

Article Title: "A Word to The Wise"

Author: Hal Crowther

Magazine: *The Independent Weekly*

Date: Unknown (1998?)

Protestants love to cast their children in Christmas pageants, even truculent and impious children, as I must have been. Joseph was the male lead in these productions, but the Three Kings wore the coveted costumes. I remember mine: a dark satiny woman's robe with glitter stripes and a green wool turban fastened with a crescent-moon brooch—a *Thief of Baghdad* look that may still pass for Oriental authenticity among a mountain of Methodists. And of course the cotton beard, a rudimentary stab at stage whiskers that may have triggered some Old-Testament tendency: I grew my own, 25 years later, and cannot give them up.

Even before that first pageant—I must have been in the second grade—I was confused by the kings, interchangeably known as the wise men. At first I thought there were three of each.

Kings, wise men. Which were they? Even to a child, those categories sound mutually exclusive. The emperor was naked too long. In our day, kings are such silly old things that nothing much is asked of royalty except to bear its irrelevance with dignity, and overbred baboons like Britain's Windsors find even this minimal requirement beyond their genetically-depleted capacities. The last place we'd look for wisdom is under a crown.

History won't relieve our puzzlement. The Three Kings or Magi, found only in the Gospel of St. Matthew, seem to have been written into the Nativity mainly to square it with Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah and Psalms ("the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts; Yea, all kings shall fall down before Him."). Even the traditional number, three, has no authority greater than Matthew's list of three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—presented to the infant Jesus by "the wise men of the east."

Modern historians are often frustrated by the scriptures because for centuries Christian scholars worked backwards, imposing church tradition where history ignored or contradicted it. The Magi of Persia, wise men who influenced kings, were the great astronomers and astrologers of the ancient world. We assume that the Star of Bethlehem is the element that linked this legendary caste of warrior priests to St. Matthew's fable.

The Three Wise Men are phantoms, essentially, but phantoms who staked a permanent claim on the Christian imagination. And it isn't only children who are confused when we call them kings in one breath and wise men in the next. It's a confusion that goes right to the roots of Western Christian civilization—a chronic confusion about the nature of wisdom and its relationship to wealth and power.

You see what I'm getting at. Symbols. Suppose you were the Son of God, endowed with all the wisdom and virtue that lineage implies. Would you choose to be idolized by the wisest men, or the richest?

That wouldn't sound like such a leading question to first-century Greeks, familiar with Plato's dream of philosopher kings. Or to the first-century Jews like Jesus. Their tradition included King Solomon, the great judge and lyricist, who found affluence no obstacle to poetry and absolute power no impediment to wisdom.

But Christianity has produced no such paragons, and its checkered history—"checkered" is a generous word—could be cast as a soul-searching struggle between the subtle charms of philosophy and the brazen lure of power. Between the Word and the flesh, between wise men and kings.

Maybe it goes without saying that wise men got the worst of it. Among the losers was the teacher Jesus, crucified by politicians and grossly misrepresented by 100 generations of moneychangers who have made Matthew 19:24 (remember the camel and the eye of the needle?) one of the most neglected verses in the Bible, especially in Christian America. Nearly lost to history are the early Christian Gnostics who equated God with intellect, deified wisdom (Sophia) and dismissed the material world as mere dross that souls must shed in order to realize themselves.

Christianity turned away from asceticism when the fourth-century Roman Emperor Constantine made it the state religion. The descendants of ragged martyrs became sovereign bishops with short memories. It was only a century later that the patriarch of Alexandria, the ferocious St. Cyril, instigated the lynching of Hypatia, a Neo-Platonist "pagan" who studied mathematics. According to Gibbon, this highborn lady was butchered in a church by Christian fanatics, her flesh scraped from her bones with oyster shells and thrown "quivering" into the flames.

"After this," comments Bertrand Russell, "Alexandria was no longer troubled by philosophers."

