In Search of God Through Artists: Jim and Helen Ede's Kettle's Yard

by Hassan Vawda

Photo: Paul Allitt

The Edes' Vision of Kettle's Yard

Walking into the house at Kettle's Yard today, in your allocated timed entry slot, you'd be forgiven for not expecting a search for God. The art gallery, museum, or historic home today in Britain is perhaps not the most explicit, encouraged, or evangelical space for pursuits of seeking divinity. We look to places of worship – the churches and now diverse constellations of faith buildings across Britain – to hold this purpose for the devoted. But maybe there is another brick-and-mortar space, somewhere in-between, that can truly bring the spirit and setting to ponder the nebulous way religion is held within modernity's slipstream, and within Britain's post-war configuration. As you walk through Kettle's Yard house, pathways open to feeling something larger. Maybe it is seeing the light flashing through a window, illuminating a Miró. Maybe it is a spiralled stone arrangement on a table, as you sit in an armchair wondering its purpose. Maybe it is the vast opening in the extension of the house where functional objects, collected artefacts, and art are arranged without seeming hierarchy. Part domestic house, part art gallery and part museum – it is a shrine to something, or perhaps for someone.

For Jim and Helen Ede, Kettle's Yard was never intended to be merely a home to display a collection of art and objects amassed through Jim's work as a curator at Tate, the social connections and friendships that emerged, or the couple's travels and temporary homes across continents. In his words, it was intended to be "not an art museum or a collection of taste, but as a display of a way of life"[1]. A way of life that positioned art as a portal to beauty, and beauty as a gateway to divinity. This sense of the divine was subtly embedded within the typography of Christianity – always present yet never framed in a way that felt like preaching.

The space they created and the purpose they envisioned it serving positions the house as a response to the rapid reconfiguring of religion and the dominant ideas of secularisation that increasingly took hold in intellectual and cultural spheres in post-war Britain. This text explores Kettle's Yard as an "open house" in this context and reflects on what it can maybe teach us about creating spaces to find meaning in religion, belief, and secularism in today's world.

Post-war Britain, Christianity and Secularisation

The Ede's 1950's arrival in Cambridge and instigation of what ultimately became Kettle's Yard, occurred during the formative stages of a post-war Britain rebuilding and reformatting itself. One such reorientation was the beginning of, or at least the perception of, a rapid decline in formal religious practice, as the Church of England, once central to Britain's cultural, social and moral framework, saw slowly decreasing attendance and engagement from the population.

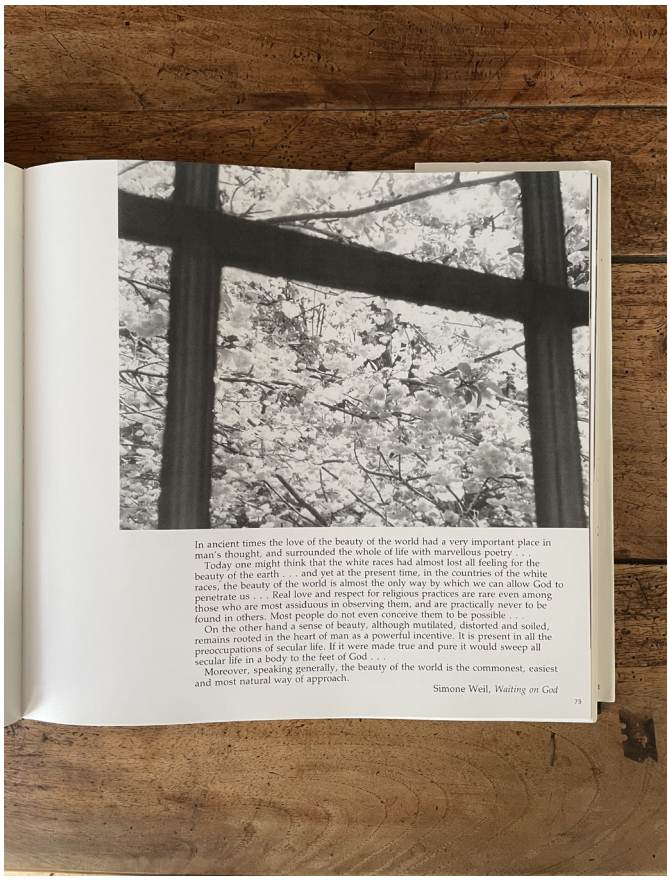
But this post-war reformatting of religion and belief was also tied to the rise of the welfare state, reshaping moral and practical forms of support that were once

the domain of the Church. The nationalisation of healthcare, education, and social services mirrored religious values of care and compassion but reframed them within a secular, state-led vision of national identity. It was Archbishop William Temple who is argued to have coined the term 'welfare state' in his speeches and texts.[2] Yet the activity that term describes is often understood to be a primarily secular enterprise.

