



Challenging Distance: Reframing the Subtle Violence of Biblical Interpretations

*The Bible and Its Influence Maintains a Consistently Objective Stance
Toward the Bible” (Meadors 2006, 711)*

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ABSTRACT

A series of the United States Supreme Court decisions, including *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. (2022) and *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. (2022), have removed previously established legal separations between religious education and public primary and secondary education. Liberal proponents of these decisions often refer to the role religious texts already play in social studies courses, emphasizing a secular purpose for religious texts. However, I argue the frameworks used by these supposedly secular forms demonstrate a narrative of constructed distance for Christian liberals in the United States from violence within Biblical texts. In the first section I extend Julia O'Brien's (2002) frameworks of violence in the Bible to analyze how distance allows Christian liberalism to avoid an uncomfortable reality of violence within biblical texts. In the subsequent sections I examine historical and modern cases of this constructed distance and how distance enables a disengagement from questions of domination and violence. I read these examples against Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* to demonstrate what engagement with violence would bring to interpretative frameworks. Then, in the final section I examine the idea of rejecting violence through the film *Nope* and challenge the notion that critique is a rejection. Throughout I argue distance provides a comfortable excuse for biblical violence, which then forecloses the possibility of deeply interrogating and understanding the role of violence in the Bible as a political project. Whereas a measured engagement with violence offers an opportunity to critique religious violence and the power structures it upholds.

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Whether you follow American K-12 public school curriculum issues closely or skim the headlines, over the last few years you will undoubtedly have noticed the increase in court cases, state policies, and media concern on the rise of far-right Christianity being taught in public schools. Headlines like The Atlantic's "The Supreme Court Has Ushered in a New Era of Religion at School," written after two Supreme Court cases, *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. (2022) and *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. (2022), highlight how these cases have fundamentally changed the legal landscape for religious, especially Christian, education in American public K-12 schools.¹ Or more recent coverage, like Reuters' "How US public schools became a new religious battleground," which follows Louisiana's recent requirement that public schools display the ten commandments and Oklahoma's mandate that public schools have a Bible per classroom and teach from it. I should note as of September 2024 both bills were paused by court orders, however, these are only two examples of an estimated 91 bills proposed across 29 states promoting religion in public school this year alone.²

These bills range from the more extreme requirements, a Bible and the ten commandments in every classroom to a more the subtle parent selection out of various classes or content but are increasingly identified as part of an overall rise of an organized, education focused Christian far-right in the US.³ Such a categorization tends to emphasize the more extreme examples noted above and focus on the idea of a rise in a far-right version of Christianity, which results in leading to an overwhelming focus on these far-right policies and enabling a subtler Christian doctrine premised on seemingly liberal and progressive understandings of the Bible to go without critical attention. One such example of this subtler, seemingly progressive Christian education that has gained quite the foothold in public schools is *The Bible and Its Influence*, it is a textbook written for secondary school students.⁴ As of 2024 it has been adopted in over 640 public high schools in 44 states, meaning over 140,000 students have used this textbook in at least some capacity during their public education.⁵ The textbook offers synopses for biblical narratives, activities for educators, and attempts to modernize biblical connect, claiming this modernization will help students connect with the material. Specifically, the book advertises itself for Language Arts or Social Studies courses and the text's format is a broad chronological history, focused primarily on Europe and American history, with an emphasis on cultural and social phenomena of various decades.

The textbook's contributors present the book as a school appropriate version of biblical narratives, both because of the way it glosses over depictions of violence—war, genocide, rape—that litter the Bible itself and by connecting Biblical narratives with various moments of European and American history. In this way, the textbook styles itself as an objective and secular tool for a social studies classroom. However, this purposefully constructed distance from violence also enables the textbook to bury its Christian advocacy and more importantly to obfuscate its inherent connections to dominative violence. This manufactured distance between the Bible and violence represents an unwillingness to engage with violent material outright and an attempt to deny that their progressive retellings still rely upon the text's unflinching violence. For example, to set up its comparison between heroic characters in Western literature and the Promised Land narrative the authors avoid the violence of conquest that is present throughout Genesis and Exodus stories.⁶ Simply put, in selling its progressive narrative the textbook asks you not to look too closely at the violence underpinning those same stories. In the end, the ability to understand the political complexity of textual violence is lost, making it all too easy to see

1 Adam Laats, "The Supreme Court Has Ushered in a New Era of Religion at School" The Atlantic, July 15 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/supreme-court-religion-schools-prayer-kennedy-carson/661365/>.

2 Liya Cui & Joseph Ax. "How US public schools became a new religious battleground." Reuters, August 7 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/how-us-public-schools-became-new-religious-battleground-2024-08-07/>.

3 For examples of current research on far-right Christianity in US K-12 schools see Prins et al. (2024) or Whitfield (2024) studies on education boards elections and history curriculum respectively in the *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*.

4 Cullen Schippe & Chuck Stetson. *The Bible and Its Influence*. BLP Publishing, 2006.

5 Bible Literacy Project, "The Textbooks." Bible Literacy Project, 2024, <https://www.bibleliteracy.org/the-textbooks>.

6 Schippe & Stetson, *The Bible and Its Influence*.

the textbook's liberal project as an emancipatory one without realizing how much of the same violence is still necessary to underpin its notion of a liberal political project.

My interest in *The Bible and Its Influence* has far less to do with the accuracy of its interpretations than with the larger narratives of a supposedly more progressive Christianity it invites the reader to sympathize with. The textbook is symptomatic of a desire to sanitize biblical narratives, but such a practice creates a theoretical distance between the theme of these stories and the violence within them. Moreover, this distance enables the obfuscation of violence which allows that same violence to persist unidentified and without the same attention that other far-right Christian moves in education receive. This paper builds on the sociological approaches developed by Julia O'Brien's in her work "Nahum and Atrocity" to analyze the politics and identity of interpreters as an essential part of understanding how such an interpretation comes about and what assumptions underpin their interpretation.⁷

