

‘The Magi’ by Patrick Fernando: A Gentle Warning on ‘Affronting Tradition’

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Widyalankara**Article History**

Received: 12.10.2018

Accepted: 23.10.2018

Published: 30.11.2018



Abstract: This study examines ‘The Magi (Reflection on a Christmas Card)’ by Patrick Fernando perceiving the poem as a gentle warning on ‘affronting tradition’ especially tradition surrounding religion. Attempting to add another dimension to the scrutiny, a brief cross analysis between ‘The Magi’ by Patrick Fernando and ‘Journey of the Magi’ by T.S. Eliot explores the poems in juxtaposition across three stages: the journey; the depiction of the nativity; the aftermath. Then a contrastive analysis of the intricacies of the finale of the poems is conducted. Syncretizing belief systems surrounding nativity and a selected Buddhist Jathaka tale: *Sasa Jathakaya*, this paper argues that scientific inquiry into the accuracy and viability of such legends is an exegesis which results in theological disillusionment. Thus, the norm that legendary belief systems are exempted from veracity analysis is stressed based on a conjecture of Karl Marx's statement "religion... is the opiate of the masses".

Keywords: ‘Journey of the Magi’, syncretizing effect of religions, opium tenet, affronting tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Often branded as a user of Western ‘modernist’ idiom Patrick Fernando, a Sri Lankan poet, on the relevance of his work to his contemporary society states, evolving a local idiom commensurate with one’s literary purpose is not at all easy. I have not come anywhere near it ... My verse as a whole has no local idiom; yet I hope, it has personal style. My preoccupation is with the latter.

This personal style according to Wijesinha [1] centers on the milieu of ‘his Catholicism and/or his classical education’. Agreement comes from Canagarajah [2] who states that Fernando ‘is steeped in Anglicized traditions’ and ‘is recognizably classical’.

The other poet under scrutiny T. S. Eliot was born as an American and moved to England when he was awarded a scholarship to Oxford in 1914. ‘Journey of the Magi’ was written ‘in 1927 after his conversion from Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism’ [3]. Ackroyd [4] claims that the purposes of [Eliot's conversion] were two-fold. One: The Church of England offered Eliot some hope for himself, and I think Eliot needed some resting place. But secondly, it attached Eliot to the English community and English culture."

Both poets have the same subject: The Magi at the focus of their poem. Tracing the origin of the word Magi, the Online Etymology Dictionary states that it is derived from Old Persian *magush* "magician" and thus they are "skilled magicians, astrologers". The Magi are labelled as pagans by Matthew and the star becomes the anticipation of the good news of salvation. The scriptures record the theological journey which is sketched by Matthew as follows.

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem...” [5]. *They on arrival in Jerusalem, queried from King Herod “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”* (Matt. 2:2) [6]. *Herod pretended to be pleased by the information given to him by the Jewish leaders and he pointed the magi in the direction of Bethlehem, encouraging them to find the Child, and if they found Him, to report back to him* (Matt. 2:8) [7] *and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” But ‘the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream’ and warned the Magi ‘For Herod means to seek out the child and kill him.’* (Matt. 2: 19-20) [8] *After their encounter with Jesus, God spoke to the magi in a dream and warned them about Herod’s true intentions, so they returned to their homeland by a different route.*

Eliot uses the above depicted journey broadly as a catalyst for his poem. Significantly Eliot’s journey from being a nonbeliever to becoming a member of the Anglican faith and the composition of ‘Journey of the Magi’ co-occur chronologically. Many scholars identify a strong flavor of a spiritual crossing over to the Anglican Church in the poem and agree that Eliot is depicting his quest for spiritual reality.

Maleki and Navidi [9] state,

‘Journey of the Magi’ is of great significance; though the poem, on the surface, portrays the journey of the Magi to find the baby Jesus, the potential Messiah who will bring about redemption to the world, it serves as a metaphoric arabesque for the difficult experiences one has to face in the course of a human soul’s bid to take the religious ascent and crystallize its integration and travel in a spiritual pursuit of faith.

