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The High Priests of Global Development: Capitalism, Religion and the Political Economy of Sacrifice in a Celebrity-led Water Charity

Filippo Menga and Michael K. Goodman

ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, 785 million people lack a basic drinking-water service and at least 2 billion people consume contaminated drinking water. At the same time, numerous global water charities fronted by 'caring', politicized celebrity figures — dubbed the 'high priests' of global development by the authors of this article — have sought to 'solve' inequalities in access to clean water through market-based solutions and charity donations. This article engages with the fields of critical social theory, political theology, political ecology and celebrity studies to analyse the interrelationship between capitalism and religion, to interrogate the drivers of international development, and to historically situate the work of celebrity-led water charities and the growing role of these 'high priests'. It takes the case of Matt Damon's Water.org to examine the increasingly religious nature of these neoliberalized charity processes, and outlines the main elements of what the authors term a contemporary political economy of sacrifice. They argue that this results in charities that, rather than reducing inequalities, actually reproduce, normalize and legitimize the very system and exploitative relations that are responsible for these inequalities and environmental problems in the first place, while scattered and localized fixes sustain the illusion that things are getting better.

INTRODUCTION

> Having traveled in the Third World quite a bit, I started to get a real appreciation for the magnitude of the water crisis, and it just shocked me.
>
> (Matt Damon, 2014)[1]

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1. CNBC, 'Matt Damon's not acting. There's a water crisis': www.cnbc.com/2014/01/22/matt-damons-not-acting-theres-a-water-crisis.html/ (accessed 13 January 2021).

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> The problems are so massive in dollar terms, you will never get there with philanthropy alone. You have to bring in the real money.
>
> (Matt Damon, 2019)[2]

Globally, 785 million people lack a basic drinking-water service and at least 2 billion people use a drinking water source contaminated with faeces (WHO, 2019). As the latest WHO/UNICEF report on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene illustrates, inequalities in basic service coverage between the richest and poorest increased between 2000 and 2017 (UNICEF and WHO, 2019) and the gap between the Majority and Minority Worlds is widening rather than contracting (WWAP, 2019). Against this backdrop, a host of global water charities — increasingly fronted by celebrities like Matt Damon (Water.org), Kylie Minogue (WaterAid) or Jay-Z (Drop4Drop) — have emerged to facilitate market-based solutions to clean water and safe sanitation problems in the Majority World, very often stating that they are acting on behalf of those who have been left behind by their national and local governments (Bunds, 2016).

Recent critical scholarship has examined the complications of international development and global development agendas in the so-called Anthropocene (Arsel and Dasgupta, 2015; Jakupec, 2018; Sultana, 2018), and specifically those related to water (Wadsley, 2020). Within this domain, there is an increasing interest in the contradictions embedded in global philanthrocapitalism[3] and the marketization of 'solutions' to social and ecological crises (Holmes, 2012; Wilson, 2016) such as access to clean water and suitable sanitation. This interest has focused most recently on critiques of for-profit and non-profit 'partnerships' which are now seen as a fundamental part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (e.g Olwig, 2021a, 2021b).

For us, the current proliferation of celebrity-led charities such as Water.org, that strive to solve the 'water crisis' through small, localized fixes, is a telling example of these development problems and agendas. Structural problems are tackled through 'post-political' technical and market-based solutions that effectively depoliticize struggles over resources, public health and questions of global development (e.g. Richey et al., 2021; Swyngedouw and Williams, 2016). It remains unclear, however, *how* and *why* these water and other celebrity-fronted charities become entrenched in these market logics and mechanisms of care driven by the imperatives of growth and competition.

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2. CNBC, 'Matt Damon's water crusade has helped 16 million people so far': www.cnbc.com/2019/01/24/matt-damon-waterorgs-waterequity-fund-now-at-60-million.html/ (accessed 14 January 2021).
3. Philanthrocapitalism is a term that denotes the need for philanthropy to become efficient, profitable, market-driven and investment-based; for a critical assessment of philanthrocapitalism, see Haydon et al. (2021).

As the world's dominant economic system, capitalism encompasses and envelops most processes in society (Fisher, 2009), often in involuntary or unintended ways, not least in the global charity and philanthropy sectors as we show below (see also Aschoff, 2015). While not all human endeavours start as capitalist enterprises, many of them are strongly influenced, if not driven, by the 'pious zeal' of the imperatives and ideologies of growth, market rules, 'choice' and competition advanced by neoliberal ideologies (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005). Indeed, due to its pervasiveness and the often sacrosanct reverence with which it is treated, there is a sizeable body of scholarship (Boer, 2011; Deutschmann, 2001; Goodchild, 2003; Löwy, 2009; Minns and Rizov, 2005; Tawney, 1926/2017) suggesting that capitalism has arguably 'replaced traditional religion as the faith of many people around the globe' (Boer, 2018). This has prompted some critical commentators to rechristen the current era as the 'Capitalocene' instead of the geologically referent Anthropocene (Moore, 2017). This is not necessarily due to rising disenchantment with the notion of the Anthropocene, but rather because of a 'migration of the holy', the virtuous and the unalloyed 'good', to the domains of economic production and consumption, capital, markets and consumer choice, entrepreneurialism and innovation, growth and crisis, profit and price (McCarraher, 2005). If, as we and many of those cited above suggest, capitalism has indeed become the religion of everyday life through its contemporary form of neoliberal capitalism,[4] then how is this religion — with its accompanying cultural processes and representations — manifesting itself in relation to the pressing humanitarian, environmental and development challenges that humanity faces in the Anthropocene?

Analysed through the interrelationships of capitalism and religion, this article engages with the fields of political theology, political ecology and celebrity studies to look critically at celebrity-led global water charities as drivers and outcomes of the changing landscapes of global development. By building on previously unconnected bodies of theory and analysis, we work to outline the main elements of what we define as a contemporary *political economy of sacrifice*, developed and maintained through the foundational ideologies, relationships, practices and materialities of global charities and their proto-religious deployment of saviour-like, celebrity 'high priests' of this political economy. To pursue these conceptualizations, we analyse the aforementioned organization fronted by Matt Damon — Water.org — a global water charity that directly connects socially conscious, empathetic

4. Neoliberalism is the processual component of capitalism and it operates through the corporatization, commodification and privatization of hitherto public assets, the financialization of the global economy, the creation, management and manipulation of crises, and redistributive policies enacted by the state (Harvey, 2006, 2014). As Leitner et al. (2007) argue, the workings of neoliberalism are always context-specific and historically and geographically situated.

publics of the Minority World to markets for microfinance[5] for clean water and sanitation and to the beneficiaries of these community projects throughout the Majority World.

One of our core contentions is that Water.org produces a complex set of relations through a political economy that is similar to religion in that it is 'ontologically communitarian and hierarchical' (Bruni et al., 2016: 2) in its efforts to do good. We thus explore the analogies around being religious, being charitable and making sacrifices in order to make theoretical and empirical contributions to the broader understandings of the 'religion of capitalism' as embedded in these rituals of global helping through international charities. More specifically, we explore the ways that the mission of Water.org revolves firmly around the *fetish(es) of capital* and the accompanying fetishes of consumerism, microfinance and gifting as driven by acts of consumerist sacrifice directed by global celebrities. These fetishes — and their discursive framings — are central to the ability of Water.org and its accompanying philanthropic relationalities to transcend relations between humans through the deployment of a celebritized neoliberal capitalism that undergirds the materializations and 'fixing' of (micro)capital through the likes of global charity and sacrifice on the part of the consuming Minority World. We discuss these conceptual and material links between the religion of capitalism, celebrity high priests, water charities and their fetishized framings of microfinance, charity and sacrifice in greater detail below.

