

# Religion and psychology in the age of emotional capitalism: The case of the Master Academy of Love

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## Abstract

The author presents the Master Academy of Love (MAL), a project conducted by Catholics in Warsaw, Poland. The initiative is shown as typical of emotional capitalism: it resonates with the therapeutic emotional style, bolsters the social impact of psychology by combining the psychological discourse with the language of belief, employs the narrative of self-help and the narrative of suffering, and focuses on increasing the emotional competence of its audience. At the same time, the paper demonstrates MAL's dualistic nature, that is, its innovative and conservative components. MAL is thus a project that uses the power of the therapeutic discourse to reinforce traditionalist tendencies in the Church. Eva Illouz's (2007) considerations on the role of psychology in contemporary Western culture underpin the paper's theoretical framework, while its empirical component is based on participant observations conducted at MAL meetings.

## Keywords

Catholic Church, emotional capitalism, psychology, religion, traditionalism

## Résumé

L'auteur analyse l'Académie des maîtres de l'amour (AMA), un projet mené par les catholiques à Varsovie (Pologne). Cette initiative est typique du capitalisme émotionnel. Elle résonne avec le style thérapeutique émotionnel ; elle renforce l'impact social de la psychologie en combinant discours psychologique et langage de la croyance ; elle emploie le récit de l'auto-assistance et celui de la souffrance tout en cherchant à multiplier les réactions émotionnelles de son public. L'étude manifeste son ambivalence, son caractère à la fois innovateur et conservateur. L'AMA est ainsi un projet qui utilise la puissance du

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discours thérapeutique moderne pour renforcer les tendances traditionalistes au sein de l'Église. Pour l'appréhender, l'article s'appuie sur les considérations théoriques d'Eva Illouz (2007) sur le rôle de la psychologie dans la culture occidentale contemporaine. Au niveau empirique, il se base sur l'observation participante des réunions de l'AMA.

### Mots-clés

église catholique, capitalisme émotionnel, psychologie, religion, traditionalisme

This paper discusses the Master Academy of Love (MAL) [*Mistrzowska Akademia Miłości (MAM)*], a project conducted by and for Catholic believers in Warsaw, Poland. Research underpinning this presentation focused on two questions: (1) how is psychology referred to and used in this Catholic-based initiative? and (2) what kind of ideological message does this initiative convey? Corresponding to these questions, the aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to discuss innovative forms of pursuing religiosity in the age of emotional capitalism, which is dominated by psychological discourse. The paper demonstrates MAL as a project that draws from discursive patterns typical of today's Western cultural landscape – chiefly the narrative of self-help and the narrative of suffering – and combines the language of psychology with the language of belief. Second, this presentation points out a paradoxical mixture of innovation and traditionalism in the MAL project. In some respects, MAL challenges Church officials' views on psychology, yet in others, it supports conservative currents in the Catholic Church. The paper goes on to claim that MAL uses the power of the therapeutic discourse to reinforce traditionalist tendencies in the Church.

The paper consists of four sections. The first situates the research subject within the framework of the academic literature. The second section draws mainly on considerations by Eva Illouz (2007) and presents the notions of emotional capitalism, therapeutic emotional style, narrative of self-help, narrative of suffering, and related concepts employed in the discussion of MAL. The third section provides another important context for considering the MAL project: it briefly reviews relations between the Catholic Church and psychology. The final and key section addresses MAL itself. It sets this initiative against the background of issues discussed in the earlier sections of the paper.

The methodology employed in the research was based on the participant observation conducted by the author of this paper at eight MAL meetings in late 2009 and early 2010.<sup>1</sup> The author participated as an audience member of these meetings, made notes, and conducted short talks with meeting participants during breaks, which concerned participants' motivations to take part in MAL events, as well as their impressions of them. This paper also makes use of materials published by MAL, mainly the MAL website and CDs, which contain audio recordings of meetings.<sup>2</sup>

### Academic context

Sociologically based works addressing the fields of religion and psychology and their mutual relations are mostly concerned with the assertion that therapy has replaced religion in contemporary Western culture. Such a belief dates back to Philip Rieff's

classic work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). The succeeding and extensive scholarly literature has enforced it (e.g. Bellah et al., 1985; Gross, 1978; Moskowitz, 2001; Rose, 1999).

