

## Article

# Teaching against the “False Religion” of the Market: Toward Explicitly Anticapitalist Teaching and Research in Religion and the Environment

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**Abstract:** David Loy’s 1997 essay, “The Religion of the Market,” should be a foundational text for all who study and teach the intersection of religion and the environment. In contrast to the more field-defining essay by Lynn White, Loy focuses on the structural and economic roots of environmental degradation and calls for scholars and practitioners to actively oppose the global capitalist systems causing the problem. When brought into conversation with other anticapitalist scholarship, Loy’s essay offers ways to characterize existing debates about economics within our field, and can be used to argue against hegemonic capitalocentrism to set the stage for other kinds of resistance in our teaching and scholarship.

**Keywords:** religion and environment; anticapitalism; capitalocentrism; David Loy



**Citation:** Hartman, Laura M., and Kevin J. O’Brien. 2023. Teaching against the “False Religion” of the Market: Toward Explicitly Anticapitalist Teaching and Research in Religion and the Environment. *Religions* 14: 975. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080975>

Academic Editor: Todd Jared LeVasseur

Received: 2 June 2023

Revised: 19 July 2023

Accepted: 20 July 2023

Published: 28 July 2023



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## 1. Introduction

In her famous 2019 speech to the United Nations, Greta Thunberg made a clear connection between climate change and the dominant global economic system:

People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (Thunberg 2019, p. 96)

Labeling the world’s most prominent stories about money and economic growth “fairy tales” was a powerful rhetorical move. With it, the then-17-year-old emphasized how childish the world’s leaders have been in failing to respond meaningfully to climate change. She simultaneously dismissed those who argue that the economic costs of political action are prohibitively high and those who suggest that markets rather than governments must solve the problem.

Thunberg’s indictment of global capitalism’s injustice and unsustainability echoes a fairly common refrain among environmentalists<sup>1</sup>, which we will argue here should be even more common than it is in scholarship and teaching about religion and the environment. By offering the explicit label “anticapitalism,” we hope to align our field more with Thunberg and other environmentalists who critique the hegemony of market systems<sup>2</sup>.

As scholars of religion, we recognize a culture’s “fairy tales” as, potentially, myths with deep spiritual significance; the “fairy tale” of eternal economic growth is no exception. Rather than simply a bloodless and clinical set of theories, the ideas that govern our economy are based upon and evoke a complicated set of moods, motivations, beliefs, and practices. David Loy’s foundational 1997 essay “*The Religion of the Market*” offers a helpful way of thinking about this. He argues:

Our present economic systems should also be understood as our religion, because it has come to fulfill a religious function for us. The discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion and its god, the Market, has become a

vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation. (Loy 1997, p. 275)

Loy's perspective sheds powerful light on the environmental argument against capitalism as currently practiced. It also helpfully clarifies the role of religious communities and scholars of religion in responding to environmental degradation. Scholars and teachers of religion and environment should take Loy seriously and should use his perspectives to examine and consider other explicitly anticapitalist perspectives.

We, the authors of this essay, are not opposed in principle to markets or market economics. To the contrary, we recognize that markets have been used to organize people for many centuries and that modern capitalism was, in many ways, an elegant solution to the problems it was designed to solve. But we are opposed to what Loy calls "the Market," a type of advocacy for unbridled capitalism, private property, and devotion to profit that defines so much of the economics and politics in the contemporary industrialized world. We believe that this form of global capitalism and the largely unquestioned support for it in so much public discourse has led, and will continue to lead, to environmental degradation and injustices among human beings<sup>3</sup>. Thus, we argue that scholars and teachers of religious environmentalism should explicitly oppose "the Market."

We are not economists and do not intend to articulate or advocate for a global alternative to capitalism here. Instead, we seek to continue Loy's work of uncovering the religious ideas that underpin the Market. We believe that our world and our neighbors deserve better than what they are getting in our current system and that better alternatives begin with good ideas and concepts. For this reason, we are comfortable naming "anticapitalism" as a moral imperative without necessarily aligning ourselves with one or another alternative economic system. This essay operates mostly at the conceptual level, hoping that these ideas will contribute to a conversation that bears fruit in practice.

