

# ANALYSIS

Philip Larkin chooses to entitle his poem “ Church Going”, making full use of pun in the title that contrasts two notions.“ The first focuses on church going people or worshippers who frequent churches to pray and would not miss Sunday Mass.

The second brings to attention a totally opposite idea of the possibility that churches as religious and spiritual institutes are going from the world or disappearing as more people are losing faith and no longer feel the need to go to churches to pray.

Right from the first line in the poem, we spot a lonely narrator who tells us about his personal experience as he visits a church. He is clearly not a worshipper as he chooses the time after prayers ended to drop in the church. When he is sure none is inside and when the church is quiet, he steps in and makes sure the door is closed so that his visit would be not interrupted. He seems to be an experienced church visitor though. He likes inspecting churches and enjoys going in to examine the interiors of churches and their contents. This church he tells us about is no different from traditional churches he has seen before. They all share almost the same furniture, the same type of seats and the same books. He notices that the flowers which were cut for the Sunday prayers are now brownish. They are sprawling dead and almost dry after they served their purpose. He notices the alter and it looks like all the alters he has seen in churches. At the holy end, there is as usual a neat musical instrument to accompany prayers and nothing in this church stands out for the visitor. He is no pilgrim and his visit is devoid of any religious purpose. However, he is impressed by the dead silence inside the church and he feels that this silence goes back to a very long time. Even though he is no pilgrim, he feels the solemnity of the place. He does not wear a hat, therefore out of respect, he takes off his cycle-clips ( something bikers wear to keep at the ankles to prevent the trousers from getting tangled in the chains of the bicycle). Obviously, churches have a spiritual effect even on those who

## *Church Going*

Philip Larkin

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

are faithless and who visit churches for purely secular purposes like the church tourist in the poem.

In the second stanza, the narrator continues to tell us about his visit of the church. He tells us about more things that capture his attention such as the font that contains the holy water and the roof which looks not new, but restored or cleaned. He is more concerned with the church as an architectural unit rather than religious one. Then he takes a look at the lectern where a Bible is open and he even reads some verses which have a strong and commanding almost bullying tone. In so doing, he throws a covert criticism against the frightening nature of the verses he reads and which confirms his scepticism further. Dissatisfied with what he reads, he closes the Bible saying more loudly “ Here endeth” or here ends. He has obviously cut his connection with religion a long time ago. The biblical verse “ Here endeth” represents his final verdict on religion; religion has ended as far as he is concerned. He feels the brief sniggering echo of his loud “ Here Endeth”, which contrasts with the “ reverence” he felt for the church in the first stanza. This church does not have anything special about it and therefore the tourist is disappointed.

On his way out, he donates money “Irish sixpence”, which gives away the location of the church as Ireland. And as he leaves the place, his mind is busy telling him that the church is not worthy stopping for and, may be, he has wasted his time visiting it. The second stanza shows the depth of the disappointment of the speaker and strengthens his faithless or at least sceptic position.

### *Church Going*

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.

## May, 10

**In the third stanza**, the poet draws our attention to his own contradictory actions. While he often thinks that the churches are not worth stopping for, he still stops to visit them. He also confesses that after each visit, he is often left perplexed and his

head is buzzing with many questions. He doesn't know why he even visits churches or rather what he is really searching for or expecting to find in the churches he visits. Is there something he hopes to discover in the churches he drops by? His wondering takes a deeper meaning when he showers himself with philosophical and even

### *Church Going*

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.

existential questions about the future states of churches. In the present, the church still stands tall as a symbol of faith and representative of God. It symbolises divinity and has heavenly authority and power. But what about the future, he asks himself? He imagines a future in which churches are no longer in use. Since there are many churches, what would happen to the buildings after people no longer go to churches and when people lose faith and pray no more inside cathedrals? In answer to this question, the narrator expects that a few of these churches, mainly cathedrals, will be kept as cultural and historical sites. These buildings will be on show regularly so people would visit them not for religious purposes. The contents of the churches like parchments ( old manuscripts) and the pyx ( containers of the bread of communions) will be placed in glass cases for show so the cathedrals will become museums showing relics of the past. He expects the rest of the buildings that served as churches will go into neglect. They will not be repaired and rain and animals will make them fall into a state of ruin. Some people may even avoid these buildings because they think them unlucky, which is another contradiction. In stead of being blessed places of sacred status, the churches are expected in the poem to be deserted and become unlucky!

**In the 4th stanza**, the speaker extends the question he asks at the end of stanza 3. After he wonders, if the churches would be avoided as unlucky places, he wonders that may be they will not be so. So churches may not be avoided as unlucky places after all. Some people still hang on what faith they have left. As an example, the speaker tells about some woman who may come to a church to collect some blessed stone.