Given his wide exposure to the literary classics, did Fernando find an impetus in Eliot’s poem when he composed ‘The Magi’? Making this the basis

for this enquiry my thesis statement focuses on identifying how far the two poems blend and coalesce during the process of the narration. Firstly the sequence of events during the journey undergo scrutiny.

THE JOURNEY

Both poems sketch the journey of the Magi. The opening first person narrative in ‘Journey of the Magi’ by T.S. Eliot the Magus are reminiscing the story. The third person narrative in ‘The Magi’ by Patrick Fernando sets down a diverse interpretation to the experiences of the Magi during their trek to the place of Nativity.

Table-I: Juxtaposing ‘Journey of the Magi’ and ‘the Magi

‘Journey of the Magi’ by T.S. Eliot	‘The Magi’ by Patrick Fernando
“A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year For a journey, and such a long journey:” “there were times we regretted” “With the voices singing in our ears, saying That this was all folly”.	They were not fools, they did not rush; studied the latest Map and chart, Then set out, achieved a journey safe and quick yet each suffered a little fever spreading from the gifts, a regret He had not brought a thing more symbolic.

Within the first stanza Eliot sets down a cold, difficult and ‘such a long’ journey. Contrastively Fernando depicts it as achievement of a ‘safe and quick’ trek by the wise men that were ‘not fools’ aided by ‘Map and chart’. Recall that the catalyst which made Fernando reflect on the journey is a common artifact: a Christmas card. But a nuanced reading invites us to perceive, even at this stage, distinctive parallels between the two poems.

Notice the usage ‘regret’ which occurs in both poems. In Eliot’s poem the Magi state that ‘there were times we regretted’ the arduous journey. Fernando’s Magi too carried ‘regret’ that they ‘had not brought a thing more symbolic’. The gifts in the treasure chests they bore were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Thus Fernando is ostensibly introducing a lighter vein to the hardships and suffering of the Magi in his poem in comparison to the spiritual quest in the ‘Journey of the Magi’.

THE DEPICTION OF THE NATIVITY SCENE

Moody [9] carves a synopsis of ‘The journey of the Magi’ At the same time, they seem to offer themselves rather readily for allegorical exegesis; the valley of life; the three crosses of Calvary; the White Horse of the Second Coming; the Judas-like world. The immediate mystery of the images evaporates under such interpretation, to be replaced by ‘the Christian mystery’. The primary sensory associations give way to an idea, and we find we are involved in a meaning beyond the Magi’s actual experience. It is the same in the final paragraph, except that here we are confronted directly with the abstract idea. The Magus is baffled by the

apparent contradictions of Birth and Death, and is left simple wanting to die.

Thus, the Magus who is narrating wants to set down that he would ‘be glad of another death’. Agreement comes from Roma 2013 who states that it is due to the fact that the New Birth does not bring unalloyed joy because the transition from the old to the new is accompanied by pain. From their entry to the ‘temperate valley’. Witness the depiction of the nativity scene by the two poets.

The first level of the above tabulation depicts that ‘The Magi’ of Patrick Fernando traces the narrative of Matthew. Herod’s reception gave them ‘unhesitant pleasure’. These wise men who had ‘power over powers of darkness, Failed’ to identify Herod’s true intention. Fernando, ‘in retrospect’, identifies this as ‘connivance with the barbarous’. Departing from Matthew, Eliot’s Magi had ‘no information’.

At the second level of the table Eliot blanks on the Nativity scene leaving it enigmatic. Agreement comes from Riemer [10]. The poem makes no overt reference to its subject-matter-the Nativity, the events surrounding it, and its consequences. Instead of the spontaneous reaction of exultation, adulation and fulfillment Eliot’s Magi are subdued full of apprehension and doubt: ‘it was (you may say) satisfactory’.

Barbour [11] constructs a complex association: "The parenthetical remark/gesture dramatizes a certain drawing back at the end into something between understatement and velleity. The key word is the

ambiguous *satisfactory*". To a deglamorized visual depiction of the Nativity scene Fernando introduces

another sensory association 'smelled of animals'. Note the non-illusory portrayal of Mary and Joseph.