Additionally, the operation of water charities presents a further fundamental problem which is yet to be scrutinized. Rather than reducing inequalities, as they aim to do, water charities seem to normalize, legitimize and ultimately reproduce the system and exploitative relations that are responsible for these inequalities. In short, scattered and localized fixes give the impression that things are getting better through the proliferation of markets for clean water and better sanitation as global networks are forged from the giving Minority World to the receiving Majority World.

As critical, normative scholars, we firmly believe in 'water justice', as the ability of all people across the globe to access clean water and sanitation facilities; we therefore have little quibble with the moral and practical *intentions* of water charities such as Water.org. Rather, our concern here is the way they go about it — or have had to go about it — in light of the hegemonic cultural politics of the celebritized political economy that animates so much of current North–South relations (Richey, 2015;

5. It is worth making a distinction among microcredit, microloans and microfinance. Microcredit refers to credit on a smaller level, while microloans are the small amounts borrowed by an individual. Microfinance is the general structure of the supply of microcredit and microloans as market-based tools to support (in this case) the development of clean water infrastructure. See Reis and Mollinga (2012) for a detailed analysis of microcredit programmes for rural water supply and sanitation.

Richey and Brockington, 2020; see also Kashwan et al., 2019) and the resulting materializations of care in the 'doing' of water charity across the planet. Instead, we offer up a normative critique of charities like Water.org by proposing a novel way to conceptualize and understand these concerns, given our central notion of the political economies of sacrifice and the ways these create and are created by object-to-object relations in global water charity networks.

With this, we look to build on and add to existing critiques of the neoliberal marketizations of international development and humanitarianism in 'cause-related marketing' (Hawkins, 2012b), 'developmental consumption' (Goodman, 2010), 'do-goodism' (Olwig, 2021b), 'brand aid' (Richey and Ponte, 2011), 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) and neoliberal water governmentality (Boelens et al., 2018; Furlong, 2010; Hellberg, 2014; Mena-Vásconez et al., 2016; Rusca et al., 2019). We also align this paper with contemporary critiques of the powerful tropes of celebrity humanitarianism and environmentalism (Abidin et al., 2020; Chouliaraki, 2013; Richey and Brockington, 2020) and the efforts to reduce socio-economic and environmental inequalities in the face of the ecological and economic crises bedevilling the Anthropocene (Houston, 2013). In short, we look to theorize the political economic relations of charity and celebrity — and their explicit and implicit framing as forms of religious sacrifice — in light of global humanitarianism and international development efforts and the ways these relationalities re-create, structure and strengthen a *particular* ideology framed through a *particular* cultural and material politics of care.

The article continues as follows. In the next section we trace the conceptual contours and premises of our argument by reviewing scholarship that discusses the interrelationships between capitalism and religion, looking particularly at the Christian tradition. Through this, we direct our attention to the spirit of capitalism, and the notions of the fetish and — most importantly here — of sacrifice. In the subsequent section we provide some background on celebrity-led development politics, its political economy and its ideological bond with the marketized neoliberalization of global politics and, in particular, the (white) saviours, the celebrity high priests. We then discuss our research design and the methodology used for data collection before fleshing out our conceptual arguments and contributions. We introduce and discuss our case study, Water.org, delineating the main elements of the charity's core ideological and material components that animate its political economy of sacrifice on the part of the consuming Minority World. The article concludes with a discussion of our key contributions and new avenues for research that emerge from our analysis in light of the continuing neoliberalized marketization of access to clean water through the likes of celebrity high priests and global charities.

ON SPIRITS, FETISHES AND SACRIFICES

> When the banks became cathedrals and the fog became God…
>
> (from 'Violet Hill' by Coldplay)

When, in the 1980s, several fragments written by Walter Benjamin in the early 20th century were published posthumously, one in particular, *Capitalism as Religion*, struck many readers as a classic, timeless piece that had a lot to say in relation to the contemporary era and the dynamics of late capitalism and late modernity (Löwy, 2009). In *Capitalism as Religion*, written in 1921, Benjamin maintained that '[a] religion may be discerned in capitalism — that is to say, capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers' (Bullock and Jennings, 1996: 288). While Benjamin was clearly inspired by Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2013), unlike Weber, he did not interpret the development of capitalism as a consequence of the secularization caused by Protestantism. Rather, he saw it as a parasite of Christianity, to the extent that in modernity, 'Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite — that is to say, of capitalism' (Benjamin in Bullock and Jennings, 1996: 290). Three aspects, according to Benjamin, underpin this religion of modernity, with religion understood in Durkheimian terms as a shared system of beliefs that unite a given group: 1) capitalism is a cultic religion, where everything has meaning only in relation to the cult; 2) this cult is permanent, as there is no difference between working days and feast days; and 3) this cult is based on a universal guilt. Guilt is a driving and pervasive force in capitalism, 'to the point where God, too, finally takes on the entire burden of guilt, to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret hope' (Benjamin in Bullock and Jennings, 1996: 289).

As capitalism tends toward guilt and despair, its aim, as a religion, is not to transform the world but rather to destroy it (Agamben, 2017). Building on the work of Benjamin and grounding his critique on Nixon's decision to suspend the convertibility of the dollar into gold in the 1970s, Agamben (2017) argues that capitalism is a religion in which faith — a word that is synonymous with *credito*, the past participle of the Latin verb *credere* (to believe) — has replaced God. How can we otherwise explain the fact that money is today fully detached from its materiality (for example. gold), becoming an object whose status depends on the fact that we *believe* in its immaterial and unperishable value (Žižek, 1989)? Indeed, as the purest form of credit is money, capitalism is a religion in which money is the God, and banks, through their ability to produce and govern credit, have replaced churches and are now the managers of faith. But a society that increasingly relies on credit, will live on credit, whereby corporate capital is increasingly sustained by a fictitious monetary capital. The capitalist religion is thus sustained by an act of faith in a future income that will help reduce this foundational debt,

and banks emerge as the priests that administer the sacrament of credit-debt (Agamben, 2017).

The fragment from Benjamin's 1921 piece is the basis for a crucial understanding of modernity, which, as Löwy (2009: 60) explains, transforms Weber's 'value-free' analysis of the Calvinist/Protestant treason of the true spirit of Christianity, 'into a ferocious anticapitalist argument'. Consistent with Marx's view of capitalism, modernity is not characterized by disenchantment, but rather by the affirmation of a new religion, the transformation of the Christian spirit into the spirit of capitalism (Bruni, 2018a; McCarraher, 2005). As Lacan (1978) observes, one of the great achievements of capitalism is its ability to exploit subjective individual desire and transform it into an object that can be produced, bought and consumed. Through the industrialization of desire, the hedonistic spirit of capitalism replaces the Christian spirit from which it originated. The god Mammon, the embodiment of material wealth in the New Testament (paralleled by the god Plutus in Greek mythology) and its countless manifestations — banknotes, bonds, credit and so on — is the highest deity in capitalism, an intensely social religion driven by growth to the extent that the cult of growth has fully colonized the Western imagination. More precisely, as Latouche (2006) observes, two phenomena — the cult of embodied value and the faith in progress, technology, science and indeed growth — have led us to idolatrize the market instead of the 'golden calf'. According to Baudrillard (2016), as we attach value to a dematerialized entity such as money, consumables and consumption emerge as new forms of the sacred that help individuals improve their social standing, encouraging social stratification. In this interpretation, Marxian use-values and exchange-values of consumables are replaced by their sign-value, by the fact that what essentially counts is not the possession of an object, but our endless desire to acquire it, by our 'consumption of consumption', in a society in which the 'only objective reality of consumption is the idea of consumption' (Baudrillard, 2016: 193).

