

Personal Story and Public Identity as Axis of Value Response: Lessons on Literacy and Morality from John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939)

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Abstract

In the hype of multi-/inter-disciplinarity, is the voice or voices of theistic religions and the attendant philosophical moral awareness (etymologically better rendered as *conscientização* in Portuguese) still meant to be heard? Can classical tales of saints and sinners remain part of the canon of public literacy? How existential is the threat of “organised religions” or otherwise established ecclesiastical structures posed to society when they are accused of attempting to fight proxy crusades against humanitarian enlightenment under the guise of religious literature? Are tenets propounded by scholars like Gavin D’Costa in *Theology and the Public Square* (2005) to be politely bracketed when discussing perennial values? Values that responsible media strive to propagate, particularly the value of human dignity eulogised by the life exemplars of great figures in times of existential crises of whatever magnitude. With these questions in mind, this article will hearken back to the stories of two “grandees” in

the Roman Catholic tradition who left their marks on the pages of the development of modern English and Chinese literacy. Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865) is just but one of the tactical devices for his defense of creedal integrity, while Ma Xiangbo engaged in catholicising the Chinese national ethos through educational literacy for close to half a century. We shall phenomenologically draw inspirations from their parallel vision and experience on what lends power to the medium of words and deeds in shaping informed public conscience in regard to the core values of truth, good, and beauty.

Keywords

John Henry Newman • Ma Xiangbo • Values • Media • Literacy • Morality

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Resumo

Na onda da multi-/interdisciplinaridade, a voz ou vozes das religiões teístas e a consciência moral filosófica (etimologicamente melhor traduzida como *conscientização* em português) ainda devem ser ouvidas? As histórias clássicas de santos e pecadores ainda podem fazer parte do cânone da literacia pública? Quão existencial é a ameaça das “religiões organizadas” ou outras estruturas eclesiásticas estabelecidas para a sociedade quando são acusadas de tentar lutar cruzadas por procuração contra o esclarecimento humanitário sob o disfarce de literatura religiosa? Os princípios defendidos por estudiosos como Gavin D’Costa em *Theology and the Public Square* (2005) devem ser educadamente colocados entre parênteses ao discutir valores perenes? Valores que a mídia responsável se esforça para propagar, particularmente o valor da dignidade humana elogiada pelos exemplos de vida de grandes figuras em tempos de crises existenciais de

qualquer magnitude. Com essas perguntas em mente, este artigo remeterá às histórias de dois “grandes” na tradição católica romana que deixaram suas marcas nas páginas do desenvolvimento da literacia moderna em inglês e chinês. *A Apologia pro vita sua* (1865) de Newman é apenas um dos dispositivos táticos para sua defesa da integridade do credo, enquanto Ma Xiangbo se envolveu na catolicização do ethos nacional chinês através da literacia educacional por quase meio século. Fenomenologicamente, vamos nos inspirar em sua visão e experiência paralelas sobre o que confere poder ao meio das palavras e ações na formação de uma consciência pública informada em relação aos valores centrais de verdade, bondade e beleza.

Palavras-chave

John Henry Newman • Ma Xiangbo • Valores • Mídia • Literacia • Moralidade

1. Introduction – Literacy as Personal Apology and Self-Translation

1.1. Media output is personal apology

A Jesuit professor once advised me thus: “Never apologise for your work”. What he meant was, we are responsible for our own product, whether written or spoken, as long as it is deliverable information for a perceiving audience and a due reflection and record of one’s honest work. We account for what we have done, and not for what we regret not being able to do. And as every author or creator of *informative* or *formative* literature who eventually has to face up to the reality of having their work enjoyed or scrutinized, it is a matter of personal dignity and integrity – you vouch for what you write or say, as an honour of your life.

To draw some historical illustration, this article shall devote its attention to two apologetical figures who embody the pristine ideals of upholding personal and literary integrity at the service of humanity: the British cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and the centenarian Chinese educator Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939). Their personal stories stirred public media frenzy of their times, especially in the metropolitan settings where they flourished. But the moral legacy that they endowed the Anglophone and Chinese world and beyond deserve retelling, as the struggles they dealt with amidst rival religious, political, and epochal values can serve to encourage our modern project of media and information literacy.

1.2. The catholic and traditional sense of Information Literacy

I suppose then that is what literacy ultimately signifies: one’s ability and willingness to own up to what we read and write, holding it up to public endorsement and scrutiny. As the old adage goes: we become what we read. So, *never apologise for your work*.

But – here comes the treat – apologise I will, albeit only momentarily. What happened was, when I was first introduced to the Tell.me International Symposium in Macau that led to this article, I felt totally inadequate academically to approach the subject at hand. I am not a media man. I have given up reading broadsheet newspapers since I own my first smartphone. My personal library has metamorphosed into an unmanageable collection of dust, mites, and dog-eared tomes. *Information literacy*, moreover, was a new expression to me. My training in philosophy and theology and canon law just seemed to place me into too old-fashioned a niche where I felt not up to speed to address what I perceived to be a highly tech savvy, urban, and current topic.