The muffling of the Church and moral compass vis-à-vis religious adherence prompted revival movements within the Church itself too, attempting to reconfigure its role in society. Figures like John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, published works such as *Honest to God* (1963), which sought to reposition Christian theology in Britain for a sceptical age. This was a time of experimentation, renewal, and anxiety for institutional Christianity, grappling with its place in this rapidly modernising and changing society and national identity.

The cultural shifts of post-war Britain also aligned with the adherence, in many intellectual, cultural and academic spaces, to the secularisation thesis – the theory that modernity inevitably led to a retreat from religious belief and practice.[3] Technological advancements, urbanisation, and rationalism all seemed to erode the traditional authority of religion in public life. This narrative had confidence in its time, but in retrospect secularisation is seen to be far from widespread in a post-colonial Britain, with its influx of migrants from former colonies. Those arriving in the country brought ideas and practices from diverse faith communities – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, among others – into the country's religious landscape. Rather than retreating, religion in Britain became more pluralistic, less tethered to singular identities, and often dislocated from formal institutions. The secularisation thesis fails to account for this diversity, as well as the general reality that modernity did not eradicate faith, but rather transformed and multiplied the pathways one can claim a connection to religion and belief.

Kettle's Yard can be seen as a bricks-and-mortar response to these cultural and religious shifts. The attempt to construct a chapel, or a shrine to this increasing sense of intangibility in Christianity and belief in Britain at that time. Jim and Helen Ede's philosophy embraced art and beauty as pathways to a spirituality untethered from formal religious structures; yet still rooted in Christianity. For the Edes, this was not a retreat from faith but a reconfiguration of pathways to *feel* God.



In his book *A Way of Life*, Jim Ede sporadically interjects his narration with dozens of quotes – the majority from Christian theological and biblical sources, but also from other faith texts, thinkers and philosophers on belief. One such quote is from the translated works of French Philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943), in which she writes, 'The beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us.'[4] This statement encapsulates the Edes' hope for Kettle's Yard: to be a space where art and beauty could act as antidotes to the spiritual disconnection that was increasingly felt to be a feature of certain European societies. In Ede's reflections in *A Way of Life*, there is a subtle lament of the loss of a collective religious sensibility. Yet rather than attempting to recreate the past, he envisions an alternative – a home where the sacred could be encountered through beauty; and beauty encountered through the careful curation of art and other objects.

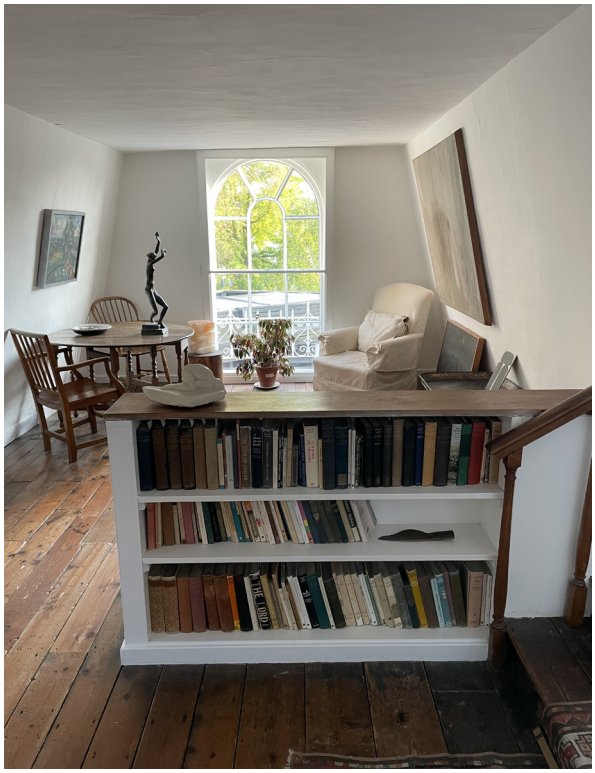
The Ede's Christian Mediation of World Beliefs