Some of the most recent publications make the issue more nuanced and point out the complexity of connections between the religious and the psychological realm. An example is the book by Stephanie Muravchik (2011), who calls into question three intertwined convictions: that the therapeutic outlook has corroded or corrupted religious faith, fostered ethical negligence, and weakened social bonds. Drawing conclusions on her study of the history of three psycho-spiritual programmes, i.e. the training of seminarians and ministers in psychology, Alcoholics Anonymous, and The Salvation Army's outreach to homeless men, she convincingly shows that therapeutic innovations have a strong potential to nurture faith, virtue and community rather than supplanting them.

From the historical perspective, academics focusing on Catholicism have also studied the patterns of conversations between religion and psychology. As shown by an American scholar, Robert Kugelmann (2011), Catholics pioneered efforts to link psychology and theology almost from the beginning of academic psychology. The intellectual and institutional separation of the two disciplines prevented the development of a closer cooperation at that time. However, the situation significantly changed in the course of the 20th century. Psychology has been institutionalised at Catholic universities, and the inflow of therapeutic views into the religious field – embodied, for instance, in the activity of encounter groups combining religion with humanistic psychology – has led to the psychologisation of belief. In the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic believers involved in the encounter-group movement in the US took an anti-institutional course: they began to stress feelings, personal relationships and individual experiences with the sacred, and focused on cultivating their unique talents and potential. The new forms of the lived religiosity provoked a conflict between conservative and liberal currents in the Catholic Church. Kugelmann (2005, 2011) describes the break-up of the Roman Catholic religious order the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which took place after the sisters had started to closely collaborate with the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers in California at the end of the 1960s, as resulting from this tension.

What is striking in the existing scholarship touching upon the issue of the contemporary interconnectedness between psychology and religion is the more or less explicitly expressed assumption that therapeutic innovations in the realm of religion are a progressive phenomenon that opposes conservative religious currents. The aim of this paper is to question this supposition. The case study presented below highlights the fact that liberalism and conservatism might complement each other within a religion-based initiative drawing from psychology.

There is yet another aspect in which this paper questions a clear opposition between innovation and traditionalism. Namely, it shows the problematic nature of such an opposition on the local level, with the reference to the situation of Catholicism in Poland. In a recent issue of *Social Compass*, Izabella Main (2011) discussed the history of Catholic student groups set up by the Dominican order in two Polish cities. Focusing on the communist period, she presented them as highly innovative and contradicting the common image of the Catholic Church in Poland as traditional and conservative. The groups pioneered liturgical reform, social activism among the laity, the ecumenical

movement, the introduction of popular culture to churches, and charismatic renewal. However, it seems that Main slightly overestimated the progressive nature of Dominican groups. If we look closer at what she described, it appears that the claimed innovation and progressivism refer primarily to ritualistic and organisational features of religiosity. 'Beat masses' and open-air religious ceremonies cannot overshadow the fact that Polish Catholics have not established any significant in-Church movement of reformatory aspirations, addressing issues such as women's ordination or the use of contraception, so hotly debated among Catholics in Western countries. Correspondingly, this paper shows that the innovation inscribed in the MAL project, which draws from psychology, does not imply that its message is unambiguously progressive.

## Emotional capitalism

From various theoretical perspectives, many scholars comment on the impact of psychology on contemporary Western culture. While discussing the issue, they note the significant shift in power relations resulting from the endowment of experts in the field of psychology and psychological therapies with tremendous authority (e.g. Lasch, 1978; Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999) and discuss major transformations in the sphere of personal life and intimacy (Giddens, 1991, 1994). For the purpose of this paper, it seems particularly apposite to refer to Eva Illouz's *Cold Intimacies* (2007), in which she highlights the importance of therapy-related rationalisation and outlines the concept of emotional capitalism.

Illouz understands emotional capitalism as a culture in which discourses and practices on the one hand emotional, and on the other economic, shape each other. As a result, affections and feelings are important aspects of economic behaviour, and emotional life (especially of the middle class) is steeped in the logic of economic relations and exchange. When Illouz points to the importance of emotions and affections, she refers not so much to the emotional sphere as such, but rather to its discursive dimension, that is, to how the language of psychology structures this sphere. The structure imposed on the emotions is solid and referred to by Illouz as the 'therapeutic emotional style'. She uses the term to encompass the ways in which 20th-century culture has become primarily interested in the emotional life, its aetiology and morphology, and has invented specific 'techniques' – linguistic, scientific, interactive – to understand the feelings and deal with them.