So as I tried to draft a humble apology hoping to excuse myself from the task, what I gradually discovered, rummaging through the UNESCO website and Professor Felipe Chibás Ortiz’s illustrative articles explaining the indicators to Communication and Creativity, is that Media and Information Literacy is a thoroughly *catholic* and *traditional* concept: *catholic* in the sense of universal, equal, inclusive, and traditional in the sense of generative, being handed down through generations. None of us living in the present can communicate with each other without first having inherited some pre-conceived form of linguistic symbols, verbal, printed, and auricular, or some adaptable nexus and medium of information system, usually technologically assisted. Even members of the visually, auricularly, and mentally handicapped community are not excluded in the exercise of media and information rights. They are, in fact, an integral part of the literacy movement through special human intelligent effort. So I dispel my baseless mental inhibitions, and boldly proceed to share with you my thoughts openly, with my own version of “Open AI” – Open, *Agitated* or *Anxious* Intelligence.

1.3. Artificial Intelligence: challenging surprise or surprising challenge for the quest for integrity?

Another disclaimer: I actually tried typing in my proposed title into an AI engine and ended up having an absolutely shocking text matching to a large extent what I had intended to say. In fact, the generated text even quoted from my own published work to my utter amazement, while to my supreme delight and satisfaction of course. In fact, here is what an online AI software bequeathed me as a conclusion to my article:

The lives of John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo remind us that personal stories and public identities intersect profoundly. As we navigate our own journeys, let us embrace the axis of value response – a dance between self-discovery and societal transformation.

I could not have waxed more eloquent... Yet this is the existential challenge we face today: how shall we claim to foster the virtues of honesty, integrity, responsibility, fairness, justice, hard work and labour, when artificial intelligence can tempt academics to tip over the edge to cut corners and to resort to simply having AI substitute one’s own natural flow of thoughts. That AI generated text really hit me hard. It said all that I had in mind. But no, “get behind me Satan.” That is not my true self. This is only a false ego. A shadow. A sham me. You have my word. I will tell *me*. Not what AI thinks about me.

1.4. Catapulting from self-translation to interculturality

I remember well what my phenomenology professor said: “Every paper takes on a life of its own”. And I discovered around twenty years ago that this un-invented cogitative and literary life force can be most strongly felt when I was asked by the editor of a journal to translate an article of mine from English into Chinese myself. It was a nirvana experience. Before that I had never realised that there is a palpable distance between what I thought frontally with my Anglo-Saxon section of the brain and what is deep down in the other more intuitive, pictographically oriental side of me. That there is a fecund, pregnant, creative space between the Platonic *nous* and the Aristotelian *psyche* begging for the incarnation of the artistic muse in me. For the first time in my life, I ventured into a virginal literacy no-man’s land in my bilingual alter-egos, as if there are two blood siblings separated at birth finally coming to acquainting each other for the first time. The meeting of two minds of two cultural milieux in the same brain. I discovered *art*. That was how I felt. And I was definitively invigorated.

And that is how that eureka moment of translating my own work from one language into another led me on to the path of studying the two personal exemplars, John Henry Newman, the quintessential Victorian English Christian prose prodigy, and the ex-Jesuit priest Joseph Ma Xiangbo, the unsung pioneer and promotor of educational reform of modern China. The parallel imprints that Newman and Ma Xiangbo left on the literacy legacy of the cities of Birmingham, London, Dublin, Shanghai, Beijing, and beyond, are simply too important to be overlooked when we talk about the perennial impact of personal biographical narratives and public identity in the context of safeguarding the civic, personal, intellectual, and spiritual moral qualities of its citizens in city environs that strive to develop media and literacy formation.

2. Cities and Consciences

2.1. Media as catalyst for interdisciplinary exercise and humanitarian effort

Today we ride on the hype and waves of multi-/inter-disciplinarity. Universities distinguish themselves with the offering of cross-subject joint degrees. Humanities and technologies are no longer incompatible partners. The ever-effervescent dialogue between science and spirituality continue to draw inquisitive and sincere adherents. Businessmen and philosophers are no strangers anymore. Even poets team up with computer savants to embellish their work with interactive graphics and sound effects. Media

is at the service of bringing what were once considered artificially disparately trained professional people back into a cooperative dynamism. And the resultant work of such interdisciplinary projects are often the bedrock material for novel and essential information delivery for the benefit of intelligent citizens as well as for the edification of the general populace. Social media, in particular, is an indispensable tool for direct, digestible, and delectable informational feed, where city or even national authorities fear at times when these are being utilized as means of mobilizing the masses for social unrest. The use of Telegram chat groups in the city of Hong Kong during 2019 protests would be a recent example, not to mention the earlier Arab Spring movement. The innumerable poignantly telling tales circulated during the Covid pandemic are glimpses of the painful truths (and half-truths) that media could or could not deliver. These are just a couple examples.

In the age of modernity, it is an almost acknowledged situation that we do not take religiosity as the singular hallmark of citizenry, except of course in some quasi-theocratic religious states where strict governance according to manifest religious beliefs runs supreme. But certain moral qualities traditionally held in high regard and commonly taught by religious bodies, such as truthfulness, magnanimity, justice, temperance, still and should remain the core values to be preserved and propagated in the fostering of modern civic consciousness. And the highly influential role that media and information literacy plays in this *conscientização*, this conscience-bound awareness, does not go against the prophetic voice or voices of theistic religions and their attendant teachings about behaviour and cultural expectations.

