

BOOK REVIEW

Pagan Theology- Paganism as a World Religion by-Michael York

ARPIT SINGH

Department of History, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, India.

**Corresponding author; Email: singharpit1607@gmail.com*



Received: 10 January 2025

Accepted: 02 April, 2025

Revision: 27 March 2025

Published: 11 April 2025. **Vol-6, Issue-2**

Cite as: Singh, A. (2025). Pagan Theology - Paganism as a World Religion. *ICRRD Journal*, 6(2), 101-103.

The Book 'Pagan Theology- Paganism as a World Religion' written by Michael York is a descriptive, and illuminating work on the diverse religious faiths that exist throughout the world. The Book specifically focuses on certain conspicuous faiths or religions whose attributes, idiosyncrasies and proclivities have a pagan elevation. The writer adheres to the Christian label of Pagan to describe all such beliefs and practices which are pervaded with 'polytheism, animism, idolatry, corospirituality, local emphasis, recognition of geospacers concentrations, perception of soul duality and either nature worship or nature as a chief metaphorical register expressive of the divine.' (Michael York, New York University Press, 2003). The Book is relevant and pertinent with the contemporaneous curiosity and intrusiveness regarding the subject Pagan Religion. By being not very tome or voluminous the book puts forward its scrutiny or perception succinctly and forthrightly. The best part about the book is its wiggle room which is not just cramped to a specific place or a religion but covers the major or even minor religious diversities throughout the world in its purview. The book is bifurcated into 3 chapters as:

(1) Paganism as Religion, (2) Paganism as Behaviour and (3) Paganism as Theology

The book lays hold of Chinese Folk Religion, Japanese Shinto, (Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Agnosticism, Atheism, and Secularism are discerned from a behavioural outlook in the 2nd chapter) and besides that a distinctive subcategory titled as Primal Tribal Religions which traverses through faiths like Shamanism, American Indian Spirituality, Afro-American Spiritism and a faith whose inculcation as a category is preferably unique and germane is the heading of "Contemporary Western Paganism" which makes the book's approach holistic and acts as its contemplative embellishment. The book is a fine roller coaster ride of confessional, apologetic and sociological emotions which the writer himself admits in his preface.

Another outlook which is very unique from the ideological perspective is Inkled in the Book's subtitle "Paganism as a World Religion," the attempt of the writer to ennoble the surrogate status which the Pagan faiths have received till now precisely from the adherents and clergymen of the Abrahamic religions and their philosophies. The writer's consideration for the Pagan beliefs to be essentially autochthonous or indigenous is a strikingly meticulous observation to which one arrives at after perusing the entire book. To look at Paganism as a Universal or World Religion with its own

distinctively independent paradigm sufficient enough to sustain itself is slightly an eccentric stance but pensively imperative. Till now the majority of works that have been published on this subject most of them follow a common narrative style which was established with the very outset of Christianity in the European lands. That narrative mainly shed the topic under a negative hue by demonizing all those traditional beliefs and practices which didn't adhere to the Christian dogma and philosophy. But the vantage point that the writer has chosen for the topic for its careful inspection definitely bestows upon it a whole new set of open-ended webs of interpretations thereby extending the scope of the topic to many new themes which are yet to be explored like the comparative analysis of the rituals, customs and traditions of different Pagan cultures that sprouted throughout the subcontinent at one point of time and how they were related to each other. And the establishment of the cause-and-effect relationship among such cultures to develop and evolve a more accurate and constructive chronology of Cultural and Religious History.

Another point that the writer puts forward is the representation of Paganism as a Root religion out of which all other religions sprouted as its offshoots or counter-developments of the Root religion. This assertion opens up the dimension of Paganism as an ever-encompassing faith which can also be granted the title of Mother Religion. The writer makes use of the term 'preternatural' for denoting whatever is other than the ordinary, explicable and natural, thereby removing the hierarchical connotation which steps in with the use of the term supernatural. Such stances make the writer's credibility more unassailable. The scientific fervour of writer's standpoint is illustrated from such instances.

