a deep regard for the poor.

In the course of time, the Magi were also given various names, depending on the country. In Europe by the 6th Century their names were Balthazar, Melchior and Casper, as we heard in the carol sung earlier.

Who they were, and what they meant, continued to evolve. In the Autun Cathedral in Burgundy there is a stone mural of the three kings all lying together under a blanket in a huge bed; all wearing their crowns. An angel is awakening them and pointing to a star.

One king is wide awake in wonder.
One is half-awake.
And the third is sound asleep.

The mural is really a depiction of the three forms of spiritual alertness and those who viewed the mural were meant to re-examine the quality of their own faith – are you alive, or half-baked, or without a clue?

But these three Magi, or astrologists, or priests, or wise men, or kings, were to evolve even more. By the 12th century they were seen as symbolic of the three stages of life, and were so depicted; one was young, the other middle aged, and the third resembled most of us in this club.

Further on in time, they were understood to represent the three human races and continents known at that time – yellow, black, and white faced, and dressed in Oriental, African, and European dress. Today in China some still proudly claim one of the wise men as their very own. Generally though, and for a couple of reasons, most believe the Magi came from Persia – Iran today.

We do have the historical record that when in the 7th Century A. D. the Persians had conquered and destroyed Palestine, burning Jerusalem and killing 60,000 of its inhabitants – all mostly Christians - their army pushed on to Bethlehem, only five miles further. There they decided not to destroy the Church of the Nativity because they

discovered on the mural walls the Three Kings, and they were clearly dressed in Persian clothing.

Also, when in the 12th Century, Marco Polo crossed Persia, on his way to China, he records visiting the reported burial spot of the Magi and heard many ancient tales of their exploits.

But today, if one wants to visit the official Shrine of the Magi you would go to Cologne, Germany where there they are, beautifully entombed in the giant Cologne Cathedral. Emperor Frederick thought that by bringing their bones to Cologne he was effectively bringing Bethlehem to Europe, since pilgrimages to the Holy Land were no longer possible after it had fallen to the Moslems.

This period also marked a new role for the Three Wise or Kingly Men. The Diocese of Cologne had declared that the Magi actually had been consecrated as bishops by Jesus' disciple Thomas when he had gone through Persia on his way to India in the First Century.

So artists from that point on were a little confused as to what type of head gear to give them – a Phrygian conical cap, or a kingly crown, or a bishop's miter. But often they preferred to portray them as Kings as if to remind their own rulers that they too must bow down to a higher authority, just as the Three Kings had done.

And history differs as to how many there were. They have been portrayed from two to a dozen. They mostly settled on three because of the three gifts that were given, but usually such Magi traveled in larger groups for safety's sake.

Of course, the gifts themselves have countless interpretations. Gold for wealth – and frankincense, generally used as an incense –and myrrh, a perfume. But all three gifts had many other uses.

One of the most down to earth explanations of these gifts, however, came from St Bernard of the 12th Century:

Gold – Money for this poor family.

Frankincense – To disinfect the stable.

Myrrh – An herbal remedy to prevent worms in children.

Well, there is no end to the Magi's story.

More recently the Magi became the focus of a 20th Century opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which tells of the Three Kings stopping on the way to Bethlehem and befriending a lame boy and his gallant Mother. This opera has become the most seen opera in all history. It may be true that nothing is truly real until it becomes music.

But let me add an even more recent development to their legacy. A few years ago my wife and I received a card this time of the year from a wonderful lady, who is aged in wisdom and years and an outstanding feminist. Opening the envelope we quickly laughed for it was a picture of the three magi with their gifts. They had various crowns which went well with their cosmetic makeup and beautiful dresses. Dresses! Yes, the Three Kings had now become the Three Queens! Surely a most appropriate addition to the Magi tradition.

We do know that wisdom in the scriptures has a feminine gender – Sophia. And that wisdom, that is Sophia, was God’s first creative act long before Adam. We read in Proverbs that “The Lord created me, Sophia, at the beginning of the creation, the first of God’s acts of old. They who find me find life...all who hate me love death.” Prov. 8:22, 35, 36.

Yes, considering the Magi’s own evolution, it does seem fitting and good for the world to both encourage and to seek gifts of wisdom from all races, from all continents, all religions, and all sexes in this world.

I believe it a hopeful sign that recently a new assemblage of seers has emerged which may brighten and broaden the world’s future. They are simply called “The Elders,” twelve persons of Nobel stature and from every continent, such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson, and others. They all share a global concern for justice and peace and are willing to go beyond all boundaries to nurture them into reality. A star studded cast of wisdom indeed, and like the Magi of old, they are willing to travel.

Bill Coffin, former Chaplain at Yale and a wise religious voice whose death this year many of us mourn, wrote that “The challenge today (on this planet) is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity...to recognize the need for roots while insisting that the point of roots is to bring forth branches.

Human beings are fully human only when they find the universal in the particular, when they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict.”

I suggest that is the kind of spiritual cosmology our little planet needs.

No, we don’t really know who Matthew’s Magi were, or any thing definitive about that star - there are so many competing for our attention. Perhaps, though, we can consider at least the one that Robert Frost saw and mused over:

O star (the fairest one in sight) ...

Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.

It asks of us a certain height,

So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

We might ask, what will do this for us that is something like a star? That will humble us when our pride has carried us too high or will resurrect us when we have fallen so low? Something like a star that will keep us from being a part of the world's unraveling? Something that will unite the particular with the universal into a peace; a harmony of harmonies, a more heavenly earth.

“As above, so below” is not a certainty. It will depend on those who are willing to travel.