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| Title | Blasphemy and persecution : Positioning in an inter-religious discussion |
| Author(s) | Richardson, Peter; Pihlaja, Stephen; Nagashima, Miori et al. |
| Citation | Text & Talk, 40(1), 75-98<br>https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-2049 |
| Issue Date | 2020-01 |
| Doc URL | https://hdl.handle.net/2115/80301 |
| Type | journal article |
| File Information | [Text and Talk] Blasphemy and persecution Positioning in an inter-religious discussion.pdf |

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# Blasphemy and persecution: Positioning in an inter-religious discussion

https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-2049

**Abstract:** In May 2017, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, the former Christian governor of Jakarta, Indonesia, was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison. Although he was released in January 2019, his trial and the various reactions it elicited continue to highlight the very sensitive and complex issues surrounding the notion and enforcement of blasphemy and how different communities talk about it. This article focuses on a discussion about the trial between an Indonesian Muslim in favor of the blasphemy charge and an Indonesian Christian opposed to it. Using positioning analysis, it investigates how their conversation in English at a University in Japan exhibited an occasioned, fluid, developing range of evaluative language, both in terms of how they talked about themselves and others. The analysis demonstrates the complex interplay and consistent tension that is often present in inter-religious dialogue, and tracks how a wide array of discourse and contextual factors relate to developing positions, storylines, expressions of social power, and strategies for conflict management. We conclude by highlighting the inherent complexity of the dynamics of such interaction and how it can lead to greater convergence and/or tension, while emphasizing the potential benefits of face-to-face conversations around issues of possible conflict.

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**Keywords:** Blasphemy, positioning, religious dialogue, discourse, face-to-face interaction

# 1 Introduction

In May, 2017, the former Christian governor of Jakarta was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison. The charges against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) were based on the following statement he made in the village of Pulau Seribu, located in a chain of islands north of Jakarta during a period of campaigning for re-election as the governor of Jakarta in September, 2016 (translation based on an Al Jazeera 2017 report):

> Maybe you think you can't vote for me because you're being deceived about Al-Maidah 51[1] and so forth. That's your right. Maybe you feel you can't elect me because you're afraid you will go to hell because you're being fooled. That's fine. That's your personal choice, but my program will continue.

The reference to the Quran (and specifically the passage in Al-Maidah 51) was made in connection with Ahok's belief that activists had been using the beginning of that verse, "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies" (translation by Haleem 2010), to undermine commitment to Ahok's economic revitalization programmes for the village by interpreting it to mean that Muslims should not be ruled by non-Muslims.

Within the Indonesian society, one common interpretation of Al-Maidah 51 positions Muslims in a Muslim-majority society in an advantageous situation in terms of social power. Within the Indonesian Islamic community, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) [Indonesian Ulema Council] clerics (along with other sanctioned groups) have the power to interpret and apply the Quran to Muslim practice, situating their pronouncements within a religious and cultural understanding of *information as a sacred entity* (Berman 1999). In a secular context, however, these pronouncements lack authority, and the participants must both address the internal debates about the role of Islam in Indonesia, while making their positions understandable to a secular, non-Indonesian audience.

The highly publicized trial and its result highlight the very sensitive and contentious issues surrounding the notion and enforcement of blasphemy law, in addition to religious ideals and interpretations that limit the social and political

**1** O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them – God does not guide such wrongdoers (translation by Haleem 2010).

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power of minority groups in Indonesia. This article focuses on a recorded conversation between an Indonesian Muslim and an Indonesian Christian about the blasphemy laws and the trial. Using positioning analysis (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and Van Langenhove 1999; Bamberg 1997), we investigate how participants position the characters in the story (i. e. Ahok, the Indonesian government, the Muslim activists), themselves, and each other in storylines that take into account a variety of different audiences. Our central focus is on how the participants enact specific positions of dominance and submission during the conversation. The aim is to describe and understand how a contentious topic, blasphemy, is navigated in inter-religious dialogue through positioning and how the positionings relate to conceptions of the social world.

We first outline the background to the notion of blasphemy before providing a review of the literature related to the study of religious language and positioning theory. We then introduce the participants and the structure of the conversation, along with our methodology for analyzing it. This is then followed by our examination of a key part of the conversation, concluding with a discussion about the value of arranging and analyzing such sensitive interactions.

