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Vatican panel says violence is 'greatest corruption of religion'

by Francis X. Rocca by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Violence is the "greatest corruption of religion," while belief in a single God is the "principle and source of love between human beings," says a new study by a Vatican advisory panel of theologians.

"God, the Trinity, and the Unity of Humanity" was released Thursday by the International Theological Commission, a group appointed by the pope to advise the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document argued against the idea that monotheism inevitably gives rise to religiously inspired violence.

The 55-page document was prepared by a 10-member subcommittee that included Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-Fai, secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. It was approved by Cardinal-designate Gerhard Müller, head of the doctrinal congregation.

The document responds to arguments positing "an intrinsic link between monotheism and violence" and says such arguments reflect a "number of misunderstandings" of "authentic Christian thought about the one God."

The very category of monotheism is "too generic," the authors argue, since it does not distinguish among the different traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

The document also objects to what it calls a "cultural simplification that reduces the alternatives to a choice between a necessarily violent monotheism and a presumptively tolerant polytheism."

The Bible contains a number of instances of "violence that involve God directly or indirectly," the authors acknowledge. Examples include God's destruction of the world in the great flood, and of Sodom and

Gomorra by fire, as well as several occasions when God orders the Israelites to exterminate armies or conquered cities as sacrifices to him.

While it rejects any interpretations that oppose a "bad God of the Old Testament and a good God of the New Testament," the document notes that the Hebrew Scriptures were written for a tribal culture "profoundly intertwined with the ethos -- intolerably violent for us -- of an archaic-sacral conception of honor and sacrifice, of conflict and reprisal, of war and conquest."

Moreover, the authors argue, the contrasting portrayals of violence in the Scriptures demonstrate the historical evolution of attitudes toward violence, "with the prospect of progressively overcoming it" through faith in God.

"The event of Jesus Christ, which universally manifests the love of God, enables the religious justification of violence to be neutralized," the document argues. "The death and resurrection of Christ (are) the key to the reconciliation of human beings."

The authors draw a link between Trinitarian love and the harmony of society: Through the sacraments, men and women become children of God and brothers and sisters to each other, achieving a spiritual unity that promotes a "human culture of social ties and the overcoming of enmity among peoples."

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Violence that appears religiously inspired is often really driven by economic and political interests that exploit faith and tend to malign religion in the name of a false humanism, the document argues.

Yet the authors warn that religion is constantly in need of purification, lest it yield to the "temptation of trading divine might for temporal power, which in the end takes the road of violence."

The document is available in Italian, along with an introduction in English and other languages, at the website of the Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which ordinarily publishes the Italian versions of the commission's documents.

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