Book Review Essay

The Phantom Limb of the One-Armed Bandit: Nigel Biggar's *Colonialism* and the Crucified People of Quintana Road

Tyler B. Davis

Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning.* Glasgow, Scotland: William Collins, 2023.

In San Antonio, where I live, we are still grappling with what might be salvaged from the horrendous suffering and loss of fifty-three lives in the back of an abandoned tractor trailer on Quintana Road in late June 2022. Traveling to the US from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, sixty-six people were deserted inside a sweltering trailer by smugglers, possessing no route of escape and no access to water or air in the raging heat. The fifty-three who perished were victims of a human cruelty that, far from random, was the result of an entrenched global system that organizes political life according to the enclosures of the nation-state.

In the aftermath, a makeshift memorial was built at the scene. The memorial consists of a cross for each victim, along with candles, flowers, wreaths, water bottles, paintings, photographs, icons, stuffed animals, and other sacred objects. It is vigilantly tended by devoted caretakers who have created a space for community members, friends, and families to remember and grieve the loss of each loved one.[1]

Responsibility for the calamity has been evaded, however. The state assigned blame to the smugglers alone, thereby deflecting attention away from its essential role in producing the fatal channels of transit and the demand for the smuggler economies which many people utilize in moving

[1] Scott Huddleston, "'They had dreams' — ceremony honors 53 migrants who died in sweltering trailer on San Antonio's Southwest Side," *San Antonio Express-News*, July 28, 2022, https://www.expressnews.com/news/border-mexico/article/They-had-dreams-ceremony-honors-53-17335842.php.

The Conrad Grebel Review 40, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 169-180.

across borders. In this context, the fifty-three crosses at the memorial acquire a universality: they reveal the fifty-three as the crucified people of history and become signs of the urgency of salvaging a new horizon of human community where this cannot happen and where people are free to move and to stay.[2]

The Contexts of *Colonialism*

Between the argument in defense of nations and empires in his *Between Kin and Cosmopolis: An Ethic of the Nation* (2014) and the full-throated imperial and colonial apologia that is *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (2023), Nigel Biggar joined company with a number of academics-turned-culture-warriors. A sequence of notable events led to this situation, particularly the "Ethics and Empire" project of the McDonald Centre—a research institute in Christian theology at the University of Oxford where Biggar served as Director. This project and reactions to it warrant discrete analysis, as they are representative of patterns across the North Atlantic world in the struggle over legitimate historical knowledge.[3]

While *Colonialism* indeed represents the fruition of Biggar's involvement in recent culture wars, focusing on this context alone may tempt misreading the stakes of its arguments, as though they were merely a matter of nostalgia or a melancholic cleaving to a shameful past. In what follows, I offer a critical assessment of *Colonialism*. More significant than its internal failures are the implications Biggar's project avails concerning the relation between imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. I suggest that *Colonialism* ought to be grasped as an academic contribution to a certain xenological politics of the nation, and, accordingly, that its arguments are instructive for understanding the positive function of imperial and colonial history in nationalist projects today in the US, UK, and elsewhere. The book consequently sheds light on the anti-nationalist shape of moral opposition needed to become accountable to the crucified people of Quintana Road.

---

[2] The notion of the crucified people is drawn from Ignacio Ellacuría. See especially, "Discernir "El Signo" de Los Tiempos," *Diakonia* (1981): 57-59.

[3] Important analysis has been undertaken by Huw C. Davies and Sheena E. MacRae in "An Anatomy of the British War on Woke," *Race & Class*, OnlineFirst, May 15, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/03063968231164905.

Reckoning as Exoneration

Colonialism may be reconstructed as follows. Biggar, an ethicist and theologian, stumbled unwittingly into the imperial wars of historiography after making a public defense of Cecil Rhodes. The jarring experience widened his perspective to new fields of scholarship producing anti-colonial arguments. And yet, what immediately became clear to Biggar was that, unlike himself, the anti-colonialists were not equipped for sophisticated moral analysis of their subject. According to *Colonialism*, any legitimate view of this history will offer a balanced picture. The book thus rhetorically begins with a position appearing inviting: a fair reading of a morally complicated story—who would be against that? It is a sleight of hand, for *Colonialism*'s real task is the exoneration of its namesake.