Another point that makes this book an absolute rumination is the information which the writer presents about other works which have directly or indirectly alluded to the topic and the contexts in which they've reflected on it gives us scrupulous insights on the topic scenarios which are already probed. Stewart Sutherland's *The World's Religions* (1998) William Frend's *Christianity in the First Five Centuries*, Hugh Wybrew's *Exposition of Russian Orthodox Christianity*, Keith Crim's *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* (1981), Hendrik Kraemer's *World Cultures and World Religions* (1960) and John Bowker's *The Oxford dictionary of World Religions* are some of the examples cited by the writer which have made use of the terms like Pagan, Paganism, Neo- Paganism, Pagan Pathfinders and Witchcraft etc.

The writer's adherence to the terminology of Pagan and his thought that there's a reluctance to consider various indigenous religions as Pagan despite the ostensible similarities, they often have with the pre-Christian practices of Europe is a misconception since there might be similarities but the context and the geography in which they've developed makes them equivalently distinct from each other. Secondly the use of the Christian term Pagan which is an Islamic equivalent of "Kafir" is equally derogatory since it was and still is mostly utilised in a derogatory way by the Christians to designate and denigrate the disbeliever as inferior and unequal which is yet a kind of ethnocentric propensity or proclivity of the Abrahamic faiths. This above claim is further axiomatic from the fact, where the writer gives description of William Young's *The World's Religions* (1995) in which he recognizes Christian missionaries' use of the term paganism to refer to the indigenous religion of American Indians.

This tendency is also evident in the book 'Pagans, The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity' written by James J.O' Donnell where he claims the idea of Christian hegemony which certainly had emerged from Constantine's reign to define itself against a pagan world from which it was fundamentally different. Though another perspective which the writer of above book put forwards is that the term "Pagan" is non-biblical as it was in vogue in the classical Rome as "Paganus" which typically meant something like "Peasant" and predates Christianity. This assertion is also put

forth by Ronald Hutton who disputes the etymology of whom the writer gives a description of in the book. O'Donnell's book though admits that the connotation of the word changed from 370 C.E. where the word specifically is used to refer to the old school folk by the Christians who were now in hegemony. 'The usefulness of the words Pagan and Paganism grows genuinely strong after the nominal "triumph of Christianity" in the time of Theodosius.' (O'Donnell, 2015).

This proves that the term Pagan from around 350CE is largely used in a derogative and relegated sense. Adherence to this terminology to describe all the other indigenous religions is equally fatal as it would inevitably propagate the baptismal propaganda of the Christians and the Church. Another point where this book loses its credibility is the use of secondary sources by the writer for the study of religions like Islam and basing his understanding on it from countries which were primarily not Islamic like Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and India. Similarly, the experts whom the writer consulted for his understanding of various religions and their philosophies are mostly outsiders and non-practitioners of those religions. For instance, his understanding of Hinduism is based on the assistance of Catherine Robinson, which echoes like as if one consults a Hindu Brahmin for the understanding of Christianity. Though his direct experience of faiths in the far east like India, Nepal, China, Thailand, and Japan mellow downs the mendacity of the information which should yet provide a legitimate motive to read the book.

The thrust given to the David Barrett's 1982 World Christian Encyclopedia for the alleged comprehensive population figures of the world's various religions is equally apocryphal as the criteria for categorizing or calibration of various population subgroups to a specific religious affiliation is fairly ambiguous since the Encyclopedia is a Eurocentric or Christocentric construction based on the title of the Encyclopedia and the place and person who published it is fully tarnished with their own set of misconceptions and biased outlook. The Roman or Latin terminology used to designate various other religions which the work identifies is equally suggestive of the fact that some of the faiths might even be western creations. Overall, the book is a succinct blend of information on various faiths and religions equipped with a holistic and wide approach covering nearly all the major geographical locations wherever there is an existence of a separate autochthonous religion in its 'Weltanschauung.'

-Arpit Singh

(M.A. History, Central University of Himachal Pradesh)



This is an **Open Access** article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium upon the work for non-commercial, provided the original work is properly cited.