This paper focuses on the story of Nahum and the concepts of just war and nationalism to connect the selected examples. These historic and current examples tie into the several chapters of *The Bible and Its Influence* to analyze and complicate some of the interpretative moves in the textbook and the necessary distance those interpretations create. The emphasis on the Book of Nahum is because while the story is a central part of the Old Testament and prophetic tradition, Nahum is one of only two prophets not directly addressed *The Bible and Its Influence*. Within the chapter on prophets, Nahum is only referenced in a list of the minor prophets whereas the other prophets' visions are covered, or, in a few cases, students are provided with a general concept of the prophet's theme, but no equivalent coverage is provided for Nahum. O'Brien's work then becomes directly relevant to our analysis of this book, and the broader political project of a progressive Christianity that it represents, as her attention is on the interpretative practices that have rejected the Book of Nahum. This paper begins by situating O'Brien's categories of interpretation and the various ways they create distance between the interpreter and the violence of Nahum before moving to significant examples of imperial violence that are covered throughout *The Bible and Its Influence*. As a typical social studies textbook this book follows a generally chronological order, focusing on the United States and pre-Revolutionary War, but by connecting these various moments to various books in the bible or general biblical themes. The textbook includes a narrow recounting of colonial missionary projects, literary responses to the World Wars, anti-communist fervor during the Cold War, right through the post-9/11 War on Terror, connecting each of these disparate historical moments by returning to student activities that emphasize moral tales and subtly rely on an unexamined *just war* approach to American history.⁸ Using O'Brien's framework, I interrogate both the textbook and a set of additional secondary sources of the textbook's historical and contemporary examples that similarly analyze this connection between violence and Christian interpretation to illuminate how seemingly progressive interpretations still rely on textual violence and empire remains just as unquestioned in progressive interpretations as far-right interpretations.

I argue that these examples highlight how this progressive Christian narrative creates distance from textual violence that sacrifices the possibility of a sharper critique of domination. Furthermore, the supposedly progressive narrative necessarily accepts at least some aspects of the text's dominative violence which could have otherwise been interrogated if violence had not arbitrarily been removed from the analysis. I conclude with the possibility that engaging directly with textual violence offers an alternative form of interpretation that enables a structural critique of these supposedly liberal Christian projects. Such a critique demonstrates how these liberal Christian narratives are complicit in the same violent projects of domination they attempt to distance themselves from and therefore require the same attention as more overt far-right projects. Simply, the focus on the rise of far-right Christianity's influence over education must be extended to contend with the similarity between seemingly liberal Christian projects and interventions into education as equally reliant upon empire and violence. Further when analyzed closely, it becomes clear that this dominative violence is an essential pillar of

7 Julia O'Brien. "Nahum and Atrocity." In *Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*, edited by John Jarick, 104–128. Bloomsbury Publishers, 2002.

8 For further reading on the relationship between Just War theory and Christian theology see John Hobson, "The Other Side of the Westphalian Frontier." In *Postcolonial Theory and International Relation*, edited by Sanjay Smith, 32–48. London: Routledge, 2013.

this liberal project, not an incidental recreation, meaning these progressively styled Christian projects are reliant upon the same violence as the far-right projects receiving significantly more attention.

I must make two distinctions at the outset. First, this paper is not attempting to say far-right Christian nationalists have the correct interpretation of the Bible by accepting and/or celebrating the violence. The interpretation they use is deeply committed to a racist, sexist, ableist, and capitalist (amongst many others) structure that it would be impossible to endorse without committing to these same awful projects of domination.⁹ Second, this paper does not claim that the Bible is reducible to its violent elements. Such a reading ignores the reality that reading of religious texts have always deified sole interpretation. Furthermore, readings of the Bible which only accept abstract violence negate the history of liberation movements who found inspiration in their own readings of the Bible. Readings such as those found in Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* do not reject violence, but rather work through it in the context of their socio-political moment.¹⁰ In such readings violence may be understood through the revolutionary and emancipatory claims of the text. I focus on the subtle ways violence is always present in liberal paradigms because of the increasingly popular notion that a progressive interpretation of the Bible offers a rebuttal to the rise of far-right Christian projects. I claim that if we cannot engage with the complexity of Biblical texts, this rebuttal risks reinforcing similarly problematic hierarchies.

CATEGORIES OF INTERPRETING VIOLENCE

The act of interpreting the Bible to narrowly fit political and social goals is as old as the text itself. O'Brien's reading of the Book of Nahum provides three categories of interpretations, the nationalist sentiment, historical context, and God's responsibility, and a final category of rejection. In the Book of Nahum, the territory of Nineveh turned away from God after having previously accepting the Judaic religion and so the prophet Nahum is sent to warn the city and tell them to repent or else face God's wrath.¹¹ When the city refuses, God's violence is unleashed and in Nahum, O'Brien tells us, "war is not just narrated, but narrated gleefully, tauntingly".¹² The enjoyment of God's violence is a key part of the story here. The gleeful and taunting tone in the Book of Nahum makes it clear that the violence wrought upon Nineveh is not something the reader should pity or sympathize, rather the reader is meant to rejoice in God's violence against the idolatrous Assyrians. The book is not simply a war story: it is lusting for revenge. It assumes all of Nineveh deserve brutal punishment simply because they are in Nineveh and Assyrian. So, what are interpreters of the text left to do with this gleeful violence? O'Brien identifies three major categories of interpretation, which I extend to identify how the interpretation creates distance between the reader and the story.

In the first interpretation, we can see Nahum as a nationalist, therefore, the violence against Assyria is part of national liberation, it is deserved violence against the oppressors. O'Brien considers this the pre-1950 category: "*Nahum the nationalistic poet*. For many nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, the violence of Nahum decisively demonstrated that it is morally inferior book, one that civilized persons should eschew".¹³ This interpretation immediately sets the reader, as a civilized Christian, away from the violence. By eschewing the Book of Nahum as a lesser book the interpretation fails to engage with the book's gleeful narration of violence, instead leaving only a vague threat about what happened to people who turned away from God. Accordingly, such an interpretation confines both the violence and the enjoyment of violence to a distant past, one that is no longer relevant for the civilized Christian reader. This enables the pre-1950 interpreter to see themselves as disconnected and at the same time morally superior to the Book of Nahum's narrator. Essentially, the Book of Nahum is worth less than

9 For further reading on the relationship between domination and far-right Christian interpretation see Matthew Gabriel. "The Deus Vult Cross." *Uncivil Religion*, 6 April 2021, <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/the-deus-vult-cross> & Tisa Wenger & Sylvester Johnson. *Religion and US Empire: Critical New Histories*. NYU Press, 2022.

10 Ernesto Cardenal. *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Translated by Donald Walsh. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1976.

11 Harold Attridge, *Harper Collins Study Bible*. HarperOne, 2006.

12 O'Brien, "Nahum and Atrocity," 105.

13 Ibid., 106.

other canonical texts. Maybe it serves as a reminder of a time long past for the reader, but it is no longer an instructional text. And this diminished status means, as O'Brien puts it, that the book should be eschewed. And yet, Nahum's story is part of the religious tradition. Furthermore, it is part of the prophetic tradition. Something this first category, hereafter referred to as the nationalist poet category, cannot accept because to recognize Nahum's place in a larger biblical narrative would mean accepting gleeful violence as a core part of religious teaching. For this interpretation to work Nahum is stripped of his status as a prophet and is instead described as a poet. Poets can be angry, call for and enjoy violence, prophets, according to this pre-1950 category, are meant to be better than that. The implication being that a prophet would never enjoy violence, that some level of regret or pity ought to accompany violence. The demotion of Nahum from prophet to poet, reinforces the notion "that civilized persons" would not find violence gleeful.¹⁴ There is an inherent normative claim being made about what a good prophet, and therefore good Christian, ought to do. What slips into the nationalist poet category, because of its attempts to distance itself from violence, is the notion that a good Christian cannot desire violence.

