When Islam goes to TED: features of a postsecular storytelling on Islam in new media

Jasbeer Musthafa Mamalipurath

Abstract

New media studies on Islam are focused on investigating the characteristics of Islamic discourse or Muslim practices in digital landscape. Since there is increasing visibility of knowledge production on Islam by non-Islamic, secular middlebrow spaces such as TED, it is significant to examine their way of communicating Islamic ideas to a global audience. By conducting a discourse analysis of TED Talks on Islam, this study explores the dominant discursive strategies of TED Talks on Islam. By doing so, this study introduces how a more empirically and context-oriented understanding of the concept of the postsecular would benefit considerably from examining the discursive features of the contemporary nexus of Islam, new media, popular culture, and storytelling. Three main discourse features are found: (1) emphasis on a Judeo-Christian framework, (2) use of awe-inducing, personalized storytelling, and (3) secular translation of Islamic themes. While this emerging online-mediated discourse on Islam informs about new storytelling strategies, the language used adopts a highly attenuated perception of Islamic themes, and a great deal of traditional Islamic interpretation is replaced with excessively individualistic assumptions that are often tailored to cater to Western secular liberal mindsets.

Keywords New media · Islam · Secular · TED Talks · Postsecular · Storytelling

Introduction

Contemporary discourse on Islam is actively engaged in imagining itself beyond the false binaries of “the Islam and the West.” This transition, as Dabashi (2013) remarks, “requires the crafting of a new language for coming...
to terms with Islam...[a] language [that] is in conversation with the emerging, not the disappearing, world” (p. 3–4). These new narratives should also be capable of addressing questions such as how spokespersons of Islam, particularly the ones with experience in engaging with the Western secular societies, have been able to use innovative and creative mediatized spaces to craft stories on Islam. By locating TED Talks on Islam as examples of these new narratives, this study seeks to understand the discursive features of the new mediatization of Islam in terms of what makes them persuasive and popular and how Islamic themes and vocabulary manifest themselves in TED Talks. It also asks how TED speakers on Islam make choices that define the nuances of their religious identity and explore how that is associated with parts of their identities. By examining the discursive features of TED Talks on Islam, this study introduces an empirically and context-oriented understanding of the postsecular discourse and develops the concept of the postsecular into a broader interpretive framework for studying the most recent trends in online mediated storytelling on Islam in contemporary secular Western societies.

An engagement with these questions of Islam’s relation to the secular reflects Habermasian ideas of post-secularism that argue for a revision of the secularization hypothesis to accelerate a renewed debate on religion and the secular (Habermas, 2008). In turn, Ratti (2013) describes the postsecular as a paradox; an effort “to find a nonsecular secularism, a non-religious religion” (p. xx). From a new media studies perspective, it is necessary to understand this renewed engagement between the secular West and Islam not only as a result of the socio-political changes but also as a result of the advance of contemporary media technologies that open up more spaces to offer “re-imaginations of Islam.” In other words, the new media storytellers with a postsecular approach validate and accept principles of faith so long as they are flexible and befittingly progressive with scope for developing a liberal subject formation and do not represent any institutionalized interpretation of the religious discourse.

This study explores some of the dominant features of a set of TED Talks on Islam presented by both Muslim and non-Muslim experts with an aim to communicate beyond the confines of religion. TED (technology, entertainment, and design), founded in 1984, is a non-profit organization dedicated to presenting and curating innovative ideas through storytelling. TED organizes conferences to bring together “prominent academics, educators, researchers, philanthropists, environmentalists, scientists, technologists, artists, activists, and others to attend and present short lectures – …TED Talks – in their areas of research and expertise” (TED, n.d). The video recordings of these presentations are curated and released under a Creative Commons license allowing their free promotions and reproductions. They also made available with transcripts and subtitles in more than 100 languages. This study conducts a detailed discourse analysis of the selected TED Talks on Islam to explore how speakers produce knowledge about Islam using storytelling and how the speakers perceive and interpret Islam.
Literature review

This literature review will briefly describe the major concepts of framing, discuss existing studies on new media discourse on Islam and provide a critical review of TED Talks with a particular focus on the platform and its knowledge production patterns.

New media and Islam

Numerous studies have sought to investigate Islam in the digital era and the features of mediatized discourses. Most of these studies have limited their investigation to Islamic outlets, such as mainstream Islamic websites, Islamic digital videos, and Muslim online content producers such as bloggers and vloggers (Bunt, 2000, 2009; Campbell, 2010). These studies have tried to make sense of the role of new media in a Muslim’s religious life and the number of social and faith-based factors which inform and guide their responses to the possibilities and challenges offered by digital media. They also led to the formation of theories of Islamic identity in a digital age (Larsson, 2007; Sands, 2010; Hoffmann & Larsson, 2014; Pennington & Kahn, 2018; Kesvani, 2019; Fakhruroji, 2019). However, there are only limited studies that investigate the discursive features and nature of the new media narratives on digital media (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009; Moll, 2012; Echchaibi, 2011, 2012). Again, one of the limitations is that the central focus is often upon new media spaces occupied by religious communities and directed toward religious audiences. However, in thinking through Islam in new media via a postsecular lens, where religion enters into new engagement with the secular by addressing questions about the public role of faith, it is important to look at how secular middlebrow creative platforms, such as TED, produce knowledge on Islam and how both Muslim and non-Muslim spokespersons interpret Islam.