Section 2 contrasts Loy's essay with Lynn White Jr's more famous explanation of the origin of environmental harm. We appreciate Loy's more structural analysis and his assertion that if religion and religious studies do not stand in opposition to the dominant systems of capitalism, they will be irrelevant to the contemporary world. We then offer the first of two correctives to Loy's approach in Section 3, drawing on the ideas of geographer J. K. Gibson-Graham to suggest that Loy ascribes undue power to capitalism and that a sophisticated religious approach to the issue will focus attention on existing "diverse economies" that stand as inspiring contrasts to the Market.

Section 4 uses the anticapitalist framework of Erik Olin Wright to demonstrate that much of the work in the field of religion and environment can already be classified as anticapitalist and to offer a vocabulary for making this more explicit. Section 5 then draws on Amitav Ghosh's recent work to explore the ways anticapitalist analysis can be expanded to include opposition to colonialism and, we hope, racism, patriarchy, and many other structures of oppression.

Our conclusion argues that those of us who teach religion have a responsibility to our students: to teach them about religious anticapitalism and to thereby show them alternatives to the destructive forces that currently define too much of their world.

Two introductory notes are in order. First, our argument is to the field of "religion and environment" broadly construed. We assume, but do not argue here, that this is an essential part of the study of religion and that everyone in our discipline should relate their work to environmental issues (LeVasseur 2021).

Second, we hope that this essay will influence not only research but also teaching. We believe that most scholars in our field have more impact in our classrooms than anywhere else. At the same time, our focus on conceptual questions means that we will not offer specific teaching tools or techniques. Instead, we hope the perspectives developed here will inform teachers who want to think about and reconsider how their work relates to "money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth"<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. The Economic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis

In 1967, Lynn White Jr.'s *"The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"* offered a clear, if simplistic, historical explanation for environmental degradation and insisted that religion could be part of the solution. He argued that Western Christianity had created the conditions for the abuse of the natural world by justifying and encouraging technology that exploits nature. The worldview of Christianity, "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," made extractivism and dominance on a global scale possible. Thus, Christianity "bears a huge burden of guilt." In a conclusion that has been remarkably popular with scholars of religion, White then argued that since environmental degradation is rooted in a mistaken religious worldview, the remedy to the problem "will be essentially religious." Specifically, he counseled that to properly care for the environment, Christians should "find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (White 1967, pp. 1205–7).

White's argument that "what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature [sic] relationship" provided an opening for both adherents and scholars to put religion at the center of our conversations about the environment. More than 50 years later, such conversations have proliferated in our discourse and in some religious communities. Much of the discussion has centered on White's agenda: debating anthropocentrism and greening religions along the lines of the human–nature relationship (Whitney 2015)<sup>5</sup>.

David Loy, writing 30 years after White, undertook a similar project in his essay *"The Religion of the Market."* However, Loy did not cite White and did not discuss anthropocentrism as a problem. Similar to White, Loy offered a clear and simple account of the historic roots of environmental degradation, with significant implications for religious people and religious scholarship. But unlike White, Loy argued that the roots of the problem are fundamentally economic and warned that avoiding this aspect of the problem would consign religious people and scholars to total irrelevance and powerlessness in the face of environmental degradation.

Loy takes a functionalist view of religion, agreeing with White that religions shape our worldviews and, hence, our behaviors. Loy then hypothesizes that any ideology functioning in this way should be understood as a religion. The observation that money and markets seem to govern the moods and motivations of the majority of the developed world then leads to an exercise in analogical thinking: if the Market is our God, then economists are the theologians, advertisers are the priests, self-interested greed underpins the ethics, and the teleology points to "happiness through individualistic accumulation and consumption" (Loy 1997, pp. 275, 286)<sup>6</sup>. In naming all of these as religious, Loy points to the Market's uncanny power and pervasiveness. It is, he concedes, "the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system in human history" (Loy 1997, p. 276).

If the Market is a religion, Loy insists, then scholars of religion should judge it as such. And he does not hesitate to do so. Arguing that human beings and the natural world have both been commodified so that they could be exploited for profit, he suggests that global capitalism is inherently linked to abuses of nature and of human dignity. Ultimately, reverence towards the Market represents "a defective value-system. . . based on an erroneous belief system."