The second interpretation argues Nahum should only be understood in his historical context. In this interpretative category, O'Brien again comments on the role of distance:

While the move to distance oneself from the violence of Nahum is still prevalent in current interpretation...the dominant trend since the second half of the twentieth century has been toward a more empathetic understanding of the book. By emphasizing the historical context of the book—the brutality of Assyrian oppression and the resultant suffering of ancient Judah—this reading strategy attempts to exonerate or at least explain the book's vehemence.¹⁵

Essentially, Nahum's gleeful violence is morally wrong for these twentieth century readers, but readers are expected to understand how brutal the Assyrians were and accept that the violence was understandable in that context and that moment of history. Implicitly, of course, desiring violence would still be unacceptable for the reader. In this second category, hereafter referred to as the historical context category, the gleeful violence has transformed from something to be eschewed to something to resign to a complicated and brutal past that is disconnected from the present. Further, O'Brien's introduction to this historical context interpretation brings up how attempts to create distance between the reader and textual violence are "still prevalent" in this interpretation.¹⁶ Rather than outright rejection, history steps in to create the distance. The explicit message is that violence is only understandable because of its historical context, then the implicit message is that history is condemned to the past and its violence has no place in the present.

The third, and final, category is to pass the responsibility for the violence onto God. O'Brien summarizes this category as:

interpreting Nahum as a theological affirmation of the sovereignty and justice of God. By positing Yahweh as the ultimate Warrior who defeats all enemies, Nahum does not advocate active resistance by its readers but rather it seeks to convince them of the power of God.¹⁷

Unlike the other two, this interpretation does not ask the reader to reject Nahum's glee and violence or to understand it but says the violence is there solely to convince us of God's power. And the distance here may be the most significant as violence moves strictly into God's purview. Violence is neither available to nor desirable by the reader. That is, the reader is asked not to see themselves in the characters at all but to see only God's might. Such a reading dismisses the possibility of serious engagement with Nahum's violence and equates questioning violence to questioning the will of God. In this way the reader is immediately presented with the ultimate out for any discomfort stemming from the gleeful violence. Such an interpretation, hereafter referred to as God's will category, resigns violence to the unquestionable will of God.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

This interpretation relieves the reader of a need to reflect on the role of violence in faith and removes the possibility for any critical engagement with the reader's own desire for the text's vengeful violence. Their lust for Nineveh's destruction can go unexamined because, simply, God willed it.

It is clear in each interpretation distance is created between the reader and the violence of Nahum. Each version offers an out for the reader's discomfort and an opportunity to put the complexity of Nahum aside either entirely or by focusing on only a narrow portion of the story. Accordingly, any lessons we are meant to learn can be separated from the violence and comfortably separated from the reader's sense of self, especially in relation to their religious beliefs. However, this separation is entirely false. As each interpretative category demonstrates the creation of distance does not fundamentally separate the reader from the text, they only obfuscate their relationship to Nahum's violence. Violence continues to underpin the reader's relationship to the Nahum specifically and biblical texts generally. This continued presence of violence is particularly relevant in the context of the supposedly progressive Christian narrative. In comparison to the violence that is so blatant in far-right Christian rhetoric the disavowal of violence in texts like *The Bible and Its Influence* appears to be the better option. However, O'Brien's interpretative categories make it clear that such a negation of violence is really about providing the reader a comfortable answer to uncomfortable questions in religion rather than directly engaging with, and potentially resolving, any of those questions.

Furthermore, in referring to a final category of interpretation, rejection, O'Brien says, "the book of Nahum cannot be contained by a simple feminist 'No'".¹⁸ Briefly, this final category of interpretation takes an even harsher approach than the prior categories as it attempts to reject the narrative in its entirety. Positioning it as a misogynistic text without merit or logic. But, as O'Brien goes on to say, the gleeful violence of the Book of Nahum cannot be simply rejected "it is the invisible fishbowl that provides the book with its shape".¹⁹ Taunting and gleeful violence is the essential theme of the text and the reader's desire for that violence, for God's wrath to destroy Nineveh, the main driver of the narrative. To simply reject it is a refusal to engage with those deeper questions about faith and morality. Such a rejection makes it impossible to re-interpret the violence in Nahum as a potential starting place for engagement; for example, what does it mean that the reader desires the destruction of the Assyrians? If such questions are off the table entirely, how can the reader work through their own desire for violence, how can they trace this violence when it re-emerges in other political projects influenced by their faith?

Given that the Book of Nahum is one of only two prophets to be skipped over by *The Bible and Its Influence* we can assume editors Cullen Schippe and Chuck Stetson were attempting to engage with this simple rejection rather than interpretation when it came to their retelling of prophetic traditions.²⁰ In fact, the chapters on prophets are organized around comfort and lamentation with students being encouraged to read various passages, rewrite them as consolation notes, and/or consider what sources or stories they turn to for comfort. Part of the broader appeal of *The Bible and Its Influence* is its supposedly careful treatment of controversial issues. In fact, Dave Meadors review of the book argues, "when controversial issues such as the creation of the world or the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are found in the textbook, they are carefully and thoughtfully explained, and different interpretive options are delineated".²¹ And yet, this lustful violence, the necessary joy in torment in the prophetic tradition is left out entirely. The only two prophetic books left out contain a type of violence that is typically associated with far-right conceptions of Christianity, and the distancing from that violence is often assumed to be the more progressive stance. However, the creation of such distance, especially when it is an outright rejection, leaves no room to identify with the violence of the text and learn from that identification. By removing Nahum Schippe and Stetson are not allowing to students

18 Ibid., 104.

19 Ibid.

20 The Book of Habakkuk is similarly removed from *The Bible and Its Influence* (2006). Habakkuk's book similarly centers these questions of violence and desire. In the book Habakkuk asks God while the faithful suffer and critically, for our analysis, is assured that nonbelievers will face God's wrath even if the retribution is not clear to believers.