Of course, it would be naïve of us to pretend that extremism does not exist on both sides. Yet the fact that there are ultra-secularism as well as anti-humanitarian factions urges us all the more to be attentive to safeguarding sound ethical principles that would steer us away from the danger of media and information manipulation. Ideologically driven politics, politicking, and cut-throat commercial competition, are known malignant forces that frequently abuse the good intention of media and information sharers.

2.2. Freedom of information and conscience: redefining secular sanctity

When I ask: Can classical tales of saints and sinners remain part of the canon of public literacy today? I do have people like brave whistle blowers who burst the burdensome bubbles of lies in mind. Because although one may not be a church goer or creedal religious adherent understood in the conventional way, I do not see any reason not to hail and hand down the sacred memory of

ordinary upright citizens who are witnesses and sharers of major events through media. And I also deem it equally important to preserve records of institutional misdeeds so that lessons could be learnt. Tales of saints and sinners. Biographical narratives fair and straight, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Many warnings have been branded as dangerous rumours by the authorities in the beginning. Had the authorities collaborated with professionals in verifying claims and made the people's right of access to lifesaving information their top priority, then perhaps we would not have had dragged the whole world down with many untold, unexplained deaths.

Separation of Church and State does not mean separation of Faith and Country. It is a matter of human dignity to have faith, even if religion is not allowed. And at the very least public polity needs to ensure that its citizens can have faith in the truthfulness of the media and information providers. I am referring to the fundamental belief in the inalienable, God-given human capacity to put our lives into someone else's hand on the basis of one's word. Word saves, if we are not self-deceitful. And so this belief goes hand in hand with the sixth and tenth Media and Information Literacy (MIL) indicators on anti-fake news training and security. As an essential tool of the educated mind, literacy is by definition broadening and all embracing, but always respectful of personal liberty and freedom of conscience, especially of one's freedom of religious beliefs and cultural sensitivities. But here comes the age-old debate: does religion still fit in in a polite society. We can all agree on the primacy of the individual conscience in freedom of expression, but what about organised religions or otherwise established ecclesiastical structures or theocratic polities? How does media and information literacy cope with the long-standing contributions of religiously themed materials visibly and palpably colouring, if not occupying, the landscape of literature, arts, architecture, and music?

We are by now not unfamiliar with the secularist position that calls for the total privatisation of religion, or, in the case of some circles in Europe, even a wholesale disassociation from its Christian heritage. Religious literacy was once the golden standard of liberal arts education. Grammar schools, choir schools, cathedral schools, universities at Oxford, Paris, Coimbra, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, none of which thrived without having at its center Scripture, theology, philosophy, and classical studies. Yet today these places of research are still leaders in technological advancement. So it begs the question whether religiously inspired institutions and systems are really so existential a threat to humanist enlightenment and societal development. *Gloria Dei vivens homo*. The glory of God is human beings fully alive. Were there instances of church authorities or theocratic rulers attempting to fight proxy

crusades against human flourishing under the guise of imposed religious censorship, I would judge them to be cases where such ecclesiastics or clerics have actually misconstrued humanity to start with. There have always been people invested with power who mistake humanity as something to be controlled rather than formed and informed. *Distinguer pour unir*. The task of supervision is to make clear distinctions in order to unite. And this is where information literacy kicks in as the essential conditions for making personal informed decisions and not for collective volitional coercion.

2.3. The crisis of public identity in academic and religious fora

In 2005, Gavin D'Costa, the Kenyan-born Catholic theologian of Indian parentage, published his thought-provoking *Theology and the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation*. There he notices that in order to avoid "theological sectarianism", the discipline called "religious studies" took root in secular academies, especially in English universities.

He posits three hypothetical responses to this phenomenon.

First, "to abolish both theology and religious studies department altogether and integrate them into history, literature, politics, and so on". The author does not support this response of course.

So the second option could be to "rename theology and religious studies as the historical critical study of religion and continue what went on previously." This second response amounts to simply acknowledging religiosity as merely a social reality. Again not something which D'Costa favours.

The third and optimal response, according to the author, then, is to "allow specific starting points to flourish, label them clearly, and allow them to interact" (p. 36). In other words, to reintroduce the authentic liberal arts model to the modern pluralistic academy. Now why the tenets D'Costa propounds here concerns us? I take his analysis of the situation of the captivity of theology in the modern academia as a parallel case study of the potential plight that general religious teachings face in public media and literacy advancement. For as long as humanity can remember, religions have been the catalyst that informs and inspires, especially in the hearts of citizens in their duty to God and Nation. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scout movement, recognised religion and spirituality as a fundamental human factor which members of the Scout movement do not have to abjure but rather to dutifully foster and develop. Let me quote from a document called "The Place of Religions in Scouting – A Catholic Vision", prepared by the International Catholic Conference of Scouting:

As for religion, even if they are not aware of it, the young people we educate are the children growing up in societies that remain impregnated with religious culture. As a result of globalization, they are also increasingly concerned with other religions than those practiced by their families. (International Catholic Conference on Scouting, 2024, p.4)

So, to slightly adapt the language of the thirteen MIL indicators, my observation would be to ask, under point 5 “culture, heritage, art, sport, tourism, and leisure”, *how to channel the perennial virtues of humility, charity, wisdom of traditional actors such as religiously inspired institutions and their literature into the mainstream consciousness of media and information beneficiaries?* D’Costa’s model emphasizes an active engagement with virtues, preserving their ethical integrity without dilution. It advocates for the free and interactive integration of disciplines, ensuring the inclusion of the theologized voices of religious agents. However, this approach requires careful discernment to avoid tendencies toward insular “ghetto-making,” as such tendencies would directly contradict the unifying objectives of the MIL project.

