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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

*Churchgoing*

In Philip Larkin's "Church Going" (1954), a bored cyclist visits an empty church. Hatless, he removes the cycle-clips from his trousers in a gesture of "awkward reverence."<sup>1</sup> He contemplates the church building with some confusion, uncertain of the names or meanings of various architectural features, and wonders what a future after religion can hold for such houses of God:

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?

For Larkin, superstition, belief, and disbelief all belong to a dead past, albeit one that his poem tries to call back to life. Larkin writes in the 1950s, at the end of the modernist period, and already he expresses some skepticism toward the possibility that literature can take over the "power" left behind by organized religion – a calling, and an anxiety, bequeathed to modernism by Matthew Arnold, who had predicted in 1880 that "Most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."<sup>2</sup> In this book, I argue that the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith" that Arnold heard on Dover Beach in the middle of the nineteenth century would continue to sound, even among the ostensibly faithless Western elites, for at least a hundred years.<sup>3</sup> As late as 1940, Wallace Stevens wrote of God as a recent loss: "It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion ... My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe."<sup>4</sup> Poets like Arnold, Stevens, and Larkin tended to treat this loss most explicitly, but novelists, too, sought to provide replacements for religion in the wake of a God whose announced withdrawal from this world never seemed to be quite complete.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85650-8 - Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*

What does remain? Larkin's speaker predicts that some people will go on attending the church he sees before him, even once it is in ruins, out of dependence on ritual or antiquarian excitement: "Christmas-addicts" and "ruin-bibbers randy for antique," he calls them, recovering Christians for whom the church holds a certain attenuated narcotic or sexual thrill. Yet he speculates that the very last person to seek the church for "what it was" will 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 which 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 recognized, 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.

The speaker concludes that the church still contains some sort of power, which he associates with the ritual function of "robing" compulsions as "destinies": the church receives its power from the dead and from its long association with central functions of human (or animal) life around which sacraments have arisen. The poem itself has something of the quality of a ritual that persists even after its participants no longer accord it sacred meaning. Larkin's consciously formal verse emphasizes this belatedness; the poem's stately pace, pseudo-Spenserian stanza form, slant-rhymes (idea/here), occasional feminine rhyme (surprising/wise in), rhetorical questions, and combination of high and low diction ("accoutred frowsty") give it an "awkward reverence" like that of its speaker. The use of the first-person plural in the final stanza seems to give the speaker's personal meditations a universal character. The poet's ironic use of the expression "Church Going" underscores that regular churchgoing (for worship) is no longer an option for him; nevertheless, when he writes of "mounting the lectern" to read

Cambridge University Press

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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Churchgoing*

3

aloud, experimentally, a few lines of scripture (“much more loudly than I’d meant”), he calls attention to his own ritual function as a poet. His position at the lectern makes his commentary on the end of religion more pronounced than he realizes: he lacks control of his own voice, and the echoes when he reads (“here endeth”) suggest the echoes of belief and ritual that continue to reverberate in his poem. The poet has usurped the position of priest and thus arrogated to himself, bored and uninformed though he may be, the power to interpret the significance of the hallowed site and to speak in some sense for the dead.

Larkin’s poem was prescient. Today, English churches are indeed mostly vacant, but most of the decline has taken place since Larkin wrote “Church Going.” Regular church attendance did fall off in the century between Arnold and Larkin. It is estimated that almost half of the population regularly attended church in the middle of the nineteenth century, probably a high point historically. This figure declined fairly sharply near the end of the nineteenth century and then leveled off for the first half of the twentieth century. When Larkin wrote, the Church of England was in fact in the middle of a post-war upswing in membership. As Callum Brown has demonstrated, it is mainly in the last half of the twentieth century that the emptying-out of churches Larkin imagined became a reality: in the year 2000, less than eight percent of the population attended Sunday worship in any given week; less than twelve percent held membership in any Christian church; and, under the supervision of the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches, many churches were closing their doors.<sup>5</sup>