21 Dave Meadors. Review of *The Bible and Its Influence*, by Cullen Schippe & Chuck Stetson. *Journal of Church and State* 48, no. 3 (2006): 711.

to carefully work through a legacy of violence that permeates much of the Bible, above and beyond these two prophetic books. Schippe and Stetson are prematurely shutting down that analysis and preventing readers from being able to understand or potentially even identify similar longings for violence in later interpretations of biblical text.

Whether rejecting it outright or applying any of the three interpretative categories the reader is provided with an out, they do not have to consider the theme of joyful violence and what it might mean to desire that sort of suffering. Further, this constructed distance makes it easier for these same violent desires and justifications for violence to (re)emerge in other narratives uninterrogated. In the first category violence is to be outright rejected as morally inferior, in the second violence is left to a sad but distant history, in the third violence is God's right and will, and the rejection simply precludes a meaningful engagement with desire and suffering. When laid out clearly through O'Brien's interpretative framework it becomes clear how such interpretations may be leveraged to justify any manner of violence.

JUSTIFYING THE JUST WAR

As explored above these three interpretative categories do their best to create a distance between the reader, more broadly the religious believers, and the domination in Nahum and yet, violence finds its way into each of these interpretations. However, because the interpretative categories attempt to dismiss the violence the reader becomes blind to the larger role violence is playing and blind to the reasons why violence against Nineveh is desired. Returning to the question of Christian liberalism this refusal to recognize the role of and desire for violence leaves open the possibility for these various interpretations to explain and justify other violent acts, outside of just the text. When analyzing religious justifications for violence it is often the most extreme examples that are highlighted, it is the barest lusting for violence that is held up as a perversion of the religious tradition, and not just in Christianity. Across religions there is often a move made wherein progressive interpreters attempt to sideline the violent interpretation, but the immediate move to distance the religion from its most violent extensions can hide the similarities between the supposedly progressive groups and far-right groups. Returning to the textbook as an example of such a progressive distancing, the first unit of *The Bible and Its Influence* begins with Genesis and over a series of feature sections connects biblical origin stories with foundational British legal frameworks and early American colonial law as well as the American constitution and state.²² While not at all surprising in the study of history, what is noticeable is the over emphasis on how biblical narratives led moral decisions, but little to no acknowledgement of how violence and/or repression was also justified via these same biblical passages. So, it is not to say that a certain interpretation has a more accurate claim to the text, but that the creation of distance is not the same as carefully reckoning with violence and without that work textual violence continues to seep into interpretation and moral justifications.

As mentioned in the introduction, the textbook moves through a series of American violences, from colonialism to World Wars and then the Cold War to the War on Terror, to highlight for students how the Bible has influenced legal doctrine, literature and art, and social norms more generally in the US. Moving through these examples follows a general chronologic framework of history that American secondary students are likely familiar with and, according to the text, is designed to help them understand the Bible's influence on society. However, by rejecting an engagement with violence the text glosses over how the Bible is used to justify these various wars. Specifically, the text applies a just war approach to these historical moments, using the Bible to provide moral cover for each of its examples rather than interrogating why violence was enacted, who benefited and/or why. Unlike its far-right counterparts though, this textbook does not start from a white nationalist agenda or actively disparage progressive movements through history, in fact it celebrates various progressive moments while tying them back to biblical origins, which is partly why I argue such texts receive less attention and critique than their far-right counterparts. But, as this section highlights, many of the core assumptions around who has the right to violence remain unquestioned. The Book of Nahum provides

22 The short sections titled "Feature: Focus on Influence" are chapter accompaniments that tie biblical narratives to various historical moments for students. These sections typically include a short activity or reflection for students to complete that directly references a few passages of the Bible and asks students to either compare it to their own life or connect it to these specific historic moments.

a relevant frame to interpret violence and conflict, importantly the book includes several prophetic warnings for the people of Nineveh and only after they fail to acquiesce does God destroy the city. This concept of prior warnings, via the multiple prophets in Nahum, serve as a justification for the violence wrought upon the Assyrians and Ninevites within the text. This same general framework of justified conflict is systematized through just war theory, simply put just war theory acts as an interpretative model that rationalizes war through a set of moral claims.²³ As noted briefly above, the standard American history textbook often relies upon such moral claims and *The Bible and Its Influence* specifically ties these morals to various biblical texts. And yet, frequently relies on less outwardly violent texts rather than directly engaging the question of violence. Following on from the textbook then, we can reanalyze two significant cases, the conquest of the Americas and modern US military actions in the Middle East. Tracing these two cases challenges the idea that violence was ever eschewed from the progressive Christian interpretation and instead demonstrates how interpretation still relies upon a just war model that enables violence and the desire for violence to be perpetuated unquestioningly.

Because of the book's focus on the US, it frequently references critical moments or notable people from the American colonial period and early American state. For example, in one chapter the authors relate American colonists' experiences to religious pilgrimages and a few chapters later arguing "at times, the colonialism diluted the religious motivation of the Christian missionaries" before quickly adding "although it is virtually impossible to use a contemporary yardstick to measure events of hundreds of years ago".²⁴ Essentially, the text positions Christianity in the American colonies as both a given and as a progressive force, with missionaries creating schools or teaching languages and colonialism is a sometimes problematic, but generally accepted, part of that progressive myth. What this does, by refusing to engage with the violence of colonialism, is ignore how colonialists relied upon the concept of just war to justify colonialism through their Christianity. The *Requerimiento* comes about as an early iteration of the category of just war theory.²⁵ The *Requerimiento* was written as "an ultimatum to conquered Indians in the Americas."²⁶ What makes the document particularly fascinating is that it was meant to be read aloud by the conquistadors, in Spanish of course, upon initial Spanish contact with Indigenous groups in the Americas. It works to acknowledge the violence, genocide, about to be done, but grants the conquistadors moral and legal rights to enact that genocide. Further, it gives the conquistadors the ability to place the responsibility for the violence they are about to enact on God rather than having to internalize that responsibility. The *Requerimiento* begins by establishing the authority of the Spanish Crown via God and telling Indigenous Americans to accept colonization and conversion to Christianity peacefully if they do so they will be rewarded, but:

If you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.²⁷

Between the first half and the second the tone changes rapidly; the *Requerimiento* goes from calling for conversion and obedience, just as the prophets sent to Nineveh, to blame and threats of violence for disobedience, again just as the prophets sent to Nineveh. This tone change is essential for both narratives, it removes any need for guilt and provides a logic

23 Hobson, "The Other Side of the Westphalian Frontier."

24 Schippe & Stetson, *The Bible and Its Influence*, 269.

25 For further reading on the relationship between Just War theory and Spanish conquest of the Americas see Lewis Hanke, "The 'Requerimiento' and Its Interpreters." *Revista de Historia de America*, no. 1 (1938): 25-34.