Accounting for the Fetish(es) of Capital and Charity

This leads us to the first crucial node in the development of our analysis: that of the fetish. The notion of the 'fetish' was first used in the 15th century by Portuguese sailors and traders travelling along the West African coast, and it refers to amulets and objects believed to have supernatural, almost magical, powers (Pietz, 1985). The word fetish became popular in Europe, where northern Protestants used it to criticize Roman Catholic practices such as that of the Corpus Christi (or Corpus Domini) feast, and in the 18th century de Brosses developed a theory of fetishism as a means to understand ancient religions (Pietz, 1987). Marx was deeply influenced by the work of de Brosses for the conception of his idea of commodity fetishism, which he defined with the following words:

> A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. … There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. (Marx, 1867/2013: 46–47)

Marx's words point to the relational but also mystical character of commodities, to their transcendental value, to the fact that the powers and values of human social relations are transferred to the fetish. This also illuminates the mechanism through which commodity fetishism becomes the capitalist surrogate for religious sacramentality, whereby the power of money replaces divine grace (McCarraher, 2005). As Boer (2011, 2018) observes in his work on *Capital* and fetishism, for Marx, in its pure essence, the fetish can be reduced to nothing other than capital itself. As Marx writes in the beginning of chapter 24, Volume 3 of *Capital*:

> The relations of capital assume their most externalised and most fetish-like form in interest-bearing capital. We have here M – M', money creating more money, self-expanding value, without the process that effectuates these two extremes. In merchant's capital, M – C – M', there is at least the general form of the capitalistic movement, although it confines itself solely to the sphere of circulation, so that profit appears merely as profit derived from alienation; but it is at least seen to be the product of a social relation, not the product of a mere thing. (Marx, 1894/1998: 391)

While fetishism, as discussed earlier, involved the transfer of the social powers of human relations to objects, we now have objects — be they real or illusory, material or imagined — establishing a relation with other objects, transcending relations among humans. Money produces more money, and capital produces profit. This is, as Boer (2011: 423) observes, the full realization of this transfer of powers: 'the complete abasement of human relations, so much so that those relations simply disappear from the scene'. The human is no longer present or productive in the formula, human powers have been metaphorically and mysteriously transferred to the gods, and in this essentially pure and distilled form of the fetish, capitalism becomes a religion. Rather than being its consequence, capital (and its various manifestations as discussed above) becomes the social productive force of human labour, and it is in these terms that capitalism becomes the 'religion of everyday life' (Marx, 1894/1998: 817). Thus, the producer and the user of a commodity are not necessarily engaging in a full relation with one another when selling or buying something.

In a similar way, and as we develop in more detail later, a donation to a charity can be interpreted as a fetish, as a means through which we establish a relationship with a distant place — or an inaccessible celebrity — without doing so fully. The fetishization of aid is accompanied by a simplification, or even a disavowal, of the multiple and complex relations that have established

the need for that same donation, for example, for bore-well technology that allows access to local, clean water. While on the one hand aid turns into a post-political arrangement (Swyngedouw, 2009b, 2010; Žižek, 2005, 2008), on the other hand the fetishized donation becomes immaterial and happens in a utopia, with utopia being understood in its literal sense as a non-place.

Accounting for the Sacrifice

What is a donation, if not a sacrifice? While nowadays a donation is interpreted by some as a way to get tax relief (Aschoff, 2015), the meaning of a donation is profound, and it is rooted in the deeply spiritual concept of sacrifice. Here, the work of Bataille (1967) and his notion of *dépense* (translated in English into 'expenditure' but also 'excess') is useful to explain that a sacrifice is meaningful only when painful, only when it leads to a loss, to the act of giving up something that matters. Drawing mostly on the case of the *potlatch* — a gift-giving feast practised by indigenous peoples of North America — Bataille explains that a cult:

> …demands a bloody waste of sacrificial men and animals. A sacrifice is no more, in its etymological meaning, than the production of sacred things. Sacred things are constituted by a loss: in particular, the success of Christianism must be explained through the value of the defamatory crucifixion of the son of God, who leads human anxiety towards a limitless representation of loss and degradation. (Bataille, 1967: 29)[6]

And indeed, sacrifice plays a central role in modern political theology. As Kahn (2011) illustrates, sacrifice is always a disinterested free act of will and, as such, it has to be considered as the point of origin of a political community. According to Marvin (2014), the ways in which enduring groups persuade their members to *voluntarily* make a sacrifice — including social or physical death — for the common good and the survival of that group is the foundational element of any given religion. To ensure its own survival, the capitalistic religion manipulates the notion of sacrifice, normalizing a system in which we are asked to make small-scale sacrifices — such as donating tiny amounts of money or buying a beer chalice to help a water charity, as we will discuss later — diminishing the real meaning of sacrifice. Just as large multinational companies have embraced the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to tokenistically respond to social and ecological criticisms and ultimately expand their businesses through 'green' capitalism (Chiapello, 2013), so capitalism produces and demands a series of domesticated and symbolic sacrifices that neutralize the possibility for real sacrifices to be offered or even discussed (Bruni, 2018b). In both capitalism and religion, certain activities and words are prohibited,

6. Original French version translated by the authors.

and become taboos. One of the main capitalist taboos is arguably that of the gift, the notion of gratuity.

According to Bruni (2017), elaborating on Rene Girard's book *La violence et le sacré* (1972), traditions of ancient totemic civilizations whereby the untouchable object of the taboo, often an animal, was sacrificed annually, consumed and eaten to take possession of its force and keep social violence at bay, are reproduced by the logic of capitalism. In this logic, the idea of the gift is evoked, teased, used and consumed, once a year or a few times per year, so that it is deprived of its force. This happens through volunteering initiatives led by employees (often in partnerships with charities), fundraisers to help the poor, occasional donations and so on. Such forms of symbolic philanthropy and subdued gifts give companies a way to sacrifice a tiny fraction of their revenues to reproduce the appearance of a real gift and keep real gratuity at bay. The culture of the homeopathic gift, the principle that a tiny fraction of poison is used to cure and neutralize larger amounts of that same poison, is typical of the mechanisms through which tiny gifts can make us immune and neutralize a real gift (Bruni, 2018c). It is only when we are conscious of the fact that these gifts are merely symbolic that we can start questioning them and start thinking about real material and structural change.

Capitalism thus emerges as a religion of modernity, one that is underpinned by guilt and the transformation of the Christian spirit into the spirit of capitalism, the cult of embodied value articulated in commodity fetishism, unlimited faith in the market, progress and technical solutions, and the appropriation of the notion of sacrifice. These are the key themes that we will use to develop our discussion of the ideologies of water charities and the political economy of sacrifice. Before doing so, and to further contextualize our conceptualizations and arguments, we provide some background on celebrity-led development politics, with its clear ties to neoliberalized market-based political economies, its quasi-religious antecedents and the deployment of the moral authority of 'high priest' celebrities.

