Postsecular rhetoric of the Pope: a discourse analysis of Pope Francis’ TED Talks

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ABSTRACT
Pope Francis has gained a title as ‘the Pope of Surprises’ for his unprecedented and unconventional papal narratives, personal viewpoints, and equally electrifying mediatised public appearances. One of these surprises was his videotaped appearance on TED. By adopting postsecularism as a conceptual framework, this study examines the dominant discursive features in Pope Francis’ TED Talks. Three main types of narrative features were found: emphasis on the postsecular solidarity between the religious and the secular, negotiating religious doctrinal engagement in public spheres, and finally, de-emphasising the papal magisterial authority. While the surface language of the Pope’s TED Talks operates in a postsecular inclusive discursive spirit, its ontological roots are nevertheless cemented in a Catholic epistemology and a faith-motivated claim for moral theology. The similarities between Christian sermons and TED’s communicative norms and practices make the Pope’s new rhetoric possible without excessive attenuation of the Catholic vocabulary.

1. Introduction
Pope Francis’ speeches and writings have become a research interest for many media and communication scholars. These studies have already framed Pope Francis as a ‘bravura rhetor’ (Oldenburg 2018; Maibach 2015) and have identified his rhetoric as inclusive and anti-elitist (Gage 2017). Studies ascertain that the Pope is a theological ethicist (Regan 2019), who pushes his populist leadership through massive mediatisation of itineraries, increased intervention on social media – thereby cultivating a ‘digital leadership’, and revolutionary apostolic exhortations (Narbona 2016; Guzik 2018; McCormick 2021). These radical rhetorical shifts are not just limited to the way in which the Pope makes historic and unprecedented public statements but are also evident in the prodigious tonality of his message. Pope Francis, according to Oldenburg (2018), is more interested in using a language that can potentially act as a cure for...
‘theological narcissism’. His messages are often articulated to show a ‘path’ that he wishes the Church to travel, thereby emphasising a critical shift in Catholicism’s mass communication. Part of this strategy involved appearing in online videos, and specifically in the TED series.

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a non-profit knowledge platform that conducts and curates talks in the form of short Internet-streamed presentations, wherein speakers primarily engage with an array of scientific, technological, and innovative topics with an aim to spread ideas that make a change for the better. TED began in 1984 as an exclusive science and technology conference originally aimed at Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Gradually, it expanded its array of topics to include policymakers, individuals with ‘extraordinary achievements’, politicians, academics and public intellectuals.

In April 2017, Pope Francis made his first videotaped message to TED’s global conference on the theme ‘The Future You’, held in Vancouver. This TED Talk was titled: ‘Why the only future worth building includes everyone’. Pope Francis’ first TED Talk, with subtitles in 32 languages, has had over 3.6 million views (as of 1st of March 2021) just on TED’s website. The extraordinary reception of his talk and the impact of TED’s online platforms (to reach beyond the confines of religion) prompted TED to have him deliver an additional talk in October 2020. It was titled: ‘Our moral imperative to act on climate change – and 3 steps we can take’. This TED Talk has over 1.3 million views (on TED’s website) and comes subtitled in 13 languages (as of 1st March 2021). His TED Talks reiterated certain key themes of the Argentinian Pope’s view of being human through a plainspoken new mediatised sermon.

This article outlines the dominant discursive features of these two TED Talks delivered by Pope Francis. It explores the dynamics of a non-theological language, operationalisation of mnemonics for social justice, and the call for a collective action and solidarity in his TED Talks. Using discourse analysis, I examine the meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in Francis’ TED Talks. The analysis draws on a postsecular framework, wherein culturally situated ‘thick’ norms attain a ‘thinner’ ethical status through translation, negotiation, (re)contextualisation, and dialogical process of normative contestation (Habermas 2008; Bettiza and Dionigi 2015). By analysing the language of Francis’ TED Talk this article argues that the language of his TED Talks reflects a postsecular rhetoric, which helps him to transcend faith-boundaries in complex ways to form avowedly inclusive partnerships. At the same time, the innate sermonic nature of TED Talks helped the Pope to effectively communicate with his audience without making any radical shift in his Catholic vocabulary and doctrinal hermeneutics.

2. Postsecularism and Catholicism

The contemporary nexus between religion, new media, and popular culture has produced dramatic changes in faith-based communication beyond the confines of institutional religious settings. A number of developments including, for example, an increasing ascendancy of the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationality, and continuous critiques of the ‘secularisation thesis’, have
prompted scholars to rethink and re-examine secularism and its relationship with religion (Molendijk, Beaumont, and Jedan 2010). Studies observe the decline of an exclusivist secularisation thesis and the emergence of interest in democratic deliberation that highlights a discursive frame, which underscores values such as individual freedom, social justice, and democracy (Habermas 2008; McLennan 2010; Casanova 2013). This discursive framing has been central to the emergence of the concept of the ‘postsecular condition’.