## 2 Background

Blasphemy, a key concept in this analysis, should be considered a cline of words and actions. In the Indonesian society, it can be understood in the social and religious principles referred to as *Pancasila*. Originally designed to unify the diverse religious groups within Indonesia, Pancasila officially recognizes six religious groups – Islam, Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Marshall and Shea 2011) – as within a democratic system of government that was designed to avoid internal conflict by promoting religious unity and social justice (Fenwick 2017: 47). These principles are reinforced through Law 1/PNPS/1965, popularly referred to as the "Blasphemy Law". This law prohibits communicating deviant interpretations of one of the sanctioned religions in Indonesia, and further explains in a provision in the Criminal Code, article 156a, that

> Whosoever intentionally publicly expresses sentiments … that by its nature is hostile, abuses or disgraces a religion practiced in Indonesia … is subject to a jail sentence of 5 years. (Fenwick 2017: 15)

This law arguably rests on the premise that the right of religious freedom should be guaranteed, but should not be understood as unlimited, allowing "for the

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possibility of government action if religious freedom led to conflict that threatened the unity and oneness of the nation" (Ropi 2017: 134).

The wording of the law and instances of its application can be approached from multiple, highly contested perspectives, attracting both strong support and criticism on many sides. For example, some conservative Sunni Muslim groups have criticized it for not representing a true Muslim worldview, arguing that any political framework should be centered on *shariah* law and principles, in addition to having the goal of Islamizing society and education (Miichi 2015). In contrast, freedom of speech advocates and minority groups have criticized it on the grounds that it deprives non-Muslims of the freedom and right to challenge social imbalances derived from particular interpretations, while also facilitating the manipulation of the law by the majority in order to persecute what they view to be the deviant beliefs of some minority groups (Marshall and Shea 2011).

## 3 Literature review

Over the last few years there has been a rapidly growing interest from language and communication researchers in the analysis of religious texts, rituals, sermons, and face-to-face and online interaction. It is possible to broadly separate this interest into two overlapping camps: those scholars who foreground an intimate connection between cognitive psychology, language, and culture, and those who stress the importance of centering on the intertwined relationship between fluid discourse streams and their socio-cultural contexts. In terms of the former, the edited collections of Chilton and Kopytowska (2018) and Howe and Green (2018), and the work of Barcelona (1999), Charteris-Black (2004), Downes (2011), Kövecses (2011), and DesCamp and Sweetser (2005) are particularly important. In their analysis of a wide spectrum of religious language, these studies draw on a variety of theories and approaches related to the socio-cognitive turn in language and communication studies, such as *conceptual metaphor theory* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), conceptual approaches to metonymy (Barcelona 2003; Littlemore 2015), *conceptual blending theory* (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), *frames* (Fillmore 1982), *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1995), neuroscientific theories of religious experience (McNamara 2009), and *critical metaphor analysis* (Charteris-Black 2004). Additionally, other studies combine elements of conceptual metaphor theory with the significance of agency patterns and force dynamic relationships in Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist language, for example Richardson (2012), Richardson and Nagashima (2018), and Richardson and Mueller (2019).

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This interest in the cognitive dimension can be contrasted with a *discourse dynamic approach* (Cameron 2015). This approach remains agnostic about persistent cognitive mappings in human minds, and instead focuses on the fluid development of attitudes emerging from situated language use within intersecting, ever-changing discourse streams. Elements of discourse dynamics have been combined with various other discourse-analytic approaches and frameworks and applied to a range of religious discourse types, especially online or face-to-face dialogues between two or more participants. Examples include its application to the study of online Christian and atheist discourse in combination with metaphor and categorization analysis (Pihlaja 2014), the language of Evangelical Christians during preaching on Facebook alongside an analysis of metaphor usage (Pihlaja 2017), conversations between Muslims and Christians during structured interviews aimed at tracking the blocking and development of empathy (Richardson 2017), and the online evangelical discourse of Muslims, Christians, and atheists in combination with corpus-assisted analysis (Pihlaja 2018).

The textual analyses of Pihlaja (2014, 2017, 2018) have also applied positioning theory (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999; Bamberg 1997) to track how believers and atheists view themselves and others as interaction develops. Positioning theory describes "the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts ..." (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999). These positions, and how they fit into storylines, can then be useful tools in discourse analysis for understanding how and why conflict arises in interaction. This notion of positioning has some similarities with the work of Bamberg (1997) and Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), who apply 'positioning' to narratives and small stories within interaction. Bamberg's understanding of positioning highlights the ways in which narratives can position storytellers and hearers through the positions of the characters within narratives, and how narratives reveal larger beliefs about the storyteller and their epistemologies. The present study draws on aspects of this approach but differs in terms of its focus on the social action of positioning in discourse activity and not taking 'narrative' as the starting point for positioning work. However, positioning in both cases can also be viewed as an ideal framework for investigating the relationship between hierarchy, power structures, and the interaction of people in the flux of occasioned contexts (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012; Moita-Lopes 2006).

