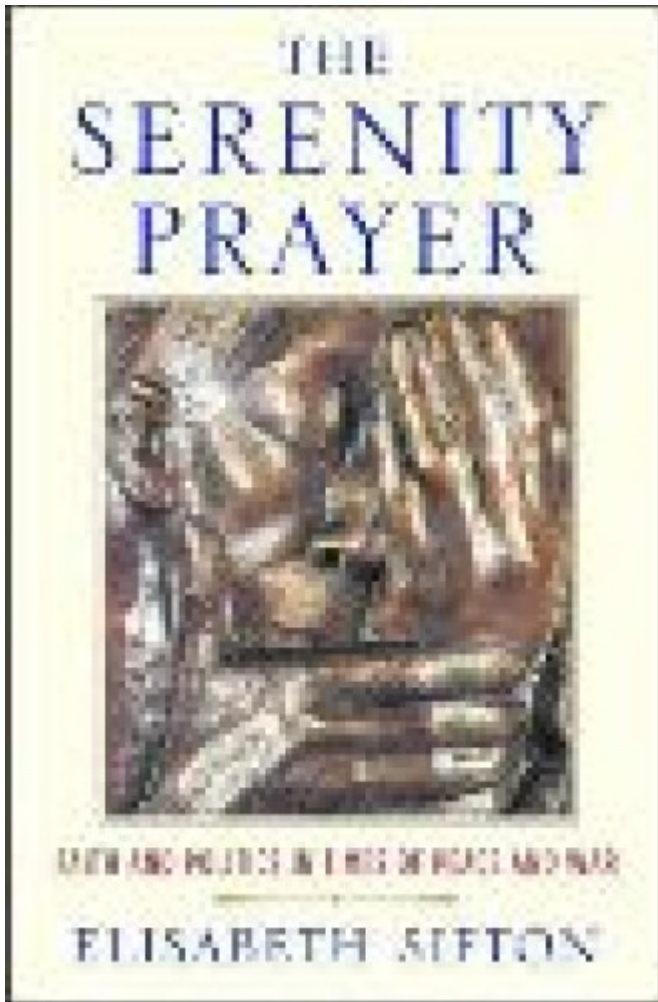


Reinhold's era

By [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War

Elisabeth Sifton
Norton

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s Reinhold Niebuhr spent his summers in the northwestern Massachusetts village of Heath, where he often spoke at the Heath Union Church. In the summer of 1943 he wrote a notable 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.”

Though the Heath parishioners were mostly Congregationalists, the vacationing summer congregants were mostly Episcopalians, with a heavy sprinkling of Episcopal theologians and church leaders. One of them, Howard Robbins, was sufficiently struck by Niebuhr’s prayer to remember it several months afterward. Robbins was dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and a leader of the Federal Council of Churches. In 1944 he included Niebuhr’s prayer in a booklet of prayers and services that the Federal Council published as an aid for army chaplains. Shortly thereafter a fledgling organization named Alcoholics Anonymous asked Niebuhr if it could use the prayer.

AA reframed the prayer in the first-person singular, changed its first clause to the simpler “what cannot be changed,” reduced its second clause to the weaker “change what can be changed,” added some extra clauses that sounded nothing like Niebuhr, and made the prayer famous. Since Niebuhr didn’t believe in copyrighting prayers, he had no way of controlling the fate of his own, though he shook his head at its appearance on bookends, tea towels, key chains and coffee mugs. In 1951 a University of Kiel professor named Theodor Wilhelm published the prayer in a book of his own under the pseudonym Friedrich Oetinger, which launched a German tradition of attributing it to the 18th-century Swabian Pietist F. C. Oetinger; Catholic-artifact versions of the prayer attributed it to St. Francis of Assisi; Hallmark cashed in on the prayer; and it was immortalized on thousands of plaques featuring Albrecht Dürer’s praying hands.

