

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

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**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.

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 Pro-

found 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

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