Scholars, however, preferred to approach postsecularism from different dimensions. For instance, Habermas (2006) describes contemporary society as postsecular, acknowledging that the theoretical considerations and approaches to religion should include the ideological manacles of secularisation theory by identifying religion as a constitutive force of modernity. Therefore, in Habermasian terms, the idea of postsecularism is not merely about the transformations in the relationship between society and religion or faith and reason, but the historical entanglements between modern society and religious traditions. In contrast to the Habermasian universalist approach, Charles Taylor defends the inclusivist nature of the postsecular public sphere. In his seminal work *A Secular Age* he attempts to scrutinise religion using a particularistic, historical framework to propose the legacy of this history of religion as a practical political project (Taylor 2009). Taylor here observes a condition in which religion has continued in secular societies regardless of how strong the growth of unbelief is. Hence, a postsecular perspective does not bespeak rejection of the secular; instead, it is a critique of both secularism and religion, with a more nuanced approach to challenge the religious-secular binary opposition. Further, the postsecular approach is concerned with exploring myriad features of the co-production of the secular and faith-motivated in modern societies and understanding the emerging frameworks, discourses, and practices as part of this co-production.

The effects of postsecularism have played a key role in the reorientation of the relationship between secular and religious public spheres. Framing this study, we can ask: what effect has the postsecular era had on Catholicism? What will be the issues religious authorities, including the Pope, have to address in the postsecular era? Scholars have addressed these questions differently by developing a thorough critique of postsecularism and by examining the radical re-entry of religious dogmatic ideas into the public sphere. For instance, Beyers (2014) suggests that the impact of the postsecular wave on Christianity can be articulated along four trajectories: individualisation, fragmentation, fundamentalism and civil religion. But Dalfé (2010, 337) looks more deeply into this process and its implications on the knowledge-production or discursive changes in Christianity and argues that the postsecular conditions do demand the normative theological discourse to ‘learn to relate in more differentiated ways to contemporary society than it normally does’. In a postsecular condition, the communicators of Christianity, Dalfé argues, ‘must find ways to show and communicate to their contemporaries that faith, hope, and love in God are inexhaustible gifts that enrich, orient, and humanize human life … ’ (2010, 339).

Therefore, a postsecular condition not only reflects the situation wherein Christian traditions no longer automatically steer the personal identity construction process, ‘but are only possibilities together with other choices from which an individual must
choose’ (Boeve 2005, 105). In a postsecular performance of care and rapprochement, the real challenge is to find a language by which both people of faith and secular citizens can enter into a discussion employing co-constituted symbolism and pluralistic sensibilities. This is important, particularly because while religious language is rooted in the divine revelation, secular language is cemented in autonomous reason and is located diametrically opposite to the former (Byrd 2016). Pope Francis has a particular way of dealing with communication in such contexts, for instance, by shifting the focus to a secular acceptable theme/position by spotlighting populist affirmation, humanism, and the future of the planet (Pope Francis 2013; Cherry 2015). In her recent work on postsecular Catholicism, Michele Dillon (2018, 33) argues that Catholicism has begun its active dialogical engagement with the postsecular moment, by considering it as an opportunity ‘to step in (anew) and articulate an ethical path for contemporary society’. She is hopeful that this engagement can bring more effective transformation since the Pope has sought to influence even the secular and other non-Catholics by speaking the language of modern science and humanism that is universally acceptable. Dillon views the Pope’s postsecular rhetoric as one which ‘recognizes that Catholics’ lived realities are secular realities and simultaneously are infused with God’s presence and the meanings and beliefs endowed by Catholicism’ (2018, 157). In other words, she identifies an interesting pattern of postsecular rhetorical quality in Francis’ discourse, which is capable of adopting secular language and ideas (alongside sacred language) in order to appeal to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. This postsecular rhetoric of Francis, Dillon (2018) suggests, helps him make a moral appeal to the global community on issues such as climate change, social justice and economic inequality, and thereby increase the Vatican’s influence on global politics. Dillon’s examination of the nature and characteristics of the authority of Francis with the postsecular moment is an important insight into how religious authorities and supreme leaders actively attempt to engage with contemporary society by attuning their rhetoric to increase relevance.

Dillon’s (2018) findings also illustrate Church leaders’ discursive endeavours to incorporate secular language, experiences, and expectations into religious messages in order to constantly negotiate the Church’s position in the contemporary secular reality. Taking the context Dillon (2018) articulates on the postsecular features of Pope Francis’ leadership and language, this study seeks to explore the discursive characteristics of Francis’ postsecular art of language. More specifically this paper is guided by questions such as what it looks like when he negotiates the mutually influencing frames of Christianity and secularity, and more specifically, how this is made possible through a digital storytelling platform like TED.