New media studies on Islam have been empirically focused on a range of practices and discourses, including Islamic activism (Eckert et al., 2019; Sumiala & Korpiola, 2017), online militaristic discourse (Kepel & Ghazaleh, 2004; Pennington & Krona, 2019), dynamics of Islamic authority (Bunt, 2003; Turner, 2007; Bunt, 2018), the role of Internet to eradicate misrepresentations of Islam (Larsson, 2007), and virtual Islamic discussion groups (Kesvani, 2019; Larsson, 2016). Eickelman and Anderson (2003) identify cyberspace as an emerging public sphere that attempts to “re-intellectualize Islam” through pushing the discourse on Islam beyond the confines of institutionalized voices. Such re-intellectualization produces a non-state version of Islam or, more precisely, as Sajoo (2004) puts forward, a “Civic Islam.” These intellectual processes using new media platforms as a mouthpiece often focus on the importance of ensuring social, cultural, and economic participation of Muslims with their non-Muslim counterparts (Dessing et al., 2016; Van Bruinessen & Allievi, 2013). Such endeavors often seek to
challenge traditional positions, including patriarchy, radicalization, cultural dominance, and religious authoritarianism. These tendencies of challenging traditional positions and narrating Islam to make it broadly compatible with secular norms are very evident in TED Talks. By analyzing TED’s discursive orientations while talking about Islam, this study contributes to discussions on internal factors and ideological commitments evident in most contemporary narratives on Islam produced in new media.

**TED Talks: secular sermons of a middlebrow megachurch?**

TED Talks form a new popularizing quasi-academic genre that presents innovative ideas and stories using various discursive techniques to narrate some unique challenges and compelling and awe-inducing opportunities in not more than 20 min on average. TED has been widely criticized for its pseudo-intellectualism and elitism because of its strong editorial policies, censorship, and exclusivity in selecting ideas, speakers, and even the audience. For instance, Wilson (2013) argues that TED presentations are often “bathed in the atmosphere of celebrity and revelation” (p. 43). According to Wilson (2013), the democratizing rhetoric, particularly evident in TED’s new media presence, is often shadowed by TED’s strict, authoritative editorial instruction and lack of room for debate or questions. Others have noted that TED is essentially “middlebrow mega-church infotainment” (Bratton, 2013), and the TEDx talks series shows that TED no longer controls its content or its brand (Merchant, 2013). Cadwalladr (2010), by looking at how the TED platform functions and how TED recruits both its conference audience and speakers, observes TED as “awfully elitist.” These evaluations indicate that TED is deeply influenced by elitism, corporatism, and intellectual practice that bestows a privileged position to Western liberal humanism and secular social orders.

Yet, it is important not to ignore the peculiar communication style practiced by TED speakers that lends itself particularly well to disseminating innovative ideas, characterized by condensing knowledge in a conducive and persuasive way to capture the interest of the global audience. There are numerous studies that examine TED’s communication styles and popularity. For instance, di Carlo (2015, 2016) examines the characteristics of TED Talks as a popular genre. Sugimoto and Thelwell (2013) identify TED as one of the most successful mediated initiatives in science popularization. The popularity of TED Talks, according to them, is also an indication of the way in which TED enables itself to cater to the public perception of science. However, these studies have been evaluating TED with a narrowed disciplinary focus. While some studies extend their focus to explore the elitism and corporatism in TED Talks with sharp criticism (Lacy, 2008, 2010), others ignore these implications and proceed with developing a sense of the “success story” of TED’s communication strategies (DaVia Rubenstein, 2012). This article takes a third path and acknowledges the importance of TED’s specific communication style and discursive strategies without ignoring the serious implications of TED’s elitism (Said, 1983) and authoritarian editorial policies.
Data and methods

To understand the discourse features of the TED Talks on Islam, this article draws on data from the transcripts of TED Talks. Since this paper emerged from my PhD research project—a comprehensive analysis of TED Talks on Islam: discourse, audience, and speakers—that was conducted between 2015 and 2019, the data taken were those published before 2019.

