



Larkin's "Church Going" carefully balances agnostic dissent with an insistence on saving the spirit of tradition which reflects secular Anglicanism

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Abstract— *Post-world war II England saw a gradual decline in attendance in the churches which reflects a slowdown in overall religious belief of the masses. They rather seemed to be interested in church buildings as they provided them an opportunity to find meaning of their lives and keep their spirit of tradition alive however they were indifferent towards religion as a governing body. Larkin's "Church Going" (1954), which is his most celebrated religious poem perfectly delineates the mood of the time and portrays the relationship between religion and the then society. The narrator, who is an atheist, describes himself as an "Anglican agnostic" which indicates he is Larkin himself. He attempts to combine agnostic dissent with an effort of preserving tradition. This is a reflection of the ideology of secular Anglicanism wherein the importance of Church remains but that of God seems diminishing. This paper aims to explore these themes and understand Larkin's perspective of religion in the twentieth century English society.*

Keywords— *Anglicanism, Church Going, Larkin, secular, post world-war England.*

"Church Going" (1954) is a unique and ambiguous poem written by Philip Larkin. It is a monologue in which the speaker discusses the futility as well as utility of religion and the institution of church. A poem of seven stanzas, each with nine iambic pentameters, it expresses a view that faith and belief in religion must minimize but that the spirit of tradition represented by the English church must exist. The poet speculates the condition of the church when it might fall out of use however these speculations makes him realise that the fear of death and loss of religious belief are counter-acted by an unshakable faith in human and individual potential. Hence, in this poem, Larkin attempts to balance his agnostic dissent with a belief in the spirit of tradition, which together reflects secular Anglicanism.

The poem begins with the narrator being an atheist but gradually he realizes that traditions cannot die and belief in ideals like religion and faith are necessary for a society to function. The title of the poem is itself ambiguous. R.N Parkinson, in the essay 'To keep our metaphysics warm, a study of Church Going', writes that the connotations of the title convey "the unapprehended complication of the

visitor's attitude". Firstly, it implies a regular attendance at the church. Secondly, it suggests "mere good manners of well-being habit which at once keep the church going and prevent it from going altogether". Finally, it indicates the ideals of the church and states that its authority is 'going' or fading from view. Hence, the title itself sets the contradictory tone of the poem.

Larkin begins the poem by writing "once I am sure there's nothing going on, I step inside" which reflects the idea that nothing of great importance takes place in the church and represents the gradual fall of the institution. After explaining the premises of the church, he begins to meditate on its future, whether it will continue to have significance in the coming times. The poet wonders if the last person to visit the place would be "some ruin bibber, randy for antique, or Christmas addict, counting on a whiff of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?" These people, whom the poet sees the possible contender of being the last people to visit the church, are the ones whose relationship with the church is superficial and not spiritual. Further, Larkin links the church with the notion of birth,

marriage and death as all the ceremonies related to these events take place within it hence it is symbolic of all of them. The poet contemplates that in a church-less future, not only these major life events will become meaningless but also the act of thinking about them might become fruitless, producing only 'separation'.

Larkin ends the poem on a contrasting note by praising the church to be a "serious house" built on "serious Earth" as a place that takes our natural compulsions and 'robes' them in religious ceremonies. He compares the church to a place where all human desires and drives blend together and meet. The speaker seems to recognise the serious work done by the church and religion which gave purpose and structure to experiences of women. It provides a meaning to people's life. This desire for deeper meaning, the poet concludes, will always make someone "gravitate" towards the ground of the church.

'Church Going' seems to be about something that is fading from view, something Larkin sees as having importance, despite the fact that he questions the true nature of Christianity as a religion. While he believes that in the contemporary world the significance of the church has declined however he still insists on its establishment to sustain in order for the people to have faith in tradition and belief in life. The tone of the poem expresses doubts about the validity of atheism either as a creed or as an attitude. Parkinson's essay states "The changing tone and attitudes of the personae of the poem constitute one of its greatest strengths, the changes show the poet feeling away stock attitudes from the surface of his character's mind until he really faces the underlying questions by stating and implying as many meanings as he can of the concept of church on as many levels as possible, before coming to the final and not altogether welcome recognition that church used to embody man's sense of deeply felt needs and compulsions."

