

and potentially conflictual; and its idealized vision of the Church ignores diversity within the Church and its scarred nature as a historical community. Brown is similarly deeply unhappy with the theological projects of Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Banner. They are insufficiently cognizant of contingency, implicitly authoritarian, and inclined to ignore the benefits Christian theology enjoys within liberal democracy. The case of Ulrich Duchrow is rather different. He does see the economy as a test case for theology, and wants the Church to be both liberal (open to dialogue and alliance with the secular) and also communitarian (defined by its confessional position). But this is an unresolved contradiction rather than a coherent synthesis.

Malcolm Brown's own resolution is set out very persuasively as an emerging theological model which he calls Dialogic Traditionalism. In conversation he draws from Ian Markham the idea that the Christian tradition itself warrants tolerant internal and external dialogue; from Andrew Shanks that we should not look for dialogue with all and sundry, but with those in civil society who are shaken by the sense of a shared predicament in modernity (this is drawn from Jan Patočka and the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia); from Peter Selby the search for alliances within a wide understanding of the poor, in response to Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"; and from Jeffrey Stout and Duncan Forrester the practice of moral bricolage.

Brown does not only show the relevance of this model to economics. It must also be tested by its fruitfulness in practice. Here he takes three current practices and shows how the elements of his dialogic traditionalism are already persuasively emerging. The most interesting section is Hans Diefenbacher's work with local communities in Germany on indicators of "sustainable economic development," as a way of challenging the market's attenuated story of prosperity in crude money terms. It does operate within a liberal economic framework, yet does not call for any grand narrative. It respects the unique features of the local situation, but also shows that the indicators can be commonly applied over a much wider area.

There are many issues here which need much more work, as Brown himself recognizes. But here we have a book that makes a very important proposal for a public theology, in theory and practice, and it should provoke the sort of dialogue that is long overdue. Immediate conversation partners would be Carl-Henric Grenholm, Normunds Kamergrauzis, and Wendy Dackson (her critical study *The Ecclesiology of Archbishop William Temple* is due out very soon). One hopes that the confessional communitarians will also respond constructively.

Alan M. Suggate
Durham University (retired)
a.m.suggate@btopenworld.com

Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003. 367 pp. \$26.95. Hbk. ISBN 0-393-05746-1.

Elisabeth Sifton's *The Serenity Prayer* is both a memoir and a biography of her father, Reinhold Niebuhr. Through the lens of her father's experiences, it also provides both a history of the theology and politics of the first half of the twentieth century and a critique of contemporary theological and political life. To do any one of these things well would be a daunting task, yet Sifton manages to do all of them in a way that is both accessible and intellectually engaging.

Framing her work around the story of the writing and subsequent diffusion of Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer," Sifton explores myriad themes that intersect and surround both the

content of the prayer itself, and the setting in which it was written: the Niebuhrs' summer abode in Heath, Massachusetts. Heath, according to Sifton, was a popular summer retreat among liberal clergy and other professionals, largely due to the recruiting work of "Aunt" Ethel Moors. Moors brought Heath to the attention of many progressive thinkers of the mid-twentieth century, including future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was to become a life-long friend of the Niebuhrs.

One of the pleasures of reading Sifton's account is her talent for drawing vivid and engaging portraits of many of the players in the story of twentieth-century America. In addition to Frankfurter, such figures as Will Scarlet, Archbishop William Temple, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are depicted as passionate theological and political companions of her father in the struggle for social justice amidst a tide of ecclesial apathy. Bonhoeffer in particular is portrayed as the complex, three-dimensional human being that he was, rather than the idealized portrait so often drawn of him. Sifton marks the points of disagreement between Bonhoeffer and her father, while acknowledging the changes that the Second World War wrought in both of their approaches.

These portraits are interlaced with Sifton's own childhood memories of growing up in New York and Heath. Although only four when the Serenity Prayer was written, she provides a clear lens into the world of its writing, and notes that the theological accents of her father's prayer were consistent with the major themes of his entire worldview. The original prayer begins, not with a plea for serenity *per se*, but for the *grace* to accept the unchangeable with serenity. Additionally, the second clause of the prayer, emphasizing as it does in Niebuhr's original the "courage to change the things that should be changed," contrasts and challenges the more well-known version, which emphasizes the "courage to change what we can change." The difference between *should* and *can* is immense, and, as Sifton notes, "the shift in the text reduces a difficult, strong idea to a banal, weak one." She adds, acidly, "I suspect that this dumbing down of the prayer has contributed to its enormous popularity" (293).

