The Globalized and the Polarized:

Seeking the Golden Mean in Intercultural Communication

A Review Article by

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Empathy in the Global World: An Intercultural Perspective
By Carolyn Calloway-Thomas
Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2010. 249 pp.
ISBN: 9781412957915.

The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication
Edited by Thomas K. Nakayama and Rona Tamiko Halualani
Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 630 pp.
ISBN: 9781405184076.

Faith and Media: Analysis of Faith and Media -- Representation and Communication
Edited by Hans Geybels, Sara Mels, and Michel Walrave
Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2009. 257 pp.
ISBN: 9789052015347.

Identities in Context: Media, Myth, Religion in Space and Time
Edited by Katherine Fry and Barbara Jo Lewis
Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2008. 192 pp.
ISBN: 9781572738201.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently pointed out that the more globalization pushes people together, the more it is pulling them apart (2008). The late 20th and early 21st century has witnessed an increase in human interactions and transactions, be it through global neoliberal policies, which eased cross-border and international immigration in hopes of stimulating national and global economies, and also through increasingly affordable information communication technologies (ICTs) such as computers and mobile devices as a medium and

gateway to the Internet. Intuitively one would think these global changes and increasing interactions would create a milieu of difference understanding; instead they have created communication barriers between secular, ethnic, and religious groups, have caused liberal democracies to question the definition of free speech, and have led to protracted conflicts and wars. Thomas K. Nakayama and Rona Tamiko Halualani's *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* (2010) provides layers of analyses in the complexities of seeking the Golden mean in intercultural communication during a turbulent time in the hyper-globalized human interaction while Katherine Fry and Barbara Jo Lewis' *Identities in Context: Media, Myth, Religion in Space and Time* (2008) situates group identity within the context of religion, myth, and media, and provides studies to support the necessity of identifying context as preamble to understanding multiculturalism. Hans Geybels, Sara Mels, and Michel Walrave's *Faith and Media: Analysis of Faith and Media -- Representation and Communication* (2009) examines the relationship between religion, media, and multiculturalism from its micro-nuances to its globalized impact such as contemporary Islamic/Middle Eastern debates from the hijab to Dutch reactions toward multiethnic and multifaith migrants. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas' *Empathy in the Global World: An Intercultural Perspective* (2010) provides that grossly important but seemingly overlooked concept of empathy when analyzing intercultural dynamics and the dichotomy of *us versus them*.

Putting the "Critical" back in Intercultural Communication

Nakayama and Halualani (2010) take the critical intercultural communication field beyond its current status by examination of historical and recent phenomena and re-engaging important scholars and their contribution to the field. Their goal is the "articulation and explication of the critical paradigm in intercultural communication" (Ibid: 11). Re-examining critical junctures in the field of intercultural communication, Moon (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) asserts that the 1980s produced scholarly work that did not take into account the social inequalities within a society. At the time, Moon recommended that focus should shift on communication processes of socially dominant groups. His line of argument is drawn from the literature of Michel Foucault's power/knowledge dynamic and Stuart Hall's notion of culture.

In line with questioning the dominant discourses of American culture, Kabatilo (in Geybels, Mels & Walrave, 2009) adopts the Foucauldian theory when examining *Time Magazine*'s representation of Muslim women's dress between 1985-2004. Kabatilo's use of Foucault's discourse theory and its knowledge/power dynamic is coupled with the metaphor theory in order to cover both breadth and depth of Kabatilo's content analysis. His findings fall within the framework of the schisms present in hyper-globalization. The discourse surrounding the Muslim veil for women is negative from the onset. Through Western perceptions and metaphors, the veil represents a symbol of oppression for women in one article while simultaneously and paradoxically a banner for brave gun-holding veiled women "Waiting to Kill Americans" (Ibid: 202-203) as a headline in another article.

