

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Number 10

(NEW SERIES—2007)

ADDENDUM NUMBER 3 TO

“A LETTER OF LAMENTATION TO AMERICA: THE UNITED STATES IS NO LONGER A SERIOUS NATION”



“Church Going”

By

Philip Larkin

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?

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?
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.

[1955]

Note to the reader:

“Church Going,” one of my own favorite of all poems, leaves little doubt that Larkin is, like me and many others, a non-god man. And yet at the same time, like Hardy in “The Oxen,” his reverence for what once was, and for the artifacts that were brought into existence out of the impulse and power of what once was—this reverence remains intact and firm, the same as in Hardy’s firm and intact wish that he could just *glimpse* what’s gone, even though Hardy never had the least bit of false or sentimental expectation that he would, *ever*, really get that glimpse. Then, too, in the case of Larkin, the word “reverence” may not be quite exact, perhaps more suitable in the case of Hardy than of Larkin. The speaker in “Church Going,” after all, isn’t above a bit of mockery and light ridicule—the altar is “the holy end” and he speaks too loudly from the pulpit—and yet at the same time there’s a touch of the genuinely awed in his attitude toward the old church. He takes his hat off, after all, and he comments that the place has an “unignorable silence.” He calls it an “accoutred frowsty barn,” true, but by the closing stanza—and who in all humanity can fail to be moved by that closing stanza?—he’s calling it “A serious house on serious earth,” suggesting the *humanist’s* awareness of religious belief: the awareness that religion itself is a *human* artifact; that even if it doesn’t have a meaning *now*, it certainly *once* did; that that meaning was created by the *human* mind and heart; and that perhaps the *most*

fundamental and profound of the universal bonds that unite all humans—*death, and the desire to escape it*—lies at the root of all religion everywhere, ever. And so comes the non-god man's prayerful and *humane* rather than *spiritual* blessing and benediction at the very close of the poem, "If only that so many dead lie round."

Life, the poem would seem to suggest, is all there is. If it isn't lived as well as possible—as reverently, honestly, observantly, humanely—then it's irreligious, inhumane, destructive, and a loss.

Another quiz: Can you think of any major contemporary politicians you passionately wish would read Larkin's poem, *re-read* it, study it, ponder it—and apply what they gain from it to what they *do* in the world, and what they do *to* the world?

—EL