

Philip larkin's Agnosticism in "Church Going"

Arunava Roy^{1,2,3*}

¹English Honours (1st Class 2nd), University of Kalyani, Nadia

²English Ma (1st Class), Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

³UGC Net Qualified (Eligible for Assistant Professor)

DOI: [10.36348/sijll.2023.v06i08.003](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2023.v06i08.003)

| Received: 12.07.2023 | Accepted: 19.08.2023 | Published: 23.08.2023

*Corresponding author: Arunava Roy

English Honours (1st Class 2nd), University of Kalyani, Nadia

Abstract

'Church Going' by Philip Larkin, the romantic recluse is not a religious poem, as it may appear from the title, but a poem about Going to Church. The poem expresses a view that faith and belief in religion must die but that the spirit of tradition represented by the English Church can't come to an end. Larkin's agnosticism becomes more understandable if we look at this poem in the National and the International context of the post-world-war years. The poem refers both to the erosion of the Church as an Institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance. The poet's tone is pessimistic and somewhat sceptic about the bleak future of the Church. But he is quite confident of the lasting mystic spiritual significance of the Church, "Serious house on serious earth" for its devotees. Larkin's dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place. The loss of religious faith and the fear of death are counteracted by an unshakable faith in individual human potential. So, the poem is both reverent and irreverent that indicate poet's dual split personality, skepticism, agnosticism.

Keywords: Atheist, Cynical, Erosion, Orthodox, Pessimistic, Skepticism.

Copyright © 2023 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin (1922—1985), an important poet of the post-war decades, specially the 1950s and 1960s, and a significant member of the group of writers known as "the Movement" was two men in one – the one, serious, cynical and depressed, the other fun-loving, serene and cheerful. In the one mood, he could be unbearably harsh and hurting, in the other, delightfully kind and courteous. The overall mood of Larkin's poetry is grim and pessimistic. Larkin Critic Bernard avers "Larkin's mood is frequently bleak as sad or at least autumnal". Olive James has described him as "the poet of the void". Larkin was a strange mixture of sublimity and slime. Larkin's most celebrated volume, '*The Whitsun Weddings*' (1964) carried forward the trend and manners of *The Less Deceived* (1955) and added to his reputation as a poet. The brilliant title poem, '*The Whitsun Weddings*' is the best of the collection and underlines its overriding theme, love and marriage.

Larkin's Agnosticism

'Church Going' by Philip Larkin, the romantic recluse is not a religious poem, as it may appear from the title, but a poem about Going to Church. The poem expresses a view that faith and belief in religion must

die but that the spirit of tradition represented by the English Church can't come to an end. Larkin's agnosticism becomes more understandable if we look at this poem in the National and the International context of the post-world-war years. The poem refers both to *the erosion of the Church as an Institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance*. The poet was in Belfast—the poet visited to a deserted country side Church becomes the occasion of writing it.

Once he is sure that nothing is going on in the Church and that it is empty, he steps inside, letting the door shut with a thudding sound. He observes its floor mating, seats and sacred stone (may be the sculptor/inscribed incarnation of virgin Mary), small sized prayer books, smatterings of flowers plucked on Sunday but now withered, a musical instrument and some such stuff at the *sanctum sanctorum* a 'small neat organ' i.e. piano-all enveloped in a tense, stale, striking silence, prevailing God alone knows for how long of course the heavy ambience of the Church and the profundity of silence, all around, are also subtly suggested here. Hatless, he takes off his cycle-clips in reluctant respect. He moves forward and runs his hand around the vessel containing the holy water. Then he speculates the roof. He is not sure, whether it is cleaned

or renovated. Someone more Church-minded orthodox might tell. Mounting the lectern, he peruses few sermonizing verses and utters 'Here ended' at the close of his perusal much louder than he really meant to. [This also recalls the feeling of relief that the audience feels when the priest pronounces that to signify the ending]. The echoes sneer briefly (Philip's inner cynical reflection). Back at the door he signs the visitor's book, donates an Irish six pence and thinks that the place was not worth stopping for. Deeply reflective ironical note is heard in the last line of the 2nd stanza.