As the globalization phenomenon has heavily eroded the concept of the nation-state (Hardt & Negri, 2001) and diversified a once ideal image of what it is to be "American" or "British", socially dominant groups have become the focal point of media attention and scholarly analysis due to their conservative and often controversial positions. These groups, such as the Tea Party, are drawing attention to the dilution of traditional American values as a consequence of hyper-globalization. As globalization challenges core identities, right-wing parties are gaining

influence in the political spectrum and galvanizing an increasingly conservative American public. A recent piece in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, titled The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy: What Populism means for Globalism (Mead, 2011), examines the recent trend by libertarians and conservatives in advocating for U.S. isolationism by attacking big government (the Obama Administration's economic stimulus package paid for by taxpayer dollars) and the perceived liberal mainstream media in the country. Mead poignantly observes that "[t]he rise of the Tea Party movement has been the most controversial and dramatic development in U.S. politics in many years. Supporters have hailed it as a return to core American values" (Ibid: 28). However in theme with the current ethos of polarizing globalization, opponents of the movement "have seen it as a racist, reactionary, and ultimately futile protest against the emerging reality of a multicultural, multiracial United States and a new era of government activism" (Ibid).

Mead's (2011) observation of the Tea Party movement compliment's Kabatilo's (in Geybels, Mels & Walrave, 2009) analysis of the seemingly conservative/liberal tensions flaring through cross-border immigrations and the power held by those in privileged positions. From a *Time Magazine* piece on the veil's segregation of women from multicultural Western societies, Kabatilo concluded that "monoculturalism is finding its way into the discourse on multiculturalism by opposing the Islamic practices" (Ibid: 204). By interviewing Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali refugee, former Muslim, and educated political activist and author, audiences are being exposed to a person of authority who is essentially defining how Muslim women immigrants can be more Dutch by means of achieving financially independent, removing the veil, and consuming alcohol.

Concerning the Netherlands, Hemels (in Geybels, Mels & Walrave, 2009) makes similar observations on migrant integration to Dutch culture and customs—especially those migrants whose religious affiliations fall outside the mainstream Judeo-Christian secular view. The Internet in the Netherlands may possibly be the only true venue of communicating one's position without alteration of the main message. Print journalism, for instance, covers only events deemed acceptable by respective gatekeepers (Ibid: 110-111). Stories that do not fit within the Dutch's cultural norms, such as diverse religious attitudes, will hardly receive the critical analysis they deserve in order to be properly understood by audiences.

A study on the positive and negative news coverage on immigrants with regards to offline (print media) and online (Internet platforms) discussions within Dutch society found that although citizens were granted easier access to Internet debates, the discourse itself largely fell within Dutch norms and values. No alternative viewpoints were present and "'the other' was not present in the debate" (Witschge, in Hemels, in Geybels, Mels & Walrave, 2009: 120). As this case shows, access to powerful communicative venues, such as print journalism, is limited to those connected to such authorities and gatekeepers.

Martin and Nakayama (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) argue that the critical structuralist paradigm falls within the framework of challenging power, where "culture is conceptualized as social structures" and not as a homogenized nation-state to which Moon (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) was also a critic. Martin and Nakayama give examples of scholarly work that focus on "economic aspects of industries that produce cultural products (e.g., advertising, media) and how some industries are able to dominate the cultural sphere with their products" (Fejes, 1986; Meehan, in Martin & Nakayama, in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010: 63).

The issues of intercultural clashes can be linked to unequal power distribution and the predominant role history (colonial/imperial subjugation) plays as westerners encounter their former indigenous subjects. Sorrells (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) argues that diasporic

groups negotiate a sense of "home" as an attempt to dispute existing cultural identities in their foreign land and furthermore engage in forms of "resistance, agency, and political empowerment" (Drzewiecka, 2002; Halualani, 2002; Mendoza, 2002; Shome & Hedge, in Sorrells, in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010). Tensions thus ensue as these groups attempt to negotiate their identity within the allocated space of their alien environment. Consequently, westerners see them as disrupting social norms, the status quo, and cultural hegemony. This flashpoint heavily contributes to the polarization of the once-perceived global village envisioned by media guru Marshall McLuhan.

