

Book Review

York, M. (2016). *Pagan ethics: Paganism as a world religion*. New York, NY: Springer.

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle, Ph.D, CPA, LMSW
The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 13, Number 1 (2016)
Copyright 2016, ASWB

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

Michael York, Professor of Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at Bath Spa University in England and self-professed pagan sociologist, has provided a monumental work arguing that humanity is essentially pagan, that “morality is a pagan product” (p. 5), and that the contributions generic paganism offers the global discussion of ethics are more suitable for multicultural cosmopolitanism than the rigid morality of Abrahamic faiths or the denial of the sensual in dharmic orientations. To York, contemporary paganism is the sequel to secular humanism and science, adding intuition and mystery back into the human experience. This book is, accordingly, not a discussion of what paganism once was, but rather, an inquiry into what it currently is becoming in a largely European resurgence over the last 35 years.

The breadth of learning York demonstrates is astonishing in the sixteen chapters. They are grouped into five sections that include a two chapter overview on ethics and idolatry, five chapters in which York engages in philosophical and ethical discourse with the Western traditions, three chapters in which York delineates the essence of an applied pagan ethics, three chapters devoted to contemporary moral issues as understood from a pagan ethical perspective, and three concluding chapters addressing pagan and Western ethics, contemporary and sectarian pagan ethics, and a somewhat indulgent final paragraph in which York ties up what he calls *loose ends*.

The salient features of paganism as a world religion “include a this-worldly emphasis, a corporeal

understanding of the spiritual, a stress on nature and the natural, an appreciation of deity as multiple and gender differentiated, humanistic valuing and an approach to the sacred as pleasurable and to pleasure as sacred” (pp. 4-5). There is no divine transcendence in York’s paganism. Instead, the divine is wholly immanent, and “any pagan understanding of ethics as either the goal of life or the correct way to live life is guided and informed by this interconnectedness between the individual, the community, the world and the cosmos” (p. 34). Idolatry, although not an essential feature of all paganism, is central to York who understands the idol as a corporeal image offering an “interactive experience between sentience and tangibility” (p. 35).

In the five chapters that comprise the second section of the book, York essentially compares and contrasts his understanding of a pagan ethics with all of Western philosophy. He anchors this discussion in Aristotle’s virtue values that lead to the good life or happiness understood as that which is “completed by the pleasures which are most proper to humanity” (p. 50). Plato’s transcendentalism is rejected, but York adopts Plato’s terminology for excellence to describe the four cardinal virtues of the ancient world – prudence, fortitude, self-control, and justice. In a sense, this entire book is about York’s attempt to develop a contemporary pagan alternative to these four cardinal virtues. York argues the importance of pleasure in his pagan ethics finding support in the Cyrenaics and Epicureans and extension in utilitarianism, but contrasts his embrace of earthy pleasures with Stoicism and Christianity, especially as understood by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

The comparisons and contrasts continue with Benedict Spinoza, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Mackie, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Anthony Grayling. I suspect that York will find few readers capable of completely understanding and evaluating all of the arguments and assertions he makes in these very dense chapters.

In the third section, York distills all that has gone before into a sevenfold *heptatheon* of pagan virtue-values that lead to well-being, happiness, and the good life. The primary goals of human life are freedom, comfort, health, and worship; the last being comprised of pleasure, productivity, and generosity. The derivation of such a positive ethical orientation grounded only on nature and the natural is, of course, York's largest challenge. Appealing to the natural aesthetic (beauty) to identify that which is good or has value must equally embrace nature's brutality, pain, and caprice. York solves this by giving primacy to freedom created through the agency of Nietzsche's will to power, "Whatever liberty we have as individuals and social collectivities is to be found in and through our abilities to exercise will – our capacity to wish and, finally, to bring that wishing to fruition" (p. 183). Desire, the capacity to want, is at the heart of pagan ethics. As long as that desire harms no other, its pursuit is worthy. Comfort, the second virtue-value, comes closest to Aristotle's understanding of happiness. "To be comfortable is to be at home in one's conditions, to have the courage afforded by one's present situation" (p. 198). Health is understood in a holistic manner, embracing bodily appetites and the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. York uses worship in the sense of "making or creating worth/value" (p. 204) which can be created formally through ritual, but informally through the pursuits of pleasure, productivity, and generosity. York's "paganism is not a religiosity of abstinence and renunciation but instead one of affirmation and indulgent celebration" (p. 222) of carnality, education, friendship, consciousness, and conversation. In productivity, York finds humanity's ultimate purpose whether the individual contribution is in art, education,

progeny, conversation, or simply living the good life. In generosity, York finds a corrective to base selfishness whether that is anchored in the Golden Rule, simple kindness, or a commitment to service for others. In this context York makes his singular reference to social work, an exemplar in his view of pagan service.

The moral issues York addresses from a pagan ethical perspective in the fourth section include same-sex unions (affirmed), recreational drug use (affirmed in moderation), terrorism (denounced), abortion (affirmed due to lack of fetal consciousness), capital punishment (denounced), and euthanasia (affirmed). He devotes an entire chapter to hegemonic dominations such as rape (denounced), gender equality (affirmed), depersonalization through bureaucracy, government, and corporations (all denounced), and environmental degradation (denounced). Many may find York's pagan ethics quite similar to libertarianism in application.

In the last section, York returns to a comparison of his pagan ethics to Western ethical traditions adding Jurgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, George Santayana, and Confucianism into the mix. Another chapter describes contemporary sectarian pagan societies including Shintoism, Santeria, Germanic and Nordic societies, Druidry, Romuva, Slavic and Kemetic spiritualites, the classical Greek/Roman legacy, and Wicca. York's loose ends include interconnectedness and tribalism, violence and over-consumption, and the importance of children.

I believe that York is best understood as a pagan writing primarily for a pagan readership. He hopes to convince contemporary pagans to embrace a broader and less sectarian form of paganism in order for paganism to earn a metaphorical seat at the table along with other world religions. There is no doubt that he believes that his heptatheon of virtue-values will lead to less global strife, greater personal freedom, and expanded human wellbeing. There are, however, several problems with York's inquiry into the potential for pagan ethics that may

prove less than convincing to non-pagans. First, only those predisposed toward paganism are likely to find his neglect of nature's pain, brutality, and caprice completely satisfying. Secondly, the self-interest imbedded within a pleasure-seeking ethic may seem to be a dangerous counterpoint to Nietzsche's will to power, York's only means of reconciling nature's beauty and brutality. Thirdly, York acknowledges the moral failings of pagan deities, but does so in an off-handed manner that does not take seriously the injustices meted out as examples more aptly termed godlessness than godliness. Non-pagans are unlikely to be so generous in their assessment. Finally, many will find it absurd that York presents paganism as the successor to secular humanism and science. Human intuition does not

require a return to idolatry, and the acknowledgment that all is not yet known (i.e., mystery) does not demand a return to ancient ritual.

However, York's heptatheon of virtue-values may be appealing to some social workers who are not already committed to another faith dynamic. While social justice and integrity are not particularly prominent in York's ethic, freedom, comfort, and health are clearly compatible with the value of human dignity we hold dear. Both service and competence fit nicely into York's understanding of productivity, and the importance of human relationships can be found in York's generosity. So if there are any pagan social workers out there looking for a pragmatic ethic, this may be the book for you.

