ther defining evil nor extending further back
than the “modern” era, set here as beginning in
1697 with the publication of Pierre Bayle’s His-
torical 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 pow-
erful emotional force, a sense of deep inev-
itability. 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 Penta-
gon 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 histo-
ry; 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
waited 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 Theo-
logical Seminary friend Paul Tillich were
suspected of communist tendencies in 1944,
FBI agents trailed them everywhere, even
“lurking around the card catalog at the semi-
inary 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 judi-
ciousness—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 reli-
giosity, 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 includ-
ed 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, slight-
ly simplified and, in Sifton’s judgment,
watered down.
She brusquely dismisses the notion, popular in Germany, that the prayer’s true author was F. C. Oetinger, an 18th-century German theologian: “Goodness, how easily [the Germans] armor themselves with the weird, awful presumption that in the profoundly Spirituality ball game they must surely have been the first to score a goal.” She is protective of the prayer and its story. Which is understandable, as that story is so entwined with her own.

—Karen Rutzick

**CONTRIBUTORS**