Many early studies of social power in discourse focused on texts such as newspaper articles and political speeches, but more recently the focus has increasingly shifted to the dynamically unfolding relationship between power and interaction. Interaction as the locus for formation of a range of social

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elements is a key premise of positioning theory. Harré and colleagues point out, "Positioning theory adds a previously neglected dimension to the processes of cognition – namely concepts and principles from the local moral domain, usually appearing as beliefs and practices involving rights and duties" (Harré et al. 2009). They go on to note that these positions fit together in storylines, or macro-patterns of rights and duties of individuals, informed by their own beliefs and practices. These storylines can, and often do, come into conflict with one another, with one of the motivating factors behind these conflicts being the different meanings assigned to the actions of others. During these moments of conflict, speakers may engage in *malignant positioning*, or the unilateral imposing of positions on others in the attempt to attack or reject the validity of their positions (Sabat 2001).

This article will therefore focus on the positioning choices that emerge from the interaction between a range of sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit dominant and contested discourses connected to national, religious and gender-based identities. It hopes to contribute to the study of the relationship between social power, narratives, and positioning in two ways. The first of these connects to the fact that analyses using positioning are only just beginning to be applied to the somewhat sensitive realm of religious discourse. The textual analyses of Pihlaja (2014, 2017, 2018) have revealed how individuals can appropriate stories and interpretations for themselves by imposing their own positionings while reinforcing, elaborating or contesting the positionings of others. Pihlaja and Thompson (2017) extended it to how young British Muslims respond to and resist the negative positions imposed on them in the media. They show how Muslim participants attempt to contest the imposition of simplified cultural stereotypes, while asserting their right to forge their own complex, multi-faceted personal identities. In order to build on these earlier studies, our focus will be on investigating how positionings around blasphemy are accomplished in real-time in a conversation between participants of two opposing points of view, taking place in a neutral context.

## 4 Data

This article uses as data a recorded discussion between two Indonesian students, Aishya, a Sunni Muslim female, and Endang, a Roman Catholic male, studying as international students at a University in Japan. The names are pseudonyms and their ages, their courses of study, and the date and location of the discussion are not listed in order to protect their identities. Both students

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signed consent forms with the understanding that their participation in the study could result in the publication of their words.

Given the sensitive nature of the conversation, we took particular care in selecting participants that were both knowledgeable about their own beliefs and the controversy, but were also happy to engage in what might be a very difficult interaction as individuals rather than representatives of their particular faith, consistent with "dialogue" rather than "debate" (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997). The participants agreed to take part after responding to an advertisement placed on University notice boards encouraging Muslim and Christian believers to take part in a structured discussion about their beliefs. Three Indonesian students initially responded to the advertisement, and after asking for their help in contacting other students, eight Indonesian students – four Muslims and four Christians – eventually signed up. We first organized four pilot interviews with one Christian, one Muslim, and a chairperson. The chairperson was directed to ask a series of questions about their experiences of being a religious believer to the two participants and to encourage them to speak freely. From those initial pilot interviews, we identified one of the Muslim participants, Aishya, and one of the Christian participants, Endang, as particularly knowledgeable about their respective religions within the context of Indonesia. We then invited them to participate in a discussion without a chairperson about Ahok's blasphemy trial. The decision was made to focus on the trial because it was seen as a salient, current event that brought together many of the critical issues facing Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia.

In preparation, the participants were asked to watch an Al-Jazeera interview of Ahok. They were then directed to produce a 1,500-word essay that gave their opinions about the accuracy of the English translation of Ahok's words (provided above), what they felt about Indonesia's blasphemy law; whether they thought there had been any cases of its misuse; and finally whether they thought Ahok should be charged with blasphemy. These questions were chosen to encourage the participants to position themselves and each other in relation to their perception of truth; and how their truth and the truth of others should or should not be engaged with. The answers to these questions were then sent to the other participant and the two students were then directed to prepare for a free dialogue about their opinions, rather than a debate over the merits of each other's arguments.

The discussion lasted for 1 hour 39 minutes and 43 seconds and totaled 14,276 words of transcribed talk, with Endang contributing 9,456 words, while Aishya contributed 4,820 words. The participants were encouraged to communicate in English, but they sometimes naturally resorted to Indonesian and their use of English did not always follow standard American or British English. The

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transcription matches this use of language as closely as possible and nothing was intentionally missed out or changed in any way. The discussion was video recorded, but the video recorder was left running with no third person present in the room while the participants were talking.

Following an initial analysis and discussion among the research team, we analyzed the development of positioning and storylines during the discussion. Given the aims and focus of the research project and the level of conflict specifically around the pre-established positions and storylines, six minutes of talk occurring between 1:10:59 and 1:16:59 at the end of the conversation became the primary focus of this analysis. The sensitive nature of the topic and the potential consequences for the participants required care be taken in the choosing of extracts for publication and the participants were in contact with the researchers after the discussion to confirm their willingness for the conversation to be used for analysis.