The therapeutic emotional style has promoted the 'narrative of self-help', which is particularly strong in North American culture and influences various cultural contexts. Since Freud's successors moved away from the determinism of the founder of psychology to offer an optimistic vision of self-development, the belief that people can and should shape their destinies has achieved great popularity. The puritan ethos of resourcefulness, shaped in previous centuries, and support from the rapidly expanding number of therapeutic guides on offer have both furthered this belief. Thus, today, the narrative of self-help appears in an immense number of social situations, for instance, support groups, talk shows, counselling centres, rehabilitation programmes, prosperity workshops and therapy sessions. The narrative organises ideas about the self, others and interpersonal relations. However, Illouz does not stop at her observation of the ubiquitous and optimistic narrative of self-help, but also recognises its inherently

accompanying shadow in the form of the 'narrative of suffering'. A closer examination of therapeutic language exposes its opaque and vague vision of self-fulfilment, as well as the fact that this language produces a wide catalogue of dysfunctions – diseases, sufferings, traumas – that hinder self-fulfilment. The narrative of suffering legitimates therapy and enables self-help narrative functioning. The narrative of self-help would not be possible without the identification of barriers to happiness and painful experiences, particularly regarding the past.

An important aspect of Illouz's considerations is that she sees the issue of emotions in the context of power relations. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory, she writes on the emotional field produced by various segments of culture, a diverse group of professionals and different actors in market exchange. The emotional field creates a distinct domain of activity and discourse, governed by its own principles. Within this field, a good in the form of emotional health is produced, processed and exchanged; the areas of pathology emerge as a side-effect of the manufacturing and distribution of this good. The emotional field is maintained by the structuring mechanism of habitus, activated by an acting subject. It works by regulating access to the new form of social competence, which is the emotional competence expressed by the ability to use the emotional style produced by psychologists. Emotional competence might become capital, since it can be translated into social benefits: a high emotional intelligence test score, which can result in a good professional position, is but one example; the concept of emotional intelligence itself is used for hierarchising society; hence, it is a manifestation of the emotional field's aspiration to produce new forms of classification and differentiation. High emotional competence can lead to the construction of extensive social networks and thus to expansive social capital, which might translate into economic capital.

Illouz also shows how during the 20th century various cultural institutions (for instance, in the US) and state agencies, the feminist movement, Vietnam War veterans, and the pharmaceutical and insurance industries appropriated and legitimated the therapeutic style. The key actors in political and social life for various reasons approved the therapeutic narrative and translated it into their own languages. Although Illouz does not comment on religion, it might be added that the process of translation is also taking place in the spiritual realm. This is quite visible within the New Age currents, where the work on discovering the sacred dimension of the self draws from therapeutic technologies, Carl Gustav Jung's ideas and humanistic psychology (see Hanegraaff, 1996). This process has also affected the Catholic Church.

## The Catholic Church and psychology

Sigmund Freud's declared atheism set psychology in counterpoint to the Church. It was accompanied by professional rivalry built around 'care for the soul', which was previously the domain and jurisdiction of specialised religious institutions. This quickly led to mutual antipathy between Church officials and representatives of the newly emerging research discipline. Until the end of the Second World War, the Catholic Church made it difficult for psychoanalysts to work, or even blocked the development of their discipline in countries where it had a strong position (Zaretsky, 2004). At the same time, early psychoanalysts were convinced that successful therapy should lead to a

loss of faith. A prominent example is Helene Deutsch, who could not persuade a nun to abandon monastic life, and consequently deemed her treatment incomplete (Rubin, 2006).

Hostility between the Church and psychology has lessened considerably since the mid-20th century. Freud's successors moved away from understanding religion as an illusion or a manifestation of psychological immaturity. The course of this change is evident in the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) prepared and regularly revised by the American Psychiatric Association, also used in Europe as complementary guidance to the ICD (*International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*) published by the World Health Organization. The early DSM editions present religion and spirituality only in the context of patient psychopathology. The fourth edition, beginning 1994, is devoid of the reductionist approach to the issue and considers 'religious or spiritual problems' (code V 62.89) a circumstance that may be the object of clinical interest. In parallel, psychiatric and psychological ethical codes recommend sensitivity to manifestations of cultural diversity that embrace religion and spirituality. They suggest refraining from reducing the spiritual experiences of people undergoing treatment to defence mechanisms, or persuading these people to adopt or abandon a faith (Prusak, 2006).

