

# Scholar alters view, says Niebuhr probably wrote 'Serenity Prayer'

## Shapiro cites new evidence: Shapiro cites new evidence

News in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

After receiving new evidence, the editor of a prominent compilation of famous quotations now believes that theologian Reinhold Niebuhr most likely is the author of the popular “Serenity Prayer.”

“I think it’s not certain,” Fred R. Shapiro, editor of *The Yale Book of Quotations*, said in an interview November 30. “If I had to put a number on it, I’d say it’s 80 percent. But it’s not 100 percent.”

In a *Yale Alumni Magazine* article published in the summer of 2008, Shapiro, the associate librarian at Yale’s law library, questioned whether Niebuhr was actually the author of the prayer, which has been popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous. At the time, Shapiro said it was “possible” Niebuhr wrote it but also feasible he “was unconsciously inspired by an idea from elsewhere.”

Elizabeth Sifton, Niebuhr’s daughter, has said the prayer, which usually begins, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . . ,” was written in 1943, but Shapiro found references to it dating to the 1930s that did not credit the theologian.

On November 19, he received a note via a listserv of the American Dialect Society that a Duke University librarian had found a 1937 reference crediting the prayer to Niebuhr. The words of the prayer in that reference, reports library staffer Stephen Goranson, are in a different order from later references: “Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.”

Said Shapiro: "By Stephen Goran son finding it in 1937 with an attribution to Niebuhr at that time, that makes it much more reasonable to conclude that he did originate it."

Unless other new evidence refutes the finding, Shapiro said his next book of quotations, scheduled to be published in about five years, will credit Niebuhr.

Sifton, the author of *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*, told the *New York Times* that the finding provides further evidence of what she has long believed. "[This] confirms what I've thought for some time." -*Religion News Service*