Hence, we do not necessarily have to bracket religion in city building at all cost. Rather, MIL can be the gentle agency that better anchor religious moral virtues in the appropriate spheres of modern citizenry, especially in intellectual circles of places where the light of traditional religio-cultural elements has grown dim.

3. Media-mediated Values and Response

What then are the values that responsible media strive to propagate? What valuable, or value-charged memory does information literacy try to preserve? In the introductory section of the MIL vademecum *From Smart Cities to MIL Cities: Metrics Inspired by UNESCO’s vision* (2020), co-edited by Professor Chibás, we have on page 27 a striking observation which deserves to be quoted at length.

Today’s communicational, educational, and technological problems should not be analysed in isolation from ethics... In our times, the idea of sacrifice has become delegitimized; people are not stimulated or want to set out to pursue ideals or moral values; politicians have deposed utopias; and yesterday’s idealists became pragmatic. We are in the age of individualism, which is another Cultural Barrier to Communication, because for the author, the individualistic pursuit of quality of life, limited by tolerance, is expressed in indifference; that is, in modern life the social is not concerned enough with moral concepts. (Minaze & Chibás, 2020)

Besides the above incisive evaluation, there is also on page 31 an interesting section on multi-talents retention

as a core value which I highly recommend for further investigation.

From my reading of it, the driving principle that MIL can take to heart is the value of human dignity eulogised by the life exemplars of great figures in times of existential crises even of extinction-scale magnitude, with people like Dr Li Wenliang of Wuhan, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Berlin, like Thomas More of London, and many other unsung heroes and heroines of ordinary life. Popular entertainment still hails super Marvel characters, rehashing figures of Superman and Batman, mythic creatures like Godzilla and King Kong. These sell because they meet our yearning imagination; gripping epics like Dunkirk, or Diary of Anne Frank, even philosophic works like Sophie’s World, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Bollywood, martial arts, folklore legends, Harry Potter, etc, all feed our longing for a world with better, stronger human characters that lift us out of mundane misery.

It can hardly be contested that human life constitutes *the* core value that requires utter, unambiguous value response, and the only proper value response to the noble essence of a person is *love* – a response to the gift of life and value of an *unrepeatable* individual. One says “yes” to the affective response and that the entire self of the lover is committed to the cause of love. As Dietrich von Hildebrand explains: “A particular trait of love distinguishing it from all other affective value responses is the unique happiness that love confers, or as we could as well say, that is deeply tied to the act of loving” (*The Nature of Love*, 2009). Spousal, nuptial love and the joy of the conjugal act would be the most supremely intimate example of all. So in my estimation, media and information literacy may sometimes be misconceived to be something static and cold, to be just a meaningful arrangement and adaptation of data and facts for passive consumption. No, I think that when MIL holds on to the core value of human dignity that solicits love as the proper response, MIL is a channel of active peace-building.

4. Lessons from Two Media-Information Charged Public Personalities

The final part of this article presents the stories of two “grandees” in the Roman Catholic tradition whom I think could serve as mentors on our MIL journey. Both John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo left their marks on the pages of the development of modern English and Chinese ethical literacy through all the possible mediums of communication available to them at their times. The focus will be on how their personal tales intersect with their public identity, for Newman and Ma are keenly aware of their high national profiles, and so in reflecting on their

personal accomplishments and failures, and by narrating them for their contemporaries, Newman and Ma were not just casual autobiographers but faith-driven teachers of their generation who love God by edifying the souls and lives of fellow citizens through ethical literacy. Thus the key to unlocking the title of my article, the axis of value response, is in essence love – love of one’s life, love of the source of life, and love for the life of the nation. And that love diffuses itself through spreading the Catholic message that Newman and Ma tried hard doing their entire life. Their journeys spanned continents, cultures, and centuries, yet their exploration of literacy, morality, and the human condition remains relevant today.

5. John Henry Newman: In Defense of Integrity

5.1. Newman the convert

The odyssey of John Henry Newman’s life story is most notably etched in public memory by his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Born in 1801 in London, educated in Ealing, he is an Oxford don, Anglican clergyman, a controversialist, a poet, an “ecclesiastical agitator”, a patristic scholar, and a popular yet sensitively sincere preacher and pastor. Even today when you read his eight-volume *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1825-1843), it can miraculously place you in his presence, and make you almost hear his feeble, silver-timbred voice and the intermittent silences between the sentences because of Newman’s penetrating insights into the human spiritual psyche. His *Oxford University Sermons* (1826-1843) are sharp analyses on the rationality of faith and culture. And his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) is a powerhouse of theological synthesis on a par with the *summata* of the scholastic ages. Not to mention the fame and fury he attracted by the letters in newspapers, magazine articles, and published tracts he produced arguing for the position of the Apostolic Church in the State.