Loy, therefore, understands the Market as a bad religion; it "is not just an economic system but a religion—yet not a very good one" (Loy 1997, p. 289). In his judgment, global capitalism fails to live up to its promises to make people happy and, in the process, degrades their morality and the ecological basis for all life. Therefore, "all genuine religions are natural allies against" global capitalism, which is "an idolatry that undermines their most important teachings" (Loy 1997, pp. 282, 289). Ultimately, Loy's article is a call to action: "religions are not fulfilling their responsibility if they ignore this religious dimension of capitalism," but if they rise to the challenge and call out this false religion, then they may earn their rightful place in society (Loy 1997, p. 278). Otherwise, the religion of the Market will continue to spread, weakening and ultimately displacing traditional religions.

For White, religions essentially amount to worldviews, and these can be evaluated based on how anthropocentric they are. A religion that fails to pass White's test is simply bad for the environment. Loy's judgments on religions are based more on their impact than their worldview. "All genuine religions" teach against the idolatry of the market and therefore have roughly equivalent worldviews for Loy. The question becomes, can they act on their teachings? Can they present a genuine alternative that encourages the Market's adherents to abandon their false faith? A religion that fails to pass Loy's test is worse than wrong. It is irrelevant. And irrelevant religions will fade away.

Thus, Loy's understanding of religion includes a more structural and collective view of the phenomenon than White's. Loy does not want to see the end of markets altogether; rather, he aspires to restore "market forces to their proper delimited place within community social relations." This can happen when human beings' "spiritual urge" is met by the teachings and practices of healthy religions rather than the machinations of the Market (Loy 1997, p. 279 n.2, p. 289).

What if, in the nearly 30 years since Loy's essay, the field of religious studies had taken his arguments as seriously as we have White's?<sup>7</sup> Unlike White, who essentially taught Christian thinkers that "we have met the enemy, and he is us," Loy has an external enemy (the wrongful religion of the Market) and a call to action (oppose the enemy!). White's charge to "find a new religion, or rethink our old one," appears to have been easier than Loy's charge to "redirect this repressed spiritual urge [away from the Market and] back into its true path" (White 1967, p. 1206; Loy 1997, p. 289). What if we scholars had been deliberately challenging, refuting, and providing explicit alternatives to the religion of the Market for the past 30 years? Where would our field be? Where would our religions be? Both, if Loy is correct, would be more relevant to the world's real problems than they are now.

Our field, and particularly our classrooms, should attend much more to Loy's perspective than to White's. While both diagnose environmental problems as religious, and both offer a place for scholars and practitioners of religion in the response, Loy's analysis is much more actionable, more productive, and more prescient than White's.

Loy's essay offers not only a call to action for scholars and teachers of religion but also a clear way to articulate the relevance of our work: We are specially equipped to understand the Market's role in contemporary society and to consider key possibilities for opposition. Scholarship and teaching in religion and the environment should follow Loy's guidance and become explicitly, resolutely anticapitalist.

### 3. The Limits and Dangers of Capitalocentrism

We can understand and build upon Loy's argument better when we place it in the context of a broader field of anticapitalist scholarship. This includes not only work that explicitly advocates for socialism or communism but also arguments that markets, profit, and property should not be as dominant in contemporary industrial life as they are. The core assumption of anticapitalism is that the Market, though powerful, is not all-powerful. Though pervasive, it is not all-pervasive; though dominant, it is not inevitable. People can choose to use markets to solve problems and coordinate activities, and they can choose not to do so.

Loy's essay fits into this category because he emphasizes that the dominance of capitalist thinking in all economic reasoning is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. Popular discourse in the Western world often assumes that capitalism is the only viable economic structure and that arguments against market-based solutions are inherently naïve or simplistic. Loy instead begins from the anticapitalist assumption that contemporary economic realities developed out of human choices, and so different choices can and should lead to different structures in the future.

However, while Loy makes it clear that the Market is not inevitably dominant, his essay repeatedly insists that global capitalism is currently hegemonic. The "first truly world religion" has, he suggests, largely succeeded in extending itself to every corner of

life on every corner of the globe. Its powers of conversion are “extraordinarily effective and persuasive” (Loy 1997, pp. 275, 278).