CELEBRITY-LED DEVELOPMENT, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND HIGH PRIESTS

Charity is, according to the far-sighted declaration of Littler (2008), now part of the job description and an established hallmark of what it means to be a celebrity. This is a function of the moral authority *afforded to* individuals as famous, wealthy and influential media celebrities, but also of the moral authority *claimed by* celebrities (and their media enablers, fans and charity organizations) through their work in charity and philanthropy. While building on a long history of the celebrity advocacy of social and environmental causes, Brockington (2014) points to the rise of relatively recent celebrity-fronted humanitarian and environmental 'spectacles' such

as Live Aid, Comic Relief, Children in Need, Make Poverty History, Product (RED), the Save Darfur Coalition and Live Earth — in addition to the more 'everyday' association of celebrities to causes like Matt Damon and Water.org, Madonna and Raising Malawi, Annie Lennox and Oxfam, and Emma Thompson and Greenpeace — as a core, recursive source of the moral authority of what Rojek (2014) calls the 'celebritariat'.

Scholars such as Chouliaraki (2012, 2013) have critiqued the ways that celebrities and celebrity-fronted charity as a process have worked through this moral authority to create a 'theatricality of solidarity' through a marketized 'post-humanitarianism'. For her, the media performances of humanitarian celebrities create a 'humanitarian imaginary' using 'the personifying power of celebrity, the enchantment of the rock concert or the professional witnessing of the [celebrity] journalist, so as to confront us with the spectacle of distant sufferers as causes that demand our response' (Chouliaraki, 2013: 3). Empathy for distant Others and 'neoliberal lifestyles[s] of "feel good" altruism' (ibid.: 4) on the part of the audience are put to work through a 'moralistic education' by celebrity performances of authentic caring for Others. Chouliaraki's (2012) example of Angelina Jolie speaks of an 'entrepreneurial confessionalism': the individualized emotional responses of celebrities (such as tearing up upon witnessing poverty) are embedded in but also replicate the spirit of capitalism activated through the 'therapeutic value' of a 'gestural economy' of audience empathy and the contemporary political economies of charity (Rojek, 2014). Further work has conceptualized humanitarian and caring celebrities through the (often multiple) 'tropes' (Abidin et al., 2020; Richey and Brockington, 2020) that they articulate, such as the 'earth mother' in the form of Angelina Jolie, the 'ambassador' in Harrison Ford, the 'guru' in Jane Goodall and 'ordinary' celebrity activists such as Greta Thunberg. One of the key tropes here is that of the 'white saviour', such as Diane Fossey, Bono, George Clooney, Madonna and Nicholas Kristof, concerned with 'saving' Africans and African nature in the often less-than-hidden guise of mediagenic neocolonialism (Mathers, 2012; Repo and Yrjola, 2011).

In much of this work — especially that of Chouliaraki (2012) and our interpretations of this past analysis — scrutinizing the celebritization of humanitarianism and international development highlights the proto-religious overtones of celebrities, their performances and the market-based, neoliberal mechanisms through which the political economies of charities are designed to function. For example, in many ways, in fronting for causes, celebrities become the 'high priests' of charities — both of their own charities and the other causes and charities they front — given their ability to direct the gaze, intentions and actions of audiences through this theatricality of humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013). They are moralizing pedagogues of the 'right' feelings (such as sympathy, empathy, care) and the 'right' actions (donation, conscious consumption, sacrifice) that frame problems and solutions to global poverty and environmental crises through the growing 'canon' of

neoliberalized problem analysis and marketized solutions. They bear witness by undertaking poverty tours to Africa and other 'needy' places to diagnose problems and share the 'successes' of, for example, microloans for bore-wells and improved toilet facilities, that are then reported back to us through TV shows, YouTube videos and news coverage.

Celebrity high priests also bear witness to their own 'conversion' — their realization of how bad the problem is — and what is the best, usually thoroughly fetishized, solution (microfinance, Fair Trade, female entrepreneurialism, etc.). This bearing of witness is often done in the company of and with the help of other, 'lesser priests' in the advisors and development experts explaining problems and solutions to celebrities and their audiences. Humanitarian celebrities 'confess' their feelings, their own 'sins', the poverty they have born witness to, in order to construct an authentic, emotional expertise that feeds their high priest persona. At the same time, these confessions transfer a kind of power to audiences to become their own version of the high priest. This is facilitated through the oft-repeated urgings of celebrities that 'your donation will support these communities in accessing clean water and sanitation' and the accompanying 'good deed' images of celebrities with the children/women/communities/environments they have helped.

In addition to speaking to their 'congregation' (that is, their audiences and fans) through media appearances, they also speak, as Bono has often put it, *on behalf of* this congregation to policy makers and other powerful elites (Brockington, 2014). Thus, celebrity high priests work to take both elites and fans with them into redemption through sacrifice, care and empathy monetized through donations, 'correct' purchases of 'helping' commodities and, sometimes, policy change or the use of other elites' personal wealth. Indeed, belief in these (very often) white saviours and the solutions they put forward offers personalized redemption for those who are willing to listen, contribute and believe (Boykoff and Goodman, 2009). Here, the public words and deeds of witness of celebrity high priests facilitate our own redemption, paved by our own donations and the psycho-emotional, personalized 'saving' of ourselves in the 'saving' of those on whom we bestow clean water and sanitation facilities. And, as Aschoff (2015) would put it, in this contemporary era, high priests are, more often than not, the literal 'prophets' of fetishized neoliberal, technocratic solutions of philanthrocapitalism and consumer choice — and their accompanying political economies — which they put before us as *the* solutions to global poverty and international development.

High Priests and the Political Economies of Care and Sacrifice

As Chouliaraki (2013) and others have articulated, there has been an overt instrumentalization and technologization of international development

through the creation of (charity) markets for development, their relationalities of solidarity and the reduction of vulnerability and suffering for distant Others. The spirit of capitalism now thoroughly animates the operationalization of global development through its monetization, with market-based techniques designed to tap into the competition for audience attention, emotion and donations (Goodman, 2013b). Indeed, much of the moral authority and power of celebrity high priests have been spent on selling the public this canonical marketized, neoliberal vision of charity through a philanthrocapitalism that is very often concealed behind the more everyday performance, theatre and emotions of celebrity humanitarian high priests.

At a cursory glance, or one partially blinded by the overt mediagenic characteristics of many of the mega-star high priests who front various campaigns, it might appear that celebrity-led concerns with development and environment are devoid of any explicit political economic dimension. The spectacles their legacy, personas and (social) media appearances afford often give the impression that they are merely the televised or digitized marketing faces of a campaign or charity, calling on a discursive and emotional script — they are often actors and performers after all — to speak to audiences about environmental and humanitarian issues in ways designed to get us to emote, sympathize, empathize and ultimately care enough to open our wallets.