Eight chapters are framed by questions Biggar poses and answers to reckon with what he takes as the anti-colonial distortion of the moral record of imperialism and colonialism. For instance: was colonialism irredeemably tied to slavery? Was colonialism pervasively violent? Was empire essentially racist? Was it predominantly motivated by greed? *Colonialism* aims to unsettle the distortive consensus implied in such questions, a goal which unfolds strategically by diminishing concepts utilized in anti-colonial critique and emphasizing the irreducible diversity of imperial and colonial history.

Thus, in chapter three, the concept of race is haphazardly naturalized as the "physical" and "cultural" features of a group and racism is reduced to prejudicial attitudes (67-9). This conceptual narrowing enables the argument that, while there were obvious cases of racism under British imperial and colonial rule, the idea that the British Empire was essentially or systematically racist is incorrect. To the contrary, Cecil Rhodes is cast as the heroic counterexample of a certain colonial non-racism. Regarding colonialism and slavery, Biggar believes everything hinges on appreciating British anti-slavery efforts. Yes, the British Empire was implicated in slavery, so the argument goes. But this only makes the British Empire typical of imperial phenomena across history. For Biggar, what is remarkable is its abolitionist awakening in the nineteenth century (65-6). So, for example, Biggar takes British colonial violence in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century West Africa as expressive of the Empire's later enlightened abolitionist

virtue (251-2).

The authoritative sources anchoring these arguments come from insiders: British colonial administrators, secretaries, and governing authorities of various ranks. In reconstructing British colonial governance in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, Lord Cromer and Lord Milner set the terms for Biggar's assessment of the facts on the ground. On their account, the decision to exclude Egyptians from governmental authority was not rooted in racism or another form of supremacy. Rather, foreign rule was justified as a paternal political structure facilitating Egyptian capacities for virtuous home rule which the British Lords found lacking. Imperialism's instrumentalist racism is understood as moral developmentalism by the Lords and therefore as the same by the author (79-83). *Colonialism* gleans from this moment the notion that the British Lords exercised domination virtuously (no contradiction on the book's terms) and this occasion is made to represent British colonialism as a morally complex phenomenon led by morally mixed human beings.

If the history of the British Empire and its colonial projects are recognized in their complexity, there is a need for a moral framework sensitive to it. Biggar characterizes the framework in need as moral realism, by which he means, first, a recognition that the world is embedded with objective moral reality. And second, realism entails the notion that the world so experienced is also fallen (10-3). For Biggar, British colonial activities are paradigmatic of both features of moral life. Generals, governors, administrators, Lords, and the like are accountable to reality's discernable principles. While colonialism caused human and ecological devastation at the planetary scale—from Australia and Tasmania to Kenya and Canada and beyond—one must, Biggar insists, see its shortcomings as natural to moral life. To the extent colonial actors were motivated by pure and not ill intentions, they are judged in their failures and the harm they caused as tragic emblems of the generically human, not ideological or vicious. The thought is that realism makes possible the recovery of the tragedies as well as complexities of colonialism. And, further, that it allows one to see the apparent benefits of the history in question, which, for Biggar, include a variety of moral achievements such as the suppression of the slave trade; the global dissemination of medicine, hospitals, transportation, and agriculture; and military opposition to Nazism.

Moral Realism as Political Manicheism

Over half a century ago, Walter Rodney anticipated arguments such as Biggar's when he wrote of a common sense justification of colonialism in Africa as having two hands:

> The argument suggests that, on the one hand, there was exploitation and oppression, but, on the other hand, colonial governments did much for the benefit of Africans and they developed Africa. It is our contention that this is completely false. Colonialism had only one hand—it was a one-armed bandit.[4]

Colonialism is the work of a moral accountant so convinced of the reality of the one-armed bandit's second, phantom limb, that he attempts to convince others of the same. But the second hand never appears as more than a phantom nor colonialism as anything but a bandit. I indicate how and why this is the case before considering more urgent questions emerging when these arguments are set in a contemporary political context.