While Ede's citation of Weil was grounded in earnest belief, the perspective offered was still coded within

the racialised thinking of the time. The full quote from Weil that Ede uses reads:

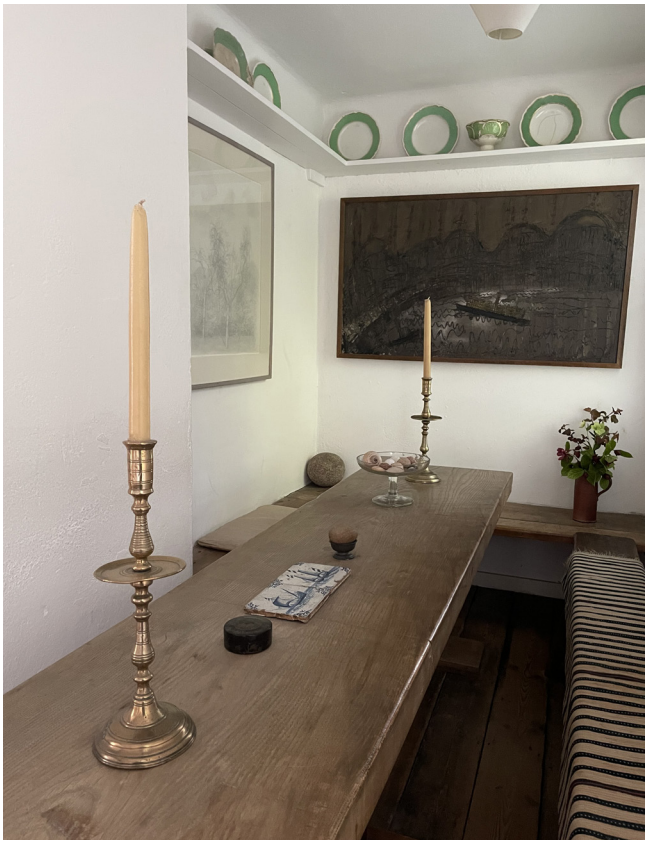
> Today one might think that the white races had almost lost all feeling for the beauty of the Earth...and yet at the present time, in the countries of the white races, the beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us.[5]

Embedded within this vision was the orientalist notion that modernity had eroded the purity of belief and divine appreciation in the West, while less modern cultures were seen as still possessing a pureness in their connection to the sacred. This worldview was common among many intellectual and artistic circles in the twentieth century, where non-Western traditions were frequently romanticised as vessels of untouched spiritual wisdom as they filtered through Western frameworks of understanding. Concepts and museum categories like Islamic Art have root in this disposition.



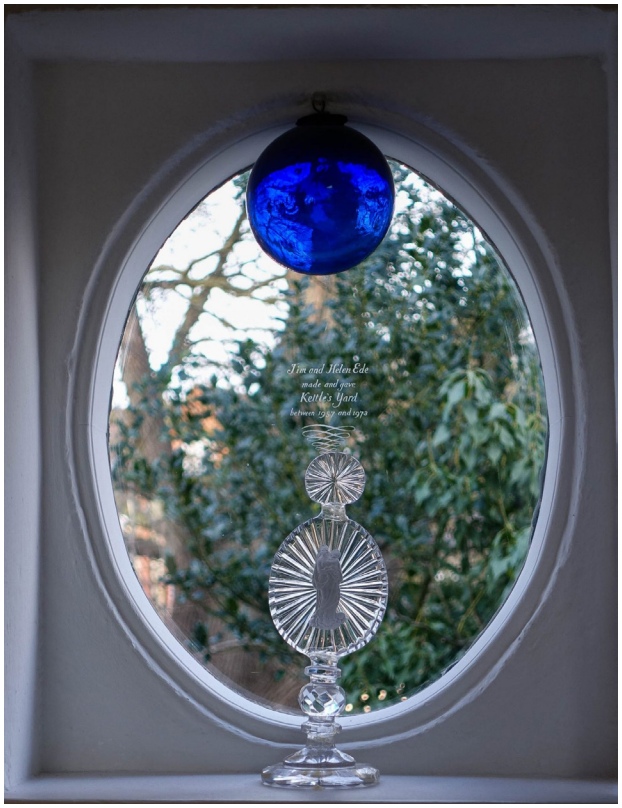
Bookshelves in The Dancer Room at Kettle's Yard

