

Let us begin by listening to our current President's Christmas message: :

"Part of me has always loved Christmas I love the ambiguities of the season, the intoxicating mixture of sentimentality, nostalgia, generosity, overindulgence, madness, Christianity, Paganism, secularism, fantasy, hope, and concern, which highlights the joys and sorrows of our humanity better than anything else in our experience. Christmas dramatically demonstrates to us both our capabilities and our shortcomings, what we strive to be, and what we sadly find it impossible to become. It illustrates the messiness of our lives in ways that no sermon, no drama, no novel even, can ever hope to emulate. Why wouldn't we associate the birth of Jesus with such a stark reminder of our numerous human contradictions?"

So let us regress for a short while to the state of an uncritical child.

### **Wise Men and Babies**

Of course these wise men are a myth and I don't suppose any but the most stimulus-bound literalist ever cares whether they are mythical or not. Very occasionally there are some insights hidden in myths and maybe there is one here that I have not heard drawn out before.

There are numerous additions to the stories around these wise men, some added as late as 500 years later. One major tradition has these men as being astrologers, the students and the academics of their time. Another, probably more common tradition, has them as kings "from the East" and names them as Melchior (king of Persia); Caspar (a king of India) and Balthazar (a king of Arabia). But the Syrian Christians still name them as Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas.; the Ethiopian Christians name them as Hor, Karsudan, and *Basanater*, while the Armenians have *Kagpha*, *Badadakharida* and *Badadilma* and many

Chinese Christians believe that one of the magi came from China. So you can have your pick.

Today, Bible Scholars see the story of the wise men as part of the propaganda for the god-status of the baby Jesus, propaganda which is suffused throughout the Gospels and throughout the writings of Paul.

Going beyond the mere propaganda, the symbolism of the story is partly about the great and the powerful bowing down to the small and the helpless. Because hidden in that story is the fact that infants have enormous power, power because of what whole families, nuclear and extended, will DO for them, power because most of them will outlive you and I by many decades. There is a contrast, or is it a kind of paradox (?), in here. There, lies the infant firmly in touch with its physical needs, well aware of its changing emotional states and perhaps already a developing spiritual being. Over here lies the ancient wise man, perhaps having lived most of his life in the mind or in service, duty and action, often very necessarily ignoring and losing touch with his real feelings, but now finding that his body rules once again. There he lies, perhaps with all power spent, perhaps rich and with a well-furnished mind, even loved and respected - but equally helpless as the infant – and, with not long to go, perhaps even already speechless, the memories of his words, deeds and thoughts soon to begin fading away.

Every infant has that power, that vast potential. The Unitarian theologian, Martineau, knew that when he claimed that every new born infant is a potential king and a wise one, every much as the baby Jesus might have been. Sophia Lyons Fahs, the Unitarian Educationalist and Hymn writer, encapsulates this thought in her poem and hymn:

For so The Children Come

For so the children come  
And so they have been coming  
Always in the same way they come  
Born of the seed of man and woman.

No angels herald their beginnings.  
No prophets predict their future courses.  
No wise men see a star which shows where to find the babe  
That will save humankind.

Yet each night a child is born is a holy night,  
Fathers and mothers - - -  
Sitting beside their children's cribs  
Feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.

They ask "When and how will this new life end?  
Or will it ever end?"

Each night a child is born is a holy night –  
A time for singing  
A time for wondering  
A time for worshipping

May we feel blessed and feel happy in this season, happy in all our regressions to childhood, even in all our forgetful and selfish ignorings of the small lonelinesses of individual people and in our helpless ignorings of the larger sufferings of millions of others, even as we celebrate. May we forgive ourselves and forgive each other for our blatant consumerism so typical of this season and may we be happy in our good fortune to be alive and able to do it, and, more importantly, may we be grateful to be healthy and well enough provided-for. Let us be mightily grateful for as much as we are and for all that we have been, still are and yet hope to be.