However, over time and as this celebritization of environmental and international politics has taken on a stable, contemporary outline, celebrity-fronted and controlled philanthropic campaigns have begun to develop their own political economic relationalities, forms, logics, intentions and outcomes, that often eschew structural change and a re-alignment of multi-scaled power inequalities (Farrell, 2020). These political economies, and the accompanying cultural politics surrounding celebrity high priest advocacy, take two predominant shapes of relevance to Water.org and our discussion here.[7]

The first comprises political economies structured around celebrity-marketed conscious and ethical consumption. These work to create and deploy revenue through shopping and consumer choice spurred on by celebrity voices or modelling of 'good' shopping behaviour. The second is related to celebrity-fronted campaigns and foundations, and often has a different set of political economic relations through the deployment of celebrities' own economic capital and that from corporate sponsorship and donations, alongside

7. We lack the space to engage in a discussion of the different nuances of celebrity-fronted campaigns and their political economies and have therefore had to essentialize for effect here. For example, the organizations led by Ben Affleck and Madonna are not self-funded foundations. They are NGOs that have both service delivery and granting functions. And many celebrity-led organizations are characterized by fundraising from corporate sponsors and philanthropists rather than through NGOs or making pleas to the public.

other, already-existing revenue streams from, for example, donations to the Red Cross or funding streams from the UN. Oxfam and many NGOs include both political economic forms by allowing consumers to purchase products that support humanitarian and environmental causes while at the same time being supported by donations and other charity work. These 'upstream' caring, affective economies are then tied directly to the on-the-ground, 'downstream' political economies that caring celebrities, NGOs and foundations work to set up to support their humanitarian efforts by, for example, building schools in poor communities, supplying medicines, providing refugee support or, as in our case here, supporting better access to clean water and sanitation.

A great deal of previous critical work has explored and analysed both these types of political economy. For Rojek (2014: 127), the 'Big Citizens' — or celebrity high priests, to use our term — in the novel form of a technocratic, 'wonky' elite, confer an outsized influence given their media profiles and fan bases, and provide a kind of personal and societal therapeutic value of gestural socio-economic change that 'leaves the primary cultural, social and economic structures of invisible government intact'. Often deploying the mantra of 'consuming our way out of misery' — what Goodman (2010) refers to as 'developmental consumption' (see also Kipp and Hawkins, 2019) — these unelected and largely unaccountable members of the 'celebritariat' push so-called stateless, market-based solutions of 'celanthropy' (Rojek, 2014) as not just 'common sense' but as how development and humanitarianism *should* be done.

In this scenario, middle- and upper-class shopping choices of the 'congregation' support humanitarian and development aid for the far-flung poor, all at the behest of some of the world's richest and most powerful megastars. Richey and Ponte (2011, 2020) refer to this more generally as 'Brand Aid', whereby humanitarian, development and environmental aid is literally branded into consumer products such as those on the approved shopping list of Bono's Product (RED) campaign, or the likes of Fair Trade goods (Goodman, 2004), shoes (Brooks, 2015) and diapers (Hawkins, 2012a, 2012b). This kind of 'iCare capitalism' (Goodman, 2013b) sets up a biopolitics of economic choice whereby consumers choose the 'care-full', affective products they buy to support various causes at the same time that charities, celebrities, NGOs and corporations select the on-the-ground humanitarian and environmental issues they wish to confront and rectify. This is truly the ideology of neoliberal capitalism exposed in the harsh light of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998): the life and death of the poor and marginal are a function of the choices made by the global middle- and upper-classes for coffee, handbags and baby buggies, corporate largesse and (often rather cynical) CSR ploys, as well as the individualized choices of celebrity high priests to 'speak out' about particular environmental and humanitarian crises.

Second, and in parallel to the above 'celebrity-consumption-compassion complex' (Goodman and Barnes, 2011), many celebrities are the formalized

faces of local and global charities, international humanitarian NGOs, UN organizations and campaigns, and a number of different types of foundations charged with delivering humanitarian aid and development resources to marginalized, often desperate groups of people. Thus, celebrities have become the media representatives of already established, and relatively well-funded humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam (for example, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga) and the Red Cross (Al Pacino and Mark Wahlberg) and UN bodies such as UNICEF (Vanessa Redgrave and David Beckham) and the UNHCR (Angelina Jolie and Ben Stiller). Many are recruited by these institutions or they have a particular affective affiliation with their causes and so offer up their star (and sometimes monetary) power directly. Other forms of celanthropy include charities developed in conjunction with existing organizations and philanthropists such as Water.org (more below) or self-funded foundations set up by individual celebrities such as Madonna's Raising Malawi Foundation and Ben Affleck's Eastern Congo Initiative (Budabin et al., 2017), or the Jolie/Pitt, Bill and Melinda Gates and DiCaprio Foundations. That celebrity high priests bring economic capital in the form of strategic partnerships with corporate entities, which promote market-based solutions and reinforce structural inequalities, is aided by the creation of their own organizations from which to speak to their congregations.

Kapoor suggests that, in these celebrity high priest-fronted humanitarian political economies, 'celebrities are "doing the right thing" not for the Third World Other, but *in order for* capitalist liberal democracies to thrive' (Kapoor, 2013: 5, italics in original). As he argues, the '"decaf capitalism" of billionaire, millionaire and corporate philanthropy is part and parcel of the naturalization of global neoliberal capitalism' (ibid.: 47). The ideologies of celebrity advocacy and philanthropic work 'are attempts at repudiating their "dirty" underside. Which is to say that [celebrity-led ethical consumption and celebrity and corporate philanthropy] aim at stabilizing and advancing the global neoliberal capitalist order' (ibid.: 48). A parallel argument has been put forward by Goodman (2013a) who suggests that it is through humanitarian and development celebrities that neoliberal capitalism is both naturalized and embodied in 'celebrity governance regimes'. As he puts it, 'drawing on but also contributing to the moral authority of a hegemonic market-led governance of sustainability, this celebrity governance regime works to produce a kind of economy of care and responsibility that goes right to "The People" in the form of fans designed to circumvent the slow politics of States, policy and government regulations' (Goodman, 2013a: 73).

For us, one of the overarching points that emerges from these critical analyses is the way that these celebrity-fronted political economies of philanthropy and humanitarianism facilitate the *moral authority* of a *particular* neoliberal political economy of sacrifice through the efforts of celebrity high priests and the donations of their congregations. Care for other people and

environments is materialized not just in the bodies, media appearances and cultural capital of celebrities, but also in the associated products, donations, goods, elites, consultants and corporations that circulate in a political economy of affect and concern that then touches down in the places 'most in need' of support, aid, capital and/or market-creation. Care is materialized downstream in the 'things' of aid (such as water pumps, microloans and toilets) through the upstream divine powers of celebrity-led and corporate-approved advocacy of markets and market-making, and choice and choice-making, in a neoliberal (philanthropic and humanitarian) world. Put another way, the political economy of sacrifice created by the caring spectacles of celebrity, corporate philanthropy and NGO campaigning has authorized, set in motion and naturalized — if not outright *deified* — the continuing neoliberalization of the life and death of Others in humanitarian aid and environmental programmes.

We now turn to an exploration of this deification embedded in the celebrity-led political economy of sacrifice through a case study of Water.org and its high priest, the global mega-star Matt Damon. We begin by briefly detailing our research design and data collection methodology.