Simultaneously, the Catholic Church has significantly changed its approach to psychology. In the 1950s, Pope Pious XII accepted the possibility of talking about religion using concepts developed by psychotherapists (Cantelmi et al., 2006; Kugelmann, 2011). Publications from the Second Vatican Council as well as statements by Pope John Paul II alluded to psychology, and references to this discipline now appear in numerous pastoral Church documents prepared by popes, episcopal conferences and various Rome congregations. Nonetheless, the official Church position on psychological therapy is ambivalent and laden with reservations. For instance, in *Gaudium et spes*, there is a passage about professionals in the field of psychology, who can serve the good of marriage and family – but only 'if by pooling their efforts they labor to explain more thoroughly the various conditions favoring a proper regulation of births' (§52). Furthermore, Pope John Paul II often warned against the 'inadequate anthropology' which, in his view, informs dominant currents of contemporary psychology and psychiatry. Instead, he postulated perceiving people in an integral perspective, in their terrestrial and eternal dimension – in contrast to 'inadequate anthropology', which is concerned solely with earthly and natural development and neglects important aspects of human vocation (e.g. John Paul II, 1987, 1988). The Vatican expressed its distrust of psychology recently in the *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood*. The document clearly separates the powers of formators (religious tutors) from the competence of psychological experts in the seminar, giving lesser importance to the latter and indicating that psychologists may be helpful only in isolated cases (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008). Certain Catholic intellectuals reinforce this reservation towards psychology and go so far as to condemn various currents of psychology, especially humanistic psychology, as a cult of self-worship, so-called 'selfism' (see e.g. Vitz, 1977).

Nevertheless, psychology and psychotherapists play a visible role among Catholic believers. At the institutional level, that role may be exemplified by the popularity of

psychological counselling centres established by religious orders (in Poland, particularly the Jesuits and Dominicans) or various organisations strongly associated with the Church (in Poland, e.g. the Association of Christian Psychologists). They offer a variety of therapies, including those drawing on the humanistic current in psychology. Catholic organisations also conduct projects that clearly refer to the therapeutic way of working with emotions – for instance, the Charismatic Renewal offers retreats called *Self-acceptance* or *Healing the memories*. Additionally, there is a wealth of relevant publications available, e.g. in Poland, the Dominican publishing house W Drodze runs a section labelled *Psychology and Religion*, primarily dedicated to self-improvement and solving mental problems. It has published nearly a hundred books on the subjects, including therapeutic guides. Catholic believers also lead initiatives aimed at cultivating the psychological aspect of identity. One such initiative is the Master Academy of Love (MAL).

## The Master Academy of Love

MAL is a project created by Mira Jankowska, a journalist of the official Warsaw Archdiocese's radio station Radio Plus Warszawa. She hosts a weekly morning broadcast entitled *Life is beautiful*, which discusses, among other topics, relationships between women and men. The broadcasts have gained increasing popularity among listeners, which has encouraged Jankowska to broaden her activity. She reports: 'I came to the conclusion that there is a need to establish something not limited to the creation of "virtual" bonds, something which lets people meet in "real" space – to see one another, to smile, to talk' (MAL website). In 2007 in Warsaw, Jankowska organised the first of a series of meetings under the slogan of the Master Academy of Love, called *Woman + Man, or how to establish a successful relationship*, and drew around 300 participants.

The positive audience response encouraged Jankowska, the self-described 'MAL architect and rector', to continue the project and institute monthly meetings. The meetings during which the author conducted participant observation took place in a cultural centre at a retreat house on the campus of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University. Each event drew about 300–400 participants of all ages, with a seeming predominance of people in their thirties. Brief conversations with participants revealed that they learned about MAL from Radio Plus Warszawa or friends in Catholic milieus: academic chaplaincies or Catholic movements, such as the Charismatic Renewal.

Academy organisers define their aims by diagnosing contemporary culture and the ways this culture deals with the issue of sexuality and relations between people of the two sexes:

Male–female relations are a hot topic in the contemporary world. The lack of role-models in this field, understatement and the superficiality of comments surrounding the field, as well as the vulgarisation of this area, all cause Poles today to know little about their femininity and masculinity, the communication between the sexes; about the body, sensuality, the sphere of eroticism, sex; and about how to establish male–female relationships so that they are an expression of *the culture of love* and not the culture of use. This results in unhappy relationships, broken marriages, unwanted children, the loneliness of women and men (including so-called singles), frustration and a sense of being cheated by the patterns of behaviour proposed today, addiction to insane love and sex, pornography, paedophilia ... (MAL website, original emphasis)