26 The National Humanities Center. "The *Requerimiento*." National Humanities Center, American Beginnings. 2006. <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/requirement.pdf>.

27 Ibid.

to the pending destruction. In the Requerimiento the shift hinges upon the actions of the Indigenous Americans, they can convert and be safe or refuse and die. Placing the action upon the Indigenous Americans means neither the conquistadors, king, nor God are responsible for any violence rather, just as in the God's will category of interpretation, violence is brought upon the self by refusing to comply with God's will. The Requerimiento provides the same distance from violence for the conquistadors and the Spanish kingdom more broadly than the God's will category of interpretation does. In fact, reading the proclamation reveals a certain level of desperation on the part of the Spanish to separate themselves from violence and to deny their own desire for that violence. That is, the Requerimiento is read out by the conquistadors in Latin regardless of whether Indigenous peoples understand Latin or are even present. Given how it was implemented it begs the question, was it meant for Indigenous peoples or for the Spanish? According to the National Humanities Center, who provides translations of the Requerimiento, "its prime purpose [was] self-justification for the Spanish invaders."²⁸ When we understand the proclamation as written for the Spanish by the Spanish its function as a tool to create distance and provide moral justification becomes far more nuanced. This is not a poetic document, to the tune of the nationalist poet interpretation, there was nothing metaphorical about it nor about the violence that followed its reading. It is not merely history, as historical context category argues, because the same idea emerges time and time again.²⁹ And it is not simply God's will, because it is people enacting violence against other people, unlike the Book of Nahum God does not appear to dominate the Americas for the conquistadors.

When understood as by and for the Spanish, the Requerimiento does not fit into categories that excise violence at all, but it does represent an extension of this supposedly progressive Christian project. That is, rather than simply enacting genocidal violence from the outset the Requerimiento provided a way for conquistadors to distance themselves from the violence they enacted. The Requerimiento represents an attempt to justify and simultaneously run as morally far from the violence they were about to commit as possible. It is the creation of a category of *just* genocide. A category created because Spaniards could not bring themselves to reckon with the violence they enacted and needed to make God their middleman. The Spanish have adopted O'Brien's God's will category in order to create this distance. They cannot be individually or collectively responsible for the genocide as it was justified by God and the Book of Nahum explicitly provides just the same example. Prophets are sent to warn the people, the Requerimiento is read, and when people do not convert, they die.

By rejecting an engagement with the biblical basis and justification for colonial violence, a liberal Christian project does not have to consider in what ways violence may be a central part of faith and can instead excise it to apparently outlier type moments. However, by returning to colonial era religious doctrine, like the Requerimiento, it is apparent that this sanitized history is a modern construction meant to make the history of Christianity and colonialism more palatable. Moreover, what this sanitization does is prevent any deeply critical accounting of American colonialism. That is, because the textbook sets up Christianity and colonialism as separable, with colonialism apparently interfering in Christian missionary work, it only reifies the same idealistic nationalism that marks far-right Christian projects. And yet, because it does not endorse the colonial project as an unceasing good this subtler excuse for colonial violence goes unexamined.

In its more contemporary examples of violence the textbook provides students a feature on Palestine and the creation of the Israeli state and religion to September 11, 2001, and America's subsequent War on Terror.³⁰ While seemingly disparate moments in history, the textbook links these moments through its narrative of catastrophe, comfort, and religion, which I will explore in more depth below. Furthermore, these two examples often employ the same moral distance and God given right to violence that is exhibited through the Requerimiento. This attempt to moralize violence often relies on the idea of God given rights or God's support for a certain people at the expense of another. For example, when *The Bible and Its Influence* does address biblical violence, it often compares that violence to the American Civil War or America's actions in World War I and II, basically attempting to provide students with a reference point they will

28 Ibid.

29 I will discuss more contemporary examples of this interpretative category below.

30 Schippe & Stetson, *The Bible and Its Influence*.

normatively accept as good. That is, Schippe and Stetson will equate US actions with God's violence, whether that's equating Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation to Moses and Exodus or qualifying the trauma of war during the World Wars as necessary to win the war. Once again, these examples celebrate seemingly progressive moments of history but in the authors' attempts to evade violence they cannot reckon with how violence is a necessary part of the liberal victory they are celebrating.

In a more striking unit, the textbook goes through the Book of Kings and then ends the section with a short piece on World War II, it uses a combination of history and biblical stories to justify Israel's occupation of Palestine. Even the title of this section, "The Second Return" invokes a sense of righteous claim on behalf of the Israeli state and yet that same section begins with "without taking any sides in the issue, here are some of the facts to consider".³¹ Of course, in its presentation of facts the textbook does take sides, but this false equivalency hides the history of colonial violence in the Middle East and in particular Israeli colonial violence against Palestine, that was certainly well documented even in 2006. This move to connect the Book of Kings to World War II and Zionism is more subtle than the *Requerimiento* and yet, similarly demonstrates how these biblical narratives are used to construct distance between violence and those enacting the violence. The section itself uses vague statements like "there have been three more wars and continual hostilities" to obfuscate Israel's domination but just previously had provided far more detail on the suffering of exile experienced by the Jewish people in the Bible.³² Furthermore, this distance reifies the same assumptions of a righteous or deserved claim to Palestinian land but because it claims neutrality, the textbook is not considered as making a political claim despite the political project of Israeli settlement that it passively endorses. As highlighted with the *Requerimiento*, the distance is an essential part of the supposedly liberal Christian project this textbook represents. It is not actively endorsing violence in the way a far-right narrative does, and yet the result, or at least the moralizing interpretations, remain similar.

Of course, these attempts are not confined only to biblical textbooks, similar examples can be found in politicians' speeches, such as George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address where he refers to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as "an axis of evil" to garner support for the US's invasion of Afghanistan and only a few months later the invasion of Iraq.³³ Just as the *Requerimiento* echoing biblical stories of (dis)obedience and suffering and *The Bible and Its Influence* echoing stories of exile and return, Bush's speech is meant to provide a moral cover for the US's actions in the Middle East. The US military's presence is preemptively *just* because these other states are evil and so it is inherently right to oppose them. I turn specifically to Bush's speech here and the subsequent War on Terror, because once again *The Bible and Its Influence* attempts to provide moral cover to US actions rather than critically engage with questions of violence and empire. While talking about George W. Bush, the textbook highlights how people turn to religion for comfort after a catastrophe, such as September 11, 2001. However, what is taken for granted is that George W. Bush's recitations of scripture would provide comfort to begin with and, of course, the text lacks any examination of how the former president often parlayed these religious sentiments into an us versus them narrative that provided justification for the expansion of US troops across the Middle East. While the text does not expressly endorse the War on Terror or George W. Bush, its paternal, comforting presentation of him certainly implies a certain level of support and moral righteousness.