RESEARCHING WATER.ORG, MATT DAMON AND THE FRAMING OF SACRIFICE

In developing our theoretical and conceptual contributions to the debates signalled above, our analysis is based on a systematic and rigorous review of the Water.org webpages and social media channels, associated reports, water and sanitation campaigning webpages and documents. Specifically, we analysed: Water.org's annual reports (from 2007 to 2019) and financial statements (from 2009 to 2019); the full content of the websites https://water.org/ and https://waterequity.org/ (as of 31 March 2020) together with related campaign websites and press releases; the content of Water.org's Twitter account (@Water); and 109 videos published by Water.org on their YouTube channel between 2010 and 2020. The bulk of our research was carried out from November 2019 to March 2020, during which time we conducted a systematic critical discourse and visual content analysis of this material — similar to previous research on the framing of celebrity and global humanitarianism by Chouliaraki (2013), Goodman (2010) and Richey and Brockington (2020) — and transcribed and analysed Water.org YouTube videos. We initially performed our discursive and visual analysis independently, but then brought these analyses together through joint critical reflection, triangulation and further analysis to illuminate the ideological, political economic and performative logics of Water.org, its celebrity high priest Matt Damon and accompanying figures, and its performative and operational desire to reproduce the religion of market-based charity.

Water.org and its Celebrity High Priest

Water.org is a global non-profit organization whose aim is to bring clean water and sanitation to the world. The charity was founded by Matt Damon, an American actor and film producer, and Gary White, a civil and environmental engineer, with experience in water and sanitation projects, who is also its CEO. While Water.org was founded in 2009, the charity is the result of the merger of WaterPartners International, a charity founded by White in 1990, with H2O Africa Foundation, an NGO founded by Damon in 2006. Thus, Water.org functions through White's entrepreneurial expertise on microfinance in the water sector, which is amplified and made fully global thanks to Damon's celebrity status and commitment to this cause. Water.org's page on Damon reads as follows:

> After multiple trips around the world, Matt witnessed what life was like for a community living in the global water crisis. While filming a movie in Sub-Saharan Africa, Matt spent time with families in a Zambian village. They lacked access to water and toilets. Matt's exposure to their daily lives inspired a commitment to helping solve the global water crisis. In 2006 he founded H20 Africa Foundation to raise awareness about safe water initiatives on the continent.[8]

Damon, whose activism has developed in parallel to his film career (Gulam, 2019; see also Littler, 2018) — and much like the 'originator' of compassionate high priests, Bono (Seales, 2019) — is the epitome of the caring, post-humanitarian celebrity high priest. As Damon himself explains:

> I think what resonates with me most is when you see people living without clean water and they are forced to scavenge for water and basically use up all of their time just doing [that] and just trying to basically survive to the next day. You realize that they are in such a crippling cycle of poverty that it's just a death spin that they can't possibly get out of. (Water.org, 2011)

This original good intention — inspired by what appears to be genuine compassion — is not only admirable,[9] but also reveals the engulfing and parasitic nature of capitalism, of its capacity to feed on other organisms and ideas (Baumann, 2011). This is visible both in this specific case and more generally in the parasitic relationship between Christianity and capitalism signalled by Benjamin in 1921 (Bullock and Jennings, 1996). This is because Damon's call to action to solve the water crisis, with its philanthropic logic, has very rapidly been absorbed by capitalism and its market logic. As Damon himself has put it, '[t]he problems are so massive in dollar terms, you will never get there with philanthropy alone. You have to bring in the

8. Water.org, 'Matt Damon': https://water.org/about–us/founders–board–team/matt–damon/ (accessed 3 March 2021).
9. Colleagues consider Damon an example. The actor Christian Bale describes his philanthropic involvement thus: 'He's also one of the bloody most decent men I've ever come across …. He's so cooperative. He's absolutely in the school of you cooperate with each other, you don't compete against each other at all …. The way he views everything, he has this bigger perspective' (Morrison, 2020: 52).

real money' (Booth, 2019). Through similar logic, as Gary White explains, '[p]eople living in poverty are not a problem to be solved. They are a market to be served'.[10]

The Credit Fetish, Faith in the Market and Technology

The aim of Water.org is to use market forces to solve the water crisis. Those who suffer from water scarcity and poor access to sanitation are seen as a business opportunity, rather than Others to be helped. Water.org operates through grants and, predominantly, through its WaterCredit Initiative (WCI), a market-driven solution that 'empowers people to immediately address their own water needs' (Water.org, 2009b). Water.org identifies regions where people need access to water and sanitation and partners with local institutions (generally banks) to finance small projects such as wells, toilets and related infrastructure. When a loan (average loan size is US$ 365) is repaid, the money is lent to another borrower, then to another, and so on. The process is very straightforward and has three main implications: 1) those who receive loans see an immediate and tangible benefit in their everyday life; 2) the lending institutions make a considerable profit; and 3) the growth of this mechanism is exponential, as is the reach of Water.org. While in 2009, Water.org served 137,400 people with clean water and sanitation (Water.org, 2009a), the cumulative total served reached 5 million people in 2016 (Water.org, 2016), 10 million in 2017 (Water.org, 2017), and 17 million in 2018 (Water.org, 2018). Likewise, its total revenue and expenses have grown considerably year after year (see Figure 1).

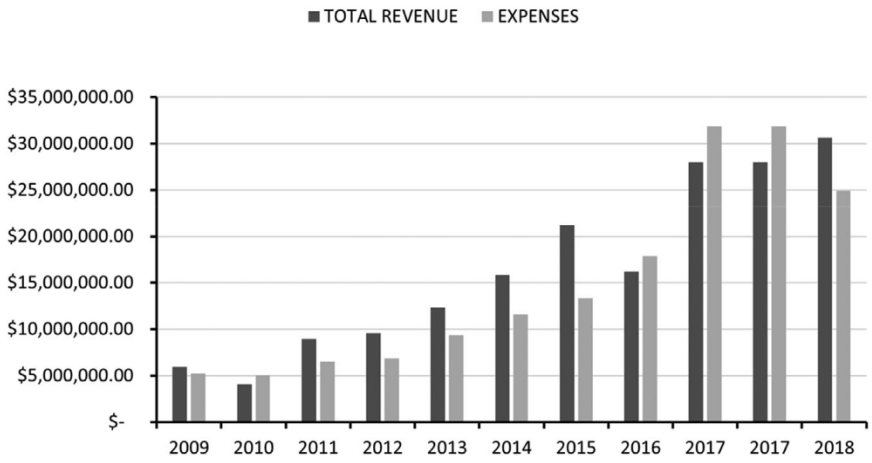
Water — a chemical substance and a social resource (Menga and Swyngedouw, 2018) — is thus transformed into a 'smart investment' (Water.org, 2018: 2), in a move that seems particularly beneficial for the banks that lend the money. As Damon puts it:

> We underwrote a lot of these loans and worked with local partners in these communities and they were so successful that now we've gotten out of the way and commercial capital has come in and you know, I sat with a branch manager of a bank in India who said I'm gonna call every branch manager in India and let them know that these are really great loans because they pay back at such a high rate and you're being introduced to a whole new level of customer. (Water.org, 2011)

Credit — or in this case microcredit — emerges as the fetish, as the social productive force of human activities and labour, whereby banks operate as the churches led by celebrity high priests of neoliberal capitalism (such as Damon) and their 'lesser' priests (such as White), who administer the sacrament of the credit-debt. Money lent through microcredit produces more money (M-M) and a profit for the lending institutions, thus

10. Water.org., 'Gary White': https://water.org/about–us/founders–board–team/gary–white/ (accessed 3 March 2021).

Figure 1. Water.org's Total Revenue and Expenses (US$, 2009–18)



Source: Water.org's Annual Reports for 2009–18, see: https://water.org/about-us/financials/

expanding the reach of capitalism into new and untapped markets. To further press this point, a Water.org staff member published a research article in *Aquatic Procedia* arguing that microloans in the water sector are less risky than commonly perceived, and water is, as such, investment worthy (Pories, 2016).