An important corrective, the anticapitalist research of J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) focuses on exploring the limits of capitalism’s dominance<sup>8</sup>. Their 1996 book *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It)* argues from the perspective of economic geography that the Market does not occupy as much “space” as it seems or claims to. They offer an extensive argument against the “widespread understanding. that capitalism is the hegemonic, even the only, present form of economy and it will continue to be so in the proximate future” (p. 2). Capitalism is powerful, they admit, but it is not nearly as dominant as it claims to be.

Ten years later, Gibson-Graham expanded this critique in *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Here, they introduce and critique the concept of “capitalocentrism,” which they define as

dominant economic discourse that distributes positive value to those activities associated with capitalist economic activity however defined, and assigns lesser value to all other processes of producing and distributing goods and services by identifying them *in relation* to capitalism as the same as, the opposite of, a complement to, or contained within. (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 54, italics in original)

In other words, capitalocentrism is the mistaken belief that the Market is the most important system in the world. It suggests that anything that can be quantified in capitalist terms is inherently more important than anything that cannot.

Gibson-Graham names capitalocentrism in order to insist that it is as mistaken as most other “-isms.” They argue that people live and work outside the boundaries, dictates, and standards of markets and the Market in many ways, valuing and prioritizing many activities and relationships that make no sense from capitalist standards. Therefore, rather than developing a grand alternative to capitalism like Marxism, they focus on daily choices that exist outside of the Market. They refer to this as uncovering the “diverse economies” concealed and silenced by capitalism’s claimed hegemony.

These diverse economies comprise many kinds of human interaction: much of government, many bartering exchanges, most household management, all gleaning and hunting and fishing that takes place on public or unmonitored property, volunteer work, the governance and accountability of non-profit organizations, and many other institutions and relationships. Gibson-Graham insists that these diverse economic expressions add up to a significant part of human life, even in industrialized societies that are generally understood to be dominated by the Market. Capitalism cannot explain the ways most people relate to their children, their charity, their friends, their pets, and their gardens.

Of course, Gibson-Graham is concerned about the dominance of the Market in contemporary life; opposing this is an animating motivation for their work. But they suggest that one important strategy of such resistance is naming capitalocentrism as a mistake. Diverse economies reveal that many aspects of life have not been colonized, or not fully colonized, by global capitalism. By their account, “‘marginal’ economic practices and forms of enterprise are actually more prevalent, and account for more hours worked and/or more value produced, than the capitalist sector” (Gibson-Graham 2008, pp. 616–17). These diverse economies demonstrate that any story of capitalism’s unquestioned dominance is much more tenuous than those who tell it might admit.

Gibson-Graham does not spend much time on the fact that religious institutions are a key site of diverse economies<sup>9</sup>. Nor do they explore the potential of religious traditions to contribute moral arguments and traditions that pre-date the Market as we know it today. Here, they could benefit from Loy’s argument and its insistence that faith traditions offer alternatives to the Market. Indigenous rejections of land ownership (Deloria 1999), Buddhist critiques of consumerism (Kaza 2005), and readings of the Hebrew Bible that insist on the personhood of land (Joerstad 2021) all suggest that religious traditions build diverse and resistant economies. Those looking to oppose the hegemony of capitalocentrism have much to learn from religion.



However, Gibson-Graham also offers a helpful corrective to Loy's essay, which seems at points to imply that religion is the only alternative to capitalism. For instance, his essay decries the "prostitution of universities and the media" and seems to express no hope for their redemption outside of religion (Loy 1997, p. 277). In part, the challenge is definitional: by categorizing Market economics as a "salvation religion," Loy suggests that only another religion could replace or compete with it. Gibson-Graham suggests that this perspective is too singular and too capitalocentric; Loy misses the diversity of economic expressions. Capitalism is simply not as big and powerful as it presents itself to be; it is not even as big and powerful as Loy's essay assumes.