3. Data and methods

This article reports on a discourse analysis of two TED Talks delivered by Pope Francis. The first TED Talk titled ‘Why the only future worth building includes everyone’ was delivered in April 2017 (‘TED Talk 1’). The second TED Talk was delivered in October 2020 and was titled ‘Our moral imperative to act on climate change – and 3 steps we can take’ (‘TED Talk 2’). The former was delivered at TED’s annual conference in Vancouver, and the latter was during the launch of TED’s climate initiative – Countdown. Both TED
Talks were delivered virtually via video conferencing. So far, there are only two TED Talks delivered by the Pope (as of 1st March 2021). English transcripts of these TED Talks are accessed via the TED website.

This article adopts a macro-level discourse analysis that focuses on the types of content and the high-level organisation of the content. This study is interested in broad analogies rather than micro-discoursal features such as number of words, word length, sentence length, object-verb construction, the use of parts of speech, and other microscopic linguistic features. The analysis also pays more attention to weaving a productive ideology critique and transformative potential of the Pope’s discourse than to overly focusing on ‘negative’ themes. The analysis of rhetorical functions adopted a bottom-up approach of analysing the text and linguistic expressions and summarising the intended rhetorical functions of the expressions found. This approach was useful to explore both the ideological underpinning and related linguistic structures as well as the global meaning of the discourse (Van Dijk 1977). Additionally, it helped me to explore various ideological expressions of the text that are operationalised through explicit, verbal formulation and the persuasive communications (Van Dijk 1995, 2006). Each transcript of the TED Talks was coded using NVivo 12 – qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). At the first phase of coding, I developed codes based on the content and analytical themes that were inductively derived from the data. However, I was particularly interested in analysing the data using more focused types of discursive strategies. They were: (1) objects/themes, (2) framing strategies, (3) ideological standpoints, and (4) self-representation strategies (Carvalho 2008; Van Dijk 1998). Therefore, in the second phase, I coded extracts from Francis’ TED Talks into matching nodes on respective analytical categories.

4. Findings

Three major narrative features identified in this study include (1) emphasis on the postsecular solidarity between the religious and the secular, (2) negotiating religious doctrinal engagement in public spheres, and finally, (3) de-emphasising the papal magisterial authority. Following sections will explain how the Pope has operationalised these discursive strategies in his two TED Talks. The findings also demonstrate how Francis delivers his TED Talks with strategic intent; by showing that he is cognizant of the importance of a postsecular rapprochement. On some occasions, he challenges the existing boundaries of ingroups and outgroups, between the religious and the secular. On other occasions, he attempts to redefine those boundaries by highlighting the importance of rapprochement, and by negotiating/translation the sacred into secular contexts. The discussions conclude by indicating the steps forward for a more grounded analysis of how emerging postsecular communication trends and TED’s knowledge production can offer space for a new religious communication and culture.

4.1. Imagining a postsecular solidarity

In TED Talks, Francis focuses on the importance of moulding a new pathway that is capable of addressing sustainability challenges in the contemporary dynamic world, an
approach that can subtly but substantially transform the ethical dominance of the secular.

He says:

How wonderful would it be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation would come along with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, while we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters orbiting around us. How wonderful would it be if solidarity, this beautiful and, at times, inconvenient word, were not simply reduced to social work, and became, instead, the default attitude in political, economic and scientific choices, as well as in the relationships among individuals, peoples and countries.

[Extract 1, TED Talk 1]

Pope Francis, in his first TED Talk, employs open-ended questions to trigger divergent thinking and to critically reflect on the importance of solidarity between faith-motivated and secular citizens. He adopts a productive and dialectical approach that also possesses the benefits of a self-conscious utopianism – using ‘how wonderful would it be’, for instance, he employs a rhetoric that can persuade people to change their behaviour and attitudes. Using these poetic expressions, the Pope is attempting to offer a counterview to the postulation that the modern technological revolutions and progress have downplayed the significance of social justice. Francis uses imagery to invoke in his listeners opportunities and problems related to a techno-economic society. He adopts a conceptual-based language that is seemingly reality-oriented and highlights listeners’ logical interpretations and problem-solving (Emrich et al. 2001). Reflecting on the global crisis here, Francis develops a rhetorical moment wherein the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions are fluid and porous. Rather than using postsecular repositioning of the discourse and praxis for the development of a rigorous critique of secularisation thesis or pointing out the ethical challenges in a materialistic focus, Francis offers a powerful and persuasive reflection of how both the secular and the religious work together in exploring possibilities for a better future. In this way Francis adopts a discursive strategy that positions an active engagement with the secular instead of merely critiquing the secular for its pitfalls.

