



BOOK REVIEW

CIVIL PATHS TO PEACE: REPORT OF THE COMMONWEALTH COMMISSION ON RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

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Reviewed by Ankita Pandey

Reviewer Profile

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ON RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING**

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Consider these two ways of comprehending the global violence that we witness...

"It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."

- Samuel P. Huntington¹
or

"While the cultural forces are among the forces that contribute to disrespect, misunderstanding and violence, they are not the causal factors, nor are they immutable and irresistible. We need a departure from old ways of thinking about the centrality of violence and the alleged inviolability of cultural confrontations."

- *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*
*Commonwealth Secretariat*²

It is with the latter sensibility that *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding* has been written. Though the report receives its mandate from the Commonwealth Heads of Government, it has successfully overcome a statist perspective towards understanding conflicts or their resolution. The eleven members of the Commission come from Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean region. The diverse backgrounds of members of the Commission has brought great insight of experiences from societies located at different stages of development as well as societies that are struggling with various types and

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) p. 51.

² *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*, (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007) p.10.

intensities of conflicts. As a result, we have a valuable document that could serve as a policy guideline in Commonwealth countries and beyond.

The ideas of 'respect' and 'understanding' invoked in the report are more substantive than their colloquial use. The report lays out the scope of these values in the following words:

...the term 'respect' reflects and encapsulates the principles for which the modern Commonwealth stands – human rights, liberties, democracy, gender equality, rule of law and a political culture that promotes transparency, accountability and economic development.

...Understanding implies an ability to grasp what someone else is saying in order to get to the heart of what they are trying to communicate...Understanding does not necessarily involve agreement with the views or beliefs others hold.³

It is the elaboration of the substantive content of the values of respect and understanding that makes these values relevant to the domain of international relations, which is traditionally characterized by its amorality and anarchy. The report operationalizes respect in a variety of contexts, including the respect with which the economically more powerful nations must approach the less powerful ones, the respect for different civilizations, the respect for international law and the respect shown to regional neighbors which can feed into multilateralist thinking.

Why are *respect* and *understanding* important in contemporary times? The report responds to this question with a plurality of answers. Firstly, conflicts are amplified beyond borders in an increasingly interconnected world. Secondly, in a world confronted with the phenomenon of terrorism (which the report insists is far more than just a security problem), as well as a world in possession of ever more potent weapons and the possibility of human and environmental catastrophe, the values of respect and understanding become topical.

The report is sensitive to the fact that to overcome violence, one needs to acknowledge that it is by capturing people's minds and loyalties that violence is cultivated. Thus, it recommends evolving new paths to bring people's loyalties to peace. The report, on the one hand, rejects civilizational explanations of global conflicts and on the other hand, discredits military interventions for the resolution of these conflicts. It suggests 'respect and understanding' as lasting ways to address global conflicts. Thus, the report is both a set of recommendations as well as a set of lenses with which one must engage with the issue of global violence.

The first half of the report lays out the foundations of its conceptual tools, the notion of 'respect' and 'understanding' and the kinds of violence that the world witnesses. It examines the explanations offered for global violence and looks toward identifying the forces that

³ Ibid, pp.16-17

actually nurture this violence. It looks at the relatively under-explored dimensions of global violence. It looks at the role of poverty in abetting conflict, inequality that feeds into poverty and vice versa. More thoughtfully, it emphasizes a psychological dimension of both poverty as well as inequality, namely, *humiliation*. The report urges us to address current as well as past humiliations.

The second half of the report is a logical corollary of the theoretical perspectives presented in the first half. There are a set of recommendations for the Heads of States within as well as outside of the Commonwealth. In the second half, there are three kinds of recommendations. There are recommendations on the principles which are in sync with the overall commitment to building an international culture of respect and understanding. Secondly, there are policy recommendations broad enough for individual governments to design more specific policies that best suit their cultural, political, economic and historical circumstances. Thirdly, there are a set of recommendations on the target groups that governments could partner with in order to build a culture of respect and understanding.

A commitment to the Commonwealth principles would include affirmation to use dialogue to address all international conflicts and political differences within the states. An affirmation to keep multilateralism as the preferred way to settle domestic as well as international issues and an affirmation to look for civil routes to peace instead of military ones.

The primary policy recommendations made are: to mobilize the international community against different kinds of violence while recognizing the factors that generate as well as nurture them; to spread awareness of the human diversity in the world; facilitate a better understanding and shedding of prejudices that people across societies and generations fall victim to; and enlarge the process of political participation. The report also urges governments to lay special emphasis on access to education, monitoring the quality of education and utilizing this powerful tool to disseminate values of respect, understanding, empathy and accepting diversity.

The report also proposes that certain groups could be partners with governments in these initiatives. A primary partner could be civil society, which could engage in advocacy and participate in creating awareness among the people. The second group is women. The report argues that women are the worst hit in a conflict situation. The losses that they commonly experience could be a resource for peace building. The third set the report recommends is faith-based groups. Most interestingly, the Commission identifies ex-combatants as potential partners too. The media could be another important partner which is very influential in shaping people's outlook as well as breaking down prejudices and preventing conflicts.

Indeed, the report addresses its mandate successfully. However, the extent to which its recommendations could achieve the desired ends is debatable. This is because the report relies on actor-centric recommendations alone, to address violence and global conflict. It ignores the structural impediments that these actors – the media, educational institutions, women, young

people and indeed governments find themselves in. These impediments could be located in the nature of international political economy, or the international balance of power. Such structural impediments that could limit the possibilities of a dialogue have remained unaddressed in the report. Sometimes, even agreements in principle between governments could go unimplemented due to structural pressures. Thus, to imagine a commitment to 'respect and understanding' by concerned actors, without addressing the contextual and structural limitations that impinge on them, could be unrealistic. These could be informal rules that inform the entire system, not necessarily based on the democratic pillars of 'respect and understanding'. Actors promoting respect and understanding in an environment that produces incentives for intensifying conflicts would be faced with an impossible mission.

However, the individual governments could utilize notions of respect and understanding to address structural issues as well. This lacuna in the report under observation is the possible space for another creative flight to take off on new thinking about global violence. This report shall certainly be the runway for any fresh look at lasting peace.