

This is the territory Sutherland explores against the background of the unfolding history of dissent. The result is a book for the specialist rather than the beginner. Sutherland assumes a familiarity with much of the literature and historiography of Dissent. This particular Paternoster series, 'Studies in Evangelical History and Thought', demands such an approach. Howe provides a link between the debate on the nature of the Church begun by the Reformers and the Calvinist stream within the Evangelical Awakening.

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*The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*, Elisabeth Sifton, London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004, pp. 363, ISBN 0393057461. £18.99

Those who have had the good fortune to spend a study year at Union Theological Seminary, New York will appreciate and relish this volume. It is an exhaustive exploration of the Serenity Prayer, as composed by Reinhold Niebuhr in the late 1940s to 1960s. This study will be of particular interest to those who take exceptional care in the composing of prayers for both private and public worship.

*God give us the 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.*

The text of the book provides an in-depth attempt to explore the deeper meaning of the prayer. What are 'the things that should be changed?' And what are 'the things that cannot be changed?' These questions underlie the graphic reflections and memories by the author of her father. Niebuhr's vocation of over forty or so years of theological and political leadership was exercised in the restless post-World War II period, when deep social issues were erupting in the USA, South Africa, and in other colonial and post-colonial nations. European society was increasingly fragmented, and this was damaging for the



initial years of the United Nations, as well as hindering the visionary hope for a united Europe. Niebuhr's intense role in both political and ecclesiastical affairs perhaps gained some credence with the birth of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam.

Running through this story there is what feels like a roll-call of the Saints of God – his associate prophets were people of the stature of John Baillie, Karl Barth, George Bell, John Bennett, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Robert McAfee Brown, Martin Buber, Henry Sloane Coffin, Stafford Cripps, Harry Fosdick, Martin Neimöller, William Temple, Paul Tillich, Max Weber, and many other notables of the period. Niebuhr carried in his soul the accumulated wisdom and vision of these prophets of their day. They were each 'giants' for an era when nothing less than 'giants' would do. Sadly in our own day such 'giants' are scarce and theological and political leadership is tepid.

The body of this book is set in the regular summer holiday venue of the Niebuhr family in Heath, Upper Massachusetts, where, with like-minded professionals with their families, they spent the summers in vocational relaxation within a keen sense of mutual community. This had its therapeutic affect, with Niebuhr himself relishing the opportunity to unwind, to reflect in what was for him a hectic academic and political life. At the heart of this regular corporate retreat was the boon of shared worship.

His insightful summary of the Church in the USA as he saw it, identified it as 'trivial, self-absorbed, with vulgar snobbery masking its ignorance.' One might be excused thinking that this is not too wide of the mark as a relevant and timely critique for today! Nonetheless his perception revealed the gift of his own deep love for the Church, enfolding it with a deep awareness of genuine loving care.

Niebuhr's engagement in a busy life was, or so it seems to this reviewer, to have been undergirded by this 'elastic prayer' – stretching out to those things that needed to be changed, whilst on occasion with a sense of deep frustration to recognise that there are those crucial concerns which for today cannot be changed. To some this may feel like 'unanswered prayer', but guidance and direction may be a more

helpful alternative than what some might consider a ‘God-given’ answer. Niebuhr lived every day in this dichotomy. Faith and politics for him were interlaced. His dependence on quietude, prayer itself, and the regular nourishing discipline of corporate worship garrisoned his vision, and fuelled him for the ongoing struggle. The wonder remains that this ‘diet’ of life enabled him to be a singularly able and visionary teacher. Those who were his students had deposited within their inner selves, as it were, ‘a coin of Niebuhr.’ He was not a comfortable personality. He knew occasions of searing doubt and uncertainty. But in transcendental mood he discovered his way forward in the struggle between what should and could not be changed.

With the current decline in ecumenism, this volume – to the mind of this reviewer – might prove to be a timely ‘call’ to that life of devotion and prophetic perception which hopefully will come again in our own islands, as well as across ‘the pond’. One hopes that those who cling tenaciously to the vision of a unified world Church, born in Amsterdam those decades ago, will find grist to their mill – even though they be found to be ground ‘finely’ or ‘harshly’.

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