Under the popes, the Mother Church became one of the world's great temporal powers, her princes unrivaled for arrogance or wealth. Attempts to purify her were suppressed by force or undermined by inclusion. The strict poverty and humility imposed on his order by St. Francis of Assisi, one of the few "true" saints by modern criteria, scarcely survived his death. Gibbon relates that Francis' immediate successor, one Brother Elias, "wallowed in luxury" and encouraged the Franciscans to follow suit.

"My vow of poverty has given me 100, 000 crowns a year," a Benedictine abbot once confessed. "My vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince."

Pick your paradox. Another source of confusion for me, when I encountered it in some sophomore textbook, was the legend of "the philosopher's stone" which converted base metals into gold. I couldn't see where philosophy entered into it, though it was evident that to a certain kind of medieval mind this alchemist's secret was the ultimate wisdom and the highest human aspiration. I learned the philosopher's rationalization—that since gold was the most perfect of metals, it symbolized a general striving of all things, including the soul, toward perfection. But I was not convinced.

Wise men might perish of neglect in a culture with such a curious notion of wisdom. Gold, inseparable from power, is a worm coiled at the core of Christendom—the worm that ate the West. Simony, the selling of sacraments for cash or preference, was for centuries the clergyman's sin of choice. Avarice often masked itself as religious passion: the Inquisition was a thriving concern long before it degenerated into tortures and burnings, because heretics forfeited their property to the crown or the Church.

The glories of the Renaissance coincided with the darkest hours of the Inquisition. Galileo nearly joined the unfortunate Hypatia as a martyr to his science. The Reformation, contested by princes and theologians, is remembered by the common people for the Thirty Years' War that devastated Europe.

Who could argue, after 2,000 years of "Christian" civilization, that the wisdom of Christ prevailed anywhere? The ingenious tinkering that began with the alchemists culminated in a bomb that can incinerate the world's largest city in the blink of an eye. In our own grandfathers' time, the dithering of royal dimwits—the grandfathers of the baboons of Buckingham—precipitated a war that resulted in 10 million deaths among Christian soldiers alone. In our fathers' time, the same national animosities (rekindled by Germany's worthy successor to St. Cyril) ignited a virtual Armageddon that liberated another 45 million souls.

Wisdom, meanwhile, has almost vanished in some Christian territories. The United States of America, a democracy founded by intellectuals, was regarded as the special stepchild of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment, a notable flowing of skeptical thought and political freedom. In the part of the U.S.A. where I live, a majority of our legislators believes that personal safety means walking the streets with a deadly weapon devised solely to kill other human beings at close range. People who call themselves Christians worship wealth and the wealthy and scheme to starve the poor.

Giant corporations, the new kings of America, control the government, the media, and the universities best equipped to explain what reckless corporate avarice is doing to the fragile, finite planet our lives depend upon. In these captive universities, the last philosophers tend the old secrets in obscurity and, remembering Hypatia, steer clear of the Christian Coalition.

Wisdom has been delegated to M. Scott Peck, virtue to William J. Bennett, prophecy (*The Road Ahead*) to Gates the geeky billionaire who peddles software. Still, it's a good life in America, for those of us who've squirreled away a little gold and have yet to be shot by our neighbors.

The trouble with philosophers is that they expect too much of people. Neither learning nor holiness is a common ambition, as Jesus probably understood and Jefferson probably didn't. Colliers or kings, you have to motivate them with big carrots and big sticks. And every time you turn your back they'll follow Brother Elias, or even St. Cyril, instead of St. Francis.

In "The Magi," the great poet W.B. Yeats imagines the eternal, anxious viewers of the human condition: "And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more / Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied / The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."

Whoever they were, or were supposed to be, there's no mystery about the enduring appeal of their journey, which has inspired writers and artists ever since the evangelist added them to our literature. They weren't looking for wisdom or salvation, or for gold or strategic alliances with the future King of the Jews. They were looking for hope.