

Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust, by Victoria J. Barnett

reviewed by [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

On a wall of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., is a quotation from Israeli historian Yahuda Bauer: "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander." At first glance, the "above all" is problematic. Why is it not better to be a passive witness to evil than an active agent? And--some would say--if the choice is between surviving injustice and being destroyed by it, why not survive by being a bystander?

Bystanders is a powerful argument against such moral-empirical flippancy. Victoria Barnett, a consultant for the Department of Church Relations of the Holocaust Museum, explores an area that has received relatively scant attention in Holocaust studies. Her thesis matches Bauer's: "In the long term, Nazism was powerful not just because of the numbers of party stalwarts, but because millions of Germans were prepared to inform on one another, obey orders, and remain passive while others became victims."

This is an intimidating book. Anyone who has visited one of Germany's death camp sites knows the question that surges through the mind as one leaves the place: "How could they?" Underneath the question is a temptation to believe that the perpetrators of the Nazi horror constituted a class apart. Daniel J. Goldhagen's well-known study, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, contributes to this view by suggesting that Germans of the '30s were culturally infected with "eliminationist anti-Semitism," a disease to which they were uniquely vulnerable. Wherever democracy prevails, says Goldhagen--as it does in modern Germany--that disease is not likely to recur.

Many an historian has taken stark exception to this comforting thesis, and Barnett is one of them. Like Christopher Browning in his book *Ordinary Men* (on the Nazi police battalions who murdered Jews and others by the million in Poland and the Soviet Union), she documents a truth that convinced democrats would like to ignore: great evils can enter politics by majority permission. For American analogies, one has merely to remember the evil of slavery and the more recent example of the hysteria that led to the unjust imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans in 1942.

The moral and empirical worth of democracy hinges not on its honoring of majority rule but on its care for minority rights. For the protection of those rights, some members of the majority must acquire what René Girard and Barnett call "disruptive empathy," an empathy that is willing to publicly challenge majority ideologies and fears. Alas, it is the virtue of the smallest minority of all: those who protest the official treatment of victims at the risk of becoming one of them.

The Nazis knew how to keep that minority very small indeed. They created a "rationality of survival" that rendered "all other motives of human action irrational. . . . Rational defense of one's survival called for nonresistance to the other's destruction." This was the operating rule in every Nazi death camp, and it was the rule for all of German society. As in the Rwandan genocide, passive and active collaboration with murder composed one moral-social syndrome, a phenomenon from which no society on earth is immune. If there is anything that citizens of the 20th century have learned about our species it is surely this: "We now know that ordinary human beings are capable of doing and tolerating terrible things."

To round out the intimidating power of her work, however, Barnett provides us with a complementary historical truth: We also know that ordinary human beings are capable of protesting courageously against terrible things. Her prime illustration is the French village of Le Chambon, whose residents collectively rescued some 2,500 Jews from certain death at the hands of Nazi occupiers during the '40s. The example of Le Chambon is especially intimidating for Americans. We speak the word "ethics" as though it chiefly connotes those principles which individuals cherish in their innermost selves. We resist being told by others what is right or wrong. Though we celebrate individuals who stand up for their convictions, we feel little obligation to imitate the martyrs whose moral courage we admire. Seldom in our personal conversation or in our public rhetoric do we note that, without social support, moral heroism is unlikely to emerge. Nor do we often notice how, when encountering social opposition, many a moral individualist retreats into public silence.

The Le Chambon case is decisive on this point. Under the leadership of its Reformed Church pastor, André Trocmé, an entire village turned to the task of keeping Jewish children out of the clutches of the Gestapo. When interviewed later about this extraordinary accomplishment, the villagers refused to describe it as extraordinary. They said, "Isn't the protection of victims what Christians should expect of one another? How could we have saved the children if we hadn't agreed together to do so? They may have been strangers, but they were first of all our fellow human

beings!" That is what people are able to say when their inmost characters have been formed and supported by the accumulated influence of a community.

Barnett's short final chapter brings home the meaning of this study for Christians of her native America. "The notion that we are obligated to help a stranger from another class or ethnic group was a radical one when Jesus of Nazareth told the story of the good Samaritan. . . . It remains radical today," more radical than in the Nazi time because now we globally wired citizens of planet Earth are flooded with knowledge of victims everywhere. On daily television we can see and see and see the horrors of Rwanda, Bosnia and Sierra Leone--and then go back to our dinners.

The theoretical conclusions of Barnett's final pages are so pertinent, so powerful, that I would gladly have seen them all printed in italics. Indeed, were I now teaching an introductory course on Christian ethics in either a church or a seminary I would include this book as mandatory reading. And I would spend a long session on this final chapter. Here Barnett takes careful theoretical exception to the implication of the title of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Widely subject to unsubtle misunderstandings of the dualism apparent in the very title of the book, Niebuhr later remarked that perhaps he should have titled it, "Immoral Man and Especially Immoral Society." But this is too easy. The implication still would be that groups are incapable of moral heroism. Barnett's critique of this view is sharp and crucial. She quotes Zygmunt Bauman: "Moral behavior can exist only in a social context." "The private and public realms of morality are ultimately one," Barnett states. During the Holocaust, "rescuers and resistance members were distinguished not just by their character, but by their vision of a different kind of society and their commitment to that vision."

Where do individuals acquire social vision and commitments worthy to be called human? Surely, in some community which models and anticipates such a society--which for Christians means some form of the church. Like other human communities, the church can be a training ground for either bystanders or rescuers, for those who neglect persecuted strangers or for those who give them special care. Only by such care can the church claim for itself some scrap of "holiness." For, says Barnett, quoting Darrell Fasching, "a holy community has its center outside itself, in a transcendence whose social analogue is the stranger. Thus a holy community defines the human in terms of an otherness that gives birth to an ethic of hospitality. . . . Compassion binds the individual within the holy community to the individuals in the society beyond its borders."

This conclusion reminded me of a similar conclusion reached by a study in which I was involved some 30 years ago on a sample of citizens in an urban area of central North Carolina. One of our aims was to discover the circumstances under which some people embody a version of ethical maturity closely resembling "an ethic of hospitality" to the stranger. We discovered that the people most likely to qualify shared three characteristics: they had a vision, often religious, of what society should be; they had a cluster of friends, a trusted community of support; and they regularly participated in an active long-range struggle for justice in the society. The "long-range" was striking in our findings. People with liberal convictions about justice who lacked the support of both a religious-philosophic vision and a community of friends soon left the public struggle. Their profiles exactly matched that of the "tired liberal."

Over the past ten years, the good news out of South Africa and the bad news out of Bosnia and Rwanda should have convinced us that collaboration for the doing of injustice can be fought only by collaboration for the doing of justice. We may honor a Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a Raoul Wallenberg for their heroic witness, but we must not forget that they used every available resource of bureaucratic organization to combat a formidable bureaucratic enemy. Nor must we forget that somewhere back in their early lives they acquired an ethical grounding in some community.

Recent research on the Berlin Jews saved from deportation by non-Jewish neighbors in the '40s indicates that for every Jew saved, an average of 12 Berliners had to help. Ethical individualists take note: "The creation of an ethical community is what saves people; its absence is what dooms them."