MAL offers its educational meetings as a remedy to the identified areas of pathology. The education is about

the integration of human personality (physical, mental and spiritual levels) so that we become healthy, fulfilled, happy women and men who understand the other sex, who know and accept the differences between them, enjoy the diversity and know how to manage it well. Only in this way do we become good and wise women and men – in all roles (wife, mother, friend / husband, father, friend, employee, citizen, Christian, etc.). (MAL website)

What is striking in this presentation is, on the one hand, the language of management, which refers to the business arena and sets the issue of emotions in a rationalised context, and on the other hand, the promise of self-fulfilment. The two threads appear frequently at MAL meetings. The traditionally assigned gender roles are noteworthy: a woman's identities are of a wife, mother and friend; a man's, found on the other side of the slash, are not just of a husband, father or friend, but also include identities related to the public space: an employee, citizen and Christian. This does not mean that the model of a woman successful in the public sphere, especially in her professional life, is unknown to the Academy; on the contrary: MAL explicitly promotes such models. At the same time, however, the Academy affirms traditional, stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity.

Each MAL event deals with a different issue. Generally, meeting themes concern relations between partners, especially in marriage, but frequently they go beyond this area. Quite often, the relationship between a woman and man seems to be a pretext to talk about personal well-being, which is in line with the idea promoted by MAL that happiness should be sought within oneself. Thus, beside issues such as marital crises, singles' search for the 'other half', and the impact of childhood on male–female relationships in adulthood, MAL devotes much time and space to various ways of achieving self-fulfilment, for example, in the field of professional life or finances. Jankowska promotes the Academy as an initiative designed for 'fulfilment and success, or how to love life passionately' (introduction to CDs published by MAL).

MAL meetings follow a standardised scenario. The audience gathers in an auditorium with a large stage set with soft, colourful armchairs and a low table. The lights dim and dynamic, TV show-like music rumbles. A male voice opens the spectacle, 'Welcome to the meeting of the Master Academy of Love! Welcome to Mira Jankowska!'. Jankowska mounts the stage and welcomes the audience. The programme consists of three parts. The first is a 15-minute play. Two actors (a woman and man) play a scene, which touches on the day's issue. The vignette presents the relationship between the partners, likely married, in a humorous way. The humour is usually achieved by emphasising misunderstandings in communication and exaggerating characteristics traditionally attributed to women (emotionality, minuteness, a focus on home affairs, etc.) and men (insensitivity to subtleties, especially in the area of feelings, fondness for unsophisticated pleasures like watching football matches on TV, etc.).

The meeting agenda then moves on to guests invited by Jankowska, usually beginning with people successful in the given field of the meeting – and this is the second part of the event. They answer Jankowska's questions and talk about how they managed to reach their dreams and comment on the difficulties they overcame. Jankowska explains the idea of conducting such interviews as follows:

We know that the best way to educate is to learn by observing those who can do something. Therefore, in its shows, the Master Academy of Love introduces people – at once ordinary and extraordinary – who talk about themselves. They tell their life stories; they explain ... how they learned to love. The extraordinary stories, amazing tales full of joy, truth and self-development. (introduction to CDs published by MAL)

Sometimes this part of the event features a new or different format, e.g. a short documentary film.

After a break, in the third part of the meeting, Jankowska invites other guests onstage. This time, they are experts, representatives of the therapeutic profession – psychologists, psychotherapists, personal development counsellors; many associated with Catholic initiatives, such as psychological or family counselling. They set the relevant issues in a psychological context. They are, to quote Jankowska, ‘to set the given reality in order’ (introduction to CDs published by MAL). If time permits, the experts answer audience questions.

At the end, Jankowska encourages participants to purchase Academy-recommended publications (usually devoted to psychological self-help) and participate in personal development workshops conducted by personal advisers or career and personal development consultants associated with the Academy. Their titles are, for instance, *Professional talent diagnosis: the driver or the passenger of my own life* and *Who am I? The search for identity*. There are also programmes targeted at members of each sex: for men, – *Men’s ways*, and for women, *Women’s ways*, but also styling and make-up workshops, such as *Check how beautiful you are!*. Such a gender split seems to appeal to the audience. Interviews with MAL event participants reveal that they are oriented towards gender-specific work on self-development; for instance, they highly value publications by John Eldredge (2001, 2005), who draws on the Bible and essentialises both genders while encouraging women and men to self-improvement based on strengthening their femininity and masculinity.

