

Religion and the Arts

by Joan Wilkinson

In 1856, George Eliot, a great novelist of the nineteenth century, wrote the following words:

'Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.'

I came across these words when studying within the Arts Faculty at the Open University some years ago now. What I liked about the OU was the way it lived up to its name – 'Open'. The courses seemed fresh and opened my mind. I appreciated the opening up of knowledge, experience and understanding of myself and the wider world, through time and especially through the study of many interdisciplinary courses which rooted the arts in the culture of the times they were produced. Bringing together art, architecture, music, literature, philosophy, social history and religion opened up new connections, influences and meanings. And yes, I did meet other people, trying to create something better for themselves and others – to give meaning to their lives.

The Arts are also a way of exercising our imagination, opening us up to the unknown, whether it be through producing, or appreciating art. This is why I feel art and human creativity are integral to religion, which over the past few years have become stronger in the Unitarian community.

I may well have been studying still had I not felt that the National Unitarian Fellowship, and the wider Unitarian movement, shared so many of the same principles and values as the OU. It seemed important to share what I had learned and what I had become over many years of studying with the OU. But most importantly I wanted to share with others exploring the religious path in an open, inclusive and welcoming way. I have never regretted that decision.

When visiting Unitarian chapels, filming their Sunday Services of Worship, I have noted what may have been bare churches in the past, devoid of any artistic expression, now transformed, from the buildings to worship itself. Poetry, reading groups, music, creative dance, mosaics, imaginative banners, some depicting the chalice, crocheting, knitting, and I could include more. Those reflecting growing and creative communities are also working to provide suitable spaces for activities which complement our religious values but require more than a worshipping space alone.

What is central to the way we produce and appreciate artistic expression is its creativity, democratization and openness. As a movement we have grown to appreciate the poetry, music and heartbeat of the natural world in a way not experienced by earlier Unitarians within their chapels. Connection and community have become important but not just within Unitarianism but in the recognition that we live in an interconnected world and our aim is to nurture that world.

I wonder, where will our imaginations go in the future, what transformations will we see? What I do feel strongly about is that imagination, openness to the unknown, and creativity will remain important for Unitarians, alongside reason, freedom and tolerance.