

*Philip Larkin's "Church Going"*

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new -  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches will fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,

And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

Written the same summer as “Toads,” “Church Going” also first appeared in Larkin’s remarkable little book *The Less Deceived*. Each of the two much-admired poems illustrates the book’s emphatic focus on relative disillusionment. The punning title “Church Going” is typically Larkinesque, implying both “attending church” and “the vanishing church.” A further irony is that Larkin’s “church goer” is a sole drop-in to whom the empty edifice is alien and puzzling, not supportive or enlightening.

“Church Going” records the spiritual longings of a man who has lost religious faith. It may be seen as representing the spiritual longings of a generation of British citizens for whom the church has ceased to be important.

That religion has lost its central position is assumed. After all, the narrator would have observed the serious decline in church attendance in England since the nineteenth century. He would also, perhaps, think of Stonehenge, a religious site whose purpose has been forgotten. The narrator does not wonder *if* churches will fall out of use. Instead, he wonders what will happen *when* they do. Understanding the rest of the poem requires the recognition of that assumption.

The discussion about what will become of the unused church buildings is, in fact, an exploration of what has caused religion to be so important to so many for so long. Uncovering those reasons also reveals the needs that must still be met in the secular world.

The church, the narrator discovers, “held unspilt/ So long and equably what since is found/ Only in separation—marriage, and birth,/ And death, and thoughts of these.” People have always turned to the church for these major life events. Weddings, baptisms, and funerals are conducted in churches (or at least by ministers), and even in an age that lacks religious faith, people need to affirm the special significance of these events. They want God to take notice of them, even if, paradoxically, they don’t believe in God. Love, birth, and death all transcend the ordinary and must be “recognised/ And robed as destinies.”

Finally, the church is a place that is “proper to grow wise in.” The secular world, the world of work, bicycling holidays, suburbs, and sheep, can do very well without the influence of the church, but “someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious.” That hunger, a spiritual longing, can be met only by going to a place where it is valued, where it has been valued for centuries.

**Analysis:** As sobriety varies from playfulness, the persona of “Church Going” varies from that of “Toads.” Yet the loneliness and dissociation from human company that one perceives in the speaker and the recognition that he contemplates an important modern dilemma tie him to the “toad-dominated” worker. One added strength of “Church Going” is its firm grounding in a concrete setting and situation, allowing Larkin’s skeptical preachment about the irrelevance of the church to occur without much offense, from the ironic opening phrase onward: “I am sure there’s nothing going on/ . . . inside.” Eventually the speaker wonders “who/ Will be the last, the very last, to seek/ This place for what it was.” Imagery of a church in ruins dominates the poem at its climax: “Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky.” (Conjured images of Tintern Abbey, or other stereotypically English ruins, here summarize the coming fate of churches in England that the speaker sees.) The balanced melancholy of the poem finds the church, though a “place . . . not worth stopping for,” to be nonetheless “A serious house on serious earth” that pulls people toward it, a place “proper to grow wise in,/ If only that so many dead lie round.” The imaginative range of the poem, moving as it does from the concrete to the abstract and universal, from “disbelief” to a future time when even that may be a forgotten human stage, gives it distinction and significance.

The theme of Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going” is the erosion of religious abutments. Larkin is largely considered to be an atheist; however, he did live in a society that was predominantly Christian, so this poem is perhaps his way of trying to understand the attraction of religion. The narrator, who appears to be an atheist also, goes to a church, wanders around, and leaves unsatisfied. He doesn’t understand the allure of churches or religion, and wonders to himself when they will go out of fashion. He then goes on to imagine what they will be turned into once they do fall out of use. In the end, the narrator comes to the realization that religion

and churches will never go out of style, because mankind has an innate need to believe in something greater than themselves.

This poem was written in 1954, and published in 1955. The rhythm of the poem is iambic tetrameter, and it has a strict rhyme of ababcadcd. The language of the poem is conversational, and the narrator poses many interrogatives (asks questions). Larkin uses a lot of religious imagery and words, some are used as they are intended, but others are used in a blasphemous way. Blasphemy is the act of expressing lack of reverence for God, but if one doesn't believe in God can what they say really be considered blasphemy? That is just something to consider while reading the poem. The title can be interpreted in a few different ways: the act of going to church, the customs that keep the church alive, visiting the church as one would a theatre, and the disappearance of the church (Philip Larkin and Christianity).

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence, (lines 1-9)

Monumental brass of Simon de Felbrigge and wife  
Margaret, St Margaret's Church, Felbrigg, Norfolk.