The Master Academy of Love explicitly references psychology. The meetings present success stories of invited guests and show the advantages of psychological self-help, which results in well-being. Representatives of the therapeutic profession set the stories in the broader context of psychological theories, describe their own experiences with patients, and sanction the way of thinking that is drawn from psychology.

MAL employs the narrative of self-help. Invited MAL speakers embody and clearly refer to their personal successes. Self-help is also visible in the profiles of forthcoming MAL guests, as posted on the MAL website. In January 2010, MAL promoted a speaker who was to ‘talk about the difficult experiences of childhood and how she achieved success’. MAL guests seem to be wholly fulfilled in their professional life – they are portrayed as graduates of several academic disciplines, the owners of thriving businesses – and in their family life (happy husbands or wives with many years of the marriage experience, having three or even five children, etc.). They have a variety of activities and hobbies: ‘the organiser of weekend canoeing and hiking trips. Hobbies: swimming, dancing, rock climbing, volleyball and theatrical improvisation’ (MAL website). MAL offers a self-development orientation, directed inwards, which later translates into a desired transformation in outward, interpersonal, relations. On opening the *Woman + Man, or your happiness is within you* meeting, Jankowska said, ‘If we do not find

happiness in ourselves, there is no chance that we will discover it in someone else. Hence today's play topic'. MAL formulates the invitation to discover happiness and to work on self-development in the language of economic efficiency, in line with trends typical of emotional capitalism. The MAL establisher often encourages the audience to 'manage emotions' and rationally control their lives:

Happiness is a decision, isn't it? I decide I want to be a happy person. A happy woman, happy man. What's more, it is not so ... that someone will give me happiness. I'm waiting for a lover, a knight on a white horse, because he will give me happiness. He will not give you it. Because it is only you who will give it to yourself. ... This is the task for all of us. (speech during the meeting *Woman + Man, or love yourself first*)

Considering that some MAL experts are specialists in humanistic psychology (i.e. process-oriented psychology, as was the case with the *Woman + Man, or the traits of sexuality* meeting), it might be concluded that the Academy is somewhat audacious in its balancing on the precipice of what the Catholic Church allows (taking advantage of the achievements of psychology) and what is no longer recommended by various Church representatives and Catholic intellectuals (references to 'selfistically' hued psychological currents).

At the same time, according to the logic of the therapeutic emotional style, the narrative of suffering accompanies the optimistic narrative of self-help, and the Master Academy of Love is an excellent example of an institution that 'manages' both success and suffering. The form of the meetings, which draws on talk-show scenarios, reinforces the interplay between these two narratives. Guests, encouraged by Jankowska, talk about difficult experiences they had before they decided to work on themselves and many (likely not coincidentally) describe what might be considered serious problems. During the eight MAL meetings at which the author was present, the audience heard stories from, among others, a bulimic woman, a woman suffering from multiple sclerosis, a person with impaired vision, another with paralysis of the speech organs and a woman married to an alcoholic, while the experts also related stories of the children of alcoholics or domestic violence. Furthermore, one gets the impression that the pathologies are deliberately multiplied, uncovered, as it were, 'on demand'. For instance, in order to talk convincingly about success, speakers first recount past failures and problems, such as the inability to express themselves or a lack of opportunity for self-development in the workplace. To give a further example, a guest invited to the *Woman + Man, or the traits of sexuality* meeting spoke of his 'sex addiction', exemplified by his enjoyment of pornography, masturbation and the services of sex workers. He broke free of his addiction by participating in an appropriate support group. High libido, in the light of the Catholic system of values promoted by MAL, is unambiguously classified as a dysfunction. The above-quoted MAL diagnosis of contemporary culture, which presents a picture full of phenomena such as broken marriages, unwanted children and paedophilia, also reflects a logic where the identified, and perhaps exaggerated, pathologies legitimate MAL efforts to educate people in the area of psychology.