Larkin’s reference to “marriage, and birth,” moreover, emphasizes the fact that by the middle of the twentieth century it was such rites of passage that attracted most people to church, with large majorities of the population still baptized and married in church throughout the 1950s. Today, in contrast, less than a quarter of English children are baptized in the Church of England, and fewer than half of the marriages in England and Wales are solemnized in church. Attendance at church was lower when Larkin wrote than in Arnold’s day, but in a broader sense, secularization was still a process being imagined and theorized mainly by elites. Larkin’s secularism, like that of the modernists before him, was as yet a distinctly minority affair. In chapter 2, I re-examine the narratives of secularization that have dominated studies of literary modernism. In my view, the early twentieth century was a period when elite groups started to consider the spiritual possibilities of life outside a church or synagogue, even as the broader culture remained largely – and traditionally – religious, particularly in the English-speaking world.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The elites entertained, although they did not always embrace, a Nietzschean skepticism about organized religion: the enlightened madman in *The Gay Science* (1882) asks, “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”<sup>6</sup> The modernists seem almost ghoulishly attracted to these splendid tombs. T. E. Hulme complained that romanticism was “spilt religion” and proposed in its place a hard, dry classicism; churches seem to have maintained a fascination for a number of his modernist contemporaries precisely because they once “held unspilt,” in the words of Larkin’s poem, some ritual or sacramental power that modern writers sought to channel into their own work.<sup>7</sup> In well-known poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, the speaker stands just outside the church door (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”) or not far from a ruined abbey (“Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”) and seeks the consolations of religion outside the church, in nature. The modernists troop back into the churches, but they no longer expect traditional religious consolation from them; rather, like Larkin’s speaker, they find their own form of religious experience in meditating on the sacramental power that can no longer be contained in the church – or on the social imagination that once conferred power on the church. The image of the church as broken container of a sacred essence, which the author seeks to transmit in the frail vessel of the novel or poem, seems to haunt the modernists. If the romantics pursued a “natural supernaturalism,” for the modernists it was no longer nature but society that embodied the power once understood as supernatural.<sup>8</sup> Theirs was a social supernaturalism.

Among the major modernists, poets were more likely than novelists to espouse religious views or to link their work explicitly with the problem of religious experience. Poems frequently took the tone or even the form of prayers, as in major works by W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden, who said that “a poem is a rite.”<sup>9</sup> Eliot and Auden converted to traditional Christianity, while Yeats pursued researches into the occult and joined magical orders. A study of religious experience in modernist poetry could certainly be undertaken.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the major novelists of the period – I am concerned here especially with Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf – tended not to belong to any particular church or cult. The novelists did, however, share the poets’ evident concern with religious experience; the importance of this concern has often been overlooked in studies of the modern novel.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps because its characteristic concerns are sociological or anthropological rather than spiritual, the novel tends to approach the sacred more obliquely than poetry; it has more in common with a treatise than a rite.<sup>12</sup>

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85650-8 - Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel

Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Churchgoing*

5

Still, Woolf described the work of the modernists (specifically, Joyce's *Ulysses*) as a return to the "spiritual" in response to the "materialism" of their Edwardian predecessors, and the modern novel is strikingly engaged with the spiritual aspects of life.<sup>13</sup> As Lionel Trilling, alluding to Hegel's notion of the "secularization of spirituality," wrote of modern literature, "No literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours."<sup>14</sup> The modernists' spiritual concerns include borderline states of consciousness, forms of the divided self, the process of conversion, the function of ritual, the magical potential inherent in words, moments of sublime experience, and the relationship between social life and sacred power. The demands of the novel form as the nineteenth century understood it, as well as the agnostic views of many novelists, seem to have meant that the modernists conducted their search less for a "substitute" for religion than for a satisfying explanation of such spiritual phenomena – some combination of religion and philosophy. The attempt to turn the novel's sociological possibilities toward a consideration of this type of religious experience helped the modernists to transform the novel. The resultant metamorphosis of the genre is the subject of this book.