Our analysis focuses on a range of interactive elements and their relationship to the positionings and storylines that emerge. We each separately watched the video discussion and conducted a line-by-line analysis of the transcript to track how previous positionings were consolidated, expanded, and challenged; how new positionings emerged; and finally how distinct storylines developed. Our focus was on both linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects, first paying careful attention to the use of analogy, negative evaluation, strong language, questions, back channeling, resorting to the shared first language, asking for help to find the right word in English, and providing help to find the right word. In terms of the extra-linguistic aspects of the interaction, we analyzed laughter, increases in volume, and apparent moments of confusion. We also tracked the use of animation and its significance for positioning, which, following Goffman (1981), we defined as the participant seeing through the eyes of someone else and reconstructing what he or she said to persuade the other that this was what that person really meant. In the following analysis, we aim to understand what positioning in the interaction between Endang and Aishya reveals about how inter-religious dialogue develops.

## 5 Analysis

The analysis presented in this section looks closely at three extracts from six minutes of talk in the interaction between Endang and Aishya. Each extract includes numbered turns and Appendix A provides a guide to the transcription conventions used. They occur about two thirds of the way through the whole

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conversation between 1:10:59 and 1:16:59 (of 1:39:43), focusing specifically on the language used by Ahok that sparked the blasphemy charge and how such language should be understood and evaluated. This part of the conversation occurs just after Endang attempts to draw an analogy between Ahok's criticism of the people who were trying to deceive others and Endang's own criticism of the Roman Catholic prosecutors who imprisoned Galileo. Endang introduces, explains, and repeats and reformulates this analogy between 1:08:17 and 1:10:58 (with turn 1 below beginning at 1:10:59), but during that period of the discussion Aishya appears to be unsure how the reference to Galileo applies to Ahok's case.

(1)

| | |
|---|---|
| [1] Endang | Yeah because<br>as Ahok<br>Ahok Ahok was condemning<br>not condemning<br>was criticizing people who used the verses to [get |
| [2] Aishya | [So] okay yeah yeah. |
| [3] Endang | Against him right?<br>And even to to get the political interests right?<br>And you said that he was doing a blasphemy. |
| [4] Aishya | Ohh |
| [5] Endang | [So |
| [6] Aishya | [I think it's] depend on<br>what is it?<br>*Niat apa yah*? <What is *purpose* [in English]?><br>The the purpose. |
| [7] Endang | [The the |
| [8] Aishya | [Yeah.] |
| [9] Endang | pur...]<br>you can see that the<br>his his his sole problem is that<br>his his sole purpose that<br>you have to get into my program<br>I am the governor right now |
| [10] Aishya | [Yeah yeah yeah |
| [11] Endang | [whether you like it or not] |
| [12] Aishya | [Yeah yeah yeah |
| [13] Endang | [whether you cannot vote me] or not<br>you have to go into my programs right? |
| [14] Aishya | Yeah yeah [yeah |
| [15] Endang | [That's] the real that's that's the only |

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| | |
|---|---|
| | that's the only purpose of his statement. |
| | And then people start [like |
| [16] Aishya | [So] that's why he have to |
| [17] Endang | he had to refers to the Al-Maida? |
| [18] Aishya | [Be... |
| | [Because] why? |

In Extract 1 above, Endang begins by positioning Ahok as a victim of persecution, responding to the malicious agency of others who were trying to "get the political interests" by attacking him. Endang positions Ahok as acting in good faith and in an appropriate, secular way. Endang's self-repair at the beginning of the extract (turn 1) highlights Endang's positioning of Ahok as reacting to the political machinations of others, rather than someone motivated by religious intentions, when he says, "Ahok was condemning – not condemning ... was criticizing people who used the verses ..." Endang is consistently concerned with positioning the politicians and religious leaders as having specific political motivations. For example, just before Extract 1 he states, "It's still very political ... it's still very political".

This positioning is similar to Ahok's own statement that the clerics and Muslim politicians are using their religious beliefs to political ends – something Ahok is positioned as not doing. Endang reveals his support and empathy for Ahok by adopting a first person viewpoint through his eyes and animating his words, along with a constructed sense of indignation, "You have to get into my program ... I am the governor right now." (turn 9) This choice of first person animation has two key effects on the conversation: first, Endang staking his claim to *telling rights* (Shuman 2015) in terms of a persecution storyline, showing that he *truly* understands Ahok's intentions; second, it positions Endang as affiliated with Ahok, making Endang's own position as a Christian relevant, particularly as it relates to the embedding of a storyline of Ahok's persecution within a larger storyline of Sunni Muslims in Indonesia oppressing minority groups. In these storylines, Aishya is implicitly positioned with the religious leaders persecuting Ahok because she agrees that Ahok has committed blasphemy.