Furthermore, as Jonathan Ebel argues in his chapter of *Religion and US Empire: Critical New Histories*, the tools of modern warfare can literally create the sense of distance previously constructed through narratives.³⁴ That is, drone and unmanned warfare create both literal and moral distance for those enacting violence and the distance becomes part of the justification for why these weapons and methods are just. At the outset of the chapter, Ebel lays out his framework for analyzing drone warfare:

31 Ibid., 108.

32 Ibid., 109.

33 Bush, George W. "State of the Union Address 2002." The White House Archives, 29 January 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

34 Jonathan Ebel. "Fire from Heaven: Napalm, the Drone, and Evangelical Territoriality in the Age of Empire." In *Religion and US Empire: Critical New Histories*, edited by Tisa Wegner & Sylvester Johnson, 253-274. NYU Publisher, 2022.

I will return many times to Blum's essay on "The Individualization of War," which illuminates a different side of shifting territorialities, and to Andrea Miller's argument regarding the criminalization of interior states and the "always already present" terrorist in the "racialized Muslim body."³⁵

As in the *Requerimiento* the very existence of the other, in this case the "Muslim body," acts as the justification for the violence.³⁶ The existence of the other is inherently threatening for the imperial state and therefore violence can be explained using both the nationalist poet category and justified via the idea of God's, now represented by America, will. And just like with the first category of interpretation, what seeps into the idea of a justified war is the idea that US has a right to violence against the other. Specifically, Ebel's work builds upon the description of drone warfare given by drone operators: "I truly felt like an omnipotent god with a god's seat above it all."³⁷ It is literally a method of killing that rains "fire from heaven."³⁸ The third category, God's will, justifies violence before it even takes place and is now built right into the machinery of modern warfare. The actual mechanics of warfare than have positioned the American drone operator as enacting God's violence by physical removing the operator from the scene of violence. In both categories of interpretation, the distance presupposes a righteousness for the American military. It is the circular logic of war laid bare—the drone operator is enacting God's will and so the droned victim must have sinned. They are guilty because the operator is innocent, and the operator is innocent because the victim is guilty. As in the *Requerimiento*, distance from violence, following the same logic as God's will interpretations, becomes a way to account for violence within just war theory and so even when the military apparatus appears secular it is relying upon these same interpretative categories to justify its violence.

In addition to this, Ebel's analysis gestures to a tension within the critique of drone warfare. He mentions, almost in passing, "There are many things to lament and to criticize about drone warfare. The desire to be precise, to discriminate, to limit deadly violence, is not one of them."³⁹ Ebel's framing of drone warfare precludes the opportunity to analyze drone warfare itself, rather he ties his argument to the idea of innocence. Inherently here he accepts the drone's violence and endorses its precision even as he critiques its application in contemporary warfare. What is lost here, what is set at a distance, is who gets to discriminate. Who gets to use violence at all and why its use goes unquestioned by Ebel. In many ways, we can see O'Brien's third category of—a passing of responsibility for violence—in Ebel's own analysis. Throughout the chapter the moment of violence itself goes uninterrogated in claims. This is particularly clear in Ebel's summary of critiques of drone warfare; "For some on the evangelical Left, the death of innocents in drone strikes reveals the drone to be another tool of unjust imperial violence."⁴⁰ The just war framework has already provided distance for Ebel's seemingly progressive Christian critics from the violence being enacted. While he may object to the innocent deaths, his summary implies the guilty deaths are justified, already. And yet, taking seriously drone warfare means recognizing that the guilty may not be guilty at all. At the very least, taking drone warfare seriously means questioning the neat categories of guilty and innocent. The distance provided by the interpretative categories extend beyond the Book of Nahum into these supposedly secular spaces where an unwillingness to engage seriously with the violence used to maintain the state, in this case the US, may occasionally save innocents but still allows for mass violence to be generally justified. Through his assessment Ebel has foreclosed the possibility of questioning whether the US has a right to deadly violence at all, instead the space of critique is limited to the relationship between innocents and violence. As he claims, the violence is *at least* precise and so the core assumption of a right to violence remains unquestioned.

For the just war concept to work the enactors of violence must also believe their actions to be just. The conquistadors could not have read the *Requerimiento* without believing in it, without truly believing God had willed this land to them and that the violence there were about to

35 Ibid., 254.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 265.

38 Ibid., 253.

39 Ibid., 256.

40 Ibid., 267.

engage in was therefore holy justified. The American military drone operators do not recount their violence as “‘God hurling thunderbolts from afar’” unless they believe that the violence was justified.⁴¹ The distance, whether textual or literal, that enables violence to go unquestioned also implicitly reinforces the project violence is enacted for. As briefly explored above while liberal critiques may question what they deem unnecessary violence that means there is some notion of necessary violence, justified violence. In these examples war and conquest are not explicitly endorsed, but the continual return to biblical narratives that have been carefully sanitized of violence provide moral coverage for these acts. That is, these varied examples challenge the idea that violence was ever eschewed from interpretation and instead demonstrate how the biblical notion of retribution becomes a justification for actual and continued modern violence wherein the desire for violence is perpetuated unquestioningly because of an interpretative framework that enable a sense of distance between the perpetrator of, supposedly, just violence and the perpetrator’s sense of self or at least sense of self-responsibility. A subtler liberal Christian interpretation may not actively endorse specific wars, but not only does it fail to disavow them, it continues to provide similar moral justifications for violence just as the more blatant interpretations from the far-right do.

REFUSAL CANNOT END VIOLENCE

There was a fourth interpretative category I briefly mentioned from O’Brien’s work that I want to turn to now: the “simple feminist ‘No’”.⁴² In the prior section, I examined how the other three categories of interpretation create a sense of distance between the reader and violence which precludes the reader’s ability to develop a nuanced analysis of violence, in turn allowing violence to persist. A reasonable assumption then may be to reject the violence of the text, to refuse to give it credence and instead turn away from it. This idea is encapsulated in a shallow form of critique. It is an approach that argues that critiquing violence is enough to put the person engaged in critique outside of an empire causing violence. For example, in the case of the *Requerimiento* this is encapsulated in the belief that Las Casas, because of his role defending Indigenous peoples and calling for more humanity in colonialism is outside the project of colonialism.⁴³ As Patricia Seed recounts, “even the eminent Spanish Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote that when he heard the *Requerimiento* he did not know whether to laugh or to cry.”⁴⁴ However, even if Las Casas “did not know whether to laugh or to cry,” his problem with the *Requerimiento* was not whether or not God had given dominion and therefore a right to violence to the Spanish conquistadors, but only that within the Spanish imperial project he believed a more humane approach to conversion would be more effective.⁴⁵ He was not calling for an end to empire, he wanted a more just empire. Accordingly, if we believe Las Casas to be refusing violence and therefore outside of structures of colonialism, we misunderstand how his work fits into a liberal tradition of enabling domination. While he did condemn mass slaughter, and certainly was sympathetic to the humanity of Indigenous peoples in a way many other Spanish officials were not, the end goal was still imperial domination.