However, all that sterling string of elite English identities and corpus of brilliant writings suddenly got very muddled and cast in suspicion in the public eyes when his quest led him to becoming a Roman Catholic instead in 1845. His conversion was an informed decision after serious discernment and study of Christian church history. He engaged in systematic reading of the early Church Fathers, Councils, and controversies. He harnessed books and built up not just a patristic library but he himself launched translation projects to anchor and spread the knowledge found, not just for his personal enjoyment, but *for the public*. In retrospect, we can say Newman availed himself the full benefit of MIL and in turn became an almost entrepreneurial conservative/

creative contents creator. Newman is the quintessential KOL (Key Opinion Leader) of the Victorian era.

5.2. Newman writes his Apologia

The public identity that Newman had assumed during his Anglican days changed dramatically. Newman’s new Catholic identity ushered him onto the path of becoming the most prolific Catholic apologist in the English-speaking world. His most famous work, the *Apologia pro vita sua*, is still a reprinted Penguin classic that you can pick off the shelf of decent bookshops today. Why? That is because the name on the cover of the book seemed like an autobiography of the great man. But in fact it is far from being a simple biographical narrative. Newman clearly states that it is a history of his religious opinions and the position of his mind. He wrote it originally in a serialized pamphlet format in 1864 against his “Accuser” Charles Kingsley of Cambridge who thought Newman the convert to be an insincere person. As a Catholic priest Newman sprung into action to defend his name and the honour of the Catholic priesthood. Newman says in the preface:

I mean to be simply personal and historical: I am not expounding Catholic doctrine, I am doing no more than explaining myself, and my opinions and actions. I wish, as far as I am able, simply to state facts, whether they are ultimately determined to be for me or against me...It is not at all pleasant for me to be egotistical; nor to be criticized for being so. It is not pleasant to reveal to high and low, young and old, what has gone on within me from my early years. It is not pleasant to be giving to every shallow or flippant disputant the advantage over me of knowing my most private thoughts, I might even say the intercourse between myself and my Maker. **But I do not like to be called to my face a liar and a knave**; nor should I be doing my duty to my faith or to my name, if I were to suffer it. I know I have done nothing to deserve such an insult, and if I prove this, as I hope to do, I must not care for such incidental annoyances as are involved in the process (emphasis added). (Newman, 1865)

Here we see the struggle – an essentially shy man who had to pick up the courage to pour his mind in ink to dispel misinformation – to safeguard the value of truth and dignity. It was a matter of record that Newman had penned the *Apologia* with intense agony, often in tears. And the popularity or notoriety generated by the publication of the *Apologia* sealed Newman’s public identity as a moral religious force to be reckoned with. Personal stories and public identity as axis of value response. Case in point.

A decade later, in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Newman gave an evocative description of what cons-

science is: “Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives.” In this quote Newman makes clear that conscience is the very centre where the unseen divine voice guides and informs us. Here interestingly Newman’s teaching on conscience elevates the value of human dignity to the plane of the supernatural, and that in turn should throw light back onto the sacred mission which media and information literacy carries when MIL is by nature an operation of citizenry conscience.

5.3. Newman caring for the souls of the city of Birmingham

Newman’s public persona is much more strengthened and made credible not only by the external display of his intellectual rigor, but by the upright life he led as a dedicated religious keeping the daily routine of prayer and services as a priest in the Birmingham Oratory. If MIL targets underdeveloped cities with a higher concentration of information-deprived labour force as locales for experimentation, then the choice of Birmingham was made surely for reasons not too far from the MIL promoters. The labour boomtown of 19th century Birmingham was a crucible of industry, innovation, and social change. But the dwellers there were certainly not comparable to metropolitan citizens in places like London marked with proliferate literacy. But does Newman have a preferential care for the less erudite ones? Let’s see for ourselves from a letter of 1864:

The Oratory, Birmingham: July 25, 1864.

Dear Monsignore Talbot, – I have received your letter, inviting me to preach next Lent in your Church at Rome to “an audience of Protestants more educated than could ever be the case in England.” However, Birmingham people have souls; and I have neither taste nor talent for the sort of work which you cut out for me. And I beg to decline your offer.

I am, yours truly,

JOHN H. NEWMAN. (Newman, 1865)

Newman’s life exemplified the axis of value response. The intricacies of his personal life story of conversion accounts for his Catholic public identity, creating a dynamic tension. He championed education, literacy, and the pursuit of broad-minded knowledge that places theistic faith back at its center. For Newman, literacy was not mere informational transfer; it was a moral endeavor – an invitation to encounter divine truths and the splendour of humble service and sanctity.

5.4. Newman takes a stance on literacy and morality

Before we turn to Ma Xiangbo, however, we must not forget a special episode in Newman’s life that pertains directly to the rationale of media and information literacy. In 1841, four years before Newman became a Catholic, Newman published a series of seven letters in *The Times* newspaper under the pseudonym Catholicus. They were Newman’s personal and public response to what was meant to be a rather harmless event: the opening of a free, open access reading room in Tamworth, Staffordshire by the then British prime minister-to-be Sir Robert Peel. The intention of Peel was the propagation of “useful knowledge”, the physical sciences generally speaking. And Peel was of the mind that the citizen who come into broader, easier contact with the created sciences would become more virtuous as a result. Newman finds fault in this notion of Peel’s. Newman argues that there is a fundamental flaw in the belief that secular education is all that it takes to drive moral excellence. Knowledge alone cannot be the be all and end all substitution of religion as a moral force in society.

Newman writes:

Man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal.

The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description.