Gibson-Graham's cataloging of diverse economies offers a vital resource for classrooms and research in religion and environment. In addition to the philosophical and religious work Loy calls for, the study and teaching of religion should also include attention to the many other aspects of life that exist outside of the Market. We should help students to understand not only the ways religious traditions and ideas inform diverse economies but also the ways existing religious communities and religious people support organizations and lifestyles outside of the supposedly hegemonic systems of capitalism. As we teach and write about religion, we should note the ways many religious and spiritual communities relate to land as something other than property; the ways religious schools, camps, and soup kitchens work to correct the excesses and injustices of the Market; the ways many (though of course not all) religious leaders reject profit as a standard of success<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. Anticapitalist Strategies in Religion and Environment

Another useful conversation partner in the field of anticapitalism is the sociologist Erik Olin Wright. Wright offers careful, rigorous accounts of capitalism's flaws, including a detailed account of the ways it contributes to environmental problems (Wright 2010).

Most useful for our purposes is Wright's final work, a short and accessible text entitled *How to Be an Anti-capitalist in the 21st Century*. This book includes a helpful typology of "strategic logics" within anticapitalism, different approaches to resisting the dominance of the Market. While he was focused primarily on anticapitalism as a political and social movement, we believe four aspects of Wright's typology are useful in categorizing the conceptual work being done by scholars of religion. Using this typology, we can see that a great deal of writing in religion and ecology is already anticapitalist and could better be named as such<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, this section will briefly review Wright's strategies and name a scholar within our field who we see demonstrating each one. Because we, as authors, focus our research on Christian ethics, we will be citing thinkers from the Christian tradition; however, we are confident that this typology could also be applied to others.

##### 4.1. Strategy #1: *Smashing Capitalism*

First is what Wright calls the "classic strategic logic of revolutionaries," which asserts: "At its core, capitalism is unreformable. The only hope is to destroy it, sweep away the rubble and then build an alternative" (Wright 2019, p. 39). Wright admits that most efforts at large-scale revolution against capitalism have failed to lead to social emancipation; however, Wright argues that it is still important to recognize the power of "an emancipatory alternative to capitalism, organized around qualitatively different principles" (p. 42).

We see an example of this approach in a thinker who has inspired a great deal of work on religion and the environment: Wendell Berry. Berry seeks to separate himself from the excesses of capitalism by farming on a small scale near the land where he grew up. But he does not seek to merely escape the dominant world; he also prophetically criticizes the Market, "an economy firmly founded on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments." Capitalism, so described, needs to be smashed. Therefore, Berry argues that Christians are called to imagine and enact a "Christian economy" that organizes life and work on entirely different principles (Berry 1992, p. 100).

#### 4.2. Strategy #2: Dismantling Capitalism

Wright's second strategy seeks a more "gradual dismantling of capitalism and the building up of an alternative" (Wright 2019, p. 43). This approach views the overthrow of the Market as a process rather than an event, accepting that people must live within capitalist structures as they currently exist, even as they try to develop an alternative.

We suspect that David Loy's work fits best into this model; he would agree with Wendell Berry that global capitalism, as currently practiced, is terribly destructive but seems less resolute about rejecting it immediately and completely. Similarly, Christian theologian Sallie McFague describes capitalism as the product of a "corporation or machine model" of the economy that "is injurious to nature and to poor people." But she approaches the alternative differently than Berry, asking, "Is there a 'Christian' economics? No, I don't think so." Instead, she argues that Christians are called to partner with ecological economists and many others in a deliberative process of more gradually resisting and replacing the values of the Market (McFague 2008, pp. 86, 37). In this strategy, it is vitally important to develop alternatives to capitalism, but those alternatives are understood to require slow, deliberate consideration.

#### 4.3. Strategy #3: Taming Capitalism

The third strategic logic does not seek to overthrow capitalism but to temper its worst impacts. "It is possible," Wright notes, "to see capitalism as a source of harms without attempting to replace it. Instead, the goal is to neutralize those harms" (Wright 2019, p. 44). This approach seeks to balance capitalism with "counteracting institutions" that make up for its weaknesses. Wright suggests that before the prominence of neoliberalism that began in the 1980s, this was the mainstream view among Western economists and politicians, who assumed that markets needed to be tempered by political structures and other institutions.

