

# THE PROMETHEAN

Symposium for Liberal Religious Youth

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November 1964

THE SEARCH  
FOR NEW  
MEANINGS  
IN  
TRADITIONAL  
RELIGIOUS  
SYMBOLS



THE PROMETHEAN

A SYMPOSIUM FOR LIBERAL RELIGIOUS YOUTH:

THE SEARCH FOR NEW MEANINGS IN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

November, 1964 Volume II, Number 1 Editor--bruceeverettelwell

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Cover design by Diane Purdy

Address contributions and letters to the Editor, Bruce E. Elwell  
Lane's End Homestead, Brookville, Ohio

The ideas and opinions expressed by contributors to The Promethean do not necessarily represent the position of every LRY'er nor of Continental LRY. This is a symposium which welcomes diversity of opinion and invites letters to the Editor from youth and adults.

CONTRIBUTORS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Blair Dean was the first editor of The Promethean -- previously President of Michindoh Federation, Secretary of MI-CON, and a Director of LRY, etc., etc.; her article explaining the choice of the name appeared in Volume I, Number 1. Blair is presently a sophomore at Swarthmore College.

I once had a Roman Catholic teacher who told me that all anonymous works were written by God; the next day I brought him some anonymous poems from atheist magazines. It would be pleasant now to think that our anonymous contributions were penned in fire by the finger of God...

Margi Clark, former Liberal's Roar editor and PSLRY Vice-President is a member of the Pasadena LRY. Her drawing originally was used as her group's Youth Sunday Cover.

Kay Arnoll was a contributing editor of a magazine called New Outlook from which "Some Old Carols" is reprinted.

The center spread print was first published in the Catholic Worker. The lines are from "The Ballad of a Carpenter" by Ewan MacColl.

D. A. Roberts (probably) was an individualist-anarchist of the Detroit area during the first twenty years of this century.

Larry McAneny, a member of the MI-CON committee planning a camp in the Ozarks, lives in Godfrey, Illinois. "Conversion" is reprinted from an issue of this year's Continental Crier.

Sue Johnson is a published poet living in Smithfield, Maine and attending Coburn Classical Institute (the editor's Alma Mater). "The Restoration of Saint Francis" is reprinted from Finnegan's Awakening.

The speakers in "A New Enlightenment" are Chuck Forester, Nancy Holland, Fritz West and Blair Dean of the 1963-64 Executive Committee and Barry Crago, 1963-64 Connecticut Valley Federation President. It is reprinted from the "When LRY is The Greatest Experience" program prompter.

The cover is from a drawing by Diane Purdy and was originally published as one of a series of order of service covers by the Council for Adult Programs.

EDITORIAL:

## EXPANDING VISTAS IN RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

The PROMETHEAN enters the new academic year under a new editor -- a fact at least vaguely symbolic because the change of Executive Boards and Editors means a change in tone and emphasis. Over a year ago, Maria Fleming, the outgoing LRY President, said that it was time for LRY to shift emphasis from organization to programming. This change is smoothly being carried out. Our Continental Conference this past summer was based on self and group introspection, and this will indeed affect the tone for the coming year.

And so The PROMETHEAN is undergoing a personality change, as it will each year according

to the personality of each new editor. The PROMETHEAN is a symposium for LRY'ers, gathered by the editor to stimulate thought and challenge the reader. Your contributions and criticisms are always welcomed.

Just as the tone of LRY must change to meet the challenge of the times, so must the interpretations of meaning in our liberal religious tradition. The peasant folk of rural England kept the ancient Druid symbols alive by applying them to the Christian religion they accepted. They adopted mistletoe to the Christmas celebration and still carved images of "The Green Man" (their ancient

protective diety) high on the turrets of rural abbeys as late as the thirteenth century.

We religious liberals claim a heritage in all the faiths of the world -- we see truths in all of them and draw upon these truths. But the truths in the great religious traditions are symbolized by little marks and words -- the Christian cross, the Jewish star, Yin-Yang, the word "God", etc. Adherents to the various faiths can point to their symbols as embodying the major tenets of their belief. If we are the "world faith for the modern age" we profess to be, we are duty-bound to examine the symbols as well as the truths they represent.