The poet did enter the church ceasing his sceptic mind; in fact, he often does and always end, perplexed much in the same manner, wondering what to look for, wondering too, when the church go completely out of uses because of loss of faith in them, what will happen to them? The poet goes to stipulate further that some big cathedrals may, perhaps, only stand as the relics of a glorious past. All the necessary equipment of the church may be kept locked as mere show-pieces.

***"A Few Cathedrals Chronically One Show,
There Parchment, Plate and Pyx in Locked Cases,"***

The church premises, turned desolated will be occasional, free shelters against rain and the grazing ground of the cattle. The poet appends that the upcoming new generation will scarcely visit the churches. Some superstitious dogmatic questionable women may be found to haunt in the ruined churches to collect medicinal herbs as panacea for fatal diseases. Some superstitious may also go there to see the ghost of their dead. Some supernatural the like, apparently by chance by design. The poet's tone here is pessimistic and somewhat sceptic. He reflects here sadly on the bleak future of the church.

Now the agnostic poet farther asks what will happen to the churches when superstition like belief also has gone. And when that occurs and the churches are unattended, naturally the church turns into ruined desolate places. Grasses, hawthorns and bushes will cover the premises and the pavements, the support of the building will crumble opening to the sky. The church will become a place more and more unidentifiable. The poet in his sadistic observation speculates that the last visitors to the ruined and desolate churches may be the researchers in antiquity that inspect and take notes, may be a ritualistic drunk in Christian dogmas, looking for things associated with prayer, like puffy gown-and-bands, organ-pipes and myrrh. Or, he may be like poet's persona, sceptic not atheist, rational individual, knowing the final remains of the Christian churches gone, yet coming to that piece of ground through suburbs laden with shrubs because the church in it held securely and steadily for so long a time what since centuries is found only in absence, that is, marriage, and birth, and death, and thoughts of death, for which the human body was made. For, though he

has no idea of what that equipped, musty church is worth, it pleases him to stand in silence there.

In the concluding portion of the poem Philip Larkin, the poet of dual personality presents completely a new view about the future of the church. In the previous stanza, the poet has presented a bleak future of Christian churches in the days to come. Now he asserts that a church is a 'serious house on serious earth' in whose air blinded with many smells all our basic stages of life (birth, marriage and death) are recognized, and called as decrees of God. And that much status of the church for seriousness can never become out of use, since someone will always be needing to satisfy a desire in him to be wiser or more serious, and he will be coming to this place in the hope and belief that such desire can be fulfilled here, for he once heard that it was a fit place to become wise, if for no reason than this that many dead lie buried in the churchyard, and death and thought about it give wisdom. The church bears an atmosphere that inspires spiritual thoughts and feelings and dwells on man's fortunes and destinies. He is quite confident of the lasting mystic spiritual significance of the church for its devotees. It is really ironical that Larkin does not write on the deeper religious functions of the church. He deliberates on its ritualistic side, but not on God or mortality. Religion has four aspects: belief in God, belief in a certain code of moral conduct, mythology and ritualism. Larkin focuses on the last aspect. Therefore, the poem is churchy but not religious, as he already quoted, 'the poem is about going to church, not religion'.

"The minor registrar of disappointment (James Wood) Philip Larkin's masterpiece "Church Going" is the longest and the most admiring poem in "The Less Deceived" – the poet speaker discusses the futility and the utility of Going to Church. The discussion is half-mocking and half-serious. The poem expresses a view that faith and belief in religion must die but that the spirit of tradition represented by the English church cannot come to an end. Larkin's agnosticism becomes more understandable if we look at this poem in the national and the international context of the post-war-years. The poem refers both to the erosion of the church as an Institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance. The speaker-poet scoffs at church going, the church and its equipment, but concludes that people would continue visiting churches even after they have ceased to be places of worship and people have lost their faith in God. They may do so because they are superstitious, or are seeking their respective 'destinies', or simply want to gain wisdom, spiritual edification in the churchyard. In this monologue Larkin gives the impression of being an agnostic, if not a down weight atheist. The upshot of the whole argument in the poem is that churches would continue to provide some sort of emotional or spiritual solace to people even if the current belief in God and in future life has collapsed and given way to skepticism.