Taming capitalism appears to be the strategy of Christian economist Alasdair Young. His book *Environment, Economy, and Christian Ethics* argues that economics and the capitalist systems it studies have much more to offer than most Christian theologians admit. Capitalism, Young argues, creates efficiencies and coordinates large-scale projects exceptionally well, and this will be essential for any pragmatic solutions to environmental problems. He admits that "the solution to environmental problems cannot be left to free enterprise" but insists that "Christians should still be prepared to support policies that make use of market forces, where appropriate, rather than rejecting them on principle" (Young 2015, p. 244). The Market should not be overthrown but tamed.

#### 4.4. Strategy #4: Escaping Capitalism

The final strategy we consider foregoes any attempts to manage things at the scale of global capitalism and assumes that "the best we can do is to try to insulate ourselves from the damaging effects of capitalism, and perhaps escape altogether its ravages in some sheltered environment" (LeVasseur and Peterson 2018, p. 51). Wright's primary examples are intentional communities of worker collectives, hippies, and the Amish. They share in common a move away from Market structures on a small scale, an escape from capitalism.

We see this strategy in Laura Yordy's *Green Witness*. While Yordy does not devote much time to critiquing the Market, she includes economic standards of efficiency and economic globalization in her account of "management" ideas that degrade and destroy creation. Such thinking cannot solve environmental problems, she argues, and are distractions from the true calling of the church. Christians are to turn away, adhering to no worldly standards but instead attempting to live out the eschatological vision of their faith. Christians are called to "testify, through character, worship, and action, to the Kingdom of God as inaugurated, preached, demonstrated, and promised by Jesus Christ." The "redemption of creation" comes from God, and the job of Christians is to adhere to God's Kingdom rather than the Market (Yordy 2008, pp. 85, 42). This is an escape from capitalism, a refusal to live by the Market's standards while trusting that only God can truly change the system as a whole.

Many other thinkers could be included in these categories, and much more nuance could be developed in distinguishing between them. For our purposes, though, it is enough to argue that this vocabulary will be helpful as we continue debating between different approaches. It is easier to engage with the nuances of anticapitalism when we can distinguish between attempts to smash, dismantle, tame, and escape the Market. The four thinkers named here—and, we would suggest, the vast majority of writing in our field that deals with economic issues at all—are already demonstrating anticapitalist strategies. To name this more completely will help us to engage in a genuine discussion of that fact and to do the work for which Loy called developing religious arguments against the Market.

### 5. From Anticapitalism to Anticolonialism

One of the most important strengths of Loy's essay, we believe, is its insistence that religious traditions and the study of religion have political and economic implications. When our work is presented as primarily a response to Lynn White Jr., we have the option of focusing on theological, philosophical, and personal questions that can seem distant from practical economic and political concerns. David Loy is a necessary correction, making it clear that any relevant twenty-first-century account of religion in the industrialized world must explicitly deal with the structural influences and implications of religious communities.

But it is important that this move toward anticapitalism not be taken to mean that the Market is the only quasi-religious force in the world that calls for a response. While Loy's essay focuses on the power of the Market and economics as its "theology," his method of analysis opens the door to other kinds of analysis, as well.

For example, we think Loy's perspective could contribute to anticolonial teaching and research. Here, we can build on the connections helpfully made by the novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh, who argues that contemporary environmental degradation is as rooted in colonial assumptions as it is in capitalism. For Ghosh, capitalism should not be understood as "the principal fault line on the landscape of climate change" but rather one of "two interconnected but equally important rifts, each of which follows a trajectory of its own: these are capitalism and empire" (Malm 2016, p. 146).

Ghosh also offers a thoughtful reflection on the often-cited statement that "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," which he attributes to literary critic Frederic Jameson. Ghosh notes that, although this phrase has

attained the status of received wisdom, it takes only a moment's reflection to realize that it is patently untrue. The majority of the world's population did not live in capitalist societies for much of the twentieth century. Even in the West the normal functioning of capitalism was suspended for years, during the two world wars. What has never been suspended, since the sixteenth century, are the dynamics of global empire. (Ghosh 2021, p. 120)

While assuming that capitalism and empire are interconnected and related, Ghosh emphasizes that the former is easier to oppose than the latter. People living today have easy access to visions of life outside of capitalism. It is much harder, he suggests, to imagine a life outside of colonial power structures. Nations that once explicitly colonized others' lands still maintain global political and economic influence, and that influence tends to contribute to climate change. Indigenous peoples around the world remain subject to external political forces, often in ways that benefit extractive industries. In the terms introduced above, we think it is fair to suggest that Empire, like the Market, is a false, disastrously successful religion that contributes to environmental degradation.