The storyline of blasphemy which Aishya follows does not engage with Endang's reasoning and explanation for Ahok's statement. Instead, it focuses on Ahok's reasons for referring specifically to Al-Maida 51 while foregrounding the importance of non-Muslims staying silent on issues of Islamic jurisprudence in the public sphere. It also leads Aishya to implicitly reject Endang's positioning of Ahok as someone reacting to the dishonest political machinations of others by questioning his intentions, saying, "I think it's depend on ... the the

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purpose." (turn 6) She continues to position Ahok's criticism of how Muslims were using the Quran as both confusing and disturbing, implicitly rejecting Endang's claim that Ahok was acting in good faith by asking "Because why?" (turn 18).

Aishya implies that simply referring to the Quranic passage makes religion relevant to the discussion on the grounds that any statement that relates to the interpretation of a religious text must involve a religious position and therefore is inherently inappropriate. This question rejects Endang's storyline that firstly politicizes the actions of the Muslim actors and secondly avoids politicizing the position of Ahok himself and his decision to highlight how a religious text was being used. For Aishya, Ahok's reference to religion, and specifically the Quran, is a direct attack on Muslim belief. The fact that Ahok is not a Muslim is a point that neither Endang nor Aishya explicitly states in this extract, even though it remains an important part of their shared background knowledge in the conversation. However, Ahok's purposes in referencing the Quran are, for Aishya, suspect because of his position as a non-Muslim negatively evaluating a Muslim's use of the Quran, an issue that becomes increasingly relevant as the conversation progresses.

In response to the "But why?" question, Endang continues to develop the previous storyline:

(2)

| | |
|---|---|
| [19] Endang | Because as you may say<br>as you may see in [the |
| [20] Aishya | [yeah yeah] |
| [21] Endang | in the Al-Jazeera<br>because there there are<br>only so many so few people who actually joined his program |
| [22] Aishya | Yeah yeah yeah [yeah yeah |
| [23] Endang | [join] join his [program. |
| [24] Aishya | [couldn't know] |
| [25] Endang | And he he couldn't know what what's wrong<br>why why wouldn't you join my program?<br>But I'm the governor now.<br>So<br>he said ohh okay that's right |
| [26] Aishya | [hmm hmm |
| [27] Endang | [if it's] if if there are some people out there who said that you cannot join my program |

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| | |
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| | you cannot vote for me because you're being lied to using Al-Maida. |
| | So it's like he was criticizing people |
| | who used the verses to encou... |
| | to discourage people to follow his programs |
| [28] Aishya | Ohhh [yeah yeah yeah |
| [29] Endang | [and then] to to vote for him. |
| | It's just like me saying that I'm condemning [the Catholic people |
| [30] Aishya | [Yeah yeah yeah] |
| [31] Endang | for putting Galileo into jail |
| | because he believed |
| [32] Aishya | Yeah [okay okay okay |
| [33] Endang | [the earth was round.] |

In Extract 2 above, Endang positions Ahok by making an appeal to the authority of the news organization conducting the Ahok interview: "As you may see in the ... in the Al-Jazeera." (turns 19 and 21) In doing so, he aligns his position with the position of the Al-Jazeera reporter, even though what follows goes beyond what was discussed. Endang represents Ahok's thoughts and feelings, beginning with a third person report of confusion ("He couldn't know ... what's wrong"), before shifting back to first person animation (turn 25). This first person reconstruction includes a moment of realization, "Ohh okay that's right," that the people are "being lied to using Al-Maida." (turn 27) Endang's response to Aishya's positioning of Ahok revoices his argument in Ahok's own feelings and thought processes. Endang appeals to Ahok's *true* intentions, emphasizing that Ahok is only responding to how others have maliciously and unjustly acted against him. Endang's summary emphasizes the act of "being lied to" by immoral others and backgrounds the controversial phrase "using Al-Maida" by again foregrounding Ahok's intention to criticize "people", not the text. Endang's foregrounding of Ahok's confusion about people not joining his community programs emphasizes an administrative (not religious) dimension, thus positioning Ahok's comments even further away from being evaluated as intending to criticize a religious text.

Endang then returns to his earlier analogy related to Galileo's imprisonment by Roman Catholic prosecutors, drawing a comparison between the Catholic Church's historical position on Galileo and the Indonesian government's condemnation of Ahok (turns 29, 31, and 33). Endang's use of the analogy and his familiarity with the specifics of the story suggest that he has used the analogy

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in the past to position himself and the Catholic church in contrast to Islam, something he had written about in his pre-discussion essay. Endang positions himself as someone willing to criticize his own religious authorities and also positions the Catholic church in a "progress" storyline, as they now accept that the earth is round. This analogy, however, draws a comparison between two very different situations: the Catholic Church historically punishing someone for an idea based on empirical reality (due to the church's interpretation of the Bible at that time), and the Indonesian government prosecuting Ahok for making a negative statement involving a reference to a text from the Quran about the power relationship between believers and unbelievers. The comparison is consistent within Endang's own positioning, but does not address Aishya's positioning of Ahok. Although Aishya's backchanneling in the form of repeating words like *yeah* (turns 20, 22, 28, 30, 32) might be interpreted as a marker of agreement and convergence, it appears here to be part of maintaining a positive relationship with Endang and lessening the negative impact of disagreement.

