“Church Going” is one of the best of Philip Larkin’s poems. The title itself is puzzling. It gives us two different meanings. One meaning is that it is a regular visit to a church. The other shows the decline of the institution because people lost faith in God and religion. His greatest virtues are clarity and close observation of social life, perfect control over feeling and tone. The language is always simple and lucid and the idiom has great variety. Through his poetry Larkin advises us not to be deceived by illusions or ideals. He asks us to have a better awareness of man’s weaknesses. Larkin is called a sceptic poet. He enters the church as a sceptic who does not have any faith in the church. But he slowly realizes the truth that church fulfils a deeply felt human need and that it is “a serious house on a serious earth it is”.

Making sure that nothing is going on inside, the speaker of the poem enters the church and closes the door behind him. He finds that it is just like any other church. He also notices the furniture, furnishings such as the plate, the pyx, prayer books, the Bible, flowers cut for Sunday holy Mass, matting, seats, the baptismal font and the organ. There are no worshippers in the church and the silence tensed him. He looks around him with contempt and he feels a bad smell when he stands staring at the altar where the church services are conducted. Having observed these details, the speaker takes off his cycle-clips in an act of mock-reverence. He did not wear a hat.

The speaker then moves forward and touches the baptismal font with his hands. He notices that the roof looks almost new but he does not know whether it has been cleaned or restored because he is not a regular church-goer. Then he mounts the lectern and began to read out a few verses from the Bible. After that he comes back to the door and signs the visitor’s book and donates an Irish six pence which has no value in England. Thus all his activities and manners inside the church show that he is a sceptic who has no faith in the church service. Finally he thinks that his time is wasted, because the place is not worth visiting at all.

But the speaker could not avoid the church. Over and again he visited the church and each time his skeptical attitude grew less and less. This time he stood inside the church thinking about its future. As science and technology began to develop, people lost faith in the institution of church. In future, churches will become empty and completely out of use. A few cathedrals may be preserved as museums for future generation because of its great art and architectural value. Their parchment, the plate and the pyx may be kept in locked cases. But other church buildings will become sheltering centers for sheep and other animals and poor people during rainy time. Sometime people may avoid such places as unlucky because of its graveyard. The speaker of the poem thinks that perhaps the church will become the centre of superstitions in the coming years. But if faith disappeared, naturally
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Philip Larkin’s
CHURCH GOING
(Short Summary)

superstition will also be disappeared because both are connected with each other. Finally the church buildings will tumble down and only its concrete pillars would be standing as silent witness of the past glory of the church. The church path will be over grown with grass, weeds and creepers. It will become a deserted place. In course of time future generation will forget even the shape of the churches.

Now the speaker of the poem reflects who will be the last person to visit the church for its purpose. It may be a lover of antiquity who is eager to see very old things or some Christmas-addict who visits church only on important occasions such as the Easter or Christmas and he wants to enjoy the smell of myrrh burnt, the flowers, the choir music, the dress worn by the choir and the priest and the music of the organ.