The moral argument of *Colonialism* is that the identification of the historical variability of empire and colonialism enables the recovery of a balanced assessment of their moral status. Sometimes virtuous, sometimes vicious, but always historically and therefore morally complex. Hence, the chapters proceed through arguments about historical variance across time and place, issuing (as matters of convenience rather than cogency) conceptual reductions (e.g., race and racism), in an effort to legitimate a certain realism about empire.

The problem with this argument, however, is that the recovery of historical variability does not generate the moral logic Biggar thinks it does. Of course, British imperial expansion and domination in the colonies exhibited diversity in practice. And of course, the cast of characters at the helm of various expeditions, programs, and actions displayed differences in orientation relative to colonized populations. But historical variability as such discloses nothing about the moral status of empire and colonialism. It remains unexplained why the diverse practices of domination utilized by British political and corporate classes should be investigated in terms

[4] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Verso, 2018 [1972]), 246.

of ethical distinction, rather than, say, demonology, or simple variations of what Paul considered the powers of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4).

What Biggar would need if he were to offer something approaching a coherent moral accounting of empire is an argument about how domination may admit morally salient distinctions. This is a question of criteria. But with respect to this question, *Colonialism* wholly fails to make sense of itself. The book is so embedded in the world of imperial and colonial power brokers that it uncritically adopts their moral criteria. Did the British exercise power justly in Egypt? Ask Lord Cromer. Was the East India Company intentionally invested in human subjugation across India? Ask company administrator John Malcolm (25-6, 150). Embracing the conceits of colonial authorities results in reproducing their self-justifying judgments in defense of obvious injustices—including, for a startling example, the spineless description of British torture and brutality during the Mau Mau Rebellion as "not radically dirty" (271).

The problem of vicious circularity is compounded by the portrayal of British colonial activity as the global paradigm for understanding human moral life. This generates an account of the British Empire not as a product of contingent circumstances, but as the natural manifestation of a human will to domination. Less a moral history, *Colonialism* is a natural theology of imperialism and colonialism. On this point it is worth observing that despite pleas throughout the book of the difference between colonialism and Nazism, Biggar's political natural theology reproduces the same conceptual form as the latter's theological purveyors (143, 147, 214, 286).

The moral argument of *Colonialism* is, in any event, subordinate to its political argument. The latter contends that insofar as imperial and colonial history can be morally rehabilitated as not only harmful but also tragic and even beneficial, there are reasons to reinvest pride in western history, which is of present political value for the west. Along these lines, Biggar charges post-colonialism with being an ally to Russian and Chinese expansionism because its shame-producing arguments undermine the west from within (5, 296-7). (Here, Biggar extends an ideological tradition of Christian ethics with precursors in Reinhold Niebuhr's use of moral realism to advance the Manichean Cold War—a disheartening legacy which Niebuhr participated in until he was transformed by the influence of the black freedom struggle

in the 1960s.) *Colonialism* is thus invested in the political utility of moral realism for the promotion of western power within a Manichean construal of reality. Had the book's moral argument achieved integrity, it would not have survived instrumentalization in this ideological project. On the terms of *Colonialism*'s political argument, then, manufacturing a second, benevolent hand for the one-armed bandit is ultimately intended as a contribution to a larger spiritual-imperial agenda: the forgery of a soul to fortify western nations for militarist expeditions and wars to come.