Key to the coherence of Endang's storyline of persecution is the positioning of those who criticized Ahok as both a religious and political actor. In doing so, Endang positions himself as someone who is not ideological or tied to a particular religious position, but instead objectively discussing the issue. The Galileo analogy therefore has three components that make it suitable for Endang's purposes. The first component is that it refers to a dispute between science and a particular interpretation of a sacred text that can now be safely evaluated in retrospect as a mistake by the interpreters. The implicit similarity is that the interpretation of Ahok's words by the religious leaders in Indonesia was a mistake, and this will become obvious over time, and Muslims should therefore come to reject it. The second component is that the example is connected to a negative evaluation of something that happened in his religion rather than Islam, therefore positioning himself as being unbiased. Key to Endang's positioning of himself here is the perception of being an objective observer, not acting as a Catholic. The third component is that it allows Endang to implicitly reject "people who used the verses to … discourage people to follow [Ahok's] programs." (turn 27) Just as Endang does not use the Galileo incident to criticize Catholicism as a whole, but only those people that made the decision to punish Galilieo, he also doesn't position himself here as critical of Islam, but instead refers to "people" who used verses to discourage Muslim voters. By doing so, he is able to maintain a storyline of persecution and implicitly reject Aishya's storyline of blasphemy, because he is not attacking the religion, but the way political actors misuse it. By comparing these two situations, Endang tries to persuade Aishya that this is what it is *really* like or *truly* represents, a strategy

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that has been investigated in advertising and political decision making (Markman and Moreau 2001).

Aishya does not engage with the Galileo analogy, instead focusing on Endang's positioning of the "people" who used Al-Maida to persuade others not to support or vote for Ahok, "We [Muslims] do not have to take a non-Muslim to become a leader, but if non-Muslim become leader … we have to follow the policy." Aishya's reference here to "Muslims not having to take a non-Muslim as a political leader" connects to her agreement with the official interpretation of Al-Maidah 51 provided by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) [Indonesian Ulema Council] clerics. It also ties in with her later argument that it is *not* wrong for Muslim campaigners to use these religious arguments when campaigning, "… because there's no wrong … if the clerics say to to anyone to not to vote." However, she also positions Muslims as willing to accept democratic processes, saying Muslims should follow that person's policies *once* they have been elected. This effectively overcomes the potential tensions of the conservative Muslim and national (support for social harmony) storylines. Aishya is therefore positioning the Muslim campaigners, which Endang positioned as deceptive political operators, as not doing anything wrong in talking to the people about Al-Maida, but that the people are wrong when they refuse to follow the current governor's policies.

In response, Endang does not acknowledge this argument, and instead continues with his positioning of Ahok as a politician, responding to a political act which misused religion. He then answers a follow-up question from Aishya by revealing the identities of "some people out there" and arguing that there were "actually several clerics" who used Al-Maida to persuade people to vote for other candidates. In her response, Aishya switches between English and Indonesian to reinforce her meaning.

> But but I think that's
> *terlepas dari itu* <besides that>
> what he [Ahok] said
> *tapi tetap salah ngerti nggak sih*? <he is still wrong, do you understand?>
> is wrong *gitu* <something like that>

Endang replies by repeating his argument and referring to a popular case of a cleric who used the Quran to persuade people that he should continue to retain his political position, but was in the end arrested for corruption. During this critical point in the discussion, Aishya refers to Endang using a shortened, informal version of his name as the tension escalates. She raises her voice and

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reiterates in Indonesian: "*Kalua menurut aku* <In my opinion he [Ahok] is still wrong>". Endang then also raises his voice and expresses frustration.

(3)

| | |
|---|---|
| [34] Endang | Why?<br>It's just like<br>that's why that's why I hate this blasphemy law<br>because you are wrong you just wrong<br>I don't know why<br>you're just wrong<br>there is no reason. |
| [35] Aishya | <laughs> Of course there is a reason. |
| [36] Endang | The reason is just I believe in something<br>and you said it's not it's wrong but<br>I don't know why<br>why I'm right [but but it's just wrong. |
| [37] Aishya | [I think when you] when you believe in our religion<br>you have to committed<br>like me<br>the guidance of how to behave how to believe<br>is written in Al Qur'an hadith and and other<br>*ngerti nggak sih* <Do you understand?> |
| [38] Endang | [Yeah yeah |
| [39] Aishya | [Yeah] I [know |
| [40] Endang | [Yeah yeah but] but it's just very naïve to<br>to believe that there won't be any people<br>who will use this to get their own political interest.<br>Ain't it [very naïve? |
| [41] Aishya | [But but]<br>I never thought about the political issues and like that.<br>*Apa yah* <What is it?><br>What I'm concerned about is just<br>about my religion<br>*Ngerti nggak sih*? <Do you understand?><br>*Jadi* <so><br>*Aku tuh nggak pernah* <I never><br>*Aku nggak pernah* <I never><br>*Maksudnya nggak berpikiran seperti politik atau gimana kek gitu*<br><I mean that I never thought about the political issues and things like that> |