The corpus of texts analyzed in this study is based on purposive rather than random sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). An entertainment face to knowledge production is one of the dominant aspects of TED Talks (as evident in its very name Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED)). Therefore, TED’s editorial gatekeepers always make sure the intellectual content is packaged as “infotainment” to appropriate the communication strategies used by professional entertainers. For instance, Mustafa Akyol—a prominent Turkish Muslim intellectual and journalist who identifies himself as a neo-Ottomanist—was invited a few times to present TED Talks on Islamic themes. His TED Talk titled Faith versus tradition in Islam is one of the TED Talks featured on TED’s main website (TED.com) as part of its playlist—Misconceptions of Islam and Muslim life. However, Mustafa Akyol’s TED Talk offers an important exception. Its strategy of engaging what it understands to be an alternate Western Judeo-Christian audience instead relies upon one’s personal experience as a pilgrim in the holy shrine of Islam. For this study, TED Talks were selected through a process of purposive sampling—to achieve a sample reflecting variation in terms of the affiliation of the speakers with Islam (by identifying Muslim and non-Muslim), a presence of popular discursive trend of TED Talks, and the dominance of translating Islamic themes to a broader secular, Western audience of the TED. For this reason, I do not include Akyol’s talk as part of the TED Talk corpus I analyze.

After preliminary sorting, four TED Talks were considered for a detailed discourse analysis. All the four TED Talks were produced in the English language, and the transcripts of TED Talks were accessed from TED’s website. Nevertheless, the transcripts were verified through multiple rounds of reading and matching with the actual video of TED Talks. NVivo—a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)—was used to code the TED Talks transcripts systematically. This helped to pursue important patterns in the data in the most systematic way.

Discourse analysis is used for multiple reasons. Firstly, discourse analysis facilitates a focus on understanding and conceptualizing the framing of themes within the TED Talks to unveil their underlying ideological standpoints. Secondly, it provides opportunities to critique the application of language and rhetorical strategies under the gaze of the researcher to reveal the agenda-setting, as well as the motivations behind the text. The purpose of discourse analysis often goes beyond the analysis of semiotic and hermeneutic aspects. Therefore, the primary concern is to inquire how a text is organized in a deliberate sequence of words and identify the emerging meanings and determine how they are interconnected with the contexts to understand not only individual speech events but also the diverse patterns emerging across them. It is important to note that, at a time, a TED Talk is (1) a live communicative event wherein selected speakers present their ideas at a venue by addressing an invited-only audience and (2) a recorded speech event...
embedded and recontextualized into a website framework and made available for use under a Creative Commons license. In addition, TED Talks come in various semiotic modes, such as spoken, written, audio, and video, and can be studied from different perspectives using multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2013; O’Halloran, 2011). However, this study employed a corpus-based approach by examining the transcripts of the TED Talks on Islam with a special focus on the language of representation, text-forming potential of the speakers, and interpretation of Islamic ideas and themes.

This study employed an integrated discourse analysis framework outlined by van Dijk (1998, 2006) in order to unveil the crucial role of knowledge representation, ideological positions, and articulation of socially shared beliefs that emerge in producing a media discourse. A grounded theory approach was used to frame the discourse analysis of the transcripts of the TED Talks. By doing so, this study examines a variety of TED Talks on the broader theme—Islam—to unveil the general patterns of representation of Islam and ideological standpoints involved in this representation process. This article approaches discourse analysis with less emphasis on micro semiotic analysis. Rather than conducting a microanalysis of the semiotic structures, grammatical and syntactic levels, the analytical focus is directed towards topics, coherence, thematic structures, actors, the background of the text and producer, stylistic features of texts, and narrative and argumentative structures.

**Analysis**

The three representational strategies identified in the study include (1) emphasis on a Judeo-Christian framework, (2) use of awe-inducing, personalized storytelling, and (3) secular translation of Islamic themes. Although these discourse features are often found helping the TED speakers to persuasively narrate Islam beyond the confines of religion, there is a high degree of attenuation of religious articulations and traditional Islamic interpretations of the themes. Such mediatized storytelling on Islam, this study views, can lead to a mere individualistic interpretation of Islam tailored to cater to Western secular liberal mindsets, wherein a great deal of Islamic theological vocabulary, jargon, and symbols are at stake. This process of postsecular translation of Islamic themes, evident in TED Talks, establishes an open hermeneutic margin for secular convincing interpretation and negotiation, which then leads to a reading of Islamic subjects with an increased level of vagueness and malleability (Bettiza & Dionigi, 2015).

**Judeo–Christian frameworks in TED Talks on Islam**

There is a tendency for TED speakers to develop a narrative on Islam by highlighting the aspects of Islam that are perceived to be more relatable to a secular Western audience. In particular, TED speakers on Islam have drawn on Judeo-Christian models of the divine message, spirituality, justice, and religious extremism to represent a version of Islam that is arguably acceptable to a secular liberal Western audience.
Lesley Hazelton, in her TED Talk titled *On reading the Koran*, says:

The Koran declares that it comes to renew the message of the Torah and the Gospels. So, one-third of it reprises the stories of Biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Mary, Jesus. God himself was utterly familiar from his earlier manifestation as Yahweh – jealously insisting on no other gods...