A symbol has both rational and non-rational elements. The meaning of a symbol is based on the feelings of a group or individual about a historical event or on impressions they have about life; yet the symbol somehow makes these feelings and impressions intelligible. The phenomenological and rational elements of a symbol cannot be separated; the symbol would lack significance if they were.

Our particular religious tradition makes acceptance of symbols difficult; our ancestors reacted to the previous distortion of symbols into idols by

rejecting symbolism itself. The acceptance is made doubly difficult by our present culture's emphasis on logic and scientific method. Many people are, however, finding meaning in religious symbols today; the contributions in this issue only prove this point.

We Unitarian Universalists have over the years put little emphasis on the symbolic significance of a church building, yet to the Roman Catholics the building has historically symbolized the physical presence of their God by being an expression of creative love and devotion and by acting as a haven from political tyranny. The life of the Christ or the Buddha can be symbolic of the truly radical social theories they preached; likewise, a symbol such as the swastika can have great significance when viewed historically and cross-culturally.

Every symbol, if it is to have validity in this rapidly changing world, must be constantly re-examined and re-interpreted. We must look anew at symbols we have previously rejected; we also must be willing to re-examine the meanings we have given to symbols we accept.

## THE PROMETHEAN QUEST

During each successive chapter in the story of civilization's development, men have sought the answers to the basic questions regarding their existence and purpose as a race. Often, their solutions have found expression in the symbolic language of mythology. The present generation, as intellectually restless as its predecessors, must create a synthesis of the spiritual resources of the past and the aspirations of the future in order to formulate a value system adaptable to its current needs.

LRY, in trying to maintain the intellectual and spiritual ferment that nourishes this process, must remain in a state of constant flux--organizationally and programmatically. To characterize the basic premise upon which LRY is founded -- an unrelenting quest for principles attuned to the demands of life in modern society -- its organ for artistic and ideological expression has been entitled The Promethean, after Prometheus, a figure in the Greek myths of creation.

Prometheus, whose very name means "forethought," is a symbol of defiance against a recognized, arbitrary authority--an idealist in conflict with the malevolent will of Zeus for the benefit of mankind. After man had been equipped by his creator with an inferior set of physical tools, in order to subjugate him beneath the yoke of divine bidding, Prometheus stole fire from the sun and gave it to man. In addition, he taught the usage of light and heat in cultural endeavors, liberating the creativity then still dormant in mankind. Zeus, too late in discovering the theft and its subsequent results, vengefully punished Prometheus for his insurrectionist activities by chaining him to a rocky gorge. . . Thus, the legendary founder of idealism was martyred, but his efforts were rewarded by the aspiration toward light and reason within the spirit of humanity.

As heirs to this tradition of unremitting search, the new generation, of which LRY is an integral part, must seek to refurbish the fuel for the "perpetual light." Rather than accepting the suppositions of previous cultures, it must challenge the premises for an ordered civilization. However, it must also substantiate its challenges with a coherent basis for improvements, reaffirm, after minute examination, those values which relate to present needs, and strike accord between these systems, to create a foundation upon which to build an applicable blueprint for the future.

Blair Dean



around a flame we gather  
(the candle of worship, late at night;  
the cigarette in a long meeting; the  
blazing sunlight of a summer camp...)

the light from these flames  
shows us the way  
in the faces of others

-anonymous





## SOME OLD CAROLS

St. Augustine wrote, "What is now called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and was not absent from the beginning of the human race until Christ came, from which time the true religion which existed already began to be called 'Christian'." Throughout all the ancient religions there has always been a special holiday season reverencing the idea of birth; the rebirth of the sun from its winter coldness, the birth of various Savior Gods such as Mithras, Krishna, Horus, all expressed the same idea that we hold today in the Christian Christmas -- that the symbol of the newborn child embodies all our profoundest hopes and desires.

We always hope that the world's children will grow up to be wiser and better than we have been. Jesus said, "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God," and there are few of us who do not wish, at some time, that we could relive our lives differently. This is why the symbol of the newborn child is so beloved of humanity. It promises a change in another and better direction, an easing of the stubborn, disuniting habits of thought and action which we cannot break.