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| | |
|---|---|
| [42] Endang | So I mean<br>the thing that prevents you<br>to open your mind<br>[is that |
| [43] Aishya | [hmmm] |
| [44] Endang | denying the tie between religion and politic.<br>It's just very naïve |

In this extract, Endang continues to develop the storyline that some Muslim clerics and leaders are corrupt and acting in an unjust way, and therefore deserve to be rejected. As a non-Muslim in this storyline, Endang chooses to take a more aggressive position in the neutral environment of this conversation by aligning himself with Ahok as implicitly the victim of particular Muslims securing "their own political interest". By attempting to position Aishya with the religious leaders, he implicitly implicates her in the persecution of the minority groups outside of Sunni Islam (through the misuse of the blasphemy law), in addition to the potential possibility of his own persecution. In the above extract, Sunni Islam is not specifically mentioned, but Endang's persecution storyline connects to an earlier point in the discussion related to the prosecution for blasphemy of an atheist and a Shia Muslim, in addition to Endang's references to the atheist being beaten and Shia Mosques being damaged by hardline Sunni Muslim activists. He animates his perception of the intractability of Aishya's position by appropriating her perspective and stating, "I don't know why ... you're just wrong ... there is no reason ... the reason is just I believe in something" (turns 34 and 36) to Aishya's laughter and potentially condensing statement, "Of course there is a reason." (turn 35) His animation of what he believes to be Aishya's perspective positions both Ahok and himself as subject to a clear attack, supporting his storyline of persecution. This is consolidated by positioning Aishya as rejecting what he has argued is Ahok's true motives.

Aishya responds by explicitly reasserting the storyline of blasphemy and returning to the centrality of the Quran in her belief system, positioning herself as a committed adherent of Islam rather than a person motivated by political forces, something she says she has never thought of before. She asserts that she considers her religion as "the guidance of how to behave how to believe". (turn 37) In this storyline, Muslims are following what they believe, not actively attempting to persecute others. This storyline includes positioning herself as empathetic to Endang, shifting to Indonesian at key moments, for example, when saying "Do you understand?" (turn 41) This meant temporarily putting aside the commitment

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to the parameters of the research where they had been instructed to speak in English, and instead positioning herself in her own language as simply being concerned about her religion. By speaking in Indonesian, she positions herself in an authentic way, emphasizing that her intention is not to create offense. In contrast to Endang, Aishya's laughter and extensive backchanneling build rapport and defuse conflict, in addition to her use of their shared first language and her use of a shortened form of Endang's name. Both participants laugh at the beginning of the conversation, which appears to dispel feelings of awkwardness. The laughter in Extract 3 accomplishes the same purpose, and is not used as an expression of malignant positioning.

When Endang attempts to reintroduce a storyline of persecution by positioning the Muslim activists as political-religious operatives, Aishya again states that her concern is "just about my religion," (turn 41) a key part of the rationale for the positioning of herself and other Muslims in a storyline of blasphemy. Endang then negatively evaluates her reasoning, suggesting that the unqualified foregrounding of her Islamic beliefs is naïve, and refuses to accept a position predicated exclusively on religion as valid (turns 42 and 44). Endang's storyline rejects blasphemy as relevant to the argument about Ahok's intentions in explicitly referring to the Al Maidah text, and he understands those intentions to be without religious motivation. Although he does not accept the storyline of blasphemy, he is less direct in his response, using a depersonalized, indirect statement, "Denying the tie between religion and politic. It's just very naïve." (turn 44) Here, Endang still does not agree with Aishya's positioning of herself, but positions her beliefs and actions as "naïve" rather than saying that she herself is naïve. The subtle shift shows how face-to-face interaction can lead to speakers softening their positions and working in small ways to accommodate others, even though they disagree.

The word "hate" (turn 34) is the strongest negative evaluation in the discussion, but Endang avoids a direct reference to Aishya or Islam, restricting his focus to the blasphemy laws. While the use of animation and analogies earlier fulfilled the purpose of presenting what Ahok *really* meant, Endang's use of *hate* here strongly attacks what he feels are ideas about what Ahok did not mean. His switch to a first person view looking through Aishya's eyes parodies her argument and positions it as unreasonable, while also presenting himself as someone who understands the essence of her argument better than she does. Endang's implicit malignant positioning of Aishya's perspective (along with the perspective of other Muslims who have similar ideas about blasphemy and its strict enforcement) highlights his own position as knowledgeable about the political circumstances, while delegitimizing Aishya's

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argument against Ahok. Aishya's perspective is therefore a metonymy in Endang's discourse for those Muslims who have accepted the claim that Ahok committed blasphemy because they have been "lied to" by the Muslim clerics and politicians.