Take the Fatihah, the seven-verse opening chapter, that is the Lord’s Prayer and the Shema Yisrael of Islam combined.

Hazleton conducts a cross-scriptural analysis of the Qur’ān with Biblical discourse to articulate the Qur’ān—(1) as a continuation of the Biblical revelations, (2) as a scripture containing Biblical characters, and (3) as an utterance on the concept of God that is already familiar to Judeo-Christian world of faith. For instance, by using the notion of “the Qur’ān as a continuation of Judeo-Christian scriptures,” she attempts to generate a consensus with the audience on common points such as universal truth, transcultural values, and scriptural interconnection. Her approach in introducing key figures as “Biblical figures” reveals that in the exchange of knowledge on Islam within her talk, Judeo-Christian understanding remains front and center.

Her words also echo an important postsecular imagination of Islam using a Judeo-Christian framework due to the innate connection between the secular norms and Judeo-Christian religious tradition, albeit by negation. For the West, the awareness of what is missing, as Habermas (2008) articulated as the emptiness of the secular, has motivated to once again come in contact with the Judeo-Christian tradition in their search for answers that secularity has failed to provide. Media studies indicate that these references [to Judeo-Christian tradition], in general, are not a mere “affirmation of faith but rather a rhetorical device used to compare a social core of values with a group or activity either in an expansive or restrictive context” (Hartmann et al., 2005, p. 230). This complex entanglement between the lingering presence of the Judeo-Christian worldview rests on the notion that secularism, both as practice and a philosophical frame, is a distillation of Judeo-Christian standpoints. In other words, in a postsecular communication, the emphasis on Judeo-Christian tradition often means a spiritual affirmation of the secular, Western norms and is employed as a theological frame to express the religious background of secular values.

However, there is a hermeneutical quandary in these postsecular communications of Islam using the Judeo-Christian framework. Firstly, Judeo-Christian religious understanding and Islamic perspectives on the Abrahamic figures such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are far more complex than, for instance, how Hazleton tries to represent. In other words, the Qur’ān deemphasizes the uniqueness that Judaism and Christianity observe in some Abrahamic figures. Rather, it considers their spiritual dynamics as the same as that of other prophets. Therefore, the difficulty of establishing a smooth interaction and dialogue between Islam and Judeo-Christian tradition is compounded by the de-emphasizing of certain essential Articles of faith, such as the divine sonship of Jesus and crucifixion. Secondly, the overall framework of scriptural reasoning used in the above extract undermines a

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1 Lesley Hazleton is a British-American author, who has been writing on the intersection and interaction between religion and politics.
clearer cross-scriptural analysis because of the sheer amount of indefensible concepts from both sides (Islam and Judeo-Christian) left unattended. In such contexts, more focus is directed towards a consensus of taste than the consensus of truth.

While Hazleton prefers to engage in an evaluation of the articles of faith from a Judeo-Christian perspective, another TED Speaker, Dalia Mogahed, employs the Christian framework to evaluate the tension caused and demonization of religion as an aftermath of the acts of militant factions and terrorist groups.

Mogahed, in her TED Talk titled *What it’s like to be Muslim in America*, says:

ISIS has as much to do with Islam as the Ku Klux Klan has to do with Christianity. Both groups claim to base their ideology on their holy book. But when you look at them, they’re not motivated by what they read in their holy book. It’s their brutality that makes them read these things into the scripture.

Mogahed ascertains that the trend of locating the source of terrorism in religion or tagging ISIS with Islam, in fact, obscures ISIS’s political origin. Mogahed’s approach, in some ways, reflects broader critiques of Western populist assumptions that link terrorism and Islam. As Jackson (2007) argues, such an assumption “depoliticizes, decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the grievances and political struggles of groups and societies, thereby de-linking the motives of the terrorists from the policies of Western states or their allies” (p. 421). Mogahed’s framing is influenced by the arguments that equating terrorism with Islam and unwillingness to see parallels in other religious terrorist groups justifies anti-Islamic sentiments. Therefore, Mogahed argues for an alternative reading of ISIS by locating it in a broader space of “religious terrorism.” She employs a reference to Christianity to see how religious terrorism exists and functions in this religion, using the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as an example.

In other words, Mogahed sees there is a popular narrative in the West that projects Islam as the only source of any forms of religious terrorism or religiously inspired violence. These narratives often undermine the religious connection of other terrorist groups with religions like Christianity. Mogahed sees these biased narratives as problematic because they engender anti-Islamic sentiments in the secular West. She invites her secular audience to re-orient their engagement with Islam by centering it on a renewed understanding of Islamic terrorism that aligns with other forms of violent religious ideology (i.e., the Ku Klux Klan) within the Judeo-Christian majority societies.