## WHEN DISBELIEF HAS GONE

Modern novelists frequently imagined their own work as competing with churches in terms of spiritual beauty and emotional power. The narrator of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* compares writing a novel to building a church: "How many great cathedrals remain unfinished," he laments.<sup>15</sup> "To go into most of the churches," writes the protagonist of Henry James's first novel, "is like reading some better novel than I find most novels."<sup>16</sup> The modernists even developed this view of church, from a position that was closer to competition than fellowship, into something of a topos: the works of several major modern novelists include scenes in which lone wanderers – usually male, often with touristic inclinations – visit churches and brood over the question of just what sort of power remains when, in Larkin's words, even disbelief no longer motivates their view of religion. This topos, not often noted, embraces a wide range of modern heroes or anti-heroes – including Lambert Strether, Proust's narrator, Leopold Bloom, Josef K., and (in a variation on the theme) Miss Doris Kilman.<sup>17</sup> Their authors all took the churchgoing scene as an opportunity to explore the nature of religious experience in modernity.

Unlike Larkin, modern novelists seldom represent a church that is totally deserted. Rather, the churches visited by the modernist protagonists contain

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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)

small groups of primarily female worshippers, who often become the object of the protagonist's fantasies and who represent perhaps the last vestiges of a sacred community. (This tendency corresponds with the "feminisation of piety" and "pietisation of femininity" that Callum Brown sees as central to evangelical religious culture from 1800 to 1950.)<sup>18</sup> The churches themselves, whether the novelist is Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish, tend to be Catholic ones, taking advantage of that faith's rich historical associations and tendency toward aesthetic splendor. Almost always, the protagonist feels like an outsider in the church, whether because of his religion, social class, or intellectual background; often he has entered in the first place only because he feels tired and hopes for a place to sit down or rest. Like Larkin's speaker, who lingers over the "brass and stuff" near the pulpit and wonders whether the roof is new, the modern novelists focus their attention on church architecture and terminology – perhaps as a way of avoiding theological questions, but also perhaps as a way of finding traction for questions about ultimate meaning, transferring them from the ethereal spiritual realm to the solid world of architectural forms and language. Although the institutions that the church building represents may no longer hold much appeal, a residuum of the sacred seems to remain, and the modern novelists try to control it: some sort of sacred power persists in these churches, which the novelists associate variously with the art of the church building ("this special shell"), the regulation of sexuality and reproduction (Larkin's "marriage, and birth"), or the passage of time ("because it held unpilt/So long and equably..."). The question posed in each of these churchgoing scenes is whether the novel can in some way sate the "hunger in [one's]self to be more serious" that Larkin associates with the sacred ground of the church – whether the novel too can become a site that is "proper to grow wise in."

The modernist novel, through the difficulty and self-consciousness of its literary style, characteristically calls attention to the problem of its own interpretation. Scenes of churchgoing highlight such hermeneutical questions, both because the protagonists often expend considerable energy on interpreting the church rituals they witness and because such scenes seem to announce themselves as worthy of heightened attention. Through a kind of comparison, they offer opportunities for the novelist to claim a form of monumentality for his or her own work. If hermeneutics sprang originally from religious texts, it has now become the province of secular literature and the cult of the author. The modernists develop highly formalized sets of linguistic conventions that depart markedly from the novel's traditional method of narrating events through the use of mainly referential language. Each novelist tends to develop his or her own style so idiosyncratically that it

Cambridge University Press

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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Churchgoing*