After Extract 3, Endang and Aishya move on from the issue of Ahok to talk more generally about the political situation in Indonesia and whether or not there is a mixture of religious and secular law in Indonesia. The conversation does turn again to Ahok and the fact that both participants agree that he is "capable". However, Aishya views him as "arrogant" and while both agree that politicians can be impolite, they disagree on the extent of Ahok's politeness. As the conversation draws to a close, both participants restate their positions, Aishya saying, "What Ahok did is a blasphemy or is a haram" while still maintaining, "but you personally can have your … interpretation about that". Endang says, "Yeah for me Ahok was criticizing people". The hedging here suggests that they both recognize the position of the other while still maintaining their own beliefs. The conversation ends with a mutual willingness to consolidate their relationship after the instances of increased volume, negative evaluation, and strong language.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has focused on several key moments of tension in inter-religious dialogue, with the goal of understanding how disagreements emerge and are managed. The specific complexity of the interaction between religious beliefs and politics in Indonesia is evident, although some key aspects of the analysis are also likely to resonate with similar dialogues in different contexts. In the face-to-face interaction between these two participants, positionings were the dynamic result of interaction intertwining with previous reasoning. Endang positions Ahok as acting in a political way, while Aishya positions the Muslim activists challenging Ahok as acting in accordance with their religious beliefs and in service of Muslims. In the interaction between the two, the storylines and positions allocated to Ahok, the religious leaders in Indonesia, and the Muslim voters are applied locally by the interactants to one another. They use the example of Ahok to account for their own beliefs and the beliefs of the other: Endang with Ahok, and Aishya with the Indonesian Muslims who viewed Ahok's statement as blasphemy. The analysis has shown the ways in which these storylines and positions develop heuristics for how they view themselves and each other in the world. These positions, the storylines and heuristics can be

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explicitly observed in the dynamic position taking of the storyteller and story hearer in the interaction as they relate to told narrative (in this case, Ahok's statement), as Bamberg (1997) has suggested.

The complex interplay and consistent tension in inter-religious dialogue can be particularly intense when interlocutors are friends or acquaintances and working to maintain face. In this analysis, the role of religion, political ideology, the risk of appearing to engage in blasphemy, and certain issues relating to national identity are prominent factors in terms of their relation to developing positions and storylines in the interaction. Although Aishya and Endang's interaction was oriented towards the dominant discourses in Indonesia, a Muslim-majority society with strictly enforced blasphemy laws, the physical context of the discussion analyzed in this article is quite different – a Japanese university where both students were minorities and friends. This too seems to have positively affected how the two viewed one another, as Indonesian students together in a foreign context. Other elements may have more impact on the outcome of any given discussion, including their degree of friendship and shared history, gender, aspects of family and cultural conditioning, personality differences, English language ability, levels of knowledge, prior negative experiences, encounters, a buildup of frustration, and the pressures of awareness that non-Indonesian academic researchers were recording their interaction in a Japanese context. There can also be a marked difference between how individuals position themselves and others in monologic contexts as compared to the more complex situation of face-to-face interaction.

In terms of the dialogue among oppositional interactants more generally, these observations emphasize the inherent complexity involved in face-to-face discussions, in addition to the importance of close analysis and attention to detail in moments of tension in interaction to deduce where, when, and how conflict emerges and might be resolved, similar to Cameron's (2012) work on reconciliation discourse. Such discussions can open up or further intensify positioning pressures and strategies which can lead to greater convergence and equilibrium, but also increase levels of potential conflict. The analysis, however, makes clear the potential benefit of direct interaction around issues of potential conflict, while also exploring the ability of interlocutors to manage differences when faced with someone holding oppositional beliefs, particularly when a prior relationship exists, the participants are knowledgeable, and they are engaging one another in a neutral space.

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**Acknowledgements:** We would like to express our gratitude to the editor, Srikant Sarangi, the two reviewers, and to the participants for their willingness to take part in such a challenging discussion. Funding for this research was provided by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI-16KT008306).

## Appendix A

The following transcription conventions were used in the analysis of the conversation:

| | |
|---|---|
| [A's turn [B's turn] | Used when participant B begins talking while participant A is still completing their turn |
| *text* (in italics) | Used when a participant speaks in Indonesian |
| <text> | Used when providing an English translation for words spoken in Indonesian |
| <text> | Used when informing the reader of behavior besides speech, such as laughter |
| . | Used to mark a pause in a participant's speech |

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