Emily Carr’s evocative paintings have suggested many things to the viewer: Canadian identity, love of nature, admiration for native cultures, environmentalism, and even sublimated sexuality. What Carr sought, however, was “to paint so simply that the common ordinary people would understand and see something of God.”¹ The struggle to achieve this goal is documented in her journals for the period from 1927 to 1941, where, amidst domestic and artistic practicalities, “the presence of God runs... like a supra-human father.”² Carr yearned to find and express God, and Lawren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven, was the catalyst for her great spiritual journey. In addition, Harris befriended and encouraged Carr, offered technical advice, and introduced her to philosophies such as Theosophy and the transcendental poetry of Walt Whitman. As a result of this friendship, Carr, in her late fifties, experienced an “explosive burst into sudden authority and a brilliant later flowering.”³ A discussion of two of Carr’s most celebrated paintings, Indian Church and Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky, conducted with an understanding of her religious quest, reveals new depths in her art which reflect her spiritual progress, as initiated and supported by Lawren Harris.

Carr, born in 1871 in Victoria, British Columbia, found spirituality not in her family’s strict Evangelical Christianity, but in the great wilderness beauty around her, which transported “her into realms of bliss, [and] experiences that were from the beginning part of an innately religious nature.”⁴ She possessed a spiritual affinity for aboriginal cultures, and cherished animals, seeing them as “a manifestation of the mystery and joy of living things.”⁵ Owing in part to economic pressures, her
painting had been sporadic for fifteen years until, at age fifty-five, she met Lawren Harris and other members of the Group of Seven in Toronto in 1927.

Carr’s description of viewing Harris’ paintings for the first time echoes Karl Rahner’s “self-communication” of God; she writes: “Something has called out of somewhere. Something in me is trying to answer. It is surging through my whole being... like a great river rushing on.” Carr’s nascent mysticism is evident in these words, and her analogy to a great river is “especially poignant mystically” in terms of the search for self knowledge. Carr writes that the Group of Seven had created “lovely spaces filled with wonderful serenity.... I think perhaps I shall find God here.” An awe of great expanses became a crucial component of Carr’s religious expression, as she moved away from paintings of native scenes and totems toward a focus on the timbers and skies of the woods. Though Christian, Carr retained the Pantheistic tendencies born in her girlhood, hearing “the myriad voices of God shouting in one great voice: ‘I am one God.... I am heaven. I am earth. I am all in all’.” Her developing religious devotion began to permeate her art.

In 1929 Carr completed Indian Church, a painting which Harris greatly admired and in which Carr’s longing for union with God is palpable. A small Christian church is set amidst an enormous forest, slightly cubist in form, which obscures the sky. The foliage forms a subtle totem-like facial profile nudging the right side of the steeple, suggesting Carr’s transitional religious frame of mind and her mission to unite God and nature. The church seems a “fragile and awkward symbol of Christian faith... [standing] bravely against an overwhelming outgrowth of towering natural forms,” a fragility reinforced by a massive boulder on the left, and a rising green ground in the front. Yet the church is not overwhelmed, standing unyielding and strong due to its sharp contrast of colour and shape. Indeed, the light in the painting emanates from the ascending brightness of the church: God’s presence is solidly felt in nature. The inclusion of a cemetery, not in the original setting, also reflects light, implying the higher aspirations of the soul. In Church a “new integration” takes place in a
“unity... created through opposites.”\textsuperscript{12} A verdant ladder at the right of the roof represents, perhaps subliminally, Carr’s stated goal of seeking the Divine in the “lovely spaces”. This search for God in nature is “the first level of mystical reality, the first form of contemplation,” and represents initial steps in Carr’s mysticism.\textsuperscript{13} Eager to learn more, on Harris’ recommendation, she began to explore Theosophy, a philosophy in search of divine truth, which included metaphysical teachings, Eastern religions, and the occult.

This field of study was difficult, but out of admiration for Harris, Carr persevered: “I know there is something in this teaching for me... something that opens up a way for the artist to find himself an approach.”\textsuperscript{14} For approximately three years she studied Theosophy, and while she did absorb from it various notions of “abstract space and motion,”\textsuperscript{15} she ultimately rejected a spirituality that did not include the warmth and comfort of Christ, who would awaken one to a far bigger sense of life... than the sense of life that comes through theosophy[sic], that static, frozen awfulness, sort of a cold storage for beautiful thoughts, no connect-up with God by Christ. At one time I... thought perhaps it was the way. Now it numbs and chills me.\textsuperscript{16}

Her joyous relief in adhering to a personal Christ as the path to God was fortified through the teachings of two Christians from India. The lectures of Raja Singh, with his “child-like, simple faith – no sect, no creed, no bonds but just God and Christ” thrilled her.\textsuperscript{17} She was also influenced by her reading of Streeter and Appasamy’s \textit{The Sadhu}, which detailed the experience of Sadhu Sunder Singh, whose mysticism included theories of vibration, nature, and the illumination obtained through union with Christ.\textsuperscript{18} These Christian-Indian thinkers validated and enhanced Carr’s non-dogmatic Christianity, which also came to echo Catholic mysticism. For example, the writings of Teresa of Avila in \textit{The Interior Castle} describe the many rooms for the soul. Similarly, Carr writes: “the soul dwells in your innermost being and it has a lot of courts and rooms and things to pass through.”\textsuperscript{19}

Additionally, Harris introduced Carr to the poetry of Walt Whitman. She admired Whitman’s “glorious excursions… into the unknown.”\textsuperscript{20} His transcendental view of humankind in cosmic
connection with nature, the universe, and time cohered with her own. Whitman’s poetry would become a life-long enthusiasm.