The Star symbol of Christmas is also much loved because it suggests the higher qualities of human nature, those urges towards Love, Understanding, Cooperation and Wisdom that pull men constantly away from the selfish, materialistic, ego-centered life. "Guide us to thy perfect Light," says the carol. We Three Kings concerns the beckoning star. These three sages, so much a part of the Christmas legend, are a beautiful symbol of humanity; white man, black man and brown man seeking together the path towards peace and wisdom.

Yet when thinking of that hopeful star, one cannot help today remembering another baleful star that waits over our horizon, whose horrible brilliance, if we ever see it in all its fullness, will destroy the hopes of all the newborn babies of the world. The Christmas spirit throughout the ages has weathered many evils, but this is a new fearsome toy that the growing human race has made for itself from the atoms of uranium and hydrogen. Whether there is in Man enough gentleness to overcome his violence is sometimes hard to predict, but there is a hopeful yet warning verse in the old carol, Angel Gabriel, that might have been written to advise us today. It will beat some careful thought and sincere singing:

"Good people all, both great and small,  
The which to hear my voice,  
With one accord let's praise the Lord,  
And in our hearts rejoice;  
In love abound to all around,  
While we our lifetime spend,  
While we have space, let's pray for grace.  
So let my carol end."

Kay Arnoll



...and he saw how wealth and poverty  
live always side by side.



...if you would only organize  
the world belongs to you.

## WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST?

The practical politician's view, A.D.40

Why, yes, I knew this Jesus very well.  
 When I held office up in Galilea  
 I lived in Nazareth for quite a spell  
 And built beside the little town a villa,  
 And there the Joiner Joseph and his boy  
 Were once for several years in my employ.  
 The youngster was a likely lad enough.  
 He might have made a very good mechanic  
 Had not his brain been addled with such stuff  
 As Golden Rules and fancies Messianic,  
 Talking of loving neighbors as yourself,  
 Instead of hustling for the sordid pelf.  
 And, then, he had no more respect for me  
 And men of rank and wealth and high position  
 Then for the horde of bums and drabs which he  
 Had gathered round him, howling with contrition,  
 Filling their heads with dreams of heaven on earth,  
 With all things new, and even a new birth!  
 We found him fast creating discontent,  
 Prating of justice, truth and free society,  
 Disdaining governors and government,  
 Deriding Sabbath days and priestly piety.  
 To stop his gab and give his victims warning  
 We hung him 'twixt two thieves one Friday morning.

A Free Socialist's view 2000 years later

Now and again, for one brief hour, there blooms  
 Upon this gnarled and stunted human stem  
 Arose of light, a living diadem,  
 Piercing with vivid rays the age-long glooms,  
 Waking strange hopes that, like a sacred fire,  
 Live thru all ages in the human breast,  
 Revealing paths to freedom, peace and rest,  
 Showing at hand the weary world's desire.  
 Then come the hirelings of kings and priests,  
 Crush the fond bloom and stifle it with lies,  
 And when the love-lit life within it dies  
 They bear its mangled form with solemn cries  
 To grace the orgies of their bloody feasts.

D. A. Roberts

## THE TWISTING OF THE TWISTED CROSS

We see a swastika, and we think of lead-heeled boots, stiff-armed salutes, mass genocide and total war. Ours is the second generation to view this ancient symbol with horror, associating it with the National Socialist German Workers Party and the little megalomaniac who adopted it to his new party forty years ago. Even today we cannot forget the swastika-George Lincoln Rockwell and his tiny arm-banded lot make noise disproportionate to their number. "The Jews are through in '72'." "This time the world..." The chills run up and down our spines, and we cannot help associating the twisted cross with twisted minds.

The swastika, however, is an ancient religious symbol. It was used in India and China at least ten centuries before the Christian era. Swastikas have been found decorating religious artwork in Bronze Age Troy, ancient Britain, Persia, Etruria and Japan. It can be found among many Indian Tribes of the Americas (the Navaho have bent cross sand paintings). The very word "swastika" is of Sanskrit rather than German origin; it translates roughly "all is well."