In this unusual memoir Elisabeth Sifton, Niebuhr’s daughter, uses the prayer’s context and career as an entry point into Niebuhr’s world. Sifton, who was four years old when her father wrote the Serenity Prayer, is a perceptive interpreter of her father’s temperament, friendships and thought. Her book strengthens our understanding of Niebuhr’s friendships with such luminaries as Episcopal Bishop Will Scarlett, Methodist Bishop Francis McConnell, Anglican Archbishop William Temple, English politician Stafford Cripps, historian R. H. Tawney, poet W. H. Auden and

theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. More distinctively, it offers an unforgettable portrait of the summertime context in which Niebuhr consorted with Protestant ecumenists, traded wisecracks with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (an agnostic among the Heath clerics) and wrote most of his major works.

Sifton is nostalgic for the “astonishing summer invasions” of her youth, though she grew up among equally stimulating company at Union Theological Seminary. During the school year she and her Anglo-Catholic mother, Barnard College professor Ursula Niebuhr, usually attended services at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, or St. Paul’s Chapel at Columbia University, or James Chapel at Union Seminary; occasionally they attended the East Harlem Protestant Parish or heard Harry Emerson Fosdick preach at Riverside Church. For Sifton, Union’s nondenominationalism stripped its services of religious interest. She had a similar reaction to Riverside, “despite Fosdick’s rousing sermons and the rather-too-glamorous sound of Virgil Fox’s organ.” On most Sundays Niebuhr himself was out of town speaking at college chapels.

At Heath, however, her father took a regular preaching turn, the congregants were family friends and the cast of supply preachers included Robbins, Episcopal bishops Charles Gilbert and Angus Dun, Episcopal theologians William Wolf and Sherman Johnson, Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown and Episcopal rector Worcester Perkins. “These were men who had learned how not to have needless liturgical or doctrinal disputes, and they were good, conscientious people,” Sifton recalls. “I thought of them as typical American clergymen: how wrong I was! Little did I know how unusual was their sturdy broad-mindedness, how atypical their devout modesty. I grew up completely insulated from the barbarous, self-congratulatory sloth of what journalists call Mainstream American Protestantism, and it took me decades to realize this.”

Mainline Protestantism takes many lumps in her account. To Sifton, the Christian Century’s Charles Clayton Morrison, “he of the pious do-nothing school,” typified the Protestant mainstream. Morrison had a certain “earnest” goodness, she allows, but he and other mainline pastors “completely failed” to face up to the crises of the 1930s. They “snoozed optimistically through the gray years of 1930-32, reassuring their congregations that soon all would be well.” Later they treated the rise of fascism as a challenge to hold onto their pious, isolationist moralism.

Sifton ignores the fact that during the same period Niebuhr was often wildly wrong on the issues of the day. She doesn't acknowledge that her father's socialism was radical and militant in the 1930s, that he postured about the need for "very considerable violence" to secure social change in America, and that he harshly condemned the New Deal throughout Franklin Roosevelt's first three terms. In her rendering Niebuhr was always a pragmatic realist and progressive who wanted only to make the structures of modern society "more fair."

Her lack of interest in tracking his zigzagging on political issues and his theological development leaves her unable to deal fairly with the criticisms he received in these areas. In Sifton's account the problem was always that mainline Protestant leaders were too sanctimonious, weak-minded and comfortable to follow Niebuhr's lead.

This perspective has its drawbacks, but it also contributes to the book's value. Sifton wonderfully conveys the social atmosphere of her father's historic and brilliant opposition to American isolationism. She describes Niebuhr's amazement at the deep hostility that he provoked among antiwar Protestants and secular pacifists, recounts his whirlwind of travel and lecturing that was "not easy for his wife, one has to note," and emphasizes the importance of his friendships with Scarlett, McConnell and Auden. She quotes a Chicago theologian's reproach to Niebuhr: the theologian could "no longer be silent at your shocking disregard for the fundamental decencies of your Christian ministry and professorship." Protesting that Niebuhr wrote "feeble yet sinister sophistries" about the unrealizability of Christian ideals, the theologian blasted Niebuhr's additional "sophistry" about the moral value of war, which was "Hitlerism at its worst." No matter how wealthy and famous Niebuhr's books made him, they were nothing but "brazen and shameless" apostasy: "You are a shocking spectacle to God, Jesus Christ, and Humanity. Some of us, who are willing to be poor, unrenowned and unpopular, know the truth."