In the second TED Talk, the Pope makes his interest in a postsecular solidarity and rapprochement more unequivocal and persuasive. He says:

I would like to invite you to go on a journey together. A journey of transformation and of action. Made not so much of words, but rather of concrete and pressing actions. I am calling it a journey because it requires a shift, a change… I would like to invite all people of faith, Christian or not, and all people of good will, to embark on this journey, starting from your own faith, or if you do not have a faith, from your own intention, from your own goodwill. Each one of us, as individuals, or members of a group… can make a substantial contribution.

[Extract 2, TED Talk 2]

The Pope employs artful expressions and impulses towards solidarity that encourages a morally guided collective action for social changes. For instance, he uses phrases such as: ‘journey together’, ‘journey of transformation’, ‘journey… requires a shift’, ‘embark a journey’, and ‘make a substantial contribution’. Francis employs these rhetorical leitmotifs of change to set a new agenda, in which the sacred and profane can
potentially come together in a rapprochement to take action against the common manifestation of evil. Of course, ‘journey together’, however defined, is a moralised process, and offering opportunities for transformation is considered as positive and pro-social attitude. The above phrases seem to derive their persuasive power from the authority of the speaker and in turn to make it more credible. Besides, these phrases, ultimately, work from a semantic non-specificity. They do not indicate the form of journey we undertake nor the shapes of the collective actions. This missing specificity in the Pope’s language is crucial not only because it permits a wide variety of audiences to comply with his call but also allows his call for solidarity to be reused in multiple contexts, and, thus, they are non-limited in their repeatability. Indeed, in a broader intertextual context these expressions such as ‘journey together’ are not merely a call for transformation but a response to a global crisis. At the same time, these expressions draw influence from its juxtaposition with the dominant narratives in Christian theology, namely the Pontifical leadership. The repeated emphasis on participation in a collective ‘journey’ is also indicative of the way in which the Pope desires to create a feeling that his audience is no longer merely an audience who listens passively to his TED Talk, but an active part of his agenda for a better world. Here, the Pope does not only include his TED audience but also invites people regardless of their religious affiliation. For instance, he says: ‘invite all people of faith, Christian or not, and all people of good will’. He does not want to be identified merely as the supreme leader of a religious community, but rather as a spokesperson who can inspire beyond the confined spaces of Catholicism.

The emphasis upon aspects such as ‘togetherness’, ‘transformation’, and ‘hope’ in Extract 2 indicates rhetorical similarities between the religious sermons and TED’s communicative culture. For instance, the Pope’s interest in bringing the Catholic message using a new outward-looking, receptive vision of evangelisation (Fernández/C19 Rodari 2016) is capable of creating inspiring moments among those in his audience who are beyond the confines of religion. This particular communicative feature that helps to integrate affective themes, insights, and revelation into the narrative, which can then persuade the audience and create awe-inducing moments, is also identified as a key constitutive element of a successful TED Talk (Anderson 2016). However, my interest is not to argue that the Pope is influenced by TED’s style or vice versa. Far more importantly, the point I want to stress is that the long-standing historical and cultural presence of the Christian traditions in the secular public sphere helps TED to adopt a less confrontational and more integrative approach towards the Pope’s message.

Extract 2 is a strong example of the Pope’s postsecular communication that integrates contemporary interfaith discourse and offers space for plural multi-religious engagement. Thus, his call to ‘invite all people of faith’ is indexically linked to an interfaith context of broader postsecular sentiment. It can be said that the Pope employs such expressions strategically; aimed at deflecting attention from viewing him as a leader of Catholics only. Here, Francis’ calls are juxtaposed with language identifying faith-motivated people as a powerful force in the public sphere. Francis employs extremely optimistic assumptions about the role faith-motivated people can play in resisting the global crisis. On one hand, these calls inform the secular spheres about
the importance of taking a positive stance towards religious people and inviting them to the deliberation process. On the other, Francis’s call for collective action serves as incitement for action that commands the faith-motivated to come forward and join the action movement.

The Pope also ensures that he utilises decorative linguistic elements that can not only lead to the widespread dissemination of his message but also produce a style of speech act that is more sublime, with a capacity to leave an inspirational impact. For instance, by repeated use of ‘journey’ and emphasis on ‘togetherness’, he adopts entextualisation strategies (Wilce 2005) that aim to produce circulatable slogans, which are produced by extracting text from its original context. Further, his repeated use of ‘How wonderful would it be’ in Extract 1 as well as ‘journey’ in Extract 2 adheres to the strategies that give his speech a certain amount of intrinsic appeal and rhythmic delivery. These rhetorical strategies go along with the new media discursive strategies used to mobilise audiences across different spheres towards activist causes. The Pope employs open-ended identifiers such as ‘people of good will’ alongside ‘people of faith’ to articulate a message that can offer a bridge between the overarching Papal narrative and Francis’ emphasis on radical political change brought about by grassroots action. Also, these interactions need to be conceptualised in terms of religious actors exploring and capitalising on new communication techniques and platforms, aiming for political integration and shared cultural patterns with a willingness for rapprochement. These interactions also indicate how religious and secular people express a desire for postsecular solidarities wherein both groups, alongside other groups, come together to develop new consciousness and secular-sacred crossover narratives.