This belief that critique is separation has become increasingly present in the liberal tradition. As demonstrated with the removal of the Book of Nahum from *The Bible and Its Influence*, but as highlighted above with Las Casas and the *Requerimiento* refusing to engage without careful consideration of empire does not negate the fundamental assumptions of imperial violence, it simply creates another form of distance. Conversely, Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname* offers this kind of complex reading of biblical violence. Where interpretations relying on distance from violence cannot question the violent structures underpinning their narratives, the conversations Cardenal facilitates do not shy away from the violence in the Bible. Instead, they engage directly with the texts, relating both Mary and Jesus to revolutionaries, accepting death and violence as part of revolution. At one point, when discussing Jesus’s miracles, a member of Cardenal’s discussion group says, “‘By doing this [miracle] he was already

41 Ibid., 265.

42 O’Brien, “Nahum and Atrocity,” 104.

43 Patricia Seed, “The Requirement: A Protocol for Conquest.” In *Ceremonies of Possession: Europe’s Conquest of the New World*, 69–99. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

44 Ibid., 71.

45 Ibid.

pushing himself into his public life, I mean, into struggle, and now he was going to begin to be persecuted.”⁴⁶ In the group’s discussions about the Bible there is no need to shy away from the violence in the Bible because it is just as much a part of the story as any other. And by embracing this complexity the group is able to move through moments of violence slowly to find a more complex and nuanced understanding of biblical texts as political, revolutionary rather than a pacified, liberal text.

Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname* engagement with the biblical violence offers a far more nuanced political possibility of understanding than distance or rejection can. The conversations in *The Gospel in Solentiname* place violence in a revolutionary context and a context of love. The idea of love and community become inseparable from their conversations on biblical violence. For example, when discussing Jesus and Mary’s relationship, Alejandro says, “That’s the way that every revolutionary mother ought to be with her revolutionary son. Instead of trying to talk him out of it, telling him ‘don’t get involved,’” and William responds with a story about his friend’s mother, “He would say to her, ‘Mama, when they kill me..’ And she would say, ‘Son, when they kill you...’”⁴⁷ This rereading of Mary and Jesus’s relationship is not about rejecting violence, finding ways to hide it, or separating either biblical character from the violence around them, but of accepting violence as part of the space they exist in and finding ways to move through that for revolutionary aims.

Here I want to turn to an application of this re-reading practice that does not shy away from violence, but instead attempts to engage with it through complexity. Jordan Peele’s film *Nope* opens with a line from the Book of Nahum, “I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle.”⁴⁸ By beginning with Nahum, and specifically this concept of spectacle, Peele is not turning away from the desire for violence and retribution that characterizes the Book of Nahum. Rather, he is embracing it head on and making it the setting, or “fishbowl” to borrow from O’Brien, for his story.⁴⁹ I turn to Peele’s film because the film itself and reviews of the film understand the use of the Book of Nahum and the plot as making a statement that refuses at least Hollywood, if not capitalist structures more broadly. What is useful about this re-interpretation of the film is that unlike the reviewer, I trace how refusal to engage with violence enables its perpetuation throughout the movie, countering the narrative that refusing to engage is what saves the Haywood siblings—the film’s main characters—to instead demonstrate how it is only engagement with violence that save the siblings.

The film invites the audience to think about *spectacle* and our involvement in it. Specifically, the spectacle is an alien that consumes almost all the characters over the course of the film. The film is set in Hollywood on the Haywood horse ranch where the siblings, OJ and Emerald, train horses for movies. Next door, their neighbor, Jupe, runs an amusement park based on his own childhood stardom and semi-successfully baits the alien with horses and sells tickets to people so they can watch the alien consume these animals. It’s noteworthy that this crowd absolutely desires violence, they actively pay to engage with the alien’s violence, just as the biblical narrator of the Book of Nahum actively desires the destruction of Nineveh. In an attempt to profit off the alien, the Haywood siblings set up an elaborate plan to film it. However, they believe that looking, engaging with, the alien is what causes it to eat people as earlier points in the film the alien did not consume OJ when he hid in his car and did not look up at it. Their plan involves an electronics support guy who provides them with cameras and generators, since the alien’s presence disrupts electricity. A videographer is brought in, but he is eventually so enraptured by the violence of the alien that he deliberately looks at it wanting to be consumed. Once the videographer is eaten a string of chaotic, violent events unfold. First, the alien consumes the electronics support guy, even though he is adamantly trying to reject the alien’s presence by hiding his head, and then a TMZ reporter shows up, trying to learn more about Jupe’s experiences, and is eaten almost immediately. Moments later, at the apex of the film, the alien almost consumes the Haywood siblings. However, the siblings narrowly survive. It is these final scenes and the way the scenes have been conceptualized in reviews that represent the most interesting case for our analysis of the film and violence.

46 Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 77.

47 Ibid.

48 Jordan Peele, director. *Nope*. Universal Pictures & Monkeypaw Productions, 2022. 2 hr., 10 min. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10954984/>.

49 O’Brien, “Nahum and Atrocity,” 104.

J.R. Forasteros' review of the film highlights a central question for analyzing *Nope*: "Are we all playing a game that can even be won, or should we say "Nope," and bow out of the whole endeavor?"⁵⁰ Forasteros organizes his review around the feminist no category of interpretation, he wants to position *Nope* as a rejection of capitalism. And so, for him, the film's story is about demonstrating how to "bow out."⁵¹ What is left out of this question though, is whether saying nope actually removes us from these systems and their violence. Or, as I argue, if our nope is another construction of distance and not detachment. The film's critique is fascinating and nuanced, but critique is not the same as bowing out. Similarly, O'Brien rejects the feminist no category of interpretation by reminding the reader that the violence of Nahum is "the invisible fishbowl that provides the book with its shape."⁵² Rejecting the violence of Nahum means losing the narrative arc and themes of the book, bowing out of the spectacle (refusing the engage with the alien) would mean never looking at the alien, never trying to capture it in film, and simply attempting to pretend it does not exist. However, pretending the alien does not exist does not spare anyone in the film. When OJ tries to refuse the alien's existence it still eats his horses. However, rejection does go beyond the other three interpretative categories in the sense that it creates an even larger distance between the reader, now turned watcher, and violence. Rejection creates the illusion of so much distance that people involved in critique may believe themselves outside of the system they critique. For example, in Forasteros' analysis of Nahum, he writes:

Again and again, the prophets warned that the violence of the empire would be revisited on the empires themselves. Allying with or placating empires seems wise in the short term because you can share in the wealth generated by their exploitation. But every empire falls, and when they do, so too do all those who've cast their lots with them. Those who live by the empire will die by (and with) the empire.⁵³

The implication, of course, is that *only* those who have cast their lots with empire will die with it. In Nahum, the Assyrians are the brutal empire and so, they receive the brutal punishment. In a way, Forasteros' assessment of the film gives the characters, who engage with the alien at many points in the film, a pass. For Forasteros these characters are consumed, whether literally eaten or their life is swept up in chasing the alien, by the spectacle, but they are not responsible for its violence.

