

*The religious imagination survives  
for most people today as not just  
the primary but virtually the  
only credible instance of an  
imagination working  
in a total way.*

SUSAN SONTAG



Title: The Living Cross

Thornhill United Church, Thornhill, ON ✦ 2003b

# The Religious Imagination

J.S. Porter

If you withdraw the sky from human consciousness, the earth withers. If you remove the possibility of the transcendent in human affairs, the arts — the means by which we express what it is to be human in a particular time and place — wobble and topple. Earth needs heaven for its vision, and heaven needs earth for its articulation. Awe and reverence and mystery are necessary blood vessels in the fully formed human heart. Joy and ecstasy need a source and a direction for their fullest expression.

The visual artist's task is to renew — in a world of throwaway marketing images intended to seduce or numb — the viewer's relationship with the ancient qualities of the heart by new pictorial means. Reconnecting with the sacred means revitalizing spiritual traditions that have borne transcendent light throughout human cultures for centuries. Each pitch of praise in Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," each stanza in Edward Hirsch's "Gnostic Gospels," each new Sarah Hall window addresses the holy afresh.

Sarah Hall's religious imagination encompasses both heaven and earth. She re-imagines devotional space in each drawing she transforms into glass. Her windows call us into reverence and contemplation; they evoke wonder and mystery. Each window is specific to its site; each is a fusion of beauty and holiness. Her innovations build on a tradition that includes the rich, deep colours of Notre Dame's windows in Paris and the austere, almost monochromatic Cistercian windows of York Minster in England — the dance of light in Matisse's windows in the chapel at Vence and the dignified weight of Rouault's glasswork.

The word religious has within its Latin origin (*re-ligare*) the suggestion of rejoining or binding. Sarah Hall binds. She sees in wholes rather than in fragments, in harmonies rather than in separated units. Often each of her images and colours in a given window bears some trace of every other image and colour in the same window. Each is interpenetrated by all. She binds heaven and earth in her works of dignified lightness, of airy earthiness. She also blends the abstract and the figurative, constantly referencing the real world, though not beholden to its limitations of form.

Her colours celebrate the shades of creation; they take root in the memory. Her greens suggest the thrust of growing things, her corals and blues bring to mind the fecundity of the sea and the composure of the sky, her yellows and reds radiate the power of the life-conferring sun.

Sarah Hall re-conceptualizes devotional spaces and images in new ways. In her magnificent "Living Cross," the Rosette Window, she has the vegetative colours of life in the form of a cross, suggesting the Resurrection and Pentecost as much as the Crucifixion itself. Christ isn't bodily on the cross but his presence of growth and transformation makes itself palpable within a circular border of a variegated blue, flecked with white. She re-imagines Christ as nature, a tree, a plant, as "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" (Dylan Thomas). The crucifixion is living, and recurrent. It goes on at all times, in all places.

Born in the north of Ireland, J.S. Porter is the author of *The Thomas Merton Poems*, *Spirit Book Word: An Inquiry into Literature and Spirituality* and *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things*. In 1999, he received a Catholic Press Journalism Award. His literary achievements are acknowledged in the *Canadian Who's Who*.

Excerpted from *The Glass Art of Sarah Hall* by J.S. Porter, 2011.



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