The narrator of this stanza is both clumsy (not tactful or subtle) and ignorant. In this stanza, the narrator talks about the present state of the church. Given that the narrator is an atheist, he makes sure that no one is around before he enters the church; he wants to be able to explore the mysticism of the church by himself. He lets the "door thud shut," which is a bit disrespectful. The church is considered to be a holy place and holy places are to be highly cherished and treated with respect by all who enter them. Perhaps, letting the "door thud shut" was his way of

seeing if the church was truly empty, because if it wasn't empty then someone would appear when they heard the noise. The narrator sounds bored when he utters: "another church;" he seems to be uninterested in the church, but if that's that case then why did he stop at the church to begin with? The narrator begins to describe the church from his clumsy and ignorant perspective. "Little books" refer to bibles or hymn books. In this context, sprawling is referring to the flowers that have been picked for Sunday service and are spread out in all different directions. The flowers are now brown, which we can infer to mean that Sunday was at least a few days ago, and that no one has come by since then to throw them out. "Brass" could be referring to the monumental brass that is commonly found in English churches. Monumental brass "is a species of engraved sepulchral memorial which in the early part of the thirteenth century began to partially take the place of three-dimensional monuments and effigies carved in stone or wood. Made of hard latten or sheet brass, let into the pavement, and thus forming no obstruction in the space required for the services of the church, they speedily came into general use, and continued to be a favorite style of sepulchral memorial for three centuries" (Wikipedia). He continues by saying "and stuff up at the holy end," which shows how truly unimpressed and ignorant he really is about the church. "The holy end" refers to the pulpit and the surrounding area. The organ is small and neat, which we can then interpret to mean that the church is small or that the church is poor; neat probably refers to it not being dusty, so there must be someone who comes there and looks after the church. The air is described as being tense (anxious), musty (moldy; stale; tasting or smelling of damp or decay), and silence so great that it cannot be ignored; I wonder if he is referring to the church itself, religion, or both. That "tense, musty" air brewed (to prepare by steeping, boiling, or fermenting) for "God knows how long." In a Christian's opinion, the narrator uses "God" in a disrespectful and blasphemous way. In respect for the church, the narrator removes his cycle-clips (devices worn below the knee to keep trouser legs from getting caught in a bicycle chain), in awkward reverence (a gesture of respect) since he has no hat. It seems like the narrator is a bit wishy-washy about his feeling towards the church; one minute he is uninterested and rude, and the next he is showing respect. He is having a Hamlet moment, to believe or not to believe that is the question.

Move forward, run my hand around the front.

From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
“Here endeth” much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. (10-18)

The narrator commands himself to “move forward;” he touches something, but still appears to feel nothing. He is still describing the church in general physical terms rather than the metaphysical ones that church is founded upon. He notices that the roof is semi-new; has it been restored or just cleaned? If it was just cleaned then it means that there is probably a caretaker hired to look after the church, but if it was restored that means that people actually care about this place and it isn't as abandoned as the narrator perceives. The clumsy narrator doesn't care enough to know whether it was cleaned or restored, because it is of no consequence to him; he doesn't believe in God or church. He steps up to the lectern (a stand to support a book for a standing reader) as if he is the priest about to give a sermon. He peruses (to read over attentively or leisurely) the “hectoring [to intimate or dominate in a blustering way] large-scale verse” (biblical verses printed in large type for reading aloud). He ends his sermon with “here endeth,” which is the traditional way to wrap-up a Bible reading in church. “Echoes” are personified, echoes cannot snigger (a sly or disrespectful laugh, especially one partly stifled). The echoes snigger at his mistake of saying “here endeth” too loudly and at the irony of what he says. In the narrator's opinion, religion is on a decline; so when he says “here endeth” he is not only talking about his sermon ending, he is also talking about religion ending; he is also saying that he will be the last person to recite those words in that church. He goes to the rear of the church and signs the guestbook; thus, taking part in religion. He “donates an Irish sixpence,” which has no value in England. Donating valueless coinage to a church can be interpreted in two ways: first, he donates to show his disrespect for religion; or second, that donating to the church has no value. An argument could be made for both positions. He shows disrespect for the church when

he mounts the pulpit and proceeds to mock church ceremony. On the other hand, why donate to the church if you don't believe in God? Even if what he donates has no value, the mere fact that he donated something could mean that he has, at least, a small amount of fear of God. He leaves the church and reflects that stopping was a waste of time.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places? (19-27)

In stanza three, the narrator starts to imagine what the churches will be turned into once their original purpose is gone. He stops at that church often, trying to figure out what the allure of that place is. Religion confuses him, and he wonders what he is missing. He envisions the churches becoming a sort of museum frequently on exhibit for those who have never been to church or those who want to relive some childhood memory. The museums would display the church artifacts: parchments, plate, and pyx, in locked glass cases, so that they can't be stolen; treating the church's belongings in this way gives them value, which in the narrator's opinion is something that the church lacks. A parchment is the skin of an animal prepared for writing on. The plate is probably referring to one of two things: first, a collections plate where people donate money or other valuable things to the church, or second, it holds the bread and wine that are brought to the altar during Sunday service. The rest of the church should be used by the "rain and sheep," because other than the artifacts the church is pretty useless. Or, instead of turning them into museums, should we regard them as unlucky places and avoid them altogether? Overall, the narrator is saying that churches are useless, but not forgotten.

