

## COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Social Salvation  
 Convener: Stephanie M. Wong, Villanova University  
 Moderator: Julius-Kei Kato, University of Toronto  
 Presenters: M. Katie Mahowski Mylroie, Boston College  
 Andrew Massena, Loras College  
 Bede Benjamin Bidlack, Saint Anselm College

This Comparative Theology session considered “social salvation” through Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Daoist perspectives on eschatological questions of temporal destiny. The panel stressed that human social and contemplative activities have soteriological effect, changing the timing of the cosmos’s unfolding.

The session began with interwoven presentations by Katie Mylroie and Andrew Massena reflecting on parables from the Christian Gospel of Matthew. Mylroie situated the reflection in the work of Nancy Pineda-Madrid, who has argued that, although suffering is not itself salvific, salvation must be understood in relation to the historical and concrete sufferings of the poor and marginalized. Mylroie highlighted two parables from the Christian New Testament—the tenants (Mt 21:33-46) and the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46)—that treat socio-religious conduct as having soteriological significance.

Andrew Massena first exegeted these parables alongside Jewish Rabbinic texts, aiming to demonstrate that the messiah’s arrival depends not on the messiah’s initiative but upon communal action. He surveyed scholarly literature on Matthew 25:32 (“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”) to note three interpretations: (1) the classical view, interpreting τὰ ἔθνη (ta ethnē) as Christians judged for how they treat fellow Christians in need; (2) the universalist interpretation of τὰ ἔθνη as all individuals, each judged for how they treat the poor; and (3) the exclusivist reading in which the τὰ ἔθνη are “all pagans,” judged individually for how they treat Christ’s people. However, in Massena’s analysis of rabbinic texts on the messiah, we see that the coming of the messiah is contingent on whether the nations live out Torah. For instance, the Bavli Sanhedrin 96b-99a debates whether the messiah’s coming is dependent on God’s timing or Israel’s righteousness, taking the position that it is on Israel to prove itself ready and worthy. In Sanhedrin 98b, the messiah is depicted as a “leper scholar” tying and untying bandages, waiting for the day that Israel returns to the Torah. These rabbinic passages suggest that salvation is not a *deus ex machina* nor a matter of individual conviction; rather, it is a question of whether and when the collective nation follows Torah so that the messiah might come.

Katie Mylroie then considered the parables through the lens of Hindu Advaita nondualist philosophy to stress the relational dynamics between Christian life and salvation. She drew upon the Hindu scholar Anantand Rambachan’s effort in *A Hindu Theology of Liberation* to recover world-affirming aspects of Advaita, like the ontological unity of all life with divine reality or brahman. In Rambachan’s reading of the tradition, the world is not unreal but is the intentional creativity of brahman. Therefore, moksha relates closely to Hindu ideals of caring for our common home like

lokosangraha. Mylroie applied these Hindu intuitions to Christian ethical reflection. She concluded with a call to see our responses to the vulnerable (our exacerbation or alleviation of the sufferings of the hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick, and imprisoned) as part of our relationship with the divine.

Bede Bidlack then presented “Toward a Welcome Eschaton: Thinking Through Universal Salvation as Renewal.” He opened by noting a current cultural zeitgeist of despair especially in religious and scholarly reflection on the ecological crisis. Acknowledging this, he offered the perspective of the medieval Daoist mystic Xiao Yingsou—whose spiritual practice aimed to hasten the universe towards its restoration, not its destruction.

The presentation centered on a diagram and text, the Scripture of Salvation (Duren jing) from the Daoist Numinous Treasure school of fourth century China. Daoist mystics would not only bathe, fast, and seek to live morally upright lives; but they would also chant the Scripture of Salvation and—in the recommendations of Xiao Yingso—engage in a typic of meditation called internal alchemy meant to harmonize the person with the Dao. In Xiaos’ commentary, this is not just a transformation of one’s own body-person, but also a means of speeding up time to bring the universe and all beings more quickly to renewal. Bidlack noted how this reflects more general ancient Chinese conceptions of human cosmographical influence (for instance, the notion that the ruler holds together and re-creates the cosmos through his embodied observance of calendrical days, movement throughout the kingdom, and arrangement of the palace). Medieval Daoists embraced time manipulation as an integral component of Daoist internal alchemy. Bidlack then explained Xiao’s Diagram of the Firing Times, the Great Reversion of the Mirror of the Mind—a circular diagram indicating yin-yang states through eight trigrams, the phases of the moon through twenty-eight dots, and times of alchemical heating and cooling through one hundred dots—meant to aid the practitioner in drawing all beings back to the Dao.

Bidlack concluded by noting how Christians share with Daoist the vision of time as moving forward and encouraged Christians to recover a sense of hope for the future. For the Christian, the end will no doubt be a profound change as the world as we know it gives way to the new heaven and new earth, but it should not be reason to fear or despair.

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