If virtue be a mastery over the mind, if its end be action, if its perfection be inward order, harmony, and peace, we must seek it in graver and holier places than in libraries and reading rooms. (Newman, 1865)

These quotes reflect Newman’s Christian anthropology, his views on education, virtue, and the circumscribed role of knowledge in shaping human character. So we see that Newman had long had to grapple with outlining the fundamental philosophical principles at work behind literacy initiatives, so that we may not confound accumulation of objective data with moral excellence, the latter of which is not to be severed from the aid received from revealed religion and the personal formation of conscience. And Newman adds:

But if we commence with scientific knowledge and argumentative proof, or lay any great stress upon it as the basis of personal Christianity, or attempt to make man moral and religious by Libraries and Museums, let us in consistency take chemists for our cooks, and mineralogists for our masons...

No legislator or priest ever dreamed of educating our moral nature by science or by argument. (Newman, 1865)

So here lies the supreme irony of the Reading Room project: while Robert Peel wanted to welcome all people without distinction of classes and creeds to benefit from this scientific literacy promotion, Newman exposed the bigotry and illogicality that belies the whole business – women of lesser virtues were not included as intended readers:

However, the Tamworth Reading-room admits of one restriction, which is not a little curious, and has no very liberal sound. It seems that all “virtuous women” may be members of the Library; that “great injustice would be done to the well-educated and virtuous women of the town and neighbourhood” had they been excluded.

A very emphatic silence is maintained about women not virtuous. What does this mean? Does it mean to exclude them, while bad men are admitted? Is this accident, or design, sinister and insidious, against a portion of the community? **What has virtue to do with a Reading-room?** It is to make its members virtuous; it is to “exalt the moral dignity of their nature;” it is to provide “charms and temptations” to allure them from sensuality and riot. **To whom but to the vicious** ought Sir Robert to discourse about “opportunities,” and “access,” and “moral improvement;” and who else would prove a fitter experiment, and a more glorious triumph, of scientific influences? **And yet he shuts out all but the well-educated and virtuous** (emphases added). (Newman, 1865)

In plain words, Newman is saying, if Peel is right and follows through with the logic of his principles, then putting libraries in red-light districts should automatically make prostitutes virtuous...So the lesson for today is, media and information literacy is not a magical formula to solving moral evils in the world while MIL can surely be a privileged means to a noble end when it does not claim to override the role of spiritual and religious agents.

6. Ma Xiangbo: Mind and Soul of Modern China

6.1. From the Imperial Mind to the Republican Heart

Bridging from the West to the East, let us look at Ma Xiangbo. If you have ever watched Bernardo Bertolucci’s mesmerising drama film, the Last Emperor of China, then you would have already a pretty good glimpse into the sort of Sitz im Leben or historical scenery that Ma Xiangbo lived in. You may remember from the movie the figure of Emperor Puyi’s English adviser and friend, Mr. Reginald Johnston. Well, in fact, it was Ma Xiangbo who was the original candidate to be invited to mentor Puyi on account of his academic standing as a polymath

and polyglot (My own grandfather met Puyi in person once in Guangzhou).

When Ma was only a young man the French authorities in Shanghai had already intended to hire him as a secretary and interpreter. But Ma famously said, “I did not learn French to serve France. I learnt it to serve China”. So at the end Ma turned down this somewhat prestigious if not odd offer to be the tutor of the dethroned last emperor of China. And that happened in 1913, the year after Ma Xiangbo was appointed the Rector of the Peking University and wrote a letter to Pope Pius X petitioning the founding of a Catholic University in Peking, which later became the Fujen Catholic University as we now know it. 1913 is also the year he laboured for the founding of a national Chinese academy patterned after the *l’Academie française*. In fact, a decade before that, in 1903 and 1905, Ma had already founded two other tertiary educational institutes, the Aurora College and Fudan College, which is present day Fudan University in Shanghai. The established educator was already 72 years old when he took part in the Republican Revolution that ended the Manchurian dynastic rule in China in 1911. Ma Xiangbo was even appointed the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Jiangsu Provincial Government, with Jiangsu being where new Republican capital Nanking is located.

Ma Xiangbo was a vocal champion for religious freedom and civic education. His patriotism was in full display during the onset of the Japanese occupation when he made use of his stature to call for unity against military aggression. He organized campaigns and broadcasted speeches up and down the country to rally support for the war relief effort. For his safety, his family and associates secretly moved him out of the Chinese south-west border, and so unknowingly he died in Vietnam, aged 100. He famously quipped, “I’m like a dog that only knows how to bark – I’ve been barking for a century and I still haven’t been able to awaken China!”

6.2. The former Jesuit

But besides being an educator and national patron, Ma Xiangbo was a Jesuit priest turned diplomat, financier, newspaper sponsor, entrepreneur, orator, scripture translator, and philanthropist. Going back to the early half of his life, Ma, like his brother Ma Jianchong, abandoned the Jesuit vocation in 1876. Ma Xiangbo’s departure sent shockwaves through the entire line of command from Shanghai to Paris, reaching finally to the Jesuit Curia. One superior wrote: “It is sad that, despite attempts on both sides to ameliorate the soured relationship, Father Ma, so gifted yet strong-willed, was

quickly denounced as a fugitive and apostate...a lost sheep...whose desertion is more lamentable than the persecution of infidels in the mission...". It triggered a radical review of policy and attitude towards the admission of Chinese students into the Society of Jesus.

