Was Ursula Niebuhr Reinhold's coauthor?

Two years before he died, Reinhold Niebuhr published one of his best-known articles. He didn't write it alone.

by Rebekah Miles in the January 25, 2012 issue

In early August 1969, an elderly Reinhold Niebuhr found himself in one last intellectual dogfight. In an article for *Christianity and Crisis,* "The King's Chapel and the King's Court," he blasted President Richard Nixon for holding Sunday morning worship services in the White House, services that were led by Billy Graham and other clergy loyal to the Nixon administration.

Niebuhr described Graham as "a domesticated and tailored leftover from the wild and woolly frontier evangelistic campaigns" and accused Nixon of circumventing the disestablishment clause of the Bill of Rights and, in its place, establishing "a conforming religion by semiofficially inviting representatives of all the disestablished religions." The presiding clergy were pandering to Nixon instead of challenging him, Niebuhr chided. "It is wonderful what a simple White House invitation will do to dull the critical faculties."

Instead of playing the role of the prophet Amos, who criticized the powers of his day, the principals in the East Room of the White House embraced the role of Amos's nemesis, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who flatters the king and warns Amos against prophesying in Bethel, "the king's chapel and the king's court." Niebuhr quoted one of his favorite texts from Amos, a verse that Martin Luther King Jr. had also loved—"But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream"—and wondered whether King, had he not been murdered the year before, would have been invited to the White House. Not likely, he decided. King was Amos to the White House's Amaziahs.

The last lines of Niebuhr's article sizzled with contempt: "Perhaps the FBI, which spied on [King], had the same opinion of him as Amaziah had of Amos. Established

religion, with or without legal sanction, is always chary of criticism. . . . Thus J. Edgar Hoover and Amaziah are seen as quaintly different versions of the same vocation—high priests in the cult of complacency and self-sufficiency. Perhaps those who accept invitations to preach in the White House should reflect on this, for they stand in danger of joining the same company."

On August 7, the *New York Times* carried a story about Niebuhr's broadside, and the *Times* piece was picked up by papers around the country. A stream of letters to the editor prolonged the controversy. Niebuhr's complaint caught the attention not only of the public but also of the White House. J. Edgar Hoover, at the request of Nixon's counsel John Ehrlichman, gave the White House a memo summarizing Niebuhr's FBI file.

Because of the ruckus, this critique of the Nixon administration became one of Niebuhr's best-known articles. Indeed, in a survey of secondary literature, I found only one article written by him that is cited more frequently.

But this famous article was not written by Reinhold Niebuhr alone. My research on Niebuhr indicates that his wife, Ursula, was in this case—and probably others—not only a major influence but a virtual coauthor.

Ursula Keppel-Compton and Reinhold Niebuhr were married in December 1931 at England's Winchester Cathedral, near her home in Southampton. He was a professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary, where she had recently completed a master's degree after completing a degree in theology and history at Oxford.

After Reinhold's death in 1971, Ursula tended his legacy. Because of her own academic training and experience as a professor in Barnard College's religion department (which she helped to found), she was well prepared for this work. She edited two important collections—one of his prayers and sermons (*Justice and Mercy*) and another of their letters (*Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr*). She assisted Niebuhr scholars, and she gathered the materials that were to be placed in the Niebuhr Collection at the Library of Congress.

Among the last files she deposited there were her own professional papers, carefully organized after her long academic career: syllabi and lecture notes from 25 years at Barnard; her published articles along with manuscripts of sermons and speeches; and correspondence with friends—Abraham Heschel, W. H. Auden, Adlai Stevenson, Norman Mailer and many others.

The final box of this collection contains transcripts of conversations between Ursula and Reinhold Niebuhr. The transcripts, covering a wide range of topics, have notations in her hand, offering corrections and comments. They show Ursula Niebuhr—who had proposed to her husband that they have these recorded discussions—engaging him, leading the conversations and drawing him out. The transcripts offer a remarkable window onto the Niebuhrs' relationship, showing their humor, their righteous indignation and their playful affection for each other. They also offer insights into their work together.

One of the most interesting transcripts is titled "How to Make an Established Church Out of Disestablished Churches," recorded on May 5, 1969. In it, Ursula and Reinhold are both angry about the Sunday services in the East Room. They quote Amos, including "King's favorite text," and rail at the Amaziahs of the White House. They agree that the services amount to "an established religion made out of the representatives of disestablished religions."