Precisely, the recurrence of a Judeo-Christian framework in these two TED Talks demonstrates the pivotal role of Judeo-Christian references in narrating Islam to a secular-influenced audience of TED Talks. Rather than making a micro-level analysis of the dichotomy between Judaic and Christian understandings, these TED speakers develop a framework grounded on the idea of a unified Judeo-Christian discourse. More clearly, this emphasized reference to Judeo-Christian faith and practices in discussions on Islam is a strong indication of the privileged spiritual position that the former enjoys in a secular society. The prominence of Judeo-Christian

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Footnote:

2 Dalia Mogahed is an American-Egyptian author, advisor and consultant who studies Muslim communities.
references also highlights how TED speakers conceive Judeo-Christian tradition as a prolific source of compassion, justice, and other egalitarian and secular values.

**Revelation, confession, and awe-inducing patterns**

Another more apparent discourse feature emphasizes creating awe-inducing moments to explore the opportunities wherein the affective forces of those moments can propel a postsecular rapprochement. In her TED Talk, Lesley Hazleton explains her encounter with the Qur’ān using a language that is infused with both secular rationality and the possibility of enchantment.

While talking about the Qur’ān, Hazleton says:

I knew enough, that is, to know that I’d be a tourist in the Koran – an informed one, an experienced one even, but still an outsider, an agnostic Jew reading someone else’s holy book. (Laughter) So I read slowly…

But every time I thought I was beginning to get a handle on the Qur’ān – that feeling of ‘I get it now’ – it would slip away overnight, and I’d come back in the morning wondering if I wasn’t lost in a strange land, and yet the terrain was very familiar…

The larger background of her description is based on recognizing the Qur’ān as a sacred text; more clearly, someone else’s sacred scripture. Using phrases such as “tourist in the Koran” and “reading someone else’s holy book”, Hazleton establishes her identity as an outsider. She uses these disclaimers to convey her doctrinal distance from the Qur’ān and her possible disenfranchisement with scripturalist reading. For instance, she uses a non-religious expression—“tourist in the Koran”—instead of saying, for instance, “pilgrim in the Qur’ān” to convey her quest for a pleasurable yet transient experience that underlies the logic of modernity. However, Hazleton does not identify her touristic journey with the Qur’ān as a non-expert one. She legitimizes her expertise by describing her authorship as a biographer of Muhammad as well as by explicitly stating that she is informed and experienced.

Hazleton continues:

The presence of camels, mountains, desert wells, and springs took me back to the year I spent wandering the Sinai Desert. And then there was the language, the rhythmic cadence of it, reminding me of evenings spent listening to Bedouin elders recite hours-long narrative poems entirely from memory. And I began to grasp why it is said that the Qur’ān is really the Qur’ān only in Arabic. The Arabic has an incantatory, almost hypnotic, quality that begs to be heard rather than read, felt more than analyzed. It wants to be chanted out loud, to sound its music in the ear and on the tongue.

Hazleton employs correlational and intertextual metaphors to represent her experience with the Qur’ān by negotiating and popularizing an understanding of a scripture likely unfamiliar to a non-Muslim audience. She familiarizes the terrain of the Qur’ān as a cultural as well as scriptural text. She identifies, for
instance, *the presence of camels, mountains, desert wells, and springs* [line 1] in the Qurʾān as something that connects to her personal experience as a tourist in the land of Saracens.

The careful yet creative selection of these leitmotifs from the Qurʾān is employed to seek a middle path between the sacred and secular. She approaches metaphors as vehicles to obscure ‘Otherness’. Rather than deepening on religious hermeneutics to interpret the Qurʾān, she connects the plots in the Qurʾān with her personal experience in the Sinai Desert of Yemen.

At the same time, Hazleton creates a sense of awe, wonder, and mystery to make her explanation more captivating. For instance, she elucidates her almost magical experience with the Qurʾān using expressions such as “the rhythmic cadence of [the language of the Qurʾān],” “the Qurʾān is really the Qurʾān only in Arabic,” “the more you add, the more seems to go missing,” and “Arabic has an incantatory, almost hypnotic quality” [lines 5–7]. By using these expressions, Hazleton depicts an irresistible dimension of human experience with the Qurʾān beyond the realms of religiosity and infuses inspiration into the minds of her secular audience.