4.2. Navigating the chasm: doctrinal solutions and secular realities

In both TED Talks, Pope Francis is engaged in interpreting Catholic doctrinal messages and social teachings in complex ways, which are at a time deeply relational as well as capable of spreading beyond the scope of traditional Christian locations.

He says:

There is a parable Jesus told to help us understand the difference between those who’d rather not be bothered and those who take care of the other. I am sure you have heard it before. It is the Parable of the Good Samaritan…

The story of the Good Samaritan is the story of today’s humanity. People’s paths are riddled with suffering, as everything is centred around money, and things, instead of people. And often there is this habit, by people who call themselves ‘respectable’, of not taking care of the others, thus leaving behind thousands of human beings, or entire populations, on the side of the road. Fortunately, there are also those who are creating a new world by taking care of the other, even out of their own pockets… We have so much to do, and we must do it together… Each and every one of us is irreplaceable in the eyes of God. Through the darkness of today’s conflicts, each and every one of us can become a bright candle, a reminder that light will overcome darkness, and never the other way around.

[Extract 3, TED Talk 1]

Francis adopts storytelling technique and provides a contextual interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan in the light of the contemporary humanitarian crisis
across different parts of the world. He does this using a complex narrative mechanism. First, he attempts to tease out the moral inadequacy of the secular discourse. For instance, he says: ‘everything is centred around money, and things, instead of people’. He highlights how selfish capitalism continue to stifle humanitarianism and results in rampant consumerism. He attacks what he sees as the dystopian features of the contemporary world – that would be acceptable to a TED Talk audience – features that set forth destructive powers and mourns on this failure of the society wherein the predatory and greedy are willing to stop at nothing in pursuit of selfish benefits and power. He then draws an abstract binary of ‘good people vs bad people’. He classifies them into people, who are ‘not taking care of the others’ and ‘those who are creating a new world by taking care of the other’. In other words, he laments the structural and material power inequality and the division between those who are willing to help others and those who are not.

As a communication technique, storytelling, in this context, reveals a strong connection between TED’s communication strategies and the Pope’s rhetorical strategies. Storytelling in the TED context suggests that the storyteller performs both as a narrator (speaking subject) and protagonist (subject of the narrative). TED speakers employ short stories or narration of incidents in their talks to elaborate on or validate an argumentative point in an ongoing speech. First, in TED Talks, storytelling is often viewed as an effective communication tool for transformative purposes, for changing a crisis into something constructive (Anderson 2016). Gallo (2016), while discussing the art of storytelling, claims that the Pope is one of the most influential storytellers, whose communication strategies are often based on simplicity and persuasion. In TED’s context, persuasion is identified as one of the three crucial elements (the others being exploration and explanation) in communication (Anderson 2016). Second, one of the major interconnections between TED and papal rhetoric is the emphasis given to propositional preaching. In both contexts, storytelling is identified somewhat as an ‘experiential-event’ wherein the narrator seeks to generate an experience for the audience rather than simply transmitting ideas or opinions. The dominant presence of sermonic features such as: ascertaining the big idea, highlighting parables, and inclusion of awe-inducing moments are very evident in both the overarching structure of TED Talks and the communication techniques of the Pope. Third, spotlighting ideas is also a strategic similarity between TED and Francis’ techniques. TED as a genre claimed to be focused more on the ‘proximity of commitment’; that is to say, TED Talks highlight ideas and how ideas have influenced the speaker(s) to ‘transform’. In a similar vein, the Pope’s rhetoric is also based on a ‘subject-centred’ hermeneutic (Oldenburg 2018). For instance, one major principle that he adopts across his TED Talks is that ‘realities are greater than ideas’ (Faggioli 2017, 48) – a principle that he articulated in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium. Taking these observations into account, one can argue that the similarities between TED’s communication style and the Pope’s persuasive rhetoric enabled his message to meet with a more affective and receptive attitude from the TED community. Precisely these interconnections, from a postsecular perspective, indicate that perceiving the sacred message and secular media as separate and opposed entities is an oversimplification and dismisses the nuanced dynamics that promote rapprochement and collaborations between the two.
Francis considers the possibilities of postsecular praxis – an inclusive approach – wherein different, often contradictory, discursive resources can come together to act against moral divisiveness. He frames his sentences in an inclusive way, for example, by saying, ‘every one of us is irreplaceable in the eyes of God’; a language that is able to reach out for dialogue. Troy (2019) identifies these inclusive approaches of Francis as different from that of previous papal attitudes, as these often approached human rights through disengaging with the secular. For instance, by emphasising ‘each and every one of us can become a bright candle’, Francis brings up the critical importance of thinking of the ‘Children of God’ beyond the confined traditional non-inclusive understanding. The category ‘each and every one of us’ in this extract is very abstract, not for its vacuity but for its wealth of meaning. On the one hand, it can designate the entire people; on the other hand, it can designate the listeners of his TED Talk. According to Dillon (2018), these postsecular inclusive tendencies are a result of the unwillingness of contemporary Catholicism to ‘deny the press of secular experiences and expectations on the articulation of doctrine’, at the same time, realising the fact that the ‘Church’s relevance among Catholics and society at large lies in dialogue with secular realities’. These inclusive and interactive tendencies are very evident in the Pope’s TED Talks. They also reveal how he articulates a set of values that can influence outlook and practices and bring together Catholics and non-Catholics, the faith-motivated and the secular, in the same space of collective social action.