Ma Xiangbo then embarked on his diplomatic career as an ambassadorial attaché to Korea, Japan, the US, France, Italy, and the UK. From 1901 to 1905, in mere five years, he and his brother published the first modern analytical treatise of the Chinese language, Ma Xiangbo then published a Latin grammar, a philosophy textbook, translated a full commentary of the harmony of the Four Gospels, and founded two universities along the way as we mentioned.

Newman basically grew up along with the developing constitutional democracy of Victorian England and its political ascendancy as an unchallenged world power. The birth of Ma Xiangbo, by contrast, coincided with the first major blow to the integrity of the Qing Empire with the outbreak of the First Opium War in the 1840s (Britain's sovereignty over Hong Kong was proclaimed in 1841). China literally grew old and frail during Ma Xiangbo's life time, and when Ma died aged 100 in 1939, the Japanese army had already occupied vast swathes of Chinese territory in the north-east and even blockaded the British concession in Tientsin. But his personal story of conversion from a disappointed ex-priest in the French enclave in Shanghai to a model Catholic centenarian steadfast during national crisis, was one not just of cultural synthesis between Chinese tradition and Western thought, but a living testament to the power of the word as a means to respond to the value of faith and national salvation.

6.3. Ma Xiangbo the public moral orator

On 7 May 1916, at age 77, on the occasion of the centenary celebration of the American Bible Society, Ma Xiangbo was invited to deliver a long speech in the Central Park of Peking, which is formerly the grounds of the Imperial Altar of Earth and Harvests (*Shechitan*). The title of the speech is *The Relationship between Sacred Scripture and Human Community*, and the text that survived contains more than twenty-four thousand characters. A contemporary report describes the occasion for this speech as a large event with the air of almost a fanfare:

Thousands of people attended the meeting. The various Christian bodies met first in groups at various points of the city and then marched to the Central Park...The American Legation band furnished the music...Many visitors to the park also attended the meeting (The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette, Shanghai, 13 May 1916).

The thrust of the speech is to exhort people to adhere to the moral precepts of biblical teachings as the sure path of personal and national salvation. Ma began by appealing to the common natural human intuition of an all-powerful, all-wise Creator. Then he argues that it is because of mankind's misuse of their sovereignty and freedom of the soul that called for the mercy and personal presence of the Creator (Christ). Ma also mentions the historical stages of biblical translation from the Greek to the Vulgate, and to the biblical works of Bede the Venerable (c. 673-735) already taking place in 8th century England. Yet Ma's ultimate target is to convince his hearers of the universal saving value of Scripture:

The Saviour of the world hasn't come to save one particular nation or one particular race. Therefore, the concerns of Sacred Scripture are related to all mankind throughout the world. But it also relates especially to the Chinese people and to the Chinese nation. Why is that so? That's because Sacred Scripture is the root and basis of all laws. (Li, 2014)

Then Ma goes on to say that traditional Chinese thinking is bereft of the spirit of the law. Rather, China has been mostly suffering from the caprice of its ruling class. Thus, the human conscience longs for "a true law":

If we wish to obtain a true law according to conscience, a law that can safeguard people's lives and property, and a law which both soldiers and plebs can carry out in unison from top to bottom, then we must have Sacred Scripture to guide and foster the God-given consciences of the masses. Otherwise no way it will happen. (Li, 2014)

Classical Confucian ethics teaches about the dos and don'ts of subordinate human relationships. But Ma contends that it is the Christian Scripture that puts flesh on our human relational framework by making us "true brethren" bound by "true love", born and raised by the Creator-Lord.

Apart from the frequent use of patristic sources in his Scripture commentaries and apologetical writings, Ma Xiangbo has a special regard for the circle of early Jesuit missionaries and Chinese Catholic convert scholars (the *literati*) of 16th to 17th century China. He considers their writings a pristine example of inculturised presentation of the messages of the Revealed Religion. These works contain the historical samples of Chinese scriptural and theological translations. Ma diligently compared their manuscripts and republished them with prefaces that reflect much of his personal insights into how to bridge the gap between timeless Christian truths and modern religious exigencies through an applied intellectual effort of re-inculturation.

6.4. Ma entrepreneuring for the body and soul of China

In Ma Xiangbo's mid-life career as a political and diplomatic advisor, his view of the "self-strengthening" of China tends more towards a bolstering of the material and physical prowess of the country. Hence his work for the modernisation of the armoury, the commercial shipping bureau, the banking projects for railways, telephone lines, and many different kinds of entrepreneurial initiatives. Then he moved on to focusing on training young intellectuals to be translators and to be educated in the best traditions of both the east and the west. And when the opportunity came, he engaged himself in political reforms along the line of constitutional and confederate republicanism. Yet not a single of these endeavours seems to be satisfactory enough for the China that is crumbling from within and without. Ultimately Ma recovers that spiritual ethos of Catholicism underlying all his intellectual and ethical campaigns, and he gives himself totally over to the work of Catholic Action to promote an awakening of the national *conscience* to the *light of Revelation*. Ma finally sees that the best hope for a China that is beleaguered by weak morals and foreign military aggression is a mass conversion of hearts to the Catholic religion, so that the spirit of true charity and Christian sacrifice may unite and fire up the Chinese to stand up for its own country both morally and militaristically.