MAL meeting themes are secular, such as better functioning in a relationship with a partner, successfully raising children, achieving financial and professional success or getting rid of oppressive restraints like fear of public speaking. Nevertheless, the

meetings also refer to religion in various ways, often taking the form of allusions. MAL organisers seem to consider Catholicism as the norm – the religion that sets the parameters of participants’ experiences and meanings. For instance, when Jankowska says that a therapist should be carefully chosen, she argues: ‘it is the same as with a confessor – you don’t go to anyone’ (*Woman + Man, or this is because of love meeting*). Sometimes, however, religion is explicitly discussed. On such occasions, the emphasis is on overcoming the improper image of God as a punitive judge, which leads to low self-esteem and various emotional deficiencies. At some meetings, the need for self-enhancement is emphasised at the same time. It is a translation process, the fusion of the language of Christian tradition with the language of psychology, a reinterpretation of Christian tradition to fit the therapeutic view. The primary example comes from the *Woman + Man, or love yourself first* meeting, when the audience posed questions about the relation between following God’s will and self-help. Jankowska’s reply referred to a Thomas Aquinas maxim, *gratia supponit naturam* (grace builds on nature):

There is a saying in theology. Grace, the power, God’s energy, the causative force, builds on nature, right? ... Nature is all I am: intellect, memory, body, sensitivity, education – all that I build within myself. ... And now, if I would like to be here, on the stage, but I’m afraid, I think, ‘Others can; well, so could I’, but I’m afraid ... So what should I do first to overcome this natural reaction? I should go to workshops, courses that teach public speaking. Well, yes or no? Yeah? Yeah! ... If I am unfit – for example, I climb the stairs and I am short of breath – what should I do? Well, ladies and gentlemen, I should start exercising. It makes sense, doesn’t it? And what happens then? Then God’s grace, the force that builds on nature, does not find a hole within me, a part of me that is withered, untrained, but it goes to work on a body which is fit, am I right? It is this kind of logic. (*Woman + Man, or love yourself first meeting*)

According to Thomastic theology, the axiom *gratia supponit naturam* denotes the complementarity of grace and nature: they neither subordinate nor eliminate each other, but are in harmony. The maxim epitomises Thomas Aquinas’ theological point of departure, the inherent goodness – although not the sinlessness – and autonomy of God’s creation. It challenges the medieval current of *contemptus mundi* spirituality impregnated with a contempt for the world, a negative appraisal of created reality (Torrell, 2003: 227–251). Jankowska is not the first who interprets Aquinas’s maxim in such a way that it fits with the therapeutic outlook. Among others, William W Meissner, an American Jesuit and a renowned psychiatrist and therapist, used to recall the axiom in his writings (e.g. Meissner, 1999). Instead of being concerned with challenging the *contemptus mundi* perspective, he emphasised the dynamism of nature and its susceptibility to psychological training. Today, numerous Catholic initiatives that draw from psychology are organised under the *gratia supponit naturam* motto. In Poland, for instance, the Encounters of Married Couples movement employs the slogan when alluding to therapeutic work on interpersonal relationships and explaining the aim of the retreats it conducts for spouses.<sup>3</sup> It might be added at this point that the psychological interpretation of Aquinas’s axiom encourages unorthodox Catholic spirituality. There is a kin relationship between the Catholic promotion of psychology under the maxim and the way the ‘grace builds on nature’ motto is presented on the internet. Namely, online

search engines direct users to web pages where the axiom is wrongly ascribed to Anthony de Mello, a Hindu Jesuit popular among adherents of new spiritualities and disapproved of by Catholic commentators for presenting religious engagement as a means to achieving well-being (Dobroczyński, 1994).<sup>4</sup> In 1998, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith critically assessed de Mello's publications. It declared that they 'are incompatible with the Catholic faith and can cause grave harm' (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1998).

Going back to the MAL meetings, it should be added that they might also be seen in the context of power relations. Like various cultural institutions today, MAL focuses on increasing the emotional competence of its target group. The audience might feel enhanced by gaining knowledge about psychological patterns of behaviour, and discussions with MAL participants reveal that they are attracted by both the entertaining formula of the show and the possibility of improving their life quality by drawing from guests' experiences. However, the process of strengthening emotional competence is not ideologically neutral. What MAL promotes by employing therapeutic language are traditional gender roles as well as ultra-Catholic views on reproductive rights.

