

# "A religious faith perhaps"

By [Martin E. Marty](#)

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Those of us who enjoy poetry had good reason to be cheered by a [two-column article on poet Richard Wilbur](#) in a recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal*. Author Richard B.

Woodward did well by him as he and we celebrated Wilbur's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It's folly to list "nation's greatest," but Woodward showed his characteristic regard for the nonagenarian in a time when poets and poetry are neglected in mass culture, pop culture and high culture. Wilbur in this article is "our finest living poet," who has won every award available--but was not besieged by TV crews or invited to the White House on his recent milestone day. We picture him not sulking over this neglect; he probably was at desk working on a new line or two of another of his well-wrought poems.

No poet is to everyone's liking, and Wilbur receives legitimate criticism for some shortcomings. Some find him not daring enough, not postmodern enough. According to Woodward, "his long life from all outward appearances has been characterized by a normality that is freakish by the standards of his peers." Some of these peers have attacked him for never "going too far."

But this was hard for him to do. Wilbur confessed to an interviewer that he was "very happily married, and so there was always a central calm and joy in my life." This helped him avoid self-destructive ways, but he also credited an iron stomach, because when younger he drank "quite a lot with them," though never self-destructively.

Woodward observes that Wilbur's source of optimism--or "celebratory sense," as one interviewer called it--derive from "a religious faith perhaps." Well, yes. He is an Anglican, has been a lay reader in the Episcopal Church, goes to church often but is anything but a fanatic. (Is that "but" really necessary?) He has been "religiously conditioned," but much of his "positiveness" is "simply a delight in the world itself, the terrestrial world, in its order and in its energy, and so, says Mr. Wilbur, a lot of my celebrating isn't remotely doctrinal."

Happy as I was to see a poet, this kind of poet, this poet celebrated in the *Wall Street Journal*, I was astonished to see his religious depths largely overlooked in two long columns of print. Something is missing in the account of one whose poems have made it into hymnals and carol books, whose best-known poem, "[Love Calls Us to the Things of This World](#)," is anthologized whenever Christian poetry is noticed.

So, what does this omission prompt? I suppose I should be conditioned to gripe about the secularism of the academy and the media. Instead, I felt a little sadness, as I do whenever otherwise profound observers and writers do not notice or know what to do with (or want to do *anything* with) this kind of religious note. Sadness for them, and for poets' co-believers who are tone deaf about the religious nuances among "the things of this world."