Table-2: Juxtaposing 'Journey of the Magi' and 'the Magi' II

'Journey of the Magi' by T.S. Eliot	'The Magi' by Patrick Fernando
But there was no information, and so we continued.	Tested at the palace gate with a simple temptation, These, illustrious in their power over powers of darkness, Failed. Their unhesitant pleasure at the king's reception Seemed, in retrospect, connivance with the barbarous.
"And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory."	The threshold was dark and smelled of animals. .. a man who stooped hammering a bed and bowed and a girl who did not hint that the visit was an honour
.....but set down This set down This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.	Yet outward poise remained, though their minds like a Stricken eagle Exchanged exalted wheeling for clumsy flap and tumble

Level three introduces the finale of Eliot's poem while 'The Magi' by Fernando, at this juncture is yet medial in progress. Many scholars have compiled multiple interpretations to the finale of Eliot's poem ranging from the modest to the intricate. Franklin [12] constructs an outwardly simplistic conclusion: The Magi have had an Epiphany, which comes from the Greek word meaning a manifestation of the divine.

Drew [13] as far back as in 1950 identified that conversion is one of the foundations of the "Journey of the Magi". According to her the central subject in the poem, climaxing in its weightage at the last stanza, is that conversion is faith without revelation. "The meaning of the new birth is obscure, full of doubt, accompanied by pain, not joy, and perplexing in the extreme" (118-119).

Scofield too [14] decrees that Eliot clearly chose the magus as a persona because he represented the experience of being caught "between two worlds", of having had an intimation of faith but now being left "No longer at ease here, in the old dispensation"--the experience of conversion without the full benefit of assured faith. But in this paper the juxtaposition of the paradoxical birth and death with a host of ambiguous implications and the spiritual perplexity generated at the last stanza do not undergo analysis.

Thus reentering 'The Magi' by Fernando we witness the vivid depiction of the emotional plunge the Magi take as they encounter the Nativity scene through powerful highly stylized metaphor. The eagle, soaring high in dignified flight, plummets from lofty heights wracked with shock. The majestic gliding is reduced to a 'clumsy flap and tumble'. Fernando in 'The Magi', this paper detects, suffixes an epilogue to Eliot's poem.

'THE MAGI': AFTERMATH

As Eliot's poem ends, exegesis of the Nativity becomes, in the hands of Fernando, a harsh depiction of the reality.

*They simply could not laugh it off, this single discretion
Of letting their glory be lured to slaughter in a hovel.*

Fernando, intentionally or subconsciously, leaves the finale of Eliot's poem unexplored and at this juncture is drawn back to his stimulus the Christmas card. On reflection Fernando interprets that what is pictured in the modern Christmas card (Illustration 1) is a form of avenging 'the shame' of the Magi.

*..... In final piety
Simplified the underserved journey from certitude to
disquiet.
Into three peaceful presbyters taking an evening ride,
favoured by a friendly sunset with perfect silhouette.*



Fig-1: 'Three peaceful presbyters taking an evening ride, favoured by a friendly sunset with perfect silhouette'



Fig-2: a 'glided matrix' surrounding Mary and Joseph with a 'stature like the founder of a proud archducal house'

Furthermore, in many a Nativity scene depicted in contemporary Christmas cards the young, secret mother and 'the shy shuffling carpenter' are 'gone'. Instead is a 'glided matrix' surrounding Mary and Joseph with a 'stature like the founder of a proud archducal house' (Figure 2)?

Reconnecting with inquiry on 'did Fernando find an impetus in Eliot's poem when he composed 'The Magi'?' this paper argues affirmatively. Fernando, albeit covertly, transforms this impetus to an argument assembling process culminating in a gentle warning on 'affronting' traditional religious belief systems as follows.

Firstly, Fernando, a devout Catholic, chastises, *'Epiphany left ambiguous will strike too hard'*.

Epiphany, the Oxford Dictionary states, has a multitude of meanings. One is Liturgical Epiphany which is the manifestation and the realization that Jesus is the Son of God. Fernando, in his poem, overtly reprimands any questioner who is hesitant to embrace Liturgical Epiphany construing it as ambiguous. Eliot in the 'Journey of the Magi' is one culprit who left 'Epiphany vague'.