Indeed, Sifton pulls no punches when comparing the world in which the Serenity Prayer was written to the contemporary world. Reading her biographies of spiritually courageous men and women who risked much (often all) in the name of social justice rooted in Christian witness, it is difficult to consider the state of mainline liberal Christianity in the United States today. Yet, it must be said, Sifton herself is aware that her father and his colleagues were quite often the exception rather than the rule for mainline Christians. All too often, the church then, as today, is beset by an apathetic inwardness, which pays little heed to the persistent problems of social and political injustice. One should therefore not idealize the Christian conscience of Niebuhr's age *too* much. Then, as today, the church accepted with serenity precisely those things that needed urgently to be changed, lacked the courage to change them, and failed utterly to know the difference. Yet a crucial difference between then and today is that then we *had* Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, John Bennett and others to call continually upon the churches to engage sincerely and realistically with their world.

Today, the mainline denominations often know the words to this song, but they don't hear the music. The nuance and moral complexity that stood at the heart of Niebuhr's work finds only a pale echo in much contemporary theology and ethics. Even when such voices can be found, they are frequently drowned out by the cacophony of rhetorical excess characteristic of the Religious Right, which for many Americans now represents the public face of Christianity. Reading *The Serenity Prayer* one is often left wondering whether in today's climate Christianity can once again possess such moral and intellectual credibility.

Sifton concludes the book with a history of the convoluted series of events that led to the numerous misattributions of the Serenity Prayer. Most egregious, to Sifton, given the con-

text of its writing, is the process by which the prayer came to be attributed to the sixteenth-century pietist theologian F. C. Oetinger through the casual plagiarism of the German scholar Theodor Wilhelm, who used the prayer in a book on politics, which he published pseudonymously (and inexplicably) under the name “Friedrich Oetinger.” Sifton notes wryly that “the German subplot of the Serenity Prayer story was truly bizarre” (343). Even more bizarre was Wilhelm’s carelessness in correcting the mistake when the true author of the prayer was identified to him.

The Serenity Prayer has taken on a life of its own, and traveled considerably beyond the small town of Heath where it had its birth. Surely Reinhold Niebuhr could never have expected that his short prayer for grace, courage, and wisdom would have become a foundation stone for the self-help movement. Sifton notes his very mixed feelings as his prayer found its way onto a broad array of kitsch (much of which was sent to him through friends). Yet, in *The Serenity Prayer* Sifton gives an honorable accounting of the true history and meaning of this prayer. By recapturing its historical context and its theological essence, Sifton reinvigorates the power of its words. She rightly notes that “the Serenity Prayer is not just a familiar, agreeable cliché. After all, its instructions are tremendously difficult and puzzling to follow” (11). But prayer at its best, and public prayer in particular, *should* challenge us and puzzle us. Otherwise, prayer simply becomes the enforcement of mediocrity through recitation. The Serenity Prayer, as Niebuhr prayed it in Heath and as Elizabeth Sifton tells its tale, helps us to understand the motivating and disruptive power of prayer.

Scott R. Paeth
DePaul University, Chicago, IL
spaeth@depaul.edu

Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 496 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-691-11436-6. Hardback.

For the Glory of God is Professor Rodney Stark’s second book in a two-volume work devoted to the social history of monotheism in shaping the modern western world. Together, the two volumes represent an exhaustive body of research that chronicles both the positive and negative role of religious belief in an engaging and accessible historical narrative. In addition, there is a further stated intention to these works, which is, as Stark explains in the Postscript to volume 2, “to understand why Gods were long ago banished from the social scientific study of religion” (367). Thus, throughout the book, Stark engages in a series of debunkings with regard to the prevailing scholarly wisdom within the subdiscipline of sociology of religion in service of his larger argument that “Gods are the fundamental feature of religion” (376), and that Gods rather than rituals are the primary influence on morality.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, Stark is not shy in attributing great power and social influence to religion. Nor is he shy about stating his thesis in a clear and direct fashion. This is indicated in the opening epigraph to the Introduction, which states that “Uncommon things must be said in common words,” and which is followed by Stark’s own claim “that *monotheism* may well have been the single most significant innovation in history” (1, emphasis his). In support of this claim, Stark devotes a chapter each to the direct causal influence of monotheism on reformations, the rise of science, witch-hunts, and the abolitionist movement.

Chapter 1 on reformations, which is entitled, “God’s *Truth*,” [his italics] does not simply chronicle the sixteenth-century period of religious upheaval and transformation known as