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August 17, 2014: Why Religion Is Better

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Title: Why Religion Is Better

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8/17/2014 – – In the August 14, 2014 issue of the New York review of Books, there are two contrasting essays, one right after the other. The first, by Dan Chiasson, is about America's new poet laureate, Charles Wright. Here is how Chiasson describes "Wright's body of work" – – it "conducts a longitudinal study of the moods as they shift and change in time. And yet, to carry out such a project obligates a poet to passivity, to routine, even to monotony...." As Chiasson puts it, "This leaves a huge surplus of mind left over for memory...." Here is Wright on his college days: All I remember is four years of Pabst' Blue Ribbon Beer, A novel or two, and the myth of Dylan Thomas – – American lay by, the academic Chapel and parking lot. Oh yes, and my laundry number, 597. What does it say about me that what I recall best is a laundry number – – that only reality endures? (With apologies to Wright--the format on the page does not allow me to replicate his design of the poem.) There is something magnificent, but sad, about Charles Wright. Is this really all there is, a complete innerness? I suppose that is all there can be when there is no story of the universe as a whole. Contrast this with Pico Iyer's review of Richard Rodriguez's new book, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*. Rodriguez is a gay Catholic, 70 years old, alert to the pain and suffering all around him. Iyer says that Rodriguez brings disparate worlds together. Rodriguez brings us to the world while Wright removes us utterly from it. And yet, Iyer speaks of Rodriguez's "Catholic remove from the world...." Rodriguez aims "to keep the reader questioning everything, most especially are two simple ideas about America and identity." You see Rodriguez's greatness when he writes about Christopher Hitchens. He does not attack Hitchens. "Instead he recollects a brief meeting with the late polemicist in an elevator, and recalls Hitchens grandstanding attacks on Mother Theresa." Rodriguez had earlier noted the dark night of the soul that Mother Theresa reported late in life that she felt during most of her time in India – – abandoned by God. Rodriguez asks, according to Iyer, "are such public triumph ultimately more useful than a nun's inner failures...." "In the end, Rodriguez seems to favor the deeply flawed women of faith over the champion debater if only because of one central distinction: the readiness to spend her days in 'terrible darkness,' abandoned by her God, yet continuing along her path, determined to question that which she cherishes most." Do you see, in Rodriguez, the man trained in Catholicism, who questions everything, the greatness of the religious tradition? The questions of the religious tradition are just better than the questions that a Charles Wright can ask.