Sifton replies that this kind of attack imagined huge royalties that didn't exist and showed that liberals can be fundamentalists too. She recalls Niebuhr's wish that the war resisters hated him less and Hitler more. In a powerful 1940 article Niebuhr protested that America's dominant liberal culture was too appeasing and moralistic to fathom "what it means to meet a resolute foe who is intent upon either your annihilation or enslavement." Sifton identifies with her father's indignation at American obliviousness. By 1940, she observes, it had been seven years since Hitler destroyed democracy in Germany and five years since he issued the Aryan decrees. What were Americans waiting for?

Sifton ignores the fact that as late as March 1939, even Niebuhr was passionately opposed to preparing for war. In 1937 he condemned Roosevelt's naval buildup as a "sinister" evil, declaring that it had to be "resisted at all costs." The next year he blasted Roosevelt's billion-dollar defense budget as "the worst piece of militarism in modern history." Right up to the Munich crisis Niebuhr insisted that the best way to avoid war was not to prepare for it; collective security was the realistic alternative to war. He wanted the U.S. to enact neutrality legislation and to voluntarily support League of Nations sanctions. Sifton never mentions any of this, but Niebuhr's strident opposition to Roosevelt's preparations for war helps us to grasp the revulsion against war that his generation felt after World War I. Even for Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* did not lead straight to the interventionism of 1940; he had had to struggle for eight years to get there. Then he had to fight very hard to bring others along—a story that Sifton helps us see in a fresh way, even though she was only a toddler at the time.

One of Sifton's chief arguments is that it is ridiculous for theologians and historians to describe Niebuhr as a "major Protestant leader" of his generation. She recalls that for 30 years, even though her father often spoke in college chapels, only a handful of churches invited him to preach in their pulpits. In her recollection St. George's Episcopal Church in New York was the major exception. Niebuhr was taken seriously by "a small minority of intrepid souls," she observes, but most American church leaders and churchgoers "simply didn't want to listen. . . . They pussyfooted around feel-good mega-preachers like Norman Vincent Peale or Billy Graham—who like so many of their successors never risked their tremendous personal popularity by broaching a difficult spiritual subject, and rarely lifted a finger to help a social cause."

Niebuhr wearied of the pious irrelevance and timidity of churchpeople, she says. This was the key to the "atheists for Niebuhr" phenomenon. It was not merely that Niebuhr attracted "cheering secular friends" who were "oblivious of his theology." Niebuhr himself came most fully alive in the company of his political friends, especially Joseph Rauh, Walter Reuther, Hubert Humphrey, John Kenneth Galbraith and other leaders of Americans for Democratic Action. Sifton explains that the ADA liberals were "a welcome relief from the sometimes inane, always piously cautious, and frequently self-congratulatory churchmen among whom he might otherwise have had to spend his time. Even at the seminary one had to guard against the constant threat of sanctimony, whereas the ADA people were exuberant, skeptical,

and energetically committed, after all, to democratic action.”

It is chastening to be reminded that Niebuhr’s influence on people was small compared to Peale’s or Graham’s. If one is inclined, like me, to take comfort in the thought that at least Niebuhr and Paul Tillich had a significant public impact, a certain defensiveness against Sifton’s statements on this theme is inevitable. Niebuhr had a tremendous impact on the fields of Christian social ethics and modern theology, and many of us who labor in these fields are grateful for it. He also influenced leading political realists such as George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau; in recent years he has been claimed by neoliberals and neoconservatives in both political parties; and in the 1950s and ’60s he was a cherished influence on Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Heschel. According to one story, when the New York City Council voted in the late 1970s to name the corner of Broadway and 120th Street “Reinhold Niebuhr Plaza,” none of the Christians on the council knew who Niebuhr was, but all of the Jews did.