The transcript contains material remarkably similar to the controversial article published less than two months later; it covers the key points, quotes many of the same passages from Amos and uses some of the same language. For example, both the transcript and the essay begin with an observation about the Constitution's position on established and disestablished religions. The transcript shows Reinhold speaking: "Our founding father were [sic] they ordained 'Shall pass no law respecting the establishment of religion . . ." The published article states, "The founding fathers ordained in the first article of the Bill of Rights that 'Congress shall pass no laws respecting the establishment of religion . . .'"

The article goes on to offer a more elegant version of another point made in the transcript. In the transcript, Reinhold remarks: "It is interesting that the East Room of the White House has thus given us a modern replica of what Amaziah, the priest, said about the king's court and the king's chapel." The article includes this line: "We do not know the architectural proportions of Bethel. But we do know that it is, metaphorically, the description of the East Room of the White House, which President Nixon has turned into a kind of sanctuary." In other places, the article offers more streamlined language. Reinhold says in the transcript, "He invites, naturally, nobody who objects to any administration policy . . . We are dealing with an established religion made out of the representatives of disestablished religions." The article formulates it this way: "[Nixon] has established a conforming religion by semiofficially inviting representatives of all the disestablished religions . . ."

The most arresting lines of the transcript point to their collaboration. At one point, Niebuhr tells his wife, "Dear, you and I always put our best feet together. We put this together . . ." A little later, he seems ready to end the conversation. "We have got the editorial, dear. We work together . . ." But Ursula ignores the signal and keeps talking, quoting Amos. He again tries to stop the conversation, "Well, I trust you as editor to put this thing together."

She takes the hint and replies, "Well, we've got it off our chests."

He adds, "We've got it off our chests. But I grant it will take some editing." Ursula responds (in the final words of the transcript), "Well, that is all right."

This conversation makes it clear that they had a familiar pattern of working and writing together, and it points to her significant role as editor and in this case, I believe, coauthor. This article is not simply a cleaned-up, edited version of the earlier conversation but a significantly longer and more complex essay, which makes a lively and compelling argument against Nixon and his White House hangers-on. The evidence suggests that Ursula had a significant hand in its composition.

It is possible, of course, that Niebuhr worked on the article alone after that initial conversation. In the transcript, however, he suggests that his work on it is virtually finished: "We have got the editorial, dear. . . . I trust you as editor to put this thing together." And her final reply indicates that she, too, thinks the remainder of the work is hers to do.

As additional evidence, some of the lines in the article that do not derive from the transcript bear the mark of Ursula's hand. For one thing, the tone of the article is more cutting than was customary in Reinhold Niebuhr's writings after the mid-1930s. The pointed style may not have been typical of him, but it was of her.

This stylistic difference is evident in their conversations, too. Their discussion about the Nixon White House is filled with them both quoting fiery verses from Amos, and at one point Ursula gets carried away: "Thy wife shall be an harlot in the city, and thy sons and thy daughters shall fall by the sword, and thy land . . ." Her husband interrupts: "That's too rigorous." Other stylistic markers of hers appear: for example, the use of rhetorical questions, the tendency to use *rather* as a submodifier, and the use of the adjective *architectural* in the phrase "architectural proportions."

The most compelling evidence for Ursula's role as coauthor in her husband's later writing comes from Niebuhr himself. In the introduction to his 1965 book *Man's Nature and His Communities,* he includes this passage:

> I will not elaborate an already too intimate, autobiographical detail of a happy marriage except to say that this volume is published under my name, and the joint authorship is not acknowledged except in this confession. I will leave the reader to judge whether male arrogance or complete mutuality is the cause of this solution.

It is troubling that a work of joint authorship would be published under only one name. Even so, one can imagine how it might have come about. Reinhold had suffered a series of debilitating strokes beginning in 1952. He continued to work, though at a much slower pace. As his strength declined over the last 19 years of his life, he was increasingly dependent on his wife. Like many stroke patients, he suffered from depression, and she tried to keep his spirits up—that was one reason, she acknowledged, for the conversations she recorded. They were trips down memory lane or around the headlines of the day.

As writing became more difficult for him, her editorial role increased to the point where we can say that she was not only editor but also coauthor. Perhaps it was hard for him to admit even to himself the full extent of her contribution to his late writings. Perhaps she, for the sake of his pride or morale, did not insist that her name be included. One can see how it might have come about that her name was not included in jointly authored pieces in these last decades of his life.