Ghosh also offers the provocative suggestion that capitalism becomes the monolithic symbol of our problems—as in Loy's essay—precisely because of what Gibson-Graham names capitalocentrism. In contemporary discourse, colonial thinking is concealed behind subtleties and euphemisms; however, capitalism boldly declares itself to be the hegemonic force of global order. This means that non-economic structures of domination "are harder to identify because they are not easily enumerable or quantifiable" (Ghosh 2021, p. 101).



Anything that cannot be easily measured and observed on the Market's terms is inevitably treated as less important, including the forces of colonization.

If done well, an anticapitalist approach to religion and the environment will include not just an analysis of the religious dimensions and religious responses of the Market but also of the Empire. And this analysis will, we suspect, also open further avenues of critique against whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, ability, and many other structures of power and oppression.

In *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft*, Aph Ko articulates a much-needed corrective to the discourse of intersectionality. The issue of intersecting oppressions, she explains, is not as two-dimensional as the "intersection" metaphor implies. Rather, Ko asserts, the problem is a three-dimensional object, like a cube with several faces. From one side, it looks like racism; from another side, it looks like sexism. Another face reveals it to be speciesism, colonialism, or capitalism, or... et cetera. Tackling any one of these issues alone cannot be successful. For Ko, the meta-problem at the center is the logic of domination, the dualisms that create oppressive hierarchies. Colonialism thrives on the creation of, and exploitation of, an "other"; so do racism, sexism, and environmental degradation (Ko 2019). Global capitalism depends on the same logic to objectify humans and nature for the sake of profit.

Dualisms are erased and hierarchies are dismantled through creative and loving action. While many religions have participated in destructive hierarchies, our reading of Loy suggests that all "genuine" religions also contain tools to dismantle dualistic thinking. From "the last shall be first" to "all are one," religious teachings support practices of solidarity and love across differences. At their best, religions enact alternatives to capitalism and all other forms of domination by bridging differences, whether by helping those in need or making peace between a people and their place—religions, rightly practiced, re-weave rifts in the name of holy healing<sup>12</sup>.

When Amitav Ghosh worries that too much focus on economics alone obscures the role of the Empire, he reveals the limitation of any exclusive focus in constructive work. To narrow one's attention only to colonialism, racism, sexism, or anything else would similarly limit possibilities.

Learning from Ghosh and Ko and many other interlocutors, a genuinely anticapitalist approach to religion and the environment will not teach or write as though the Market is the only problem, just as it will refuse to accept any suggestion that capitalism is the only way to structure human economies. Anticapitalist teaching and research will need to also be anticolonial. It will also, we hope, be antiracist, antipatriarchal, antiheteronormative, and anti-ableist.

## 6. Conclusions

The famous Greta Thunberg speech cited above ends with a haunting prophecy:

The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. (Thunberg 2019, p. 99)

In a similar vein, Dawn King's play, *The Trials*, portrays teenagers of the somewhat-near future judging those of us who are adults right now, deciding whether we did enough to fight climate change. The punishment for those found wanting is death.

AMELIA. But... what about... forgiveness? And... being kind?

GABI. It's too late for that! If they're over the economic threshold, and they went over the carbon limit... to me there are no excuses! They used too much, they're all guilty! (King 2022, p. 48)

White's play and Thunberg's speech are harrowing and sobering. They remind audiences that our actions have environmental consequences not only for abstract "future generations" but for young people alive today. They remind us that these young people are watching what we do and have the right to judge whether we are doing enough. As we, the authors of this essay, inexorably age, we see more of our students in Thunberg and King's characters. They are an embodiment of the future to whom we must answer.

The stakes are very high. The task—somehow smashing, dismantling, taming, or escaping the Market and the other forces that are degrading life on Earth—is daunting. But it is not optional.

The authors of this essay would both categorize the goal of our own written work as contributing to the “dismantling” of the Market; however, our project in this essay has not been to advocate for that strategy. Instead, we call on scholars in our field to be anticapitalists in some explicit way. More importantly, when we teach this subject, we can help students to recognize the anticapitalist arguments being made in our field and in religious communities. We can inspire students to become active participants in diverse economies that build and strengthen alternatives to the Market.