To millions of Jains and Buddhists today in Asia (and, for that matter, North America) the swastika is a symbol of the ever-renewing Wheel of Life. Originally -- at least among the Buddhists -- it was connected with the Southern Cross constellation which appears at the natural renewal of life each year. To the Jain or Buddhist, the swastika does not bring to mind the racist statism we identify with Hitler and the entire Nazi movement; to them, it is a very useful and very ancient religious symbol and should be revered as such.

But the American or European is emotionally unable to accept the swastika as the symbol it historically is; a little Austrian postcard painter made it impossible when he adopted it in his infamous group. Adolph Hitler was no fool; he adapted the swastika because of its universal mystical appeal. He was many things, but you cannot discredit his ability to work with human emotions through symbols. He placed the swastika on a flag of red and black—these were the colors of Imperial Germany, so the junkers and the old military classes were attracted; they are also the colors of the Revolution, so the workingmen were drawn.

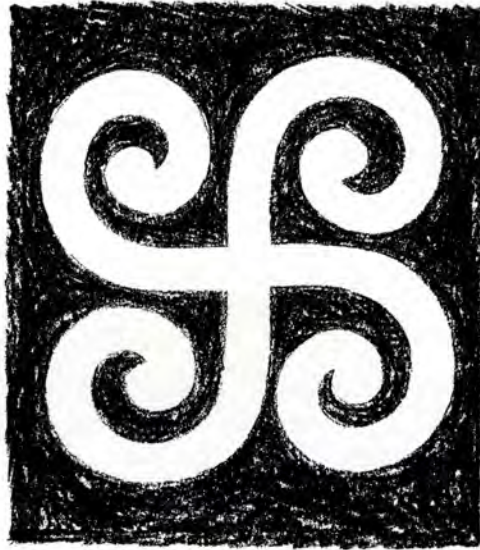
Thus, a red flag with a black swastika on a white field makes the blood of freedom-loving men run cold, when it could have been a banner around which Humanity would rally. The Nazis perverted a traditional symbol and destroyed it for us just as the men of the Inquisition and the Falangists of Franco's Spain committed and commit heinous crimes under a Christian cross.

Yet the swastika is perhaps the most ancient religious symbol we have, far more universal than its Christian counterpart. It does not deserve its present association with the murder and plunder that has been committed in its name.

Our generation will not see the rebirth of the respectable swastika; but if we train our children and our children's children to treat symbols in a fuller context, the day may yet come.

anonymous

## THE CELTIC SWASTIKA



Apparently an Aryan symbol and probably originating in the Danube area, this symbol traveled from there first to Thrace, Greece and Italy and then into Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland.

Though its meaning is uncertain, "its branches may symbolize the rays of the sun in motion, from which it may

have come to symbolize astronomical movement in general, that of the moon and the stars as well as the sun."

We refer you to Kenneth L. Patton's A Religion for One World; Art and Symbols for a Universal Religion, (Beacon Press), from which we derived this information and drawing, page 471.

## CONVERSION

Silently, softly tread under the trees.  
 Shiver, but keep a calm face to the breeze.  
 Pad 'cross the sidewalks. Avoid the streetlamps  
 Glistening in the mist of the night damp.  
 Slip through the shadows. Retreat from the brights  
 Of cars turning corners --interrogative lights  
 That dart frightened questions: "Why are you out?"  
 "What monster are you to prowl hereabout?"  
 Concealing darkness ends: An open space  
 Lies cat-like 'cross the path. Now quicken pace,  
 For hostile stars throw down a chilling fire  
 And outline pale the stone cathedral spire.

Now much faster, from the list'ning, staring moonlight, flee,  
 Silver hooting at your heelsteps in satyric glee.  
 Run beyond the moonlit border, hounded by the cold.  
 Dart and swerve among the tree-trunks from its bitter hold.  
 Run a-raving, without order, heedless of the sound.  
 Run half-stumbling, just toes touching on the unseen ground.  
 Now ahead the all-surrounding dimals part once more:  
 How warmly glow the wooden panels of the chapel door!