According to Fry and Lewis (2008), media play a central role in identity formation. They argue that context, such as communications media and its non-neutral "information transmissions", is a necessary main feature of ethnic and religious groups identity formation. Strate (in Fry & Lewis, 2008), for example, examines the negotiation of space and time to identity formation, or re-formation, of Jews and Judaism within the context of Zionism and diasporic American Jews. Print media, such as books, pamphlets, and periodicals helped reform and foment Jewish identity and the Zionist enterprise (Blau, 1966; Dimont, 1962; Martin, in Strate, in Fry & Lewis, 2008).

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, a chasm followed Jewish identity re-formation with Jews in Israel on one side and their diasporic counterparts in America (Strate, in Fry & Lewis, 2008). Achieving the Golden Mean in globalized relations requires not only negotiating a sense of identity in new lands as a recent migrant, but also negotiating one's identity with the motherland and its people as the case for Israel shows. Strate points to some Jewish Americans who find it "difficult to identify with a state [Israel] plagued by conflicts and . . . war" (Ibid: 34) while other Jews defend Israel's actions.

Intercultural Empathy on Sabbatical

Cultural theorist and philosopher Edward Said, in his groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1994), makes similar observations to authors studying intercultural communication and interactions. What Said puts forth in *Orientalism* is the notion of the west stereotyping the Other through means of knowledge, language, and power structures (i.e. the news media, classic paintings and famous storytellers, among other media). A salient underlying factor, the nuance within the discourse of intercultural communication, is a lack of empathy for the Other. Calloway-Thomas (2010) magnifies this nuance by focusing on the need for intercultural empathy in an increasingly globalized world. Defined, empathy "is the ability 'imaginatively' to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural Other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally" (Ibid: 8).

The psychological perspective of understanding multifaith and multiethnic diversity, through empathy, is a necessity if one wants to properly grasp the push and pull of globalization as well as remedies to its consequential tensions. Calloway-Thomas (2010) examines immigration patterns and what they mean to the Self and the Other. She addresses the Arab question post-September 11th, 2001 and the ensuing intercultural/multifaith clash with the west and the extensive role communication and the media play within that clash. "[M]uch is at stake culturally, economically, and geopolitically when we fail to refashion the world along the lines of empathy" (Ibid: 3). More so, she seeks to understand the extent in which humanity is practicing empathy at the critical "juncture of globalization" (Ibid: 5).

Other works favour Calloway-Thomas' (2010) focus on empathy as the bridging of differences. Jeremy Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization* (2009) highlights humanity's

simultaneous struggle between the rise of "empathic awareness" and entropic "dramatic deterioration of the health of the planet" within a globalized context of diverse human communications. Frans de Waal, a renowned primatologist, makes similar arguments in his *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (2010). His study of mammals reveals empathy to be an intrinsic behaviour in animals and argues that contrary to the selfish self-interested Hobbesian state of man, humans also possess the capacity of applying empathy in solving human conflict. Self-interest individualistic goals, de Waal believes, is a man-made construct. Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell's study, although focused on *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), similarly demonstrates that the idea of uniqueness and individuality are selfish traits in which empathy may be a possible treatment. Their data, through the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, reveals mainstream media and social media, among other cultural factors, to be main culprits of the narcissism epidemic—an aggressive human trait whose history, the authors conclude, is used to say "other people are different, wrong, less than human" where Nazis killed the Jews, "[t]he Tutsi killed the Hutu, Shiites kill Sunnis, and Serbs killed Croatians" (Ibid: 287).