But in the 2nd stanza we find confusion in the poet's mind—

**“ ..The Place was not worth Stopping For”
Yet Stop I Did: In Fact, I Often Do”**

But at the very end of the poem the poet asserts that the church bears an ambience that inspires spiritual thoughts and feelings and its serious functions are regulation of birth, marriage and death, and the inculcation of wisdom. Andrew Motion says that the speaker in ‘Church Going’ appears as an interloper or intruder, slightly goofy or silly, disrespectful, bored and uninformed. He introduces religion of his own terms, speaking as someone without faith, and as someone trying to recover the comfort which faith used to provide. He says no indication of feeling the spiritual gap created by the general loss of faith in God; only structures would remain though the glow of sanctity may have faded. But it still pleases the poet to “stand in silence here”. Larkin's dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place. The loss of religious faith and the fear of death are counteracted by an unshakable faith in individual human potential. So, the poem is both reverent and irreverent— that indicate poet's dual split personality, skepticism, agnosticism. This demythologizing theme (deliberate reduction of belief and ritual) springs clearly Larkin's dislike in common mythy-kitty.

About The Author

ARUNAVA ROY, an infinitesimal devotee of English Literature from Murshidabad, West Bengal, India has graduated English Hons securing 1st class 2nd from University of Kalyani, Nadia. He has completed his Masters in English from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. In his treasures of excellence “UGC NET” (National Eligibility Test for Assistant Professorship) adorns in its splendor. To achieve the apex of success, he is on the way of seeking the guidance of Almighty.

To relish the nectar of Literature, he has plunged into the deep delve of it. He has published nine (9) research articles in reputed National and International Journals. His joy knew no bound when an American Research Journal was published focusing on Samuel Johnson's famous poetry “London”.

Take A Glance:

<https://www.arjonline.org/papers/arjel/v8-i1/25.pdf>
(AMERICAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, ISSN (Online)- 2378-9026, Volume 8, Issue 1, 125-127 Pages, DOI: 10.21694/2378-9026.22025)

TOPIC: SAMUEL JOHNSON'S LONDON AS A SATIRE

Arunava's Research interest sprawls towards Indian Literature as well as British Literature. He has published a book (Memoir)— **“DOWN THE MEMORY LANE”** from a reputed publisher, Chennai, Tamil Nadu—Xpress Publishing. [ISBN—978-1-63633-118-8] in 2021.

A collection of memories—sailing to the smiling land of childhood's passing days. A young boy of mediocre talent, protagonist Tarun's view on conventional educational system, his inflexible love towards English literature, his awkward experience of witnessing men's superstitious belief and its full-fledged practice, sharp observation over the erosion of familial relationship, visual perspective on social mobility, realization about hurdles and hindrances on the way to achieve success, his critical overview between love and infatuation, mere ostentation and modern people's indecisiveness, hesitance and snobbery, his protest against the discrimination between rich and poor; his focus on the triumph of humanity, his temperament of digesting societal carping tongue, his assertion about the role of a caring, affectionate mother, his wandering in the world of fantasy, immense influence of Rabindranath Tagore-his guiding spirit and ultimately his belief on Almighty—are recapitulated in this book in the first person narrative technique.

Now he intends to publish a poetry collection depending upon the viewless wings of poesy. To be the wanderer of smiling Land of Literature is his aspiration.

REFERENCES

1. http://cola.calpoly.edu/~pmarchba/TEXTS/POETR Y/P_Larkin/1955_ChurchGoing.pdf
2. Tandon, B. G: (2006). “Philip Larkin: A critical Review of selected poems”, New Delhi.
3. Gilroy, J. (2012). “Reading Philip Larkin: selected poems”, Literature Insights, Ebooks.co.uk; illustrated edition, (16).
4. Calvin, (1974). Bedient: Eight Contemporary Poets, Oxford: London.