These forms of imagining of Islamic scripture strongly engage in moving beyond the normative narratives and representations of this religious scripture by the religious (as a sacred text) as well as by the radical secular (as irrelevant text). In other words, the speaker adopts a new commitment to Islam that is different from that of both the religious and secular. This new commitment to Islam, this study argues, is a marker of postsecular imagination, in which the journey is moving beyond the secular but without falling back to conventional forms of religiosity. These awe-inducing and revelational expressions come to represent, in emerging new media discourse on Islam, for instance, the ultimate sign of postsecular personalized narrative.

Given the complexity of the postsecular imagination, what sort of emphasis/de-emphasis could express a path beyond religious fundamentalism and radical secularism? Hazleton highlights the importance of artistic beauty in the Qurʾān rather than discussing and clarifying the linguistic significance of specific words. She recreates the history of the Qurʾān by highlighting its interconnection with Arabian indigenous poetry and literary public spheres. For instance, she says the rhythmic language reminds her “of evenings spent listening to Bedouin elders recite hours-long narrative poems entirely from memory” [lines 3–4]. Hazelton connects scriptural reading to artistic and cultural performances, literary forms, and sensory travel experiences to create a sense of secular aesthetic value in the text.

Hazleton also uses various types of awe-inducing expressions to motivate her listeners. Using these expressions, she legitimizes a search for meaning in the Qurʾān that is outside the premises of institutionalized and traditional religious belief. For instance, Hazleton uses expressions such as “resist the temptation,” “mystical chapters,” “feeling of ‘I get it now’,” “wondering if I wasn’t lost in a strange land,” “the rhythmic cadence,” and “an incantatory, almost hypnotic, quality that begs to be heard rather than read”; these indicate the abundant enthralment, emotion, and a sense of enchantment. The recurrent words of enchantment with both their connotative and denotative meanings constitute a powerful postsecular reading of the Qurʾān that aims to fuel listeners and arouse their desire to experience the Qurʾān.
This communicative strategy, operating as part of a postsecular imagination, represents active efforts to acknowledge, embrace, and seek affective thinking in a way that goes beyond conventional secular rationality.

While Hazleton talks about the Qur’ān by identifying herself as a non-Muslim “tourist,” a Muslim TED speaker—Dalia Mogahed—narrates her encounter with the Qur’ān differently.

Mogahed says:

I did not just passively accept the faith of my parents. I wrestled with the Qur’ān. I read and reflected and questioned and doubted and, ultimately, believed. My relationship with God – it was not love at first sight. It was a trust and a slow surrender that deepened with every reading of the Qur’ān. Its rhythmic beauty sometimes moves me to tears. I see myself in it. I feel that God knows me. Have you ever felt like someone sees you, completely understands you, and yet loves you anyway? That’s how it feels.

Mogahed elucidates her encounter with the Qur’ān as that of a Muslim during the process of faith formation by emphasizing the efficacy of an individualized interpretation. She highlights the independent formulation of faith rather than a traditional mode of faith transportation from generation to generation. She uses the phrase “relationship with God” [lines 2–3] to signify her agentic participation in the faith. Mogahed, by using the phrase “I wrestled with the Qur’ān” [line 1], also sets up a counter-discourse to the popular Western misrepresentation of Muslim women as a group that has been “brainwashed” by patriarchal religious culture (Wheeler, 2014). She uses wrestling as a metaphor to denote her engagement with the Qur’ān as an intellectually laborious and strenuous journey. She uses this phrase to implicitly express her opposition to the narrow and negative stereotyped construction and projection of the roles of Muslim women in religious spheres as passive believers. She illustrates her tryst with the Qur’ān as a “slow surrender” [lines 3–4], a growing recognition of the divinity of the scripture rather than a blind and immediate acceptance. She masks the act of “surrender” with the tones of mystical enchantment to make it more appealing. This expression of self-surrender as an essential spiritual virtue has a centuries-old history and has strong connections with Judeo-Christian mystical language. It is, for instance, significant in the work of Meister Eckhart (Caputo, 1974; McGinn, 2008). Mogahed employs awe-inducing expressions such as slow surrender and literary exaltations of the Qur’ān to depict a spirituality that takes the form of an inner encounter of the divinity mobilized by one’s open-ended questions. She uses this language of felt experience to develop the collective learning of the Qur’ān along with her audience.

Precisely, both TED speakers employ awe-inducing language, describing complex emotions in depicting their profound experience with the Qur’ān as meaningful, and filled with amazement and beauty. However, they use it differently. While the first TED speaker, being self-identified as non-Muslim, illustrates the encounter with the Qur’ān from an agnostic aspect by connecting it with her lived experiences, the second speaker highlights mystical aspects filled with emotions, critical and rational thinking, and independent journey to faith as well as expressions of power. Furthermore, both speakers repeatedly emphasize the aesthetic
aspect of the Qur’ān, its literary beauty. These narrative patterns, as Ratti (2013) argues, echo new aesthetic turns dominant in postsecular communications that opens up avenues for a re-enchantment through aesthetics. The interconnection between aestheticism and postsecularism then leads to seeing the sacred through secularism; thus, it offers a new framework for secular translations of the sacred in new media discourse.