Sifton takes no interest in current academic debates over her father’s theological method, and she ignores liberationist critiques of his nationalism, cold warriorism and androcentrism. She says nothing about the precipitous decline of Niebuhr’s influence after the emergence of liberation theology. She does take a quick pass at the usual picture of his later career, briefly asserting that the image of Niebuhr as an “in-house establishmentarian gadfly” underestimates the ironic, tragic and pathetic aspects of his later life. And she pauses a bit longer over the cultural fate of his passionate philo-Semitism.

Niebuhr despaired over much of the non-Jewish literature on Zionism and Jewish existence, a literature which, in Sifton’s telling, consisted of “pretentious nonsense, offering specious reasoning, idiotic psychobabble, or poor contrasts between Jewish and Christian ethics that slandered the first and misapplied the second.” She observes that things have gotten much worse in the 30 years since her father’s death. Niebuhr’s philo-Semitism was embattled in his time, but it would find little place at all in today’s intellectual culture. While guarding against nostalgia for what was, after all, a terrible time, she fondly recalls the score-keeping discussions her parents conducted with Frankfurter and Isaiah Berlin: “We all knew who the friends had been—but oh the guffaws and acerbic dismissals of the enemies: the appeasers, the reactionaries, the anti-Semitic Jews, the isolationists, the Nazi sympathizers, the bad Germans, the Germans who thought they were ‘good’ but weren’t!”

Sifton went to Radcliffe College and the University of Paris before starting a career as an editor at Viking Press, but her memoir is pervaded by a feeling of disappointment. Her home discussions while growing up set a standard that was hard to match afterward; the church leaders that she knew at Heath were more interesting than those she met afterward; she agrees with her father that the generation that succeeded him fled into the “cellars of irrelevance.”

In 1952 Niebuhr suffered a stroke that ended his circuit-riding days and spurred the Niebuhr family to make retirement plans. They sold the stone cottage in Heath, bought a comfortable home in the historic valley town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where medical care was readily available, and prepared for Niebuhr’s 1960 retirement from Union. Berkshire County had hills that Melville and Hawthorne had climbed, beautiful historic towns, grand houses, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Atheneum library, but to Sifton it seemed a poor trade for the modest farms and captivating friendliness of Heath: “It was more like exurbia for the power elite.” While her father fell into a morose depression and her mother struggled with a difficult new situation, Sifton stewed in adolescent rage.

Worse yet, Republicans won the White House. Niebuhr told his daughter sadly, “You poor girl, you’ve never lived under a Republican administration. You don’t know how terrible this is going to be.” Sifton rightly concludes that everything her father wrote about American politics took for granted that there was little point in writing if one had no concept of America’s spiritual and cultural identity. His “constant gripe” about American politicians was that they were “stupider, prouder, more self-righteous, more moralistic, more vain-glorious than the American people on whose behalf they spoke.” Niebuhr was convinced that ordinary American Christians made better Christian realists than their political leaders did.

As an ethicist he moved from the imperatives of the gospel ethic of sacrificial love to the requirements of ambiguous situations, always under the mediation of the principles of justice—freedom, equality and order. This method of ethical reasoning has puzzled and divided Niebuhr’s interpreters, as has his religious sensibility as a whole. He was deeply prayerful and profoundly religious, yet also hyperactively worldly and allergic to the expressions of piety that many Americans identify with faithfulness. One of his interpreters, John Murray Cuddihy, wrongly believes that Niebuhr was totally politicized; another, Richard Wightman Fox, offers a highly skillful and better informed interpretation, but still presses too far in the same direction.

For many years Ursula Niebuhr and Sifton chafed at interpreters who didn't capture the Reinhold Niebuhr they knew or who sometimes got him quite wrong. That experience moved Ursula Niebuhr to publish her correspondence with her husband, and now Sifton has described the family and social atmosphere behind his work. *The Serenity Prayer* gives us a strong dose of the politicized Niebuhr, but it also splendidly conveys the hopeful, ironic, polemical, prophetic spirit of a great theologian who prayed from the heart and unfailingly asked himself, "What does the gospel ethic mean in this situation?"