A prominent example is the short documentary about Barbara Paradowska screened during the *Woman + Man, or when I miss you* meeting. Ms Paradowska decided to continue her pregnancy despite a diagnosis of cancer. Instead of treating her illness, she decided to protect her unborn child at all costs and died after delivery, in 2007, at the age of 31. At the MAL meeting, after the film, her widower related his emotions and a psychologist commented on the story. Ms Paradowska's case is known in Polish Catholic circles and is sometimes used for persuasive purposes. For instance, a representative of the clergy cited it during a radio broadcast devoted to in-vitro fertilisation. The priest spoke about the 'heroism' of the woman, defending the position that human life should be protected from the moment of conception (the *Religion Lesson* broadcast, Radio TOK FM, 26 May 2010). Significantly, the clergy was extensively involved in the public discussion on in-vitro fertilisation in Poland and the Church hierarchy made strong and open efforts to influence political decisions on state financing of the procedure at the time when the referenced MAL meeting took place. By referring to publicly debated issues, MAL becomes a political project, which promotes very conservative views on reproduction. MAL formulates and communicates these views to its audience in a therapeutic coating, using language that fosters emotional competence, so highly valued in a culture dominated by the therapeutic emotional style. Thus, the Master Academy of Love uses the power of therapeutic discourse to broaden the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Poland. The progressive form of MAL meetings along with bold employment of strands of psychology not fully approved by the Vatican does not change the fact that its message endeavours to further a deeply conservative religious agenda.

Perhaps this is why the official Church in Poland has not expressed any reservations over the MAL project, and the initiative does not seem to raise significant controversies. Representatives of the clergy take part in MAL meetings as invited experts and regular audience members. Moreover, the Academy is advertised at web pages set up by the Conference of the Polish Episcopate: [Opoka.pl](http://Opoka.pl) and the Catholic News Agency's service, [Ekai.pl](http://Ekai.pl).

## Conclusion

The Master Academy of Love is a project spawned of emotional capitalism and one that contributes to its vitality. It places great importance on individually achieved success in both personal and professional spheres of life, and devotes much space to the various restrictions that one needs to overcome when striving for self-fulfilment. Hence, MAL uses the narrative of self-help and the narrative of suffering promoted by the therapeutic emotional style, and, simultaneously, reinforces their strength by employing the talk-show formula emblematic in a contemporary culture dominated by psychological discourse. MAL also expands the cultural impact of the therapeutic emotional style by translating therapeutic language into the language of belief. The interpretation of the Thomas Aquinas maxim 'grace builds on nature' in such a way that spiritual and psychological growth become strongly intertwined, if not indistinguishable, evidences this process. Furthermore, MAL focuses on building and multiplying the emotional competence of its audience, and so it becomes a powerful actor in the emotional field.

Considering the attractive form of MAL meetings, which combine a talk-show format with theatrical and cinematic spectacles, and considering that the project boldly draws from the currents of psychology the Church has distanced itself from, MAL might look like a progressive offer to Catholic believers. And indeed, the project seems to reshape Catholicism and adjust it to contemporary cultural trends. However, to interpret MAL solely in terms of innovation would be one-sided and incomplete. The Academy paradoxically combines its progressive characteristics with a traditionalist morality. Its ideological stance cannot be unambiguously classified as liberal. MAL not only endorses the ideal of self-fulfilment, but also promotes traditional gender roles and conservative Church views on societal issues, such as reproduction, through its website, personal development workshops, theatrical vignettes and other show components. Within the therapeutic coating, and thus using the power of the therapeutic discourse, MAL seems to support the interests of a particular Church, the predominantly traditionalistic Polish Catholic Church.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Master Academy of Love does not seem to be a unique, or even a specifically Polish, psycho-spiritual project challenging the dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism, innovation and traditionalism. Another example is the reparative therapy movement. This internationally known initiative aims at 'healing' the homosexual orientation. It makes use of therapeutic techniques to repress the 'sinful' desire. Projects like these show the need to be particularly cautious when attributing progressivism to religious phenomena which eagerly use psychological currents.

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## Notes

1. The participant observation was conducted at the following MAL meetings:  
23 September 2009: *Woman + Man, or a positive family*  
04 November 2009: *Woman + Man, or the traits of sexuality*

- 13 January 2010: *Woman + Man, or this is because of love*  
 19 February 2010: *Woman + Man, or your happiness is within you*  
 24 March 2010: *Woman + Man, or fear doubles all*  
 16 April 2010: *Woman + Man, or people with character*  
 25 May 2010: *Woman + Man, or when I miss you*  
 23 June 2010: *Woman + Man, or love yourself first*
2. The Master Academy of Love: <http://www.akademia24.pl>.
  3. The Encounters of Married Couples: <http://www.spotkaniamalzenskie.pl/pl/wiecej-ospotkaniach-malzenskich/duchowosc-i-charyzmat>.
  4. See, for instance, Polish websites that present famous quotes: <http://www.cytaty.info/cytat/laskabudujenanaturze/1>, <http://www.historia-powszechna.yoyo.pl/cytaty/ll.php?ll=86>, <http://www.cytaty24.eu/11958,szukane.html>.

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