However, there is another possible interpretation of the spectacle and responsibility that Forasteros' review skips over. In *Nope* the Haywoods are the only major characters to live, now Forasteros claims they live because they "don't participate in the spectacle."⁵⁴ Except the siblings do participate. They start by trying to capitalize off the alien's existence and then they engage with it directly to survive. Towards the end of the film, OJ tells the others not to look at the spectacle as it will consume them, that engaging with it means a violent death. The idea is that looking away will protect them from being consumed—distance will protect them. At the end of the film, when each of the minor characters die, it seems inevitable that the Haywood siblings will die as well. However, their narrow survival comes only when OJ looks directly at the alien, giving his sister time to escape. He gives up on the idea of rejection as a form of safety and instead engages with the alien, the violence, head on. When Emerald escapes she is able to use a camera's flash to slowly kill the alien and in the final seconds we see that OJ too has survived. Every other major character dies in *Nope*, every character that either embraced violence joyously—Jupe and the videographer—or attempted to reject it by hiding from the alien—the electronics guy—die. However, when OJ and Emerald engage with the alien, and its violence, carefully and for one another, rather than the enjoyment of violence that the videographer embodies, do they live.

The film offers a more dramatic presentation, but in general this type of direct engagement with violence is lacking within liberal Christian interpretations, which inevitably means the texts reproduce the same violence assigned solely to far-right projects. Rather than attempting

50 J.R. Forasteros. "American Empire, Biblical Prophecy, and Cosmic Horror in Jordan Peele's *Nope*." *Reactor Magazine*, September 21, 2022. <https://reactormag.com/american-empire-biblical-prophecy-and-cosmic-horror-in-jordan-peeles-nope/>.

51 Ibid.

52 O'Brien, "Nahum and Atrocity," 104.

53 Forasteros, "American Empire, Biblical Prophecy, and Cosmic Horror in Jordan Peele's *Nope*."

54 Ibid.

to sanitize our interpretations, Cardenal's revolutionary *The Gospel in Solentiname* offers a roadmap for engaging with violence through the desire for violence and a recognition of the pain it causes. Similarly, my alternative analysis of *Nope*'s ending highlights how survival does not come about because of rejecting violence, but out of careful and considered engagement with violence. In such a reinterpretation of *Nope*'s narrative, it is not only "Those who live by the empire will die by (and with) the empire," rather everyone in and near the empire dies regardless of how they have cast their lot.⁵⁵ Therefore, we cannot believe that rejection of violence will spare anyone from being implicated or harmed by that same violence.

CONCLUSION: ENGAGEMENT COUNTERS DISTANCE

The Gospel in Solentiname does not encounter biblical violence through any of O'Brien's interpretative frames, rather Nicaraguan community members find mirrors of themselves and their revolutionary moment, with all of revolution's pain and violence recognized, in these stories. Cardenal reflects on this type of reading of the Bible, "all of us in the community were radicalized by these discussions of the gospel."⁵⁶ The readers did not attempt to get away from the violence in the Bible, but instead addressed it head-on, with one another, to come to a revolutionary reading that included the violence. Importantly, their reading was not about violence, as highlighted above ideals of love and community became the main method for interpreting the text. In other words, their work was not celebrating violence. There were no gleeful or lusting accounts of retribution, but a recognition of the role of violence in liberation and its limited place.

From the *Requerimiento* and drone warfare, through the desire for a just war, to *The Bible and Its Influence*, each example struggles to recognize and make sense of the violence of the Bible. Each example relied upon one or more of O'Brien's interpretative categories to obfuscate textual violence which implicitly or explicitly ended up endorsing violence in a variety of ways. In attempt to avoid dealing with textual violence, their works endorse real violence. However, *The Gospel in Solentiname* and the reinterpretation of *Nope*'s ending offer an alternative frame to understanding violence. By engaging directly with biblical violence these interpretations recognize the Bible's limitations and possibilities as existing with one another. In this way the text is never fully squared as gleeful brutality or blind optimism, meaning violence cannot move uninterrogated and its presence is always questioned, measured, and considered.

Starting from this constantly in-tension understanding of violence and distance makes it easier to identify the way Christian liberalism allows for violence to go unchecked. It becomes clear with such an interpretation to see how *The Bible and Its Influence* represents a similar project of domination that is blatantly apparent in Louisiana and Oklahoma's latest attempts at religious law, mentioned in the introduction. Engaging with textual violence directly opens the possibility to see how these projects of domination are reproduced and go unquestioned, an increasingly necessary process as a progressive Christian narrative is positioned as a viable alternative to increasing far-right rhetoric. Each of the interpretative categories seen in the examined liberal projects cannot give up the comfort of their constructed distance because doing so would mean recognizing that each project does justify violence, and may even, like the Book of Nahum, find it gleeful at times. Such a recognition would counter these projects' moralizing and critical claims. Further, Christian liberalism often relies upon distance to set up a sense of superiority. For example, George W. Bush's famous axis of evil line is not only about setting up North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as villains, but equally about making the US a hero. It is only because the US is a hero that it can invade Afghanistan and Iraq without rebuke. For the *Requerimiento*, it is because the conquistadors have been empowered by God that they can commit genocide. In each liberal project, distance enables the interpreter to set themselves apart and on high. For Cardenal, and his co-readers, engagement with violence is precisely why they cannot set themselves apart. It is precisely why they recognize revolution as liberating rich and poor alike, "poor people are going to be liberated from the rich. The rich are going to be liberated from themselves, that is, from their wealth. Because they're more slaves than we are."⁵⁷ As opposed to a liberal Christian project wherein the interpreter is trying to soothe their

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* xiii.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

own discomfort, Cardenal's liberatory Christian reading requires forsaking that protection and engaging with violence precisely because of the discomfort.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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