As Loy argues, scholars of religion and religious practitioners have a particular role in the work of anticapitalism. The Market has distinctly religious dimensions, and religions are well equipped to develop alternatives to it. We who teach religion have a responsibility to our students and to the future to learn and teach others to recognize and imagine alternatives. We have a responsibility to be anticapitalists.

Behind every no, there is a yes. Behind all the *anti*- prefixes—anticapitalism, antiracism, anticolonialism, and so on—there is a *pro*-. The social ailments of racism, colonialism, capitalism, and every other oppressive system stem from unholy rifts in our thinking and behavior. Scholars and practitioners of religion are well situated to facilitate holy healing and to build bridges across differences. This should animate our teaching and our writing. We can learn and teach others to think beyond market capitalism, to recognize when objectification undermines human well-being and the land’s wholeness, and to build bridges that lead to a better future.

Thunberg and King’s teenagers may never forgive us. That is up to them. We have the power, though, to try to be worthy of forgiveness. We, along with our colleagues and students, can plant seeds of discernment, creativity, and healing that work against the Market. We can cultivate, through our actions and our work, healthier relationships among humans and with the Earth. Twenty-five years after Loy’s essay—it is time!

**Author Contributions:** Both authors participated in all stages of researching, developing, writing, and editing this paper. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A few examples suffice to establish the trend: (McKibben 2012; Hayes 2014; Klein 2014; Malm 2016; Aronoff 2021; Huber 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> There are, of course, many critiques of global capitalism in our field, many cited throughout this essay. Our argument is not that this will be an entirely new project for our field, but that a more explicit and common language for it will allow for better discussion.
- <sup>3</sup> On this see especially (Daly and Cobb 1994; Moe-Lobeda 2013; Oreskes and Conway 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> In Patricia Killen’s term, we aim for “midrange reflection” on teaching, which “lifts out” from particularities to “the issues, themes, questions, approaches, procedures, and so forth, that have the potential, thus identified, to be of general relevance in other situations of teaching and learning” (Killen 2007, p. 144).
- <sup>5</sup> For retrospective critique and analysis of White and his thesis, see especially (Jenkins 2009; LeVasseur and Peterson 2018).
- <sup>6</sup> Communism, interestingly, is named as a “capitalist ‘heresy’” (p. 275).
- <sup>7</sup> For a helpful account of the ways this idea was discussed in the first ten years after Loy’s essay, see (Foltz 2007). We appreciate Foltz’s argument that religion scholars need to develop “a coherent framework for analyzing the faith-based perspectives of global economics and consumer capitalism” (p. 136), regret that this project remains unfinished, and offer the present essay in hopes of moving toward it.

- <sup>8</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham is a pen name shared by Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, who playfully write in a single voice and shift between plural and singular first-person pronouns. As co-authors who have maintained distinct scholarly identities, we are impressed by and deeply respect their approach, and our reference to them as a non-gendered, singular scholar throughout is meant as a sign of that respect.
- <sup>9</sup> Churches and temples are referenced in their coauthored book *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), but not in detail or at length.
- <sup>10</sup> This is not to say that religions are inherently anticapitalist, and of course a comprehensive account of religion will include the ways many religious people, leaders, and communities participate in and support the Market. But, inspired by Gibson-Graham, we believe it is at least as important to demonstrate that there are alternatives to the Market as to dwell on the ways it influences people and institutions. Furthermore, we follow Loy in believing that the moral teachings at the core of existing religious traditions are older and more charitable than the logic of the Market.
- <sup>11</sup> Wright's typology includes six strategies. We will not address two: "resisting capitalism" is distinguished from "taming capitalism" largely by its relationship to state power, which is not strictly relevant to our discussion. "Eroding capitalism," which is Wright's preferred model, is a hybrid of all five other options, and so beyond the scope of our consideration here.
- <sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Ghosh sees religion as an important partner in resisting Empire and global warming, reporting that the "most promising development" in this work is "the increasing involvement of religious groups and leaders in the politics of climate change" (Malm 2016, p. 148).

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