The Nationalism of *Colonialism* and the Challenge of the Commons

I have indicated why the one-armed bandit's phantom limb remains just that, despite the attempt to construe Manichean politics as moral complexity and benevolence. Still, the more pressing consideration concerns the availability of *Colonialism*'s arguments to the grim nationalist projects of exclusion, enclosure, and expulsion conditioning the global present and future. A critical question is how to challenge these terms: how to respond to a political Manicheism leveraging ethical and elite academic resources to refashion the history of imperial ruin for nationalist projects today? How to move toward a future not rooted in the enclosing national pride of colonialism's glory but one that works through the latter's painful afterlives to declare "Never Again"?[5]

I suggest our present context demands an anti-Manichean moral imagination committed to the remaking of common life. Critically it will involve grounding anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in a principled anti-nationalism. The reason for this may be gleaned, surprisingly enough, from an extended argument Biggar has been making—in *Colonialism* and other writings—about essential continuities between imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. The argument I am referring to may be indicated in thesis form from *Colonialism*: "Empire, then, is a phase in the history of many a nation-state" (14). The citation is not given to affirm a developmentalist

[5] This echoes the exhortations of Paul Gilroy. See Gilroy, "Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human," The 2019 Holberg Lecture, https://holbergprize.org/en/news/holberg-prize/2019-holberg-lecture-laureate-paul-gilroy; See also, Gilroy, "Never Again Grenfell," April 24, 2023, https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/art-and-ideas/never-again-grenfell/. The latter's account of Grenfell aided reflection in this essay.

account of the nation, but to highlight the practical relations which scholars such as Nandita Sharma have powerfully identified (though toward radically different purposes than Biggar): nationalism arose with racism as a support mechanism for emerging imperial and colonial power, a way of ensuring the metropole maintained ideological legitimacy over its colonies. What *Colonialism* illumines—what I understand as its profound and perverse insight—is that today the positive remembrances of imperialism and colonialism are potent ideological tools in the effort to prop up nationalism.

A genealogical analysis of the nation's roots in colonial history is not needed here to grasp lines of connection, for the author's recent publications disclose the political stakes of *Colonialism*.[6] In the last five years, Biggar has produced sermons, public addresses, popular opinion and policy pieces, and academic articles, all of which, in the British xenophobic tradition of Enoch Powell, seek to catalyze nationalism through advancing repressive state restrictions on transnational human movement.[7]

Representatively, Biggar argues in the journal of *Studies in Christian Ethics* that nations have duties to preserve the features that make them attractive to migrants in the first place, which should involve restricting and deporting migrants to their home countries, or, according to more recent policy, to Rwanda.[8] Exemplifying what John Berger identified as the pernicious "Second Calculation" of migrant subjugation, Biggar suggests that concern for the economic interest of the national working class runs in essential competition with international migrants.[9] A cynical appeal to the

[6] See, for example, Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[7] For two such instances, see Nigel Biggar, "The Bishops Are Wrong: There's Nothing Immoral about Controlling Our Borders," *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2023, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/26/bishops-wrong-nothing-immoral-about-controlling-borders/; "Immigration: Christian Reflections," *Anglican Ink*, November 14, 2021, anglican.ink/2021/11/14/immigration-christian-reflections/.

[8] Biggar, "Whatever Happened to the Canaanites? Principles of a Christian Ethic of Mass Immigration," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 35.1 (2022): 127–139, https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468211046687; "More Heat than Light: The Christian Churches and the Rwanda Policy," Policy Exchange, December 7, 2022, https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/from-the-channel-to-rwanda/#contents__accordion.

[9] John Berger, Jean Mohr, and Sven Blomberg, *A Seventh Man* (New York: Verso, 2010 [1975]), 148-51; Biggar, "Whatever Happened to the Canaanites?"

limits of trade unionism from a member of the academic class, the argument is meant to undermine whatever solidarity an ethics of compassion could attain by disciplining it according to nationalist identity politics. Rather than allowing compassion to become the basis for confronting the limits of bordered human community and, further, the borderless structures of capitalist exploitation, the mystifying contradiction of national belonging divides solidarity through a hierarchy of citizens and migrants.[10]