Francis’ second TED Talk makes the call for a postsecular approach to ecology louder and clearer:

Five years ago, I wrote the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*’, dedicated to the care of our common home. It proposes the concept of ‘integral ecology’, to respond together to the cry of the Earth, as well as to the cry of the poor. Integral ecology is an invitation to an integral vision on life, starting from the conviction that everything in the world is connected and that, as the pandemic made sure to remind us, we are interdependent on each other, as well as on our Mother Earth.

… I invite therefore all of you to embark on this journey, that I proposed in *Laudato Si*’ and also in my new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

[Extract 4, TED Talk 2]

Here, Francis’ intention is to stimulate a dialogue between the secular and Catholic on ecological issues. He calls for a new partnership wherein Catholic interests and Christian references can have a rejuvenation; the Church can go from being a hushed voice to being an influential policy player on ecology while retaining its role as ‘expert’ on moral and ethical issues. Francis carries this out by introducing and summarising one of his two encyclicals – *Laudato Si*’ – that offers a major narrative of the impact of theological and ethical intervention on the science of ecology and discussions on climate change (Pope Francis 2015; Miller 2017). Although this encyclical was released in 2015, what is striking is that he made no mention of it in his first TED Talk in 2017, which also had ecological themes and discussions about climate change. While the encyclical was widely lauded in the global media and policy spheres across the world, it also received criticism from the right-wing camps, to the degree that they were accusing him as the Pope of ‘catastrophism’ (Monagle 2017). Francis spends almost 35% of his second TED Talk’s total time (12:51 minutes) in summarising and discussing this
Precisely, he is bringing up this theme with more significance to imply the degree of ethical authority accorded to the encyclical as well as to ensure an ongoing discussion between those who appreciate it and those who do not.

Francis makes his postsecular agenda more explicit by inviting religious and secular alike towards collective action wherein the religious discourse and texts find a relevant agency. He asks the secular to abjure their traditional opposition to religious worldviews. He invites the TED viewer to embark on a ‘democratic adventure’, wherein deliberations on common issues can have the breadth to include everyone, irrespective of their ethical convictions and spiritual or secular affiliations. By bringing up a religious resource (the encyclical) and its role in addressing climate challenges, Francis is facilitating an epistemic base for the justification of the faith-motivated to reclaim space in public sphere, and he makes a call for public theology. He seeks a transformative alliance, wherein the official organisations and government initiatives can take an inclusive approach and incorporate faith-based insights and resources, alongside secular knowledge and practices, for the common good.

However, there are various factors that make Francis’ postsecular navigation and his deployment of Catholic social teachings acceptable in a seemingly secular space like TED. Most importantly, the undercurrents between the secular and Christianity provide ways for Francis to have a smooth delivery of his TED Talks without investing more on addressing the epistemological dilemmas. For instance, he is not asked for an epistemological clarification or justification of the belief, rather, his message is assumed to be clear and will induce awe and wonder and produce applause. Although he is engaged in delivering a message that is viewed by an immensely heterogeneous and complex audience, he does not find himself obliged to provide explanations for the Catholic jargon used throughout his TED Talk. TED as a platform does not offer a ‘footnote’ to the Catholic terms used in his talks. There is a sense of demand from the producers of the discourse (both speakers and production crew) and the guiding rule is: take the burden upon yourself to make the most of the talk. It also speaks about the persuasiveness and privileges that Christian theological vocabulary, notions, jargons, and symbols enjoy in a secular sphere regardless of the so-called incommensurable divide and argumentative opposition between the secularism and Christianity. Unlike in the case of, for instance, Islam, the epistemological tensions between Christianity and secularism may turn out to be less substantial than they are proclaimed to be, since Judeo-Christian semantics persist at the very foundation of secular discourse.