While microfinance's rhetoric of empowerment and its validity as a universal development tool have been questioned by critics both as a practice and an ideology (see for instance Aslanbeigui et al., 2010; Isserles, 2003; Schwittay, 2014), in its purest, distilled form, microfinance becomes an almost transcendental being, an abstract and universal entity that has the power to establish relationships between peoples and places and to solve the global water crisis. In line with our earlier discussion, the fetishization of microfinance leads to a simplification, and to an extent a disavowal, of the complex relations behind a specific microcredit project and the global water crisis in general. To paraphrase Davis (2006), the limit of this approach is that it attempts to solve the water crisis by treating its symptoms (lack of safe water and sanitation), rather than questioning its cause: poor governance, rapid urbanization, privatization, water grabbing, reckless consumption and economic and political inequality (Bakker, 2010; Boelens et al., 2016; Johnston, 2003; Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2011; Menga and Davies, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2009a; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014). This contradiction is eloquently illustrated by the WaterEquity Global Access Fund, a US$ 150 million private investment fund launched by Water.org in 2019 to 'provide debt capital to high-performing financial institutions in emerging markets to enable them to scale their water and sanitation micro-finance portfolios. The size of this undercapitalized market is large, with an estimated

USD18 billion of demand from families living in poverty' (WaterEquity, 2019: 1).

Water.org is committed to 'accelerating an end to the global water crisis for millions of women, children, and men' (WaterEquity, 2019: 2), and it is aiming to do so through a seemingly win-win scenario: pushing forward the capitalist frontier targeting countries with large populations living without access to safe water and sanitation.[11] While solving the water crisis is still prominent in Water.org's mission (the original good intention discussed above), this seems to have become a means — to expanding toward new large and untapped markets — rather than an end.

Among its investors, WaterEquity includes the Bank of America, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Niagara Bottling. The participation of Niagara Bottling (a manufacturer of bottled water and soft drinks) as a contributing partner and foundational investor is particularly telling of the abovementioned contradiction. Plastic bottles are the third-most collected discarded items from oceans; they require large amounts of energy to be produced (and so generate greenhouse gas emissions), lead to the commodification of water making it pricier and more inaccessible, and constrain local water supplies across the globe (Gleick, 2010: Jaffee and Case, 2018; Wilk, 2006). Besides the general issues attached to bottled water (Pacheco-Vega, 2020), Niagara Bottling has been directly involved in several notable controversies, conflicts and even legal battles with local communities about water pumping in aquifers across the United States, including the Floridan Aquifer in Florida (Spear, 2014) and the Cooper Lake in Kingston, New York (Okeowo, 2016). As Rebecca Martin, a Kingston resident and community activist who fought Niagara noted: 'To privatize a municipal water supply for a corporation to commoditize in plastic bottles and ship from our watershed to other parts of the world is an awful idea for everyone. It's a short-term solution that benefits capitalists and a real wake-up call for our community' (R. Martin, personal communication, 24 April 2020). While Niagara's Director of Corporate Giving describes the partnership with WaterEquity as a means to accelerate 'an end to the global water crisis for hundreds of millions of women, children, and men [living in] emerging markets',[12] Niagara's actions as a profit-seeking business seem to make water more exclusive and less equally distributed.

The mutually constitutive relationship between the marketization of the water crisis and the commodification of water resources is held together by an acritical belief in the healing capacities of progress and (micro)technical solutions. A PET water bottle, for example, is not conceived of as an unnecessary source of plastic pollution, but rather as an innovation that provides

11. Target regions include Latin America and the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific (WaterEquity, 2019).
12. WaterEquity, 'Investors': www.waterequity.org/investors/ (accessed 5 April 2021).

the 'smallest ratio of packaging material to product'. According to Niagara, a PET bottle comprises 2 per cent package and 98 per cent product (as compared to an egg which it claims comprises 13 per cent package and 87 per cent product!).[13] In a related vein, the installation of taps, toilets and the network of pipes necessary for the circulation of water becomes both the material accomplishment of the desire to end the water crisis, and a market with an enormous untapped potential. As White and Damon (2018: 56) highlight:

> clean water and sanitation is a viable market, and we are not alone in understanding its potential. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation estimates that the global market for microfinance in water is $12 billion. Deloitte's Monitor Inclusive Markets estimates a $10 billion to $14 billion market for toilets in rural India alone. The demand exists, as does the approach to meet it. Now we are beginning to see the missing piece: the investment capital that will catalyze the process.

Damon thus emerges not only as a celebrity humanitarian high priest, but also as an expert on water and markets. The dichotomous role of toilets as both a basic need and a business opportunity is also detectable in the 'More than a Toilet' campaign,[14] launched in 2018 by Water.org together with Harpic, a company producing a toilet bowl cleaner that also happens to be the leading toilet cleaner in India. Prior to this campaign, in 2013, Damon had launched a toilet strike to raise awareness about the water crisis.[15] Celebrities endorsed the toilet strike, and the likes of Richard Branson, Olivia Wilde and Bono pledged the physical impossibility of 'not [going] to the bathroom until everyone in the whole world has access to clean water and sanitation' (Water.org, 2013), while supporters were asked to use the hashtag #strikewithme to share funny news about the strike. Beyond its spectacularization of the act of 'going to the bathroom', the toilet strike plays into the absurdity of the real that encapsulates a late capitalist, Anthropocene response to ecological, humanitarian and health crises.

Sacrifice and Gift

Beyond the credit fetish and faith in the market and progress, the parasitic relationship between capitalism and religion feeds on the manipulation of the notion of sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice, as discussed earlier, is a profound one, and is radically attached, following Bataille's (1967) discussion of the potlatch, to the notions of loss and pain. And while the example of the potlatch is a rather extreme one, it is clear that a sacrifice, in its literal sense, has to make the experience of giving uncomfortable. Take the case of

13. Niagara, 'Packaging Efficiency': www.niagarawater.com/sustainability/packaging-efficiency/ (accessed 7 May 2020).
14. Water.org, 'More than a Toilet': https://water.org/morethanatoilet/ (accessed 6 May 2021).
15. Water.org, 'Strike with Me': http://strikewithme.org/water_post_hr/ (accessed 7 May 2021).

Abraham, for instance, who was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering to God.[16] Or consider the rich young man, told by Jesus that he must give all his fortune to the poor if he were to enter the Kingdom of God,[17] thus hinting at the interrelations between privilege, sacrifice and justice. In the case of Water.org we can detect this phenomenon through the fetishization of donations. We should note that this process applies to charities in general and not only to Water.org, as this is a systemic issue rather than the peculiarity of a specific water charity. For example, WaterAid, an international NGO funded by the UK water industry, runs the campaign 'Give it up for Taps and Toilets'.[18] In this campaign, volunteers are asked to turn their 'self sacrifice into a fundraising frenzy!', by, for instance, 'giving up beer for a year, or giving up chocolate for a month', to promote their sacrifice, make an event out of it, and raise money for taps and toilets.