And then Fernando cautions, *Even the young should keep strictly to the card. They must remember the unsuspecting hands of children Cut deep with baubles pressed and broken.*

The associations generated by the metaphor *baubles*: delicate, brittle, tantalizing seemingly are extended to religious belief systems. When investigated too deeply, 'pressed' as Fernando states, the shattered shards will 'cut deep'.

Fernando's use of the term *children*, within the context of 'Even the young', in the first line above, Can give rise to the interpretation, as ostensibly addressing adults who are immature enough to resort to a truncated emotional or intellectual capacity appropriate to someone younger. Thus, in the finale of his poem Fernando seemingly issues a warning to the readers against deep theological inquiry into matters which are legendary. Such exegesis, Fernando reiterates, will 'Cut deep'. Many a reader who is familiar with 'Journey of the Magi' would recognize in Fernando's 'The Magi' frames overt and covert warnings extended to T.S. Eliot's metaphysical conceit utilized to depict the faltering steps of his own spiritual journey.

DISCUSSION

Every religion comprises of belief systems which result in a syncretizing effect assimilating various diverse religious traditions, a mass of legends which glorify their central figures and often serve didactic purposes. Many Buddhists find solace in taking a resolutely undoubtful stance when accepting Jataka stories though they are blatantly against the reality in the modern age.

For example, in the Buddhist Jathaka tales (Tale 316) [15] *Sasa Jathakaya* is woven around a

rabbit who was a Bodhisatta (a person who can reach nirvana but delays doing so through compassion for suffering beings: Oxford Dictionaries). The rabbit casts itself into a fire, offering his whole body to an old man who wanted something to eat. However, the hare was not burnt. The old man reveals himself to be Śakra the Lord of the Devas.

Then said Sakka to the Bodhisatta, "O wise hare, be thy virtue known throughout the whole world." And squeezing the mountain, with the essence thus extracted, he daubed the sign of a hare on the orb of the moon.

This Buddhist legend is popular and part of local folklore throughout Asia in China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.



Fig-3: A temple mural of Sasa Jathakaya at Bodhirukaramaya in Sri Lanka <http://www.brelief.org/reports/report-45.htm>

Figure 3 above is a temple mural depicting Śakra as the old man and the Bodhisatta, destined to attain Buddhahood, in this birth is a hare. The daubing of the sign of a hare on the orb of the moon by Śakra, in this instance as the Lord of the Devas is in the inset.

Scientific inquiry into the accuracy and viability of 'daubing the sign of a hare on the orb of the moon' will lead to theological disillusionment. Such exegesis, as Fernando states, will 'Cut deep'.

This study conclusively would recourse to Marx's opium metaphor acknowledging that Marx moves the question of religion away from theology and decisively makes it a political and economic problem. Karl Marx's statement "religion... is the opiate of the masses", Carpenter 2012: 7 construes as 'religion served the interests of the elite bourgeoisie by pacifying the oppressed proletariat'. McKinnon 2005 interprets the maxim as follows: Opium is a drug that kills pain, distorts reality, and an artificial source of solace to which some poor souls can become addicted; so also is religion. Igboin 2014: 2 agrees stating that 'Marx had thought that religion muffles the mind of people'.

Thus, the religion-opium tenet could be conceptualized as something that promised 'illusory happiness' by disguising and alienating the realities of the real world. If religion is an illusory contentment, adherence to certain religious archetypes and acceptance without dissent or doubt in the collective unconscious

of the followers is a syncretized norm set down by all religions.

Thus the ubiquitous influence of religions syncretizes merging and assimilating discrete legends, especially in theology and their mythical heritage thus asserting an underlying unity. This assimilation state *Georges and Owens 1995: 7* 'operate within the realm of uncertainty, never being entirely believed by the participants, but also never being resolutely doubted'. Based on this analysis of Fernando's 'The Magi' this paper constructs a caveat which is a gentle warning: religious values and belief systems are exempted from 'affront'.

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