To Carr’s relief, Harris warmly supported her hard won religious convictions, and remained a stalwart ally and correspondent. He lent her artistic guidance, for example, advising her to move forward from native imagery and to “push the forms to the limit in volume, plasticity, and precision and relationships in one unified, functioning greater form.”21 American artist Mark Tobey claimed credit for inspiring Carr’s “great swirling canvases, [and] wonderful tree forms,”22 but Carr “was never truly in step with any group, movement, or trend” and therefore “the question of direct influence on her work remains mainly a matter of conjecture.”23 As she developed her technical skills and style, expression of the Almighty remained foremost in her artistic purpose. By 1934 she could write: “I am painting my own vision now, thinking of no one else’s approach.”24 Carr had synthesized her faith into a personal, non-dogmatic Christianity, accented by traces of Pantheism, all of which would be reflected in her famous “sky” paintings.

In 1935 Carr painted *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*, one of her most incandescently spiritual paintings. *Scorned* is a great departure from the accommodation of opposites and dark tones of *Indian Church*, with its complete absence of sky. The painting is accented generously with blue, the colour of spirituality,25 and is virtually all sky – light, vibrating, and intense – and thus dominant, but in full union with nature. The landscape is undersized, with many stunted or cut trees, and soft hills, one painted blue, which draws the land into the transcendence above, as an impossibly tall, thin tree reaches joyously upward. For Susan Crean, the painting represents an environmental statement about “devastation in the forest,”26 while Doris Shadbolt describes the effect as “a pure state of joyous identification with all nature.”27 These are astute comments, but when viewed through the lens of Carr’s mature mystic Christianity, *Scorned* becomes a profoundly Christian painting, suggestive of the Crucifixion and the Ascension of Christ. Certainly, the title echoes the life of Christ, scorned by...
mankind, but beloved of God. The foremost and tallest tree, reminiscent of the ascension of Christ, seems about to be released from earthly bonds, to ascend in majestic triumph, while the aura and rays of the sky, in corresponding descent through the mountains, embrace the entire landscape. A small dab of dark paint high in the tree hints at the crossbeam of a crucifix, which, in combination with two lesser tall trees, suggests the triple crucifixion of Calvary. The scene reflects words from *The Sadhu* which resonated with Carr: “the glorious Christ with the waves coming out of Him was seen here, there and everywhere.” As a Christian representation, *Scorned* draws the viewer into a vision of union with God through the agency of Christ, reflecting Carr’s Christocentric faith. Moreover, the association of the scene with Christ in upward thrust toward God points toward the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Davis notes that Carr’s ability to depict such vibrancy corresponds with a religious state described in *The Sadhu*: “[I]n the spiritual world which I visit in Ecstasy... [all is] active, [and] I am passive.” The earth-centered, established religion depicted in *Indian Church* has surrendered to a mystic Christianity through which Carr’s soul has “slip[ped] the surly bonds of earth.... / ...and touched the face of God.” This joyous ascent is intensely depicted in *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*.

Carr’s Journals, autobiography, and stories have made her also an important Canadian writer, and her spiritual and artistic goals, and indebtedness to Lawren Harris, are amply detailed. Various interpretations of her art certainly capture aspects of her diverse interests in nature, the environment, and native life. An awareness of her struggle to formulate and express a concept of God, however, affords the viewer an added insight into the underlying goals and inspiration of a large body of later works, only two of which have been discussed here. Carr intensely disliked being asked what her paintings “meant”. She experienced great joy, however, when her art “spoke” for her; reading a letter from an admirer who saw divinity in one of her paintings, Carr wrote: “I cried hard.... [because] somehow my soul spoke to
hers, or rather, God spoke to her through me.”31 By thus detailing her journey, Carr’s soul still fluently speaks, allowing her admirers the privilege of more fully embracing her vision and art.
Bibliography


Appendix 1:

Emily Carr’s *Indian Church* can be viewed by clicking on this link:  

Emily Carr’s *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* can be viewed by clicking on this link:  
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/EmilyCarr/en/popups/pop_large_en_VAG-42.3.15-b.html
The Spiritual and Artistic Journey of Emily Carr

Margaret Hirst


2 Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr.* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1979), 60.

3 Ibid., 11.


5 Ibid., 15.


7 Emily Carr. *Hundreds.* 6-7.


10 Ibid., 31.


13 Ibid.

14 Emily Carr. *Hundreds.* 79.

15 Ann Davis. *Logic.* 112.

16 Emily Carr. *Hundreds.* 112.

17 Ibid., 93.


21 Doris Shadbolt. *Art.* 62.

22 Mark Tobey. Quoted in Doris Shadbolt. *Art.* 64.

23 Doris Shadbolt. *Art.* 194.


27 Doris Shadbolt. *Art.* 122.

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29 Ibid., 18.