Situating *Colonialism* in the context of Biggar's nationalist agenda against human movement across the English Channel and the planet raises the stakes of opposition to its arguments. The recovery of pride in the imperial and colonial projects of yesterday functions as a disavowal of responsibilities today. It is this morally freighted dynamic—what has been called the boomerang effect of colonialism as captured in A. Sivanandan's saying, "we are here because you were there"—that *Colonialism* aspires to undermine.[11] The phantom benefits of imperial inclusion there and then become the punitive warrant for national exclusion here and now. To challenge *Colonialism*'s vision of the earth, then, not only means challenging revisionist historiography of imperialism and colonialism, or, as above, challenging the moral criteria underwriting its revision. More fundamentally, it entails refusing the political imagination of human community its arguments serve.

In this setting, what potential may other forms of nationalism hold, especially those of a qualitatively distinct expression which have emerged in response to imperial and colonial power? To the extent British imperialism and colonialism essentially contributed to the political imagination that would coalesce in the ascendence of national home rule, the limits of anti-imperial and anti-colonial nationalism come into view. This is to

[10] To my knowledge, Biggar has yet to convert his arguments for repressive controls on human mobility into demands for the repatriation of long-standing residents, but such a position may be anticipated as a potential development of existing arguments with precedent in British politics. For analysis of the relations between immigration controls and repatriation which remains contemporary, see A. Sivanandan, "From Immigration Control to 'Induced Repatriation'," in *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1987), 131-140.

[11] On Sivanandan's saying, see "We Are Here Because You Were There," asivanandan.com/key_sayings/we-are-here-because-you-were-there/; On the boomerang effect, an image drawn from Aimé Césaire, consult Kojo Koram's *Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire* (London: John Murray, 2022), 3-7.

say, *Colonialism* grasps the pervasive imperial and colonial conditioning that persists in the form of the nation itself, especially in practices used for hierarchal separation and subjugation. In the national paradigm, such practices are mediated by citizenship. Thus, while there are invaluable lessons to be learned from nation-centered forms of decolonization,[12] as well as irreducible differences to be maintained between Third World and bourgeois nationalism, the overriding border-producing logic of citizenship persists even in nationalism's most commendable iterations. According to Nandita Sharma this is because:

> [A]ll nationalisms are fundamentally autochthonous and productive of a hierarchical separation between National-Natives (autochthons) and Migrants (allochthons). Across the political spectrum from far right to hard left, the right of National-Natives is the right to home rule. In the process, Migrants are left without a home in this world.[13]

I find Sharma's description demanding of a vigilance for new possibilities of common life beyond nationalism.

The Spirit of the Crucified People of Quintana Road

That *Colonialism* leverages the non-discontinuity between nation, colony, and empire for ideological purposes represents its contribution to contemporary discourses of the nation and thus its challenge to all who find the *status quo* intolerable. Salvaging an alternative will involve making the earth a place where capacities to move and to stay are not taken as threats to identity and possession but are recognized as being just as essential to life as the right and capacity to breathe.[14] Imagining human community beyond the nation-state

[12] See, for example, Adom Getachew's important *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[13] Nandita Sharma, *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

[14] Echoing what voices including Achille Mbembe and the Dream Defenders have articulated. See, for instance Achille Mbembe, "Bodies as Borders," *From the European South* 4 (2019): 10, europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it; Mbembe, "How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness," interview by Nils Gilman, *Noema*, January 11, 2022, www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness/; Dream Defenders, "Freedom of Movement," *Freedom Papers*, www.dreamdefenders.org/freedom-papers/freedom-of-movement. On the spiritual vision

presents an undeniable problem theoretically and practically. But this should not mean overlooking where it is presently being practiced nor the abundant archives, parables, and wells of inspiration to draw from for this purpose—from heroic witnesses like the Diggers and the Zapatistas to ordinary border-transgressing prayers to sources yet to be gathered.[15]