**Secular translations**

Another dominant feature of TED Talks on Islam is the emphasis given upon secular translation of Islamic themes and idioms, which is actualized through the process of re-imagining Islamic topics with an aim to establish a postsecular hermeneutic margin and allow Islamic idea to gain popularity, acceptance, and legitimacy beyond its context of origin.

Naif Al-Mutawa,3 in his TED Talk titled *Superheroes Inspired by Islam*, says:

Consider this: like the prophets, all the superheroes are missing parents. Superman’s parents die on Krypton before the age of one. Bruce Wayne, who becomes Batman, loses his parents at the age of six in Gotham City. Spiderman is raised by his aunt and uncle. And all of them, just like the prophets who get their message from God through Gabriel, get their message from above. Peter Parker is in a library in Manhattan when the spider descends from above and gives him his message through a bite. Bruce Wayne is in his bedroom when a big bat flies over his head, and he sees it as an omen to become Batman. Superman is not only sent to Earth from the heavens or Krypton, but he’s sent in a pod, much like Moses was on the Nile. (Laughter) And you hear the voice of his father, Jor-El, saying to Earth, “I have sent to you my only son”.

Al-Mutawa introduces prophets of Islam by comparing them with fictional characters rooted within American pop culture. The depiction of religious themes using comics and humorous language is no longer considered a deviant form (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992). The increasing role of popular culture in religious discourses shows they are no longer restricted to the traditional communication schemes set by religious institutions. This changing pattern in disseminating a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs, ideas, identities, and praxis also highlights the need to focus on the role of the translation process of religious ideas into popular genres, like comics (Santo, 2014). Al-Mutawa highlights a secular translation that, rather than openly propagating an “Islamic way,” adopts a language that emblematizes an essentially humanist and universalistic Islam and spotlights commonality through shifting boundaries and connecting identities. Instead of depicting saints and prophets with common traits such as masculinity, mysticism, and enchantment, Al-Mutawa focuses on comparative analysis, thereby translating spiritual figures into superheroes of

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3 Naif Al-Mutawa is a Kuwaiti clinical psychologist and creator of THE 99—comic superheroes inspired by Islam.
fiction using a series of life events and social functions. In other words, Al-Mutawa translates mystical figures such as prophets through careful selection of expressions. However, the selection process not only informs a translation of the sacred into secular but also reflects the interaction that Al-Mutawa aims to build between Islam and Judeo-Christian and North American pop culture. For instance, in the above extract, Al-Mutawa emphasizes Judeo-Christian spiritual figures such as Jesus and Moses. While Jesus is represented without referring to his name directly, Moses has been explicitly compared. In contrast, Muhammad is only implicitly referred to through indications such as missing parents during childhood and receiving a divine message through Gabriel. Moreover, the comic characters and superheroes he has considered for comparison are all from American comic culture. In other words, while talking about a creative narrative that is inspired by Islam, Al-Mutawa pays equal attention to the Judeo-Christian context as well as to secular American pop culture. Nevertheless, there are more patterns of secular translations evident in TED Talks on Islam.

Faisal Abdul Rauf, in his TED Talk titled Lose Your Ego, Find Your Compassion, attempts to outline the reasons and rationale for the necessity of exploring a “common God.”

Rauf says:

Rumi has another story about three men, a Turk, an Arab – and I forget the third person, but for my sake, it could be a Malay. One is asking for angur – one is, say, an Englishman – one is asking for eneb, and one is asking for grapes. And they have a fight and an argument because – “I want grapes”. “I want eneb”. “I want angur” – not knowing that the word that they are using refers to the same reality in different languages.

By highlighting an Islamic idea using Sufi interpretations, Rauf focuses on the need to assimilate Islam into the modern Western religious landscape. He legitimizes this argument by referring to a Sufi anecdote attributed to a 13th-century Sufi mystic Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi. Rauf personalizes the story attributed to Rumi to make it more convincing to his TED audience. In the actual story depicted in one of the earliest English translations of Rumi’s magnum opus, Mathnawī, the conversation is between four people—a Persian, an Arab, a Turk, and a Greek (Nicholson, 1926, p. 413). Rauf customizes the anecdote by changing it into a conversation between three people—a Turk, an Arab, and an Englishman. He acknowledges this modification by saying, “but for my sake.” Firstly, he chooses a “Malay” and then changes into “an Englishman.” This attempt of translation or personalization reflects the prominence given to a Western secular audience. This process of constructing and reproducing Western versions of Islamic themes and stories revolves around the securitization and normalization process to generate a sense of “Islam possible” among the Western and secular influenced worldviews (Mavelli, 2013). Therefore,

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4 Faisal Abdul Rauf is the imam of a mosque in New York City and founder of an American Sufi organization working toward creating bridges between the American public and Islam.
the metaphors in the above extract of Rauf’s TED Talk act as “metaphors of interaction” rather than mere extensions of meaning.