Enter slowly, pause and wait  
 For deep breathing to abate.  
 Glide gently up the center aisle,  
 Noiselessly on carpet pile.  
 For silence hangs throughout that hall  
 As tapestries upon each wall,  
 And in the rows of empty pews  
 Four hundred ghosts may sit and muse  
 Into a statue's vacant eyes.  
 Now on the altar steps arise.  
 Face the candle's flaming hood  
 Burning in the burnished wood  
 And as a humble refugee  
 In stillness sink upon one knee.

Larry McAneny



The Restoration of Saint Francis'

the massive door  
opened and as  
i walked, voices from  
the pews were raised  
in laughter.  
gossip in the carpenter's  
lunch-pail. God smelt  
odd today ... not  
santified by coveted  
shawls of incense  
and fear. but in this  
hour he is forced to  
withdraw in the  
empty mirror of  
gaudy paint.  
my intentions were  
lost,  
as i stood, engrossed  
with the spattered  
ceiling of indigo blue.

Sue Johnson

## A NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

(The following dialogue was taped at the February, 1964 Executive Committee meeting. Complete transcripts of the "Greatest Experience" Conversation are available as program prompters from the LRY office - ed.)

Barry: LRY has a distinct philosophy.

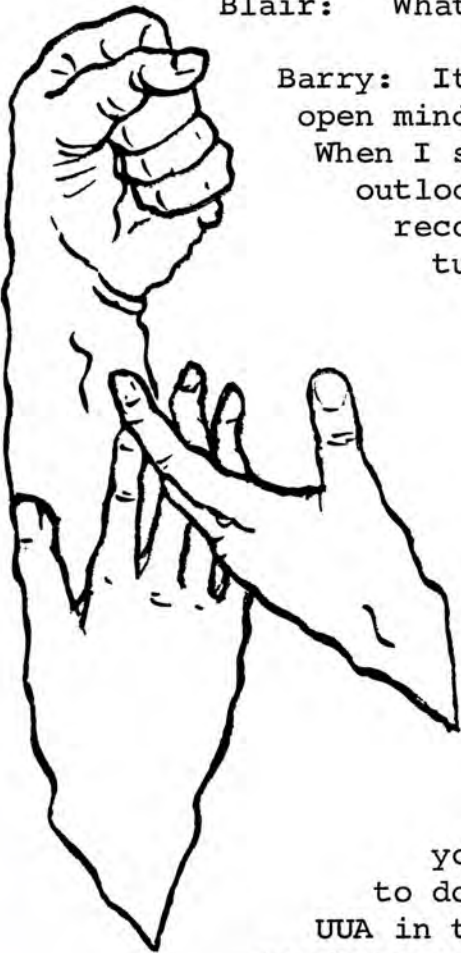
Blair: What is this philosophy?

Barry: It's a rational way of looking at things with an open mind and a willingness to accept what one sees. When I say that LRY is a rational group with a rational outlook, I mean that it recognizes the emotional, it recognizes vested interest, it recognizes the factual reasons for illogical behavior.

It is rational in the sense that people attempt to be as sensitive to human beings as possible and make logical decisions based not only on the factual information but based on the emotional content of the factual information as opposed to the emotional content of whatever else happens to be there, which is the irrational content or emotional content.

Blair: I completely disagree. You can let your emotions play a very definite part in all your actions, and you don't have to support everything you do with reasons from your background. You act because you feel a need to do so. I think this is why LRY differs from the UUA in that LRY has created an emotionally charged atmosphere and has created a set of symbols and its own myths.

We profess a rationalistic attitude but I think this rationalism has become a meaningless concept. We do support some of our generalizations with facts and empirical evidence in the 18th century tradition, but I think that in accepting other people's idiosyncrasies, we have created a very emotionally charged atmosphere.



Chuck: There's intellectual enlightenment and then there's a kind of awakening of emotions in human personality. Both of these are a part of LRY

Fritz: The fact that we are able to express ourselves through our emotions in LRY is enlightenment, for we cannot do this in the social environment.

Nancy: I think that we become rational after the fact in that we have an experience, a meaningful experience but not because it is a rational experience. For example, when you get home someone says, "What's LRY all about? What did you go to the conference this weekend for?" And you find yourself having to try to justify it, justify the time you put in, and you begin to feel that people won't understand if you just say that we had an unrational experience and so you try to make it intelligible for others.

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