

## 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 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?

Pyx: container in which the wafers for the Eucharist are kept

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?

Simples: herbs used for medicinal purposes

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,

A shape less recognizable 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 whom 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 recognised, 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.

**Note:** Larkin wanted it to be quite clear that this poem was not religious. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, he said, ‘I was a bit irritated by an American who insisted to me that it was a religious poem. It isn’t religious at all. Religion surely means that the affairs of this world are under divine surveillance, and so on, and I go to some pains to point out that I don’t bother about that sort of thing, that I’m deliberately ignorant of it: ‘  
“Up at the holy end”, for instance.’

The poem begins with Larkin standing outside the church, waiting for a short while to ensure that he will not be interrupting a service if he enters. Note the way in which the first line flows into the second, pausing only when Larkin goes into the church. This mirrors the poet’s walking inside and then stopping. Note also the onomatopoeic ‘thud shut’ to describe the closing of the church door.

Once inside, he appears underwhelmed by what he sees. His boredom is clear in the dismissive tone: ‘some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end’. The description of the church moves from the general to the more specific. We learn first of the ‘matting, seats and stone’ but then Larkin begins to take in more details: the flowers and the books which are ‘brownish now’.

Despite his lack of engagement with the church, Larkin nonetheless begins to be affected by the atmosphere. Even he cannot ignore the silence, and if he were wearing a hat, he would take it off as a mark of respect. Being hatless, he instead removes his bicycle clips. There is a gentle humour in this stanza as Larkin says that the silence was ‘Brewed God knows how long’. In this setting, it could be said that God does know how long ago this silence began, but it is also Larkin’s way of showing his indifference.

This indifference is picked up again in the second stanza when Larkin notices the condition of the roof. It looks ‘almost new’, suggesting that it has been taken care of. Clearly this church is important to its congregation and they are maintaining it. Larkin, however, is unimpressed and seems to want to distance himself from it: ‘Someone would know: I don’t’. He moves to the lectern and reads a few words aloud. He hears his own mocking tone echoed back to him when the echoes ‘snigger briefly’ and is a little taken aback. He did not mean to be so loud and feels self-conscious.

Interestingly, Larkin signs the visitors’ book, but as if to remove any significance from that gesture he puts an Irish sixpence in the box. This valueless coin seems appropriate as he

sees no value in the church and says it was ‘not worth stopping for’.

Larkin reflects that he often stops at churches, and ends up feeling ‘at a loss’ each time. However, he is still drawn to them and wonders why this is so.

In this stanza, Larkin shows that he knows more about churches than he let on in the first stanza. There he talked about ‘brass and stuff’ and ‘the holy end’ in a dismissive tone, but now he talks about ‘parchment, plate and pyx’. The casual language in the first stanza, therefore, was intended to show indifference rather than ignorance. Now he is more engaged, and uses the word ‘we’ when wondering what will happen when churches ‘fall completely out of use’. He seems fully confident that this will happen in time. What then will happen the empty buildings? Some may be preserved but others will fall to ruin. Again, there is gentle humour in the suggestion that they will be let ‘rent-free to rain and sheep’.

It is worth remembering at this stage that ‘Church Going’ was written in 1954, and that the idea of churches falling out of use would have been far more controversial then than it would be today. Is Larkin’s prophecy coming true to an extent?

Larkin wonders if churches will come to be viewed as ‘unlucky places’ and may be visited by people moved by superstition rather than religious belief. Some may consider them haunted. Larkin is unimpressed by this imagined future, as is suggested by the use of the word ‘dubious’ to describe the superstitious women who may come seeking a cure.

There is one fact of which Larkin is certain, and that is that eventually all belief systems – whether based on religion or superstition- will fade and the churches will fall into ruin. All that will remain is ‘Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky’. This list reminds us of Larkin’s listing the features of the church and its contents when he first entered, and brings that earlier image to mind again. Now we contrast it with the crumbling remains Larkin describes, and the starkness of this image presents us with a bleak vision of the imagined future.

In the last three stanzas of the poem, Larkin uses long sentences and a lack of clear endings or breaks between the stanzas to show how preoccupied he is with his current train of thought. The poem now has a far more philosophical feel to it than it did in the opening stanzas.

As the church deteriorates, it will become less recognisable and its purpose will fade from

people's memory. (Think of the way we still struggle to interpret ancient sacred sites such as Newgrange or the Lascaux caves.)

Larkin wonders who will be the very last person to come to this place because they understand its significance. The possible characters are described in dismissive terms. One is 'one of the crew' who are interested in architecture, another hungers for anything that is antique: 'ruin bibber', while a third yearns to be part of the ceremonies that once took place here. Perhaps it might be someone like Larkin himself, a person who has some spare time and is aware of the importance of such places once held in the lives of many people.

The final stanza is more solemn than those that came before. The repetition of the word 'serious' in the first line sets the tone. The language changes from a rather conversational tone to a more formal register: 'blent', 'robed', 'gravitating'.

Larkin now admits that although churches are just an empty shell to him, they have played an important role in the lives of their congregations. Churches give meaning to the key moments in life – birth, marriage and death – and link them through ceremonies, thereby giving a meaning and coherence to the participants' lives. Without the church, such events would not be linked and would exist only in separation from one another. Despite Larkin's lack of interest in religion, he nonetheless acknowledges that it has given meaning and consistency to people's lives and has treated all equally. Through the church, human 'compulsions' are acknowledged as important and are given the status of destinies. The church takes people and their paths through life seriously. There is a part of most people that longs to be treated with such seriousness and respect: 'that much can never be obsolete'. Without the church, people will be somewhat adrift in the world and may well 'gravitate' to this place where life was once given meaning.

At the end of the poem, Larkin accepts that we will always need something like churches to give meaning to our lives. It will draw people to it, even in its ruined state. They will recognise the role it played in the lives of others and will see it as a sacred place, even if they do not believe the same things as those who originally worshipped there. God and religion represent the ideal 'happy ending' that everyone would like to believe exists. However, it is important to note that Larkin, while he accepts that very human desire, does not believe in God himself. The poem does not offer any easy consolation.

Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with Ian Hamilton', *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews* (London: Faber, 2001)