Both speakers use the concept of negotiation to underline the dynamic linkages between different standpoints on faith. They use various translation mechanisms in this open-ended process of constructing identities with efforts to dissolve boundaries. By doing so, they attempt to remind their TED audience about the significance of a complementary learning process (Habermas, 2008) to balance shared identity. Notwithstanding, such negotiations are often held within a framework based on mainstream and dominant religious and socio-cultural norms and, in this case, that measuring scale is a combination of Christian-Western-Secular values.

Since the truth claims of Islam are deeply interwoven with its own particular language, a great deal of theological and spiritual significance of these Islamic topics is already “lost in secular translation.” The moral weight given to the secular knowledge framework offers a strong argument against the complementary learning process because of the tendency to exclude traditional religious interpretations. By endorsing a moderate translation of Islamic themes into a secular-acceptable language, these TED speakers promote a highly attenuated understanding of Islam. At the same time, by establishing a connection with history, language, and spirituality, these translations of Islam on TED, to a limited degree, evoke a counter-hegemonic narrative on Islam that challenges the traditional authoritative (mis)representations of Islam. As textual evidence of new mediatized narratives on Islam, these secular translations offer emotional anchors to the emerging online spokespersons for the continued (re)invention of Islam with moderate tones.

Conclusion

In summary, this article demonstrated that the new media discourse on Islam through secular spaces, such as TED, is not a dichotomous engagement between secularism and Islam; on the contrary, a recasting of Islamic subjects into a complex, often tense, narratives that resonate the nexus of Islam, Judeo-Christian tradition, popular culture, and the Western model of the relationship between religion and society. Three main types of discourse features were found: (1) emphasis on the Judeo-Christian tradition, (2) prominence of a combination of secular reasoning and enchantment as frameworks to communicate the sacred, and finally, (3) significance to secular translations of Islamic subjects. The analysis also demonstrated how TED speakers’ narratives on Islam are often centered on the universalization of Islam, individual interpretations, and the language of felt experiences.

There is a trend to push Islam beyond the traditional Islamic discourse and stretch the secular to search for alternative frameworks such as postsecular thinking. In such communications, the spokespersons of Islam may seek an almost utopian visualization of both Islam and secularism by drawing on a collection of both religious and non-religious language, a combination of both revelation and reasoning. They express their worldviews using a multitude of discursive strategies, emotions, and awe-inducing expressions, highlighting experiential dimensions that are more familiar with the secular society. Personalized interpretations of religious values,
dismissing the significance of referring to classical Islamic discourse or literature to legitimize their arguments, tagging the spiritual sources that are already familiar and socially approved by the secular, and contextualizing Islam into the secular public discourse and Western pop culture are some of the dominant discursive strategies found.

By introducing TED Talks into the discussions on media and Islam, this study sought to account for the emergence of a postsecular storytelling in new media produced by a globally popular secular middlebrow platform. Examining dominant discourse features of a postsecular narrative on Islam, this paper revealed some strong rhetorical negotiations conducted by the spokesperson of Islam in Western society, wherein professing Islam can either form solidarity either among religious or secular citizens or can be a force of division. By examining the discursive features of TED Talks on Islam, this study introduced an empirically and context-oriented understanding of how postsecular discourse as a conceptual framework operates in producing persuasive narratives within the contemporary nexus of Islam, new media, popular culture, and storytelling.

To my knowledge, this is the first research to use TED Talks as a case study to explore emerging postsecular narratives on Islam in the new media landscape. Few steps remain. First, this study demonstrated the interactive nature of a set of new narratives on Islam in new media, wherein negotiations (with the dominant Western secular) are identified as an important contributing factor to the influence of the new spokespersons on Islam. It demands more research to understand the nexus between Islam and secularism while producing enormous hybrid and versatile narratives on Islam in new media. Second, more studies are needed to understand how audiences engage, contest, share, and negotiate with these emerging new media discourses on Islam. Finally, this study also invites media scholars to think about how TED’s style, delivery, polish, and discursive arrangement together produce dynamic, engaging narratives on other religions. These are three directions towards which this article has made the first critical step.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available at https://www.ted.com/.

Declarations

Ethical approval This paper is part of my PhD research. This paper, in particular, is based on a discourse analysis of the video transcripts, and no humans were involved in this study. Therefore, ethics approval was not required for this paper. However, the broader PhD project (which involved fieldwork focus group/interviews with TED viewers and speakers) has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia. The Approval number is: H11508.
Conflict of interest  The author declares no competing interests.

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