Ma Xiangbo's public identity was multifaceted. As an educator, he founded three universities in China and advocated educational reform. Simultaneously, he grappled with questions of morality, ethics, and social justice. His engagement with Western philosophy and theology shaped his public persona, making him a scholar committed to dialogue and transformation through media literacy. Ma Xiangbo's life also embodied the axis of value response. His personal story intersected with China's historical context, and he navigated the tensions between tradition and progress. Literacy, for him, was not limited to language proficiency; it encompassed moral literacy – the ability to discern right from wrong, justice from injustice, on both the personal and national scale.

7. Dialogue and Conclusion

7.1. Literacy does not replace morality

Here we can bring Ma Xiangbo into dialogue with Newman on the purpose and impact of educational literacy in the wider cultural, societal, and religious context. In the *Speeches and Lectures given at Various Schools in Wuxi* (Li, 2014), Ma Xiangbo highlights the universal quality of conscience from an anthropological point of

view. He criticises the Chinese for being backward and short-sighted, for whilst the west has already "thrown out to Utopia" Huxley's and Darwin's theories as being outmoded, the youths of China in Ma's times (1920s) only then get fascinated by them. Similar to Newman's argument in *The Tamworth Reading Room*, Ma Xiangbo does not believe that to change people for the better is as simple as giving them education. Ma says one cannot just round up rascals of the lowest rung of society and then expect to "educate" them out of immorality.

Newman's criticism of the shallowness of philosophical religion is akin to Ma Xiangbo's constructive critique of Confucianism as a medley of personal human ideologies:

Among the lay faithful nowadays there aren't people who love to study. Such is the second nature of the Chinese people, that they imitate what their superiors do [referring to the not so learned priests and missionaries]. What a pity! How sad! Confucius the Chinese doesn't talk about life after death, that's why everybody is so complacent and useless with whatever situation, whether in prosperity or in adversity (1919). (Li, 2014)

As a point of comparison on personal story telling, both Newman and Ma Xiangbo also wrote works of fiction. Newman wrote two novels, *Callista* (1855) and *Loss and Gain* (1848). *Callista* was about this Christian girl who was martyred under Roman imperial persecution, while *Loss and Gain* was actually the very first work Newman published after converting to Roman Catholicism. It was appropriately a story about a convert set in Victorian Oxford. Ma Xiangbo, on the other hand, created a hyperbolic work called *A Dialogue between a "Big Hairy" and a "Small Hairy" on the Draft of the Constitution*, written in 1916. The background to this work was the attempt by President Yuan Shikai to try to make Confucianism the state religion of the new Chinese state, something which Ma Xiangbo vehemently opposed. It is not clear why both Newman and Ma have individually chosen to make public their ideas in the form of fictional conversations. It could only be said that Newman and Ma are not foreign to the tradition of literary productions, especially the artforms of poetry, plays, and fiction. These are simply the vehicles of expressions of ideas common to both the eastern and western tradition across the ages. But it would not be too farfetched to surmise that, apart from a personal predilection for the literary genre, the intimate familiarity that Newman and Ma have towards the dialogues, parables, and accounts in the Bible and in other Christian hagiographical literature, might have influenced the choice of style in their writings.

While on points on the Church's role in the public arena of media and literacy, literary or scientific, both Newman and Ma Xiangbo share similar insights. In the secular sphere, the Church exercises her authority not

in an autocratic mode. The Church engages in dialogue with the cultures of the world, then it authoritatively assimilates or corrects their components depending on the exigencies of faith and salvation. Newman writes:

She fears no knowledge, but she purifies all; she represses no element of our nature, but cultivates the whole. Science is grave, methodical, logical; with Science then she argues, and opposes reason to reason...any how, her principle is one and the same throughout: not to prohibit truth of any kind, but to see that no doctrines pass under the name of Truth but those which claim it rightfully. (Newman, 1852)

As a meaningful parallel to Newman's position above, Ma Xiangbo is also keenly aware of the Church's discerning power between truth and falsehood when he writes:

Adore the Truth – there is a difference between True vs. False, and Evil vs. Good, for Falsehood must always counterfeit Truth in some shape or form. It is more difficult to distinguish and identify a false church and false teachings, than to spot out an evil religion and evil teachings. (Li, 2014)

While no evidence suggests that John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo were acquainted, this article explores

their shared intellectual alignment. By examining their writings and projects in parallel, the research highlights their contributions to common areas of concern, contextualized within their life journeys. These journeys unfolded amidst the contrasting media and information landscapes of 19th-century England and early 20th-century China, offering insights into their engagement with traditional faith, interculturality, and social progress.

Both Newman and Ma Xiangbo recognized the power of personal narratives. Our stories shape our values, inform our choices, and influence our impact on society. As educators, leaders, or individuals, we must honor our personal narratives while engaging with broader issues. They exhausted all the possible means available: books, letters, essays, tracts, novels, journals, newspapers, sermons, lectures, pamphlets, and for Ma radio broadcast especially. The media formats are contingent of course, it is the contents that matter after all. For Newman and Ma, literacy involves moral formation as ethical discernment of and personal response to the intrinsic value of human dignity. Our public identities emerge from personal convictions, therefore as we engage in public discourse, we carry a responsibility – to uphold truth, promote justice, and contribute to the common good.

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Bio

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