The poem embodies Larkin's personal beliefs since he was also an agnostic person. He does not seem to be interested in the spiritual aspect of the church but on the everyday material reality of it. When he claims that "the roof looks almost new, cleaned or restored. Someone would know I don't", it suggests the poet's overall attitude towards religion and reflects that he does not know its significance but someone else would. There lies a conflict in his mind regarding the aspects of religion while considering the church to be a worthless place; the poet often visits the place. He values the place as an institution but does not seem to value the God which resides inside it. In his another poem "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb" (1943), he reviews the church as a place that "plants deeper than the roots" and admits "I have worshipped that

whispering self however the worship here is of the place and not the divine. Not abiding by the conventional, but nostalgic for the Church as an embodiment of tradition and community, he described himself in a letter to his mother as "an agnostic, I suppose, but an Anglican agnostic, of course". He being an Anglican agnostic hints towards a liberal ideology of the tradition. 'Church Going' as a poem too reflects secular Anglicanism while talking about the insignificance of religion.

Anglicanism as a tradition within Christianity comprises of the Church of England and other churches which are historically connected to it or practice similar beliefs. The Anglican faith is considered as reformed Catholicism, a combination of the Catholic and Protestant faiths. The 'Book of Common Prayer' (1549) is believed to be the foundational prayer book of Anglicanism. The tradition believes that the Bible contains the core of all Christian faith and thought and that God is manifested in three "persons", the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The tradition of Anglicanism gives authority to the Church to perform rites and ceremonies and settle controversies of faith. They believe that their beliefs, practices and authority derive from an integration of the Scripture (the Holy Bible) and Reason (the practices and beliefs of the historical church). These pillars of this tradition demonstrate a balance in the Anglican approach to faith, contrasting it with Roman Catholic and the Protestant doctrines.

Anglicanism is closer to Catholicism than Protestantism since it still believes in God's Church and has bishops as Church leaders but it is a reformed version as it also shares the principles of other Christian churches which broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. However, "Church Going" presents a further more secular view of Anglicanism. Larkin, though his contrasting views, portrays Anglicanism in a secular manner. The poem sets its context in the post-world war II England when there was observed a general decline in religious attendance at Churches after 1945. At the beginning of 1950, less than 10% of the population comprised of Church-goers. This was a result of the world war as after witnessing bloodshed and massacre which 'God' could not prevent, people discontinued their blind belief in God and the Church in large numbers. Also, the prosperity of science and technology also reduced people's faith in orthodox religious ideals.

Following the wave of the majority population, Larkin also created this poem in a similar context wherein it embodies secular Anglicanism which concedes that belief can diminish but also insists that the spirit of tradition represented by the English Church cannot die. As the

Church seemed to lose its importance, there were fears that its place in the modern society would become insignificant. The poem acknowledges those fears, and reveals its own specific context by locating "this cross of ground" at the edge of "suburbs scurb". Anglicanism here can be termed as secular because earlier the Church of England and 'one God' was the basis of the Anglican ideology but later the narrator and majority of the people do not seem to worship God and follow religious practices as Larkin but they still worship the institution of Church and believe it to be important for keeping alive the traditions and ideas of life and human existence. In this case, even if religion is not completely practised, the importance of the institution of Church does not go down.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Philip Larkin's "Church Going" strikes a careful balance of agnostic dissent with an insistence on saving the spirit of tradition which represents secular Anglicanism as being practiced by majority of the population in the post-world war II England. Secular Anglicanism represents a faith in tradition while it rejects the idea of religion as a saviour and this poem also portrays similar ideologies. Larkin himself was an 'agnostic' but his views made him "Anglican agnostic".

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