Undoing the conditions that made the crucifixion of the fifty-three people on Quintana Road possible and predictable entails moral opposition to the international-national order of hierarchical expulsion, in this case, one seeking rejuvenation through phantom histories of imperial humanitarianism and colonial benevolence. The building of a just alternative demands a moral commitment to enacting something like the Good Samaritan parable at the scale of the earth, along the lines Martin Luther King, Jr. proposed in "Beyond Vietnam," where ordinary acts of love for neighbors on the move are combined with transformative efforts to restructure the edifices that make Jericho and Quintana Road fatal.[16] Remaking common life will not raise the fifty-three crucified people of Quintana Road. Resurrection remains the work of God. But an anti-nationalist commons, as one form of responding to the Spirit of the crucified people, can contribute to the life-saving ending of violent political projects that deny so many the capacity to live and move and result in the building of more crosses.

On my last visit, a tattered dictionary rested on top of the lectern, which stands in front of the crosses and faces toward Quintana Road and the

---

of the Dream Defenders, see the forthcoming essay by Nyle Fort, "Power! Transformation! Miracles!"

[15] For an example of border-transgressing prayer in disaster conditions, see Will Wellman, "Why Do We Look for God in a Hurricane?" *America: The Jesuit Review*, August 29, 2019, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/08/29/why-do-we-look-god-hurricane.

[16] King: "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed., James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 240-1.

world. In a place as holy and haunted as the memorial for *los 53 migrantes* one becomes attuned to the charged meanings—stories and signs—of the objects all around. The softball glove placed at the foot of the cross for the young woman. The Elmo for the child. The eternal laments inscribed on posterboard. The ubiquitous image of Guadalupe. And at the top of the page of the open dictionary, the word "inescapable." Reverberating across the memorial, the word first evokes the unspeakable scene of the inescapable trailer. And yet, in the next moment it poses the question of the fifty-three crosses: what is inescapable? Is it the imperial-colonial-nationalist currency that guarantees a future with more crosses? Or is it the making of something else—the raising of new ways of living in common?[17]

Tyler B. Davis is an instructor in the department of theology at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas.

[17] This essay is dedicated to the memory and courage of the fifty-three crucified people of Quintana Road: Alvaro Ojeda Salazar, Efrain Ferrel Garcia, Fernando Gallegos Garcia, Francisco Javier Delgado Rodriguez, Francisco Javier Delgado Rodriguez, J Marcial Trejo Hernandez, Jair Valencia Olivares, Javier Florez Lopez, Jesus Alvarez Ortega, Jose Antonio Perez Ramirez, Jose Guadalupe Lopez Muniz, Jozue Diaz Gallardo, Juan Jesus Trejo Tellez, Juan Valeriano Domitilo, Julio Lopez Lopez, Marcos Antonio Velasco Velasco, Maria Guadalupe Montero Serrato, Mariano Santiago Hipolito, Mayra Beltran Frausto, Miriam Ramirez Garcia, Misael Olivares Monterde, Omar Rico Almanza, Oscar Aguado Romero, Pablo Ortega Alvarez, Pedro Telles Gonzalez, Yovani Valencia Olivares, Aracely Marroquin Coronado, Blanca Ramirez Crisostomo, Celestina Ambrocio Orozco, Deisy Lopez Ramirez, Denis Nis Barrios, Doniz Galvez De Leon, Enrique Chavez, Fidelino Ramirez Sanchez, Francisco Tepaz Simaj, Jonny Tziquin Tzoc, Juan Tulul Tepaz, Juan Vasquez Morales, Karla Lopez Espana, Maria Ramirez Alvarado, Nicolas Meletz Guarcax, Pascual Guachiac Sipac, Rudy Chilel Yoc, Sebastian Och Mejia, William Ramirez Alvarado, Wilson Ambrocio Lopez, Yeison Jimenez Abelarde, Adela Ramirez Quezada, Alejandro Andino Caballero, Belkis Anariba Caceres, Fernando Redondo Caballero, Margie Paz Grajeda, and Yazmin Bueso Nunez.