

**Redeeming Religious Faith and Penetrating Divinely Bond:  
A Thematic Study of Philip Larkin's Church Going**

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**Abstract:**

*Church Going*, a poem by Philip Larkin depicts the essentiality of religious in our lives. The paper depicts the situation of a modern man who is least bothered about religious practices. The starking theme of the poem is to establish faith in God who will guide us when we are not on the right path. The essence of the poem is to contextualize the present condition of the church in our lives by comparing it with the psyche of a modern man who is skeptical about the importance of church in our lives.

Keywords: faith, love, truth, religion, existentialism.

Philip Arthur Larkin was born on August 9, 1922, in Coventry. He was the second child, and only son, of Sydney and Eva Larkin. Sydney Larkin was City Treasurer between the years 1922-44. Larkin's sister, some ten years his senior, was called Catherine, but was known as Kitty. He attended the City's King Henry VIII School between 1930 and 1940, and made regular

contributions to the school magazine, *The Coventrian*, which, between 1939 and 1940, he also helped to edit.

After leaving King Henry VIII, he went to St. John's College, Oxford, and despite the war (Larkin had failed his army medical because of his poor eyesight), was able to complete his degree without interruption, graduating in 1943 with First Class Honours in English. His closest friends at Oxford were Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery. He worked in libraries his entire life, first in Shropshire and Leicester, and then at Queen's College in Belfast, and finally as librarian at the University of Hull.

His father, a self-made man who had risen to be Coventry City Treasurer, was a singular individual, 'nihilistically disillusioned in middle age', who combined a love of literature with an enthusiasm for Nazism, and had attended two Nuremberg Rallies during the mid-'30s. He introduced his son to the works of Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, James Joyce, and above all D.H.Lawrence. His mother was a nervous and passive woman, "a kind of defective mechanism. Her ideal is 'to collapse' and to be taken care of," dominated by her husband. Larkin's early childhood was in some respects unusual: he was educated at home until the age of eight by his mother and sister, neither friends nor relatives ever visited the family home, and he developed a stammer. Nonetheless, when he joined Coventry's King Henry VIII Junior School he fitted in immediately and made close, long-standing friendships, such as those with James "Jim" Sutton, Colin Gunner and Noel "Josh" Hughes.

From his mid-teens Larkin "wrote ceaselessly", producing both poetry, initially modelled on Eliot and W. H. Auden, and fiction: he wrote five full-length novels, each of which he

destroyed shortly after completion. While he was at Oxford University he had a poem published for the first time: "Ultimatum" in *The Listener*. Around this time he developed a pseudonymous alter ego for his prose, Brunette Coleman.

In addition to collections of poetry, Larkin published two novels—*Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947)—as well as criticism, essays, and reviews of jazz music. The latter were collected in two volumes: *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1968* (1970; 1985) and *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (1984). He was one of post-war England's most famous poets, and was commonly referred to as "England's other Poet Laureate" until his death in 1985. Indeed, when the position of laureate became vacant in 1984, many poets and critics favored Larkin's appointment, but Larkin preferred to avoid the limelight.

Larkin achieved acclaim on the strength of an extremely small body of work—just over one hundred pages of poetry in four slender volumes that appeared at almost decade-long intervals. These collections, especially *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974).

Larkin received many awards in recognition of his writing, especially in his later years. In 1975 he was awarded the CBE, and in 1976 was given the German Shakespeare-Preis. He chaired the Booker Prize Panel in 1977, was made a Companion of Literature in 1978, and served on the Literature Panel of the Arts between 1980 and 1982. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the Library Association in 1980. In 1982 the University of Hull made him a Professor.

In 1984 he received an honorary D.Litt. from Oxford University, and was elected to the Board of the British Library. In December of 1984 he was offered the chance to succeed Sir John Betjeman as Poet Laureate but declined, being unwilling to accept the high public profile and associated media attention of the position.

Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* (1954) was published in his collection *The Less Deceived*. The poem *Church Going* depicts the significance and value of church in the present era. It deals with the confusion and doubtful nature of the poet who is not sure of the importance of the church in the present time and what effect it will have in the future on people. Church is a place where one finds peace and solace, comfort and happiness and above all a space where one remains in touch with God. But the skeptical nature of the poem raises the question of the existence of the church in society.

The poet tries to go inside the church when nothing is going on inside. He is inquisitive about why people go to church. This shows the condition of a modern man who doesn't care to worship and pray. For him worldly affairs are more important than praying and inculcating good habits which one could only imbibe if he goes to a religious place or have faith in God. He goes inside only to have a tour of the church without much giving importance of offering prayer:

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; sprawling of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff.

The poet knows the purpose of church but he didn't give much attention to what should be done inside the church instead kept on moving here and there and exploring new things of a

church. To him church has become like a tourist place where everything is attracting him just like a tourist explore a new place. He is enjoying himself inside the church by touching the stuff inside the church and playing like a child with the echo when he pronounces something:

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
Mounting the lectern, I pursue 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

The poet didn't want to stop in the church as he considered the place not worth to stay back but the curious thing is that he still visits the church often in order to satisfy himself or deceive himself. He often asks the question to himself about the significance of the church in the lives of the people. He is not sure of the importance of the same. I think that it should be turned into museums. It should be the case because churches today have lost the importance and their primary goal to bring people back on the right path. Instead it has become a place for the religious propaganda which is ruining the lives of the people. Museum enlightens us and teaches us the true importance of a place and the true significance of the things placed over there. Above all museum gives the 'correct' information of a particular place. People will visit the church and will wonder about the true importance of the church of the past days:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches will fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into.

With church being vanished the aroma of religious integrity will also disappear and superstitions and evil-mindedness will conquer the whole world. However, people are losing faith in religious ceremonies due to their involvement in worldly affairs. And with the demolition

of the church the world will come to a complete halt. Morality, goodness, ethics, faith, compassion and above all love would be lost for each other. The poet wonders who will be the last one to visit the church originally for the purpose of worship, not those who come in search for antiques, the researchers, the one who is habitual to visit the church on Christmas as a festival, but the one who really comes for religious purposes. We should not forget the real essence of the church where people gather to celebrate their happiness, grief and above all to offer prayer to the almighty:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek

Initially a question was raised by the poet of the importance of church in one's life. It is not about what important church brings in one's life, rather it is a medium to connect to the God which is very much essential in our lives. We cannot escape from the rudiments of religion. Even though we are not interested in going to religious place it doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. Larkin effectively presented the unavoidable bond between God and man in his poem *Church Going*.

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