Overall, donations from individuals account for a relatively small part of the Water.org total revenue (17 per cent in 2016, 13 per cent in both 2017 and 2018).[19] Nevertheless, Water.org is quite active on this front, and has launched several fundraising campaigns over the years. The peculiarity of these campaigns is that they are generally run in partnership with large multinational corporations, including the IKEA Foundation, the PepsiCo Foundation, Inditex and Stella Artois. The case of Stella Artois — a beer brand owned by the world's largest brewer, Anheuser-Busch InBev SA/NV — is particularly revelatory of how capitalism manipulates the notions of gift and sacrifice, rendering them empty and using them to expand its reach. In March 2019, Water.org and Stella Artois celebrated World Water Day with the #PourItForward campaign. As Stella Artois' press release explains:

> Stella Artois and Water.org co-founders Matt Damon and Gary White are rallying America to 'Pour It Forward®' by choosing Stella Artois to help end the global water crisis — and they're challenging some famous friends to spread the word, starting with Sarah Jessica Parker. … It's easy to get involved. For a limited time, every Stella Artois helps provide access to clean water for someone living without it:
>
> - Every Chalice gives access to 5 years of clean water for one person in the developing world.
> - Every 6-pack gives access to 6 months of clean water for one person in the developing world.
> - Every 12-pack gives access to 12 months of clean water for one person in the developing world.
> - Every pour (or bottle) sold at bars and restaurants gives access to 1 month of clean water for one person in the developing world. (Stella Artois, 2019)

16. *New International Version Bible*, 2011: Genesis 22.
17. *New International Version Bible*, 2011: Mark 10: 17–31.
18. WaterAid, 'Give it up for Taps and Toilets': www.wateraid.org/us/publications/give–it–up–for–taps–and–toilets (accessed 4 April 2021).
19. Water.org revenue breakdown for 2018 reports: US$ 13.1 million from corporations (43 per cent), US$ 12.7 million from foundations (41 per cent), US$ 3.9 million from individuals (13 per cent) and US$ 802,000 from 'investment and other' (3 per cent) (Water.org, 2018).

Celebrities were thus asked to spread the word using the #PourItForward tag on social media, and Stella Artois pledged to trigger product donations of US$ 3.13 for every limited-edition Stella Artois chalice sold (for US$ 13) in the United States. Stella Artois also purchased a 30-second spot during the 2018 Super Bowl (Stella Artois, 2018) for an estimated price tag of US$ 5 million (Gharib, 2018), representing a fifth of Water.org total expenditures in that year, in which Damon encouraged viewers to buy a limited-edition chalice to help end the global water crisis. Rather than being aimed at making a real difference and helping humanity solve the water crisis, such an emotional and spectacular call to arms contributes to raising the profile of both Stella Artois and Water.org and, by implication, Matt Damon performing in his celebrity high priest role, while also boosting celebrity-led ethical consumption among its growing congregation.

Similarly, Water.org and the Levi's® brand celebrated World Water Day 2012 with the 'Go Water<Less' campaign, to encourage people to adopt a 'Water<Less™' lifestyle.[20] The campaign — which understandably does not make any reference to the fact that the garment industry is one of the most polluting in the world, and that it takes 3,781 litres of water to make a pair of jeans[21] — invited people to visit Levi's® campaign site to complete several challenges that raised awareness on how to reduce individual water consumption. Each challenge completed unlocked a number of Water.org 'WaterCredits' and participants were introduced to the water-conscious Water<Less™ jeans collection.

The act of giving and the notion of sacrifice — and the political economies built around this sacrifice in donations and purchasing decisions — are thus crucial for these campaigns. But they have also come a long way from their forebears, as they were discussed by Girard (1972), turning into a pale imitation. Under this logic, a donation is no longer a *gift* — one of the main taboos in capitalism alongside the notion of gratuity — but rather another opportunity to buy goods and engage in consumption patterns, all the while normalizing and sustaining the capitalist imperative of growth that helps partner companies expand their businesses. Individuals who have made a donation are prompted to share this on social media to encourage others to do the same, making the experience of giving both public and implicitly reciprocal.

The foundational vocation of this endeavour — solving the global water crisis — is still central, but at the same time feels very distant, almost peripheral, and spatially it is unfolding in a generic and utopian 'developing world'

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20. Water.org, 'Levi's Water<LESS Campaign': https://water.org/about-us/news-press/levis-waterless-campaign/ (accessed 7 June 2021).
21. For more information refer to the United Nations Environment Programme website: www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/cleaning-couture-whats-your-jeans#:~:text=Lifecycle%20assessments%20show%E2%80%94taking%20cotton,TV%20on%20a%20big%20screen.

in need of help. H_2O, it appears, has been channelled into a form of apolitical populist environmentalism and global developmentalism, whereby the ecological, economic and social problems caused by capitalism and modernity are detached from the relations of global neoliberal capitalism that lie behind them, and the matter of concern is disembodied and ultimately vague (Swyngedouw, 2009b). Indeed, the purchase of a beer chalice will eventually help, through microfinance, a family in India or in Bangladesh that does not have access to water. And yet, for as much as we might fetishize this localized fix processually facilitated by global charity networks and the high priests of celebrity humanitarianism, the purchase of a beer chalice does not help solve the global water crisis and the underlying systemic issues that are causing it.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the interrelationships between capitalism and religion to develop a critical analysis of celebrity-led charity. In particular, it considered a global water charity, Water.org, and its high priest figurehead, Matt Damon, to outline the main elements of the ideology underpinning what can be labelled the political economy of sacrifice, and thus to contribute to research that explores the predatory nature of capitalism and the contradictions embedded in the current practices of the global development agenda. We drew on perspectives from the fields of critical theory, political theology, political ecology and celebrity studies to bring to the surface the opportunistic nature of capitalism, and underline its ability to appropriate seemingly distant and non-capitalistic endeavours (that is, those that are not related to the domains of production, growth and value), pinning them down to market logics, the imperatives of growth and the spectacularization of global developmentalism and charity campaigns. This, we argued, results in charities that, rather than reducing structural inequalities as they claim to do, continue to reproduce, normalize and legitimate the system and exploitative relations that created the need for their intervention.

There can be much to commend in Damon's original good intention, or for that matter, in anyone who decides to make a donation to a charity or to support and practise a monetized solidarity with those in need. But we need to ask ourselves if this neoliberalization of aid and its scaling up is really the only way forward, or if this forecloses the emergence and imagination of alternative socio-technical arrangements and infrastructures aimed at improving the human condition. Specifically, we question the market-driven rationale that informs the mission of these charities, and the ideological mechanisms that morally enable a rich Western entity, and global mega-star, to operate in the global South — often represented as powerless and hopeless — thus replicating a highly problematic form of colonial thinking that is not conducive to a much-needed structural change (e.g. Kapoor, 2013).

In addition, the discussion above has provided insights into the conceptualization and fetishization of aid, highlighting the capitalist appropriation and domestication of deeply relational concepts such as sacrifice, gift and donation, in the name of growth, progress and proto-religious 'good deeds' for others.

Celebrity-led international charities in the spaces of humanitarianism and environmentalism operate and prosper in this utopian landscape, and more theoretical and empirical work is needed to understand how the contemporary conception of sacrifice can be repoliticized and humanized to advance innovative socio-ecological visions and infrastructural justice. In particular, research should focus on alternative models of global humanitarianism and environmentalism that facilitate relationalities outside the bounds of the sacred framings of the market and the neoliberalizations of life and ecologies that are so much a part of celebrity-led campaigns like Water.org. Only when life, happiness and the existence of a healthy environment are detached from their commodification and the largesse of the world's rich will the conversation about what constitutes a radical shift in humanitarian and environmental movements begin.

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