7

is easy, for example, to tell a text by Kafka apart from one by Proust (even in translation); in the attempt to create a sense of the ultimate reality behind everyday life, the very language of the modern novel thus becomes ritualized. The first English translators of Proust (C. K. Scott Moncrieff) and Kafka (Willa and Edwin Muir) have met criticism for exaggerating the theological tone of the originals, as for example when Scott Moncrieff translates “transvertébration” as “transubstantiation” or the Muirs describe a church tower as “soaring unfalteringly” rather than “tapering decisively” (“geradenwegs verjüngend”).<sup>19</sup> The criticism is fair enough, but these early translators, who belonged to the generation of modernists discussed in this book, were also responding to the frequent use of religious language by Proust and Kafka, even if they sometimes downplayed the irony of those authors. Perhaps, too, it is not accidental that Proust and Kafka, both fascinated by the limits of secularization, became the European novelists who were most influential on English modernism (one reason for their belonging to the canon explored in this study). Along with Henry James, Joyce, and Woolf, they represent the mainstream of high modernism in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Among the first major works of modernist fiction, Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* (1902) features a central scene in Notre Dame Cathedral. Although the protagonist, Lambert Strether, lacks the possibility of any religious consolation in his confrontation with the alien mores of Paris, when he sees the apparently wicked Madame de Vionnet praying in Notre Dame his attitude toward her unexpectedly changes. Strether begins the episode resignedly conscious of his exclusion from the Catholic Church: “The great church had no altar for his worship, no direct voice for his soul; but it was none the less soothing even to sanctity; for he could feel while there what he could n’t elsewhere, that he was a plain tired man taking the holiday he had earned.”<sup>20</sup> His contemplation of his own relation to the cathedral typifies the “double consciousness” that James has ascribed to him early in the novel: there is, as James writes, “detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference” (vol. 1, 5). James represents the psychomachia of hesitations, evasions, and self-corrections that make up Strether’s half-hearted struggle to escape from his own subjectivity.

Like a “student under the charm of a museum,” Strether attends to the architectural features of the cathedral. The episode introduces some subtle and ancient stereotypes about Catholicism upon which a number of modernists will draw. The plural character of Notre Dame’s “altars” and “clustered chapels” suggests the “far-reaching, quivering groping tentacles” that Strether has imagined earlier in the novel as part of his friend

Cambridge University Press

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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Waymarsh's perception of the Catholic Church (vol. 1, 41). The novel will play on these tentacles too in the image of Madame de Vionnet as having a mind with "doors as numerous as the many-tongued cluster of confessionals at Saint Peter's" (vol. 1, 230). Strether also takes note of the lighting effects of Notre Dame, seeming to associate the holy gloom with a refusal on the part of such institutions to view the world in the hard light of reason: "Justice was outside, in the hard light, and injustice too; but one was as absent as the other from the air of the long aisles and the brightness of the many altars" (vol. II, 5). Ultimately, Strether seems more interested in studying those visitors for whom the cathedral retains its theological significance, the "figures of mystery and anxiety," as James puts it, "whom, with observation for his pastime, he ranked as those who were fleeing from justice" (vol. II, 5). As interested in anthropology as he is in church architecture, Strether distances himself from the worshippers in the cathedral, the "real refugees," but he longs at some level to participate in their rites. He sits in the choir as if he might like to sing a hymn, and he goes on to meditate at some length on absolution, a sacrament alien to his own Protestant tradition. He regards Catholicism as a beautiful *fiction* in which he would like to be able to participate – a theme that Henry and William James shared and one that I explore in chapter 3.

Settled into a mood of innocent voyeurism, Strether observes a lady who seems to be praying: "She reminded our friend...of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly-protected meditation" (vol. II, 6–7). The subject of his observation, in a wonderful example of "delayed decoding" that prefigures the famous recognition scene by the river later in the novel, turns out to be Madame de Vionnet, the woman from whom Strether is supposed to "rescue" Chad Newsome, and this encounter proves to be a turning point in the novel's plot.<sup>21</sup> In this episode are present the central themes of the modernist churchgoing scene: Strether's attempt to understand the frame of mind of the worshippers, the author's play with the relationship between the narrator's observations and Strether's thoughts, and even a sort of typology whereby Strether associates the real Notre Dame with the imaginary one of Victor Hugo. Although the church itself has only residual theological meaning for Strether personally, as a setting for historical romance it allows him to transfigure a woman whom he admires but mistrusts into a splendid heroine. This "small struggle" of Strether's shadows forth the monumental subject of the novel as a whole, the question of how he should respond to



Cambridge University Press

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Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Churchgoing*

9

the beautiful lies of Madame de Vionnet and Chad Newsome. The scene of his encounter with Notre Dame emphasizes both his distance from institutional religion and the continuities between his own spiritual crises and those of the “real refugees,” the still-believing Catholics (vol. II, 4–5).

In Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À la recherche du temps perdu* [1913–27]), the idea of the church as a sort of sacred fiction depends with special force on the history of the church as a building. Proust’s narrator is a serious churchgoer with a taste for Romanesque and Gothic architecture, in which he is inspired in part by Émile Mâle and John Ruskin. (Proust himself had translated Ruskin’s book about the Cathedral of Amiens into French.) The narrator’s memories of summers in Combray come into focus in two churches, each of which brings the romance of the middle ages to the narrator’s childhood and inspires one of his earliest sexual fantasies. At the fictional church of Saint-Hilaire, with its array of aristocratic associations, the narrator’s family used to attend mass. The church is a treasure-house of art, containing two famous tapestries in silk and wool representing the coronation of Esther, the tombs (“in porphyry and enamelled copper”) of the abbots of Combray and the sons of Louis the German, and stained-glass windows depicting medieval noblemen and battles.<sup>22</sup> Proust seems to take a certain pleasure in the accuracy of his technical descriptions of these works, several of which connect the church to the noble family of the region, the Guermites; their ancestor Gilbert the Bad is the subject of one of the stained-glass windows, and an earlier countess of Guermites is said to have served as a model for Esther in the tapestries.

For the narrator, this connection to a legendary history gives the church its “supernatural” power. The narrator is introduced into the passage describing this church in a subordinate clause, one of many in a sentence 384 words long, which has only one main clause. This introduction dramatizes grammatically how the splendor of the church overwhelms the narrator’s tiny self:

... je m’avançais dans l’église, quand nous gagnions nos chaises, comme dans une vallée visitée des fées, où le paysan s’émerveille de voir dans un rocher, dans un arbre, dans une mare, la trace palpable de leur passage surnaturel, tout cela faisait d’elle pour moi quelque chose d’entièrement différent du reste de la ville : un édifice occupant, si l’on peut dire, un espace à quatre dimensions – la quatrième étant celle du Temps.

... I used to advance into the church, as we made our way to our seats, as into a fairy-haunted valley, where the rustic sees with amazement in a rock, a tree, a pond,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the tangible traces of the little people's supernatural passage – all this made of the church for me something entirely different from the rest of the town: an edifice occupying, so to speak, a four-dimensional space – the name of the fourth being Time.<sup>23</sup>

Immediately upon his introduction, the narrator strides into a kind of epic simile, comparing himself to a peasant who observes with amazement the evidence of the passage of fairies. In order to explain his own feelings in encountering the church, the narrator has to reach for a simile referring to an older form of supernatural belief, while at the same time drawing on the most contemporary science for his notion of Time as a fourth dimension. He continually seeks for parallels between the legendary history of the Guermantes family, the Biblical story of Esther, and his own bourgeois life, just as he imagines his own relation to Swann in typological terms. Swann represents the Old Testament, the narrator the New. Similarly, the story of Esther hints at questions of assimilation and Jewish identity that will play an important role in the sections of the novel that concern the Dreyfus Affair.

Proust's novel emphasizes the *magical* element of our relationships with others and with the past. The invocation of a variety of religious registers raises the questions of the relative primacy of folk and "advanced" religions (the fairy world versus Christianity), while the emphasis on the question of what makes the church building sacred links Proust to his contemporary, the sociologist Émile Durkheim. (Both questions are addressed in chapter 4.) Although the apse of the church is, in the narrator's judgment, "so crude, so devoid of artistic beauty, even of religious feeling," and although its exterior gives it the impression of being, like the adjacent buildings, a "simple citizen of Combray," the narrator invests the church building itself with an aura of sacredness associated with his fantasies about the Guermantes family. Biblical narrative, legend, and history merge in this passage, just as the colors of the tapestries of Esther melt into one another. The historical associations of Saint-Hilaire contribute to the narrator's fascination with the current Duchess of Guermantes, who one day appears in the family chapel and seems to the narrator to be watching him with special attention. Although the Duchess's physical appearance rather disappoints the narrator, since it has more in common with that of her stylish bourgeois contemporaries than with the tapestries or stained-glass windows across which her ancestors parade, he manages, by summoning his fantasies about her aristocratic lineage, to transform this unremarkable-looking woman into a sort of fairy princess – and, thinking that she may have noticed him, he falls in love with her.