Further, Francis is very careful in framing his summary of the encyclical in a non-theological and secular-acceptable way to harness more impact from his TED audience. He elucidates a text that is, obviously, framed in Christian language and articulated within Catholic theology of creation using what Monagle (2017) termed as, ‘Christian anthropology’. While an encyclical, in most cases, is regarded as the exercise of the supreme power of Papal magisterium, Francis introduces to his TED audience by de-emphasising the authoritative, exhortative tone of the document. He employs phrases such as: ‘I wrote’ and ‘it proposes’ to make his audience feel that Laudato Si’ is rather an authorial exercise than a magisterial one. In other words, his presentation style and word selections indicate that his intention is to offer little heed to the religious
significance to the text, his authority, and the institution that issued it. Rather, to stimulate more rapturous discussion of its reference to the global politics and climate crisis.

4.3. De-emphasising magisterial authority

The discussion, so far, of Pope Francis’ communication strategies leads to questions around the patterns of self-representation of his authority throughout his TED Talks. Francis, through his TED Talks, is actively engaged in various levels of negotiation of his religious authority in order to increase the acceptability and legitimacy of his message as well as to downsize the demarcation between the religious and secular spheres.

Francis, in his first TED Talk, says:

As I meet, or lend an ear to those who are sick, to the migrants who face terrible hardships in search of a brighter future, to prison inmates who carry a hell of pain inside their hearts, and to those, many of them young, who cannot find a job, I often find myself wondering: ‘Why them and not me?’ I, myself, was born in a family of migrants; my father, my grandparents, like many other Italians, left for Argentina and met the fate of those who are left with nothing. I could have very well ended up among today’s ‘discarded’ people. And that is why I always ask myself, deep in my heart: ‘Why them and not me?’

[Extract 5, TED Talk 1]

This extract illustrates how Francis constructs his self-identity by explicitly invoking the notion of ‘ordinary person’ to explain the situation. But at the same time, however, he uses self-representation strategies to invite a range of ambivalent interaction with his past predicaments. This self-representation strategy also appeals for a sympathetic listenership – a call to instigate, rather than political discussion, a reflection on the subjectivity and humanity of the migrations and displacement. It also operates as a reclamation of identity that challenges orientalist agendas, which ‘otherise’ migrants and refugees. Francis employs a self-representation strategy that makes a radical and continuous striving against previously established and dominant labels such as the ‘supreme leader’. It is important to note that this self-categorisation plays a central role in the political project of the mobilisation of public opinion. His self-representation strategies are highly crucial because unlike most TED Talks – that rarely, if ever, receive wider mainstream media attention, and are primarily focused on storytelling to attain recognition at the confined space of a TED conference – Francis’ TED Talk is designed to seek broader acceptance and mobilisation. Francis positions himself not only as standing for the prototypical ordinary migrant but also constructs different levels of articulation of his identity, often analytically abstract, in order to claim more nearness with his listeners as well as with the ‘otherised’.

In the second TED Talk, Francis employs a self-representation strategy that, again, de-emphasises his magisterial papal power and identity. He then moves towards a post-secular strategy by sounding the desire to engage in a process of ‘complementary learning’ with a secular camp that is tempered with scientific scrutiny. Francis, in his second TED Talk, says:
Science tells us, every day, with more precision, that urgent action is needed – and I am not dramatizing, this is what science says – if we are to keep the hope of avoiding radical and catastrophic climate change. And for this we must act now. This is a scientific fact.

[Extract 6, TED Talk 2]

References to scientific claims are typical in Francis’ TED Talk. This is partially because of his awareness about his (TED) audience’s expectation about making an ‘informed choice’ about the topics represented in his talks. It also reveals how he sees the prioritisation of scientific claims as a benefit to present his argument in a seemingly morally neutral way. Arguably, the ‘science’ in Francis’ talks is not about belief but about understanding and accountability. What, therefore, resonates is how Francis considers ‘scientific evidence’ as a reference that gives credence in a narrative delivered on a predominantly secular-influenced platform such as TED. To a greater degree, these strategies to highlight scientific evidence and accountability in Francis’ TED Talks reflect the ways in which ‘science’ is interpreted, internalised, and mobilised in postsecular communicative endeavours. Francis’ reference to science in his TED Talk is not an isolated event. For instance, in his first TED Talk, Francis says:

Even science – and you know it better than I do – points to an understanding of reality as a place where every element connects and interacts with everything else.

[Extract 7, TED Talk 1]

Here, Francis uses disclaimer – a discursive strategy to eschew or reduce the misleading impression of the text (Van Dijk 1992) – to indicate various aspects. First, he uses it to de-emphasise his magisterial authority to enhance a rapport with his audience without the hindrances of power. Second, to indicate a non-controlled consequence (Van Dijk 1992) of the situation or theme. And finally, from an elite discourse perspective, it can be said that Francis is deploying these disclaimers to indicate that the opinion is not ‘ours’ but ‘yours’ or ‘others’.