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;



Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort or other will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky, (28-36)

Stanza four imagines the churches becoming places of superstition. Dubious (uncertain, feeling doubt, or undecided) women will come after dark to perform various superstitious rituals like “touching a particular stone,” picking “simples [medicinal herbs] for a cancer,” or “walking a dead one.” The power of that holy ground will remain in one form or another. Believing in superstition will end just like belief in God ended. The only things that will be left are the “grass, weedy pavement, brambles [rough prickly shrubs or vines], buttress” (a projecting structure to supports a wall), and the “sky.” The church will be overgrown with nature; what was once built from the earth will return to the earth, leaving only a few superficial remnants.

A shape less recognisable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative, (37-45)

Stanza five is a continuation of the stanza four’s thought. The narrator of this stanza is isolated and meditative, and appears to be less deceived by religion. The church becomes more and more unrecognizable each week as the trees and plants overtake the structure. The buildings original purpose has become more and more obscure as well. He ponders who will be the very last person to seek out the church for its original purpose. Will it be one of the maintenance

men, who look after the church? “Rood-lofts” are galleries, in churches, on top of carved screens separating the naves, or main halls, from the choirs, or areas where services are performed. Rood also means cross or crucifix. Or, will it be some “ruin-bibber,” who is “randy for antique”? Ruin-bibber stems from the biblical term wine-bibber, which is a person who regularly drinks alcoholic beverages. Using the definition of wine-bibber we can infer that a ruin-bibber is someone who regularly visits old ruins or churches; the ruins act like alcohol and make him drunk and randy (ill-mannered or sexually excited). Or, will it be someone who misses the smell of Christmas, no churches/religion essentially means that there is no Christmas. The term “gown-and-bands” refers to the gown and decorative collar worn by the clergymen. This visitor wants to hear the organ play Christmas music again like it did when he was a child. He also wants to smell the scent of myrrh (gum resin, from trees of eastern Africa and Arabia, used to make incense; one of the three presents given to the infant Jesus (Matthew 2 and Luke 2)) again. Or, will the last the last visitor be someone like the narrator; someone who doesn’t believe in God, but still wonders what all of the fuss is about.

Bored, uniformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation—marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thought of these—for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea  
What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here; (46-54)

In stanza six, the clumsy and ignorant narrator returns, but this time he appears to have been touched by religion and found some new sort of respect for it. He knows that the “Ghostly [means both spiritual and saint] silt” (fine earth; especially particles of such soil floating in rivers, ponds, or lakes) was said to be spread over this “cross of ground” (most churches were built in the shape of a cross); nonetheless, he tends (to show an inclination or tendency) to travel there through the scrub (a thick growth of stunted trees or shrubs) of suburbia to try and

experience the power of the church himself. The Church has stood for so long without being destroyed, so there must be something there, right? This “special shell” (i.e. churches) was built to celebrate marriages, births, and the lives of those who have died; so can religion be all that bad? The narrator shows respect for the church and religion by saying that even though he doesn’t know what this “frowsty [musty, uncared-for appearance] barn is worth,” it still “pleases him to stand in silence here.” Silence connotes comfort; he doesn’t feel the need to disrespect the church by making noise any longer, he simply enjoys his surroundings.

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round. (55-64)

Stanza seven shows the narrator as being an independent thinker; he realizes religion will always have a place in the hearts of man, because they need to believe in something that is greater than themselves. Churches will never fall out of use. Until about the nineteenth century, the word “serious” meant religious; so saying “a serious house on serious earth” means a religious house on holy ground. The church is where all of our compulsions (an irresistible persistent impulse to perform an act) are realized. The word “destiny” is given to major life events in order to explain them. Destiny is said to be God’s will; the cliché “everything happens for a reason” comes to mind here. The fear of God’s wrath holds people accountable for their actions. God gives humans guidelines to live their lives, which is something that a lot of people need. Religion teaches you “right” from “wrong;” thus, religion becomes a necessary entity to keep society running smoothly. People inherently want answers: why was I born? Why did such and such have to happen to me? Religion is able to answer these questions, which gives us a purpose. Only those who are dead know the truth about whether there is a heaven or not.