Besides touching blessed stones, some people may come to churches to find cures for diseases that advanced medicine can't cure like cancer. Simples are herbal medicines which are thought to cure some difficult illnesses. May be someone will visit

#### *Church Going*

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.

the church graveyard in the hope of seeing a ghost 👻! Some people are interested in ghosts and spirits and they think that a church yard at night may help them meet one. It seems the poet thinks there are many reasons why churches will survive even after faith perishes. Churches as spiritual institutes have a power of some sort and people will continue to be drawn to them. Yet, he insists that churches are part of superstitions which have to go away one day. The more the world develops, the more the chance superstitions die and disappear. Then, what will remain of churches? What will happen when even disbelief disappears and people no longer consider it an issue? Again, the speaker tries to see the future and predict a very gloomy picture of the future of churches. His forecast is pessimistic in which churches will be overgrown with weeds and wild plants. A church then will be no more than a buttress covered with creepers and grass standing tall pointing to the sky. We can notice how the poet chooses to say “sky” rather than heaven because in the future he predicts churches will lose their religious status. Sky is the secular replacement of heavens because he believes that in the future the notion of divinity disappears. Churches would fall into ruin when they are no longer treated as representatives of

God and when worshippers no longer take refuge in them from the hardships of the world.

In the fifth stanza, the sceptic narrator continues to draw a very dark future of the church. He first expects the churches to be less recognisable each week. As people stop to go to pray each Sunday, the distance between people and the church grows wider and the purpose of the church becomes more and more obscure.

According to this gloomy future scenario, people would go past the churches without recognising them as such. People will start to forget why the church is built in the first place. In such a state of obscurity, neglect and forgetfulness, the poet

starts to wonder whether even in those times there are still individuals who go to the church. The narrator even gives a list of such potential future visitors. They could be among those who used to work in the church and such person knows the details and particulars of the church very well. The future visitor may be someone who likes to collect relics and enjoys visiting historical sites and ruins in search of antiques and souvenirs. The visitor can be someone who likes Christmas celebrations and sees the church as a place to celebrate Christmas best. He enjoys the Christmas decorations and music.

However, the most important type of visitor is the speaker's or his representative. This last type is going to be fully explored in the sixth stanza.

### *Church Going*

Philip Larkin

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,

This last type of visitors to which the speaker in the poem belongs is very interesting. He is neither a lover of historical sites, not a collector of antiques. He is the sceptic and unbelieving type. That visitor finds the churches boring. Such visitor does not have full information about religion and is not a Bible expert. In spite of all this, this visitor is keen on preserving churches. He does not want to see them entirely gone from the future. The reason why this visitor wants the church to remain is because it has still a cultural and social job to perform even long after its religious purpose is gone. This visitor who is bored and uninformed thinks that churches should remain if even their only purpose is to perform marriage ceremonies, record child birth, and hold funerals of the dead. The church becomes this special shell or building to host these social or cultural events of birth, marriage and death. Apart from these events, the poet says he can not see why churches should be otherwise kept. This church looks to him like a frowsty barn that serves only these purposes after its religious job is no longer needed. But that is something only the future will decide. It is something that has to wait since only the future can tell whether it will happen or not! Until the day when the churches are gone comes, the speaker says he is meanwhile pleased to visit them. He likes to stand thinking and speculating in the middle of the silent atmosphere inside the church.

### *Church Going*

Philip Larkin

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;



This is the last stanza in which the poet concludes his contemplation of the future status of churches. Regardless of all his reservations about religion, faith and the church as a spiritual institute, the poet admits that the church is a serious house that has serious purposes.

Spirituality can never be absent from human mind and the church represents a mixture of all these spiritual needs and compulsions. The church and faith are interconnected with notions of fate and destiny, which human beings cling to tightly.

Therefore, such spiritual beliefs can never be out of date. They never disappear because they can never be too old-fashioned or obsolete.

People who are serious and spiritual will never cease to exist. Such people will find themselves drawn to the church and its magnetic power will continue to pull them so that they gravitate towards the churches.

Such people will have a hunger to the serious and spiritual power of the church and therefore they will forever be church goers. And ironically, the speaker is not surprised that his theory which he puts forward in the beginning is found invalid.

In fact he himself realises the importance of faith and its representative, the church, saying that churches need to stay if only for the dead people buried in their grounds. All in all, the speaker revises his first position as he realises the importance of the church as a spiritual and morbid grounds where birth and death meet. It's also the place that oversees life, marriage and hosts the human beings as their last destination.

### *Church Going*

Philip Larkin

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.