Interestingly these mitigations, often also in the form of euphemisms, offer him opportunities to construct a positive self-representation, which in turn, plays an effective role in his postsecular communication initiative. In a postsecular context, this rhetorical strategy of sharing interpretative power has a crucial role to play. His emphasis on his identity as a non-expert in the domain of scientific knowledge must be identified as an indicator of willingness to engage in a ‘complimentary learning process’ with the secular scientific community. While looking at certain essential features of Francis’ leadership, Dillon (2018, 48) observes that ‘he projects postsecular authority, an ability to be listened to and taken seriously by religious and secular audiences alike’. In other words, Francis’ readiness to adopt secular language and ideas to appeal to a broader audience, both religious and non-religious alike, seems to reflect not only on the representation of themes but also self-representations in his speech acts.

His self-representation strategies advantageously invoke, particularly in a celebratory sense, a rhetorical modesty for effective defensive self-effacement. These self-representations can be seen as an eagerness to develop a rhetoric of authenticity and to be humanistic; to use a language that makes religious authority ‘meritorious’ once again in the post-metaphysical society. Francis’ self-representation strategies show how
religious authorities are redefining their communication strategies to address a postsecular condition, wherein the real challenge is to find a common language by which both people of faith and secular citizens can harmoniously enter into the process of a collective discourse. Precisely, Francis’ rhetorical modesty plays a crucial role in a postsecular rapprochement as it reduces the power of religious authority and dominance over themes and provides more space for expressions of secular argumentation and worldviews to enter therein.

5. Discussion

This article demonstrated how Pope Francis uses the TED platform to amplify the relevance of a postsecular communication framework, holding a strong belief in the outcome of a dynamic interplay of Catholicism with secular ideas and realities. The discussions throughout, however, do not make a claim that Francis’ rhetoric is exclusively postsecular. Rather, a postsecular rhetoric is one among the many communicative strategies that Pope Francis adopts to make his message more lucid and appealing, particularly while addressing hybrid audiences. He adopts and amplifies postsecular rhetoric, particularly at the speech acts wherein there is an evident interaction between religion and secularity. This article identified three communicative turns that Pope Francis adopts in platforms that are not exclusively Catholic. They are (1) introducing Catholic doctrinal solutions to the secular realities for addressing the challenges collectively; (2) making a strong call for postsecular solidarity to move beyond the religion/secular binary and thereby push religion through secular rationality to construct new visions; and (3) adopting a rhetoric that de-emphasises his papal magisterial authority in order to represent his identity as someone who welcomes new ideas, even if they come from traditionally contradictory camps. Using these rhetorical strategies in TED Talks, Francis seeks to mobilise religion’s scope in a communicative engagement with the secular beyond reactionary potentials. Francis’ postsecular rhetoric, therefore, can be viewed as a semantic force with which the religious and the secular can thrive, on the basis of mutual recognition, reconciliation and collective learning.

One of the strengths, perhaps, of the Pope’s postsecular intervention is the strong immanent presence of Christianity, as a traditional frame, in the secular discourse. Besides, the similarities between the Pope’s innovative communication principles and TED’s discourse features also play a role in making his message more receptive and persuasive. Christian values continue to have great influence in TED’s discourse as well as infrastructure. This is despite the fact that TED has grown beyond the Christian-influenced secular public spheres of the Global North. Findings indicated that TED’s discursive characteristics, such as ascertaining the big ideas, emphasis upon storytelling, overall manifestation as a sermonic urge for secular actions, and its distinct similarities with traditional evangelistic preaching, play a key role in the success of the Pope’s TED Talks. Further, the prevalence of sermonic, propositional, rhetorical persuasiveness, and the awe-inducing communicative nature of TED bring into question the deep-seated influence of Christianity and the secular’s impartiality between various religions. That is to say, postsecular communicative strategy, so understood, may ultimately not be able to get away from its historical roots in Judeo-Christian tradition, and
accordingly may turn out to be not as successful in translating other religious/doctrinal teachings as the Pope was in his TED Talks.

6. Concluding comments

This study evokes larger questions around how religious spokespersons find TED Talks – mediated environments – as an opportunity to operationalise their postsecular narrative strategy that could then be adopted to represent new ways of communicating the role of faith-motivated people in contemporary societal engagements, and even to re-conceptualise what ‘counts’ as religion. How will the megachurch and the sermonic nature of TED Talks impact the continued mediatisation and knowledge production on religion? While this article highlighted some of the dominant discourse features of the Pope’s TED Talks, more studies are needed to explore and understand how the TED audience engages with these messages to map out the (un)successful integration of ideas into social actions. Future work must critically scrutinise how pre-production, production, and dissemination phases of these secular media projects on faith can be viewed as part of an inclusive imagination of solidarity between religious and secular actors alike in the contemporary postsecular landscape. This article also joins the existing research that calls for exploring more the production of alternative discourses that contest the dominant secularist arguments on the separation of religion from the public sphere. This article has made initial critical steps towards such interventions, but additional work is required to make sense of tensions and possibilities between religious and secular spaces in contemporary society.

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