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Subject: Infallibility - the old chestnut
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> So, I'm wondering - would you consider walking us through the
> reference you're referring to in SAQ?

I will try to do a translation of SAQ chapter 45 this weekend.

We have to start with the presumption that we do not know what 'isma or infallibility/immaculacy/preservation etc is, and also with the presumption that every word has seventy-two meanings. I will be happy if I can find six or seven of the meanings of the doctrines of infallibility in Bahai theology, mainly by looking at infallibility in parallel with the term khata' (sin, error, mistake, blame). Note that a different starting-point would probably produce different results!

We should start by surveying the term in some Quranic, Sunni and Shiah contexts, which may or may not point the way, but will certainly show that a single or clear meaning is not to be expected. We should also note that the word infallibility has different meanings in English: there is the infallible computer system with triple backups and self-correction (but subject to GIGO), there is the infallibility of the Pope speaking ex cathedra on questions of faith and morals, the inerrancy of scripture in some Protestant theologies, the infallibility of a correct deduction from correct premises in logic, and so on. Arabic and Persian are much the same: words take on different meanings in different contexts, and writers are not consistent with themselves or among themselves. The deduction of meanings from texts is therefore an inexact science.

For reasons that will become clear, it will be helpful to also bear in mind the various senses in which something or someone may be said to fail, err or sin in English. There is the failing which is part of our nature and has to be overcome, the mistake of perception (a mirage), a mistake in logic, the wrong we commit in ignorance, the harm we do to another by not thinking or failing to take proper care, there is law-breaking, failure to live up to our potential, or failure to satisfy requirements or expectations.

The Arabic term khata' corresponds to some of these. Broadly, a khata' is a mistake that is made in thought, speech or action. This contrasts to a fault or shortcoming which one has, an `ayb. The opposite of khata' is s.awaab, that which is correct. So in the field of knowledge, khata' is error and mistake; in the field of action, khata' is an omission or failure. From the omission or failure in action there is also the meaning of "the wrong which one commits," a transgression. In the Quran, 17:31, the killing of children is a great khita' (sic) which certainly looks like a culpable, not accidental, moral failing, but in 4:92 we have "It shall not be that the believer shall kill any believer, except by way of khata' ..." (mistake, misstep). The Quran also has related words. There is khatiia' in 4:112 where it seems to mean an accidental fault: It says, "one who acquires [something] by way of khatiia' or by way of ithm (sin, evil, crime) and throws it upon the innocent ..." Here, to 'acquire something' is simply to bear the responsibility for some act, not literally to get possession of an object. It makes most sense to me if khatiia' is accidental responsibility and ithm is culpable responsibility here.

Khata' became a technical term in various fields: in logic it means invalid, not true, mistaken. In Sunni theology there has been a long discussion about whether a mujtahid who reasons by correct logic from correct sources can come to a wrong conclusion. A mujtahid here is not necessarily an officially recognised person, but any Muslim who has acquired the knowledge and made the effort. But in the mainstream view, "being right" in such cases does not mean being factually correct, rather it means that the diligent mujtahid has duly fulfilled his or her responsibilities and will not suffer divine (or