

What About Hitler?

reviewed by [John D. Roth](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

In Review



What about Hitler? Wrestling with Jesus's Call to Nonviolence in an Evil World

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Brazos

A green-dyed spray of grass seed and chemical fertilizer is all that marks the site where, on the morning of October 2, 2006, 10 children were shot in their Amish schoolhouse at the edge of a field outside Nickel Mine, Pennsylvania.

The army of media SUVs, bristling with camera equipment and satellite linkups, has long since disappeared, and the nation's attention has returned to the more familiar litany of suicide bombings and casualty counts in the global "war on terror." Yet for a brief moment the attention of the world was focused on this tiny community, fascinated less by the familiar tale of violence than by the remarkable story of forgiveness. Within a week of the event at least 2,400 news stories had appeared expressing amazement at the gestures of kindness offered by the Amish community to the killer's widow or bewilderment at the announcement that public donations gathered for the survivors of the massacre would be shared with the killer's children.

The watching world has had many opportunities to observe Christian responses to violence in the past five years, perhaps none more visible than the flurry of books and articles published in the wake of September 11, 2001, on topics related to just war theory. The tenor of these publications ranges widely—from standard rehearsals of traditional just war arguments by Peter Temes (*The Just War*), J. Daryl Charles (*Between Pacifism and Jihad*) and David Rodin (*War and Self-Defense*), to a hawkish defense of the neoconservative "war on terror" by Jean Bethke Elshtain (*Just War Against Terror*) and a revival of crusading language by Darrell Cole (*When God Says War Is Right*). What all of these books—and dozens of articles and op-ed columns—have in common is the goal of convincing readers that under the right circumstances Christians may legitimately kill other human beings.

To be sure, no defender of just war theory sees this outcome as a happy one: most Christians, like the Kung Fu master, hope to resolve conflicts in a peaceable manner through a combination of reason and self-disciplined restraint. But defenders of just war think that if the stakes get high enough—there is some debate about the precise threshold, though everyone seems to agree that Hitler presents the classic case—then any Christian with a shred of decency should pursue the cause of justice, even if it means using lethal violence.

Robert Brimlow, a Catholic philosopher teaching at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, wants to be persuaded by the just war arguments of his theological tradition. In *What About Hitler?* he engages the discussion in its most

emotionally charged form, critically examining the assumptions in just war arguments and peeling back the layers of his own deepest fears. In each chapter he begins with a searching meditation on a scripture passage, in *lectio divino* fashion, and recounts a personal story before turning to theological arguments with the laser clarity of his philosophical training. The result is an unusual mix of devotional piety, self-revelation and rigorous logic.

Brimlow is deeply respectful of the church's tradition, but against his own inclinations he cannot reconcile Christ's teachings with just war arguments. His conclusions are likely to offend many mainstream Christians. For example, he regards Augustine's distinction between a Christian's inner disposition and an action itself as a false dichotomy—a logic that can ultimately sanction abortion as readily as just war theory. He describes Thomas Aquinas's principle of "double effect"—that the unforeseen evil of a moral action is permissible if the intended benefit is clearly good—as a "strange and noxious doctrine, notwithstanding its longevity, [which] renders null all moral absolutes and opens the door for all sorts of actions that ought to be prohibited."

Furthermore, Brimlow exposes the incoherence of the distinction between combatants and noncombatants in just war theory. And perhaps most disconcerting, he demonstrates that virtually all of the arguments put forward by Osama bin Laden in his 2002 "Letter to America" meet just war criteria.

Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the patron saint of the "What About Hitler?" question, does not stand up well to Brimlow's criticism. After all, Brimlow argues, Jesus faced the same questions of ineffectiveness and apparent helplessness that Bonhoeffer and other Christian pacifists did in the face of National Socialism. Yet far from justifying killing his oppressors, Christ broke the cycle of violence, confident in the resurrection's power over the cross and the knowledge that love will ultimately triumph over fear. "The main difficulty in accepting the implications of our call to be peacemakers," Brimlow concludes, "is our fear of death and dying, born of a weakness of faith."

Chapter 7, the climax of Brimlow's book, consists of only a half page, the essence of which can be easily summarized: "The gospel is clear and simple, and I know what the response to the Hitler question must be. And I desperately want to avoid this conclusion. . . . We must repay evil with good; and we must be peacemakers. This may also mean as a result that the evildoers will kill us. Then, we shall also die.

That's it. There is nothing else. . . . We are called to live the kingdom as he proclaimed it and be his disciples, come what may."

Clearly, Brimlow does not believe that Christian nonviolence is a clever strategy of resistance that will guarantee a successful outcome. Nor does he suggest that his arguments can be translated directly into U.S. foreign policy. Instead, Christian peacemaking is a confessional posture, a conscious preparation for dying—for dying well—that "ceases to be absurd only when it is embedded in a life of faithfulness and the practices that arise from our faithfulness."

Brimlow is far less clear about what forms of ecclesial life are needed to shape these practices of faithfulness. His prayers in *What About Hitler?* tend to be private conversations with God that often sound astringent and even lonely.

Which brings us back to the Amish community at Nickel Mine. In the end, the kind of Christian witness Brimlow describes here is possible only if it emerges out of the collective worship and life of the gathered church. Christ's call to discipleship is genuinely good news to the world only if it is embodied in practice.