September 11th, 2001 pushed Islam under the microscope. The post-9/11 atmosphere, as Calloway-Thomas (2010) notes, halted postmodernity's challenge to cultural and monolithic ideological hegemonies. Three important flashpoints marked tensions between Muslim immigrants to European countries: the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist who believed van Gogh's documentary on Islam was an insult to Muslims; the Paris rioting by disenfranchised Muslim youths in which the discourse and rhetoric by senior government officials and news media in France painted the youth with an Islamic paintbrush, regardless of ethnicity and country of origin; cartoons printed in a Dutch newspaper depicting the Muslim Prophet Mohammad as a terrorist and how Islamic leaders subsequently tried to secure meetings with Danish officials and even released statements condemning the cartoons as hurtful to Islam. The media, however, framed these tensions as a clash of civilizations.

In general the mainstream media's lack of empathy and framing of these events perpetuated these and other tensions. The media function within a hegemonic ideology. *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Wall Street journal*, ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, WB, and UPN act in re-enforcing cultural stereotypes, whether covering the war on terror or social class tensions such as the wealthy or poor (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). The media not only frame and amplify the cultural Other, but do so with "astonishing speed and sometimes to the detriment of those whose wishes, aspirations, and points of view are slighted or ignored altogether" (Ibid: 117).

Whither these Tensions?

The struggle for power and conformity in face of diversity at the global scale has slowly created a globalized world where polarization has become a symptom of these tensions. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2008) was astute in his observation and his recent initiative in fostering multifaith understanding in an era of globalization should be welcomed. Traditionally, diversity was a contention debate. Countries, such as the United States, generally held anti-immigration attitudes. This stance changed in part due to then President Theodore Roosevelt's declaration in 1938 that America is a nation of immigrants. Calloway-Thomas (2010) observed that this empathetic gesture fostered acceptance of Others into the midst of an Anglo-Saxons populace. As economic imperatives, liberal policies, academic activism, and war increased

global immigration, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 began to have an adverse affect on how immigrants were viewed—especially those of Arab-Muslim origin.

Calloway-Thomas (2010) critically notes that empathy is the lynchpin of intercultural relations and that its moral cohesion may hold civil society together. However she offers a warning that if human reciprocity is not met, society itself will crumble.

The perceived decentralization of power and crumbling of what Gramsci calls the "hegemonic historic blocks" facilitated by social media is, as Moon (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) and other scholars argue, a step in the right direction in critically challenging the status quo, both academically and tangibly. In the wake as well as the aftermath of the Obama campaign, for example, scholarly work critically assessed the extent in which power, ethnicity, and the mainstream media played in covering a black president's bid (whom some thought/still think is Muslim—an apparent taboo in American society) for the White House (Hollander, 2010; Weeksa & Southwella, 2010).

Although Strate (in Fry & Lewis, 2008) concludes that electronic media, as an agent of change, is a potential challenger to continued Jewish identity re-formation, Campbell's (2010) case study of the kosher cell phone in Israel provides refreshing progressive insight on globalization's stress on traditional norms. Where ICTs provide the environment of instant communication, they simultaneously facilitate provocative access to secular ideologies. The Israeli wireless company MIRS Communications, in sound with tackling secular/religious tensions, developed a cellular phone capable of blocking content deemed un-kosher to Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities.

In seeking the Golden Mean of intercultural communication, Martin and Nakayama (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) observed that numerous scholars critiqued the American ethnocentrism of communication research and theory and instead argued in favour of an internationally-shared "multicultural communication perspectives" (Ibid: 64). Additionally, Sorrells (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) and Martin and Nakayama (in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) take the position "scholar-activists" that scholars in their field ought to use their research efforts as a means to elicit positive changes in the lives of those affected by dominant power structures.

De-polarizing the globalized also involves less theoretical and more pragmatic approaches. Hemels (in Geybels, Mels & Walrave, 2009) suggests that religious groups should embark on interreligious dialogue only after working toward greater social cohesion amongst them, lest their efforts fall on deaf ears. Hemels offers similar advice for journalists: the discussion of hot topics that can no longer be neglected in a fair, neutral, and responsible fashion.

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