Among the Edes' personal library at Kettle's Yard, the religious texts are gathered on shelves in the Dancer room – a concise collection rooted in Christian liturgy, punctuated by sacred writings from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions. On the bottom shelf sits a book that perhaps encapsulates their Christian-leaning meditation on world beliefs: Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* from 1911. It presents a case for the spiritual sense of the inner self, drawing from mystical traditions across time and geography. Yet its focus is clear: while many paths offer insight, Underhill writes, 'the Christian atmosphere is the one in which the individual mystic has most often been able to develop his genius in a sane and fruitful way.'[6]



Candlesticks at Kettle's Yard

Similarly, while the objects and artworks in the Edes' collection refer to a range of different beliefs and cultures, they are most often present as a Christian mediation of world beliefs. Here they are structured within an aesthetic and philosophical vision that framed beauty as a bridge to the divine, informed by Ede's own cultural and religious background. However, this particularity is not explicit, and instead the rationale is presented in terms of the universal. When Ede recalls the purpose of two candle sticks acquired during their time in Morrocco, he gives meaning to them by being portals to a memory, to a feeling of hearing the Adhaan (the Islamic call to prayer) from his bedroom, a sound he described as forever with him and one that captures the faithful to prayer. This is manifest in the object, the object in the constellation of beauty in Kettle's Yard, which then leads to a divine encounter of Christian typology.

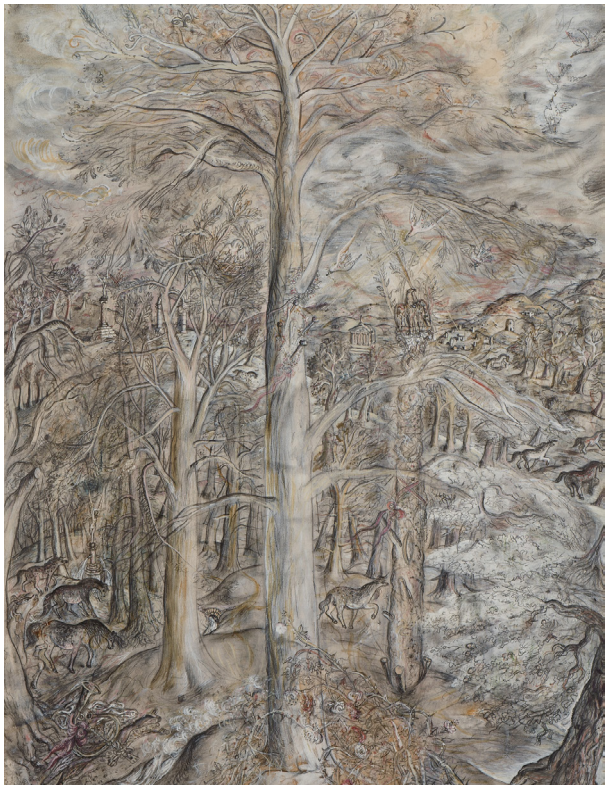


Monstrance at Kettle's Yard

Art and Objects - Gateways to Beauty, Gateways to Divinity

For Jim Ede, the relationship between art, objects, and divinity was not merely about appreciation but transformation. He believed artists played a central role in shaping new ways of accessing the divine, their work unlocking and enhancing the beauty inherent in the material world. As he wrote, 'From the material world the artist makes a new world... and this new form of expression will not only stimulate our own imagination but will actually dictate new forms to our material paraphernalia'.[7] This vision was shaped profoundly by many of the artists Ede developed relationships with, arguably none more so that his relationship with Ben and Winifred Nicholson. The Nicholsons' pursuits in abstraction, form and light were also embedded with their engagement with Christian Science: the nineteenth-century religious movement that prioritized the conscious navigation between the mortal mind and the divine mind as the place where belief can be held.

The engagement with Ben Nicholson's work in particular, and the ideas that lay behind it reinforced Ede's belief in the artist's role in revealing the sacred within the everyday. Ben Nicholson himself expressed this connection explicitly, stating, "I see it – painting and religious experience are the same thing"[8]. For Ede the modern artists he championed were not just creators of beauty but conduits for spiritual perception, offering an alternative pathway to divine experience.