Whatever reason for the pretense then, there is no reason for it now. It is time for scholars to examine more fully Ursula Niebuhr's influence on her husband's work not just in the last years but throughout their marriage. This acknowledgment does not diminish Reinhold Niebuhr, arguably the most influential U.S. theologian of the 20th century.

I told Elisabeth Sifton about my theory that her mother had a significant role in her father's later writings. Sifton, a longtime senior editor at Viking Press, Knopf, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, disagreed only about the modifying word *later*; she believed that her mother played a role long before.

"Her influence is all over the place, even in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* [published in 1932]. She didn't talk about 'my influence on your father.' I don't have

written evidence, but I know it from their ideas. I know it in my bones."

Scholars have written of the intellectual energy that enlivened the Niebuhrs' marriage. Their daughter described them both as "wildly intelligent" people who were interested in the life of the mind, adding that they "hugely enjoyed each other's intellectual prowess." It is hard to imagine that they would not have shaped each other's thought.

We cannot know for sure what views the Niebuhrs might have held about these matters coming to light. It is difficult to predict the opinions of the living, much less the dead. We do know, however, that Ursula Niebuhr, a careful scholar and meticulous archivist, left the evidence, well organized and filed away in her papers at the Library of Congress. This woman was nobody's fool; she knew what she was doing.

And what of Reinhold Niebuhr? How might he have regarded these revelations? He himself acknowledged her significant assistance and influence in many places, most notably in that curious reference to "joint authorship" quoted above.

Besides, whatever his frailties in those difficult final years, Niebuhr at his best worked to strip away the pretense of the powerful—including himself—and to unmask the human tendency to hide injustice behind the veil of claims to mutuality and love. This was a leading theme to which he returned throughout his life.

Niebuhr had a reputation for being idealistic about the family, giving too much attention to agape love in the family and too little to the realities of injustice there. According to Sifton, this was in fact a point of contention between her parents. Her mother would complain of the "sentimental attachment to the family" found in the Niebuhr family, including Reinhold. She regarded this as a "deplorable German tendency." Sifton told me, "She did not like it at all. I remember her saying, 'You know, my dear, your father has the idea that it's all about love in a family, and justice must be found in the public sphere. But I'm the fifth of five children, and I know. Justice is an issue in family life. It's not all about love.'"

Perhaps this is one point on which Ursula Niebuhr changed her husband's views. He came to recognize the need for justice not only in public life but in the family. Indeed, his first reference to the unjust tyranny of males within the family appeared in *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* a book written during their engagement and the first year of their marriage.

This theme recurred in his writings. In 1940 he wrote, "Without the balance of power even the most loving relations may degenerate into unjust relations and love may become the screen which hides injustice. . . . There are Christian idealists today . . . whose family life might benefit from a more delicate 'balance of power'" (*Christianity and Power Politics*).

In light of Reinhold Niebuhr's insistence on the need to seek justice in the family and to strip away pretense, it is right to acknowledge Ursula Niebuhr's role in her husband's work; it is flat-out Niebuhrian. Indeed, to try to maintain "the screen which hides injustice" would be to patronize Reinhold Niebuhr and repudiate one of the great themes of his life work.

Whatever Ursula and Reinhold Niebuhr might have thought about these revelations, the extent of their collaboration is nothing to be hidden. Their work together is a tribute to the vitality of their marriage and their shared intellectual life. Doing justice, in this instance, is not in tension with love; it puts the spotlight on it.

When I asked Sifton about her parents' collaboration, she told me a story. During the summer of 1962, when she married Charles Sifton, the two of them went, together with his parents, Claire and Paul Sifton, to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to see her parents. The elder Siftons were well-known progressive activists who during the 1930s had often collaborated in their work—both in the theater and in journalism.

During the visit, the two mothers went for a walk, chatting about their children, no doubt, and their many mutual friends. Mrs. Sifton later told her daughter-in-law about part of the conversation. Ursula Niebuhr had remarked that it was nice for both the Siftons that the writing they did together was published under both names. Claire Sifton had insisted, in response, that the Niebuhrs' work had had a tremendous influence, after all, whatever the title page said—to which Ursula Niebuhr replied: "Yes, but my name isn't on any of the books."