

cial coexistence, but the price was high: Radical Reconstruction effectively scuttled Republican control of the South. A century later, it was the Democrats who set out to fulfill the promise of civil rights. The GOP opposed these New Frontier and Great Society reforms, and thereby won back the loyalties of Southerners.

Since splitting with Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moosers in 1912, Gould notes, Republicans have generally opposed labor unions, welfare programs, and regulation of business. He also pays some extended recognition to such Republican presidents as William McKinley, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Dwight Eisenhower, whose accomplishments were scanted during more liberal periods. With Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential candidacy, Republicanism "shrunk and shifted rightward at the same time." By the 1980s, the GOP "had detached itself" from most of its own history. Current leaders, Gould

suggests, have become so arrogant as to raise doubts about whether they "really believe in the two-party system as a core principle of politics."

Unfortunately, Gould mostly sidesteps the fundraising dilemma of American politics. He discusses the post-Watergate regulations only briefly, by noting that "soft money" helped the Republicans because of their "greater access to corporate resources." The true magnitude of the problem, for the political system as well as for the GOP, and its defiance of workable solutions go largely unmentioned.

Still, Gould is especially effective in charting the shifts in the defining political issues of the past 150 years. And he reminds us that the Republican positions on these issues haven't always been predictable: The party has repeatedly "moved in directions that would have seemed improbable to its members only decades earlier."

—HERBERT S. PARMET

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

EVIL IN MODERN THOUGHT: An Alternative History of Philosophy.

By Susan Neiman. Princeton Univ. Press. 358 pp. \$29.95

Susan Neiman's "alternative history of philosophy" is no exercise in fashionable special pleading or canon reform but an attempt to show that Western philosophy has the wrong focus. Instead of the common but misleading alliance of metaphysics ("What is real?") and analytic epistemology ("What can we know?"), Neiman argues, philosophers ought to recognize that metaphysics is linked with ethics ("What is right?"). The traditional questions of appearance and reality, substance and change, reflect a sustained struggle, often frustrated or futile, with the problem of evil. This is not an unprecedented thesis—Aristotle, for one, had a version of it—but Neiman's modern focus and the unhappy coincidence of recent events make the issue of evil at once more difficult and more pressing.

Usually conceived as a strict theological debate within Christian theodicy, the problem of evil is based on the widespread perception that bad things happen to good people. If this is so,

then the Christian deity's "triangle of perfection"—the linked divine qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence—is challenged; at least one corner must give. If innocents suffer and die, then God must be ignorant, weak, or malicious. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake, a shocking devastation, prompted sharp criticism of the theodicy, especially Gottfried Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" version, which was lampooned savagely by Voltaire.

Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, asks: Are natural evils, such as the Lisbon earthquake, and human evils, such as the Holocaust, versions of the same problem, or are they distinct? If there is a distinction, what is it? We may abandon Christian belief, and so ease the sting of a natural disaster (it's no longer, except metaphorically, an "act of God"). But this will not help us when human-made evils, genocide and torture and terrorism, have the very same effect of tearing asunder our idea of the world as a place where things make sense.

The book is ordered in four long chapters, working within self-imposed restrictions of nei-

ther defining evil nor extending further back than the “modern” era, set here as beginning in 1697 with the publication of Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Neiman’s first two chapters survey rival responses to evil: “The one, from Rousseau to [Hannah] Arendt, insists that morality demands that we make evil intelligible. The other, from Voltaire to Jean Améry, insists that morality demands that we don’t.” There follows a separate chapter on the mixed, category-defying views of Nietzsche and Freud, and a final one of assessment and account taking, including some nuanced reflections on the rhetorical uses of the word *evil* in the days and weeks following September 11.

Neiman’s book is written with considerable flair, as many critics have already noted, but it possesses a far rarer and more valuable quality: moral seriousness. Her argument builds a powerful emotional force, a sense of deep inevitability. Both natural and moral evils exist, and both have the power to threaten the intelligibility of the world as a whole. The unforeseeable attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were evil not because people died—far more people die every summer on American highways—but because they tore our fragile tissue of meaning.

Evil in Modern Thought is not merely a clever revision of traditional intellectual history; it is a demand that philosophers, indeed all of us, acknowledge the deep responsibilities of being here, in a world where neither God nor nature—nor, sometimes, other people—cares what happens to us. It is not often that a work of such dark conclusions has felt so hopeful and brave.

—MARK KINGWELL

**THE SERENITY PRAYER:
*Faith and Politics in Times of
Peace and War.***

By Elisabeth Sifton. Norton.
353 pp. \$24.95

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was the most prominent theologian of his day—he even made the cover of *Time* in 1948—and biographies of him tend to shoulder such colossal titles as *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the 20th Century* and *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America*. In this memoir, Elisabeth Sifton, Niebuhr’s only

daughter, breaks free from the venerating tradition and finds a much more personal approach.

Now an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Sifton experienced Niebuhr not only as thinker, activist, and writer but as parent. During a taxi ride to see *Singin’ in the Rain* at Radio City Music Hall, the young girl grew frantic that they were going to be late. “‘O God, please let the light turn green,’ I wailed from the jump seat. The rebuke was gentle but instantaneous. That’s not what prayer was for.”

In a doe-eyed manner, Sifton tells tales of the intellectual luminaries in the Niebuhr circle. When Niebuhr and his Union Theological Seminary friend Paul Tillich were suspected of communist tendencies in 1944, FBI agents trailed them everywhere, even “lurking around the card catalog at the seminary library.” To young Sifton, Justice Felix Frankfurter was Uncle Felix, who invariably asked her opinions on the latest news.

Though experienced by a girl, these events are recounted by a woman who seems to have inherited her father’s general judiciousness—and occasional stridency. She writes of his dismay over anti-Semitism in some Christian churches in the 1930s, and adds: “A half century later, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson . . . plumbed even deeper reservoirs of vain inanity. High-decibel religiosity, with its excellent profit margins and growing political clout, is drowning out true religion all over the country.”

The memoir is three-quarters done before it focuses on Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” According to Sifton, her father composed the prayer in 1943, first recited it later that year at Union Church in Heath, Massachusetts, then allowed it to be included in a 1944 book of prayers for military chaplains. “This was its first publication in any form and in any language, and it’s because of this little booklet that eventually it became famous,” she writes. Soon after, Alcoholics Anonymous started using the prayer, slightly simplified and, in Sifton’s judgment, watered down.