David Jones, *Vexilla Regis*, 1948

Whether in the sacramental symbolism of David Jones or the meditative abstraction of Italo Valenti, the artists Ede engaged with, collected, and displayed all aligned with his vision of inner contemplation as the site where the divine might be found. Valenti's collages – *Nr. 284; Etana, Nr. 287; Giardino a mezzogiorno*, and *Nr. 286; Pietra* – were gathered and arranged as a triptych above an altar-like configuration, making explicit Ede's belief in art and artists as conduits to a divine inner disposition. It is no surprise, then, that the Trappist monk Thomas Merton's texts feature prominently in his library: 'Without any need for complicated reasoning or mental efforts or special acts, his [the contemplative one's] life is a prolonged immersion in the rivers of tranquillity that flow from God into the whole universe and draw all things back into God.'[9]

These philosophies gave structure to Ede's evolving outlook, bridging his Methodist upbringing, his experiences in the First World War, his civil service

roles at the Tate, his travels during periods of turbulent coloniality and the experiences and connections he made in this trajectory. It is this way of life that is the curatorial vision for Kettle's Yard.

A Kettle's Yard for Today?

The Edes' vision for Kettle's Yard was a response to an increasingly uncertain landscape for faith, religion, and belief in Britain. It was not an attempt to proselytize or reclaim lost religious traditions but rather to cultivate an environment where traditional spirituality could be encountered through an untraditional path. Their approach was not doctrinal but methodological, showing how art could be a conduit to the divine in an era where traditional religious structures no longer held the same authority.

When Jim and Helen Ede entrusted Kettle's Yard to the University of Cambridge, they hoped it would remain a living space rather than a static museum – a continuation of their 'way of life' rather than a collection to be observed. Today, in 2025, Britain's relationship with religion is more fragmented than ever. The 2021 census revealed that Christianity, while still the largest religious affiliation, now accounts for less than half of the population, with a growing number identifying as having no religion. Yet, belief itself has not necessarily declined; rather, it has transformed into more diffuse, individualised, and often non-institutional forms of spirituality. While the structures of traditional faith communities have weakened, there remains a persistent search for meaning, transcendence, and connection beyond the material world.

In this climate, the foundations of Kettle's Yard offer a timely lesson. The uncertainty surrounding faith in Britain is mirrored in the uncertainty of how art museums and galleries engage with religious belief today. While some institutions remain hesitant or even resistant to exploring the divine, the Edes' Kettle's Yard provides an example for rethinking these engagements.

It stands as a model for how art and artists might once again be entrusted to explore the complexities of belief in contemporary Britain. In looking back at Kettle's Yard through this lens, we might find pathways to reclaiming the potential for art to serve as a bridge to spiritual experience – not in the service of any one religion, but in the pursuit of understanding the role of belief in an increasingly secular yet spiritually searching society.

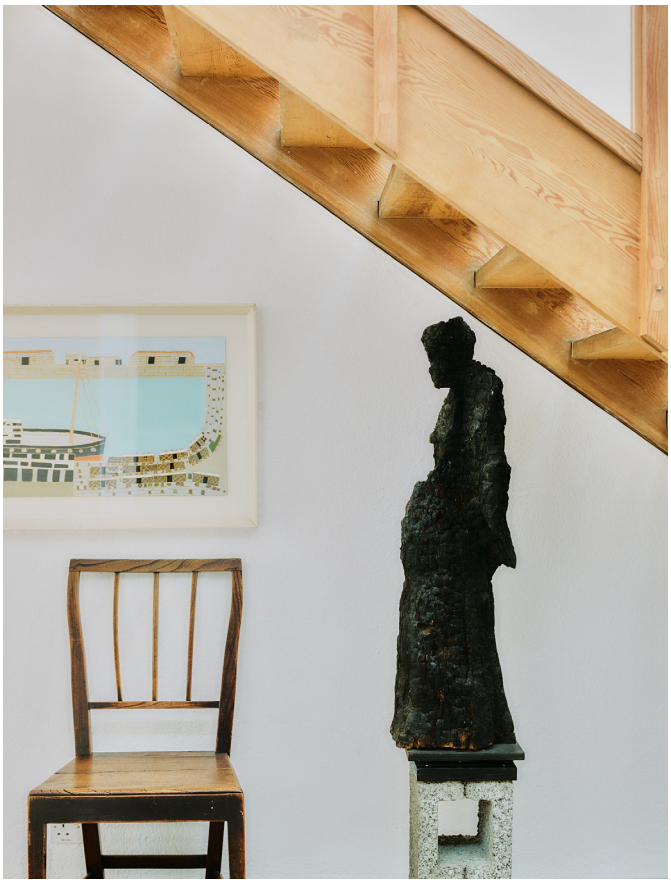


Photo: Jasper Fry

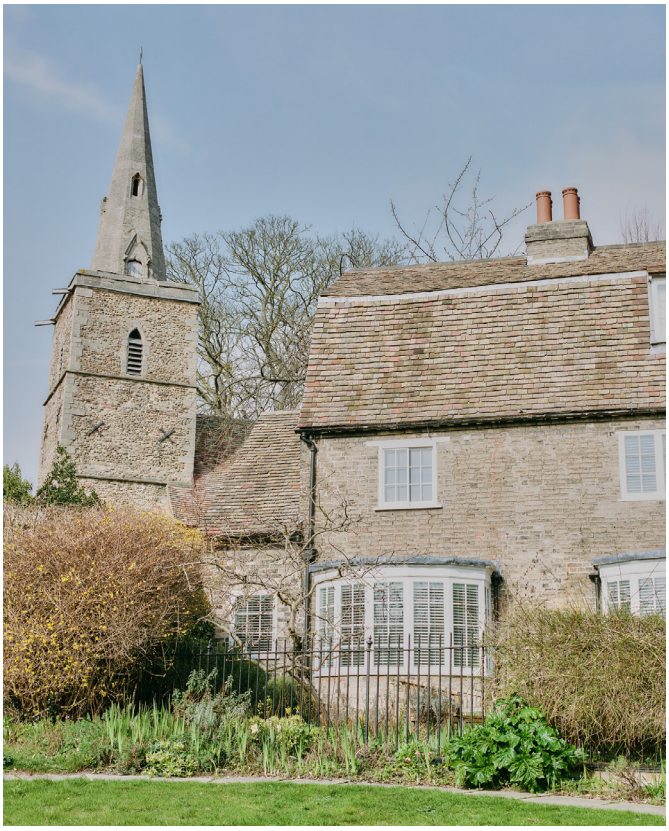


Photo: Jasper Fry

About Hassan Vawda

Hassan Vawda is a researcher, writer, and policy maker whose work explores the role of religion, belief, and spirituality in modern and contemporary art institutions. His research focuses on developing approaches to programming, audience engagement, and governance that address the harmonies, tensions, and questions that arise between art and religion. Vawda is currently a Relationship Manager at Arts Council England, where he founded and chairs the Multi-Faith Staff Network. He is also completing an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded PhD at Tate and Goldsmiths, University of London, examining how British modern and contemporary art museums engage with religion, belief, and secularism through the experiences of Muslim communities and the framing of Islam. Previously, Vawda has curated and produced projects and conducted research for institutions including Tate, INIVA, Barbican and the National Trust, as well as collaborated with faith groups, community organisations, and local authorities on cultural and heritage initiatives. He was the Lead Engagement Officer for the Mayor of London's Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm, working on contested heritage, public art, and the representation of statues and memorials across London. In 2017, he was awarded the Aziz Foundation Scholarship in Applied Anthropology and Community Development at Goldsmiths and in 2023 he was Scholar-in-Residence at the Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts, South Carolina.

NOTES

1. H.S. Ede, *A Way of Life: Kettle's Yard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp. 17-18

2. William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Penguin, 1942)

3. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967)

4. As quoted in H.S. Ede, Op. cit., p. 79

5. Ibid.

6. Evelyn Underhill *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen & Co., 1911)

7. H.S. Ede, *The Artist and the Layman* (unpublished lecture). Papers of H.S. Ede, KY/EDE/4, p.4. Cited in Elizabeth Fisher, *Kettle's Yard: Anti-Museum – H.S. Ede, modernism and the experience of art* (Doctoral thesis: Clare College, Cambridge, 2018).

8. Cited in Lucy Kent, 'Immortal mind: Christian Science and Ben Nicholson's work of the 1930s', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 157, no. 1348, July 2015, pp. 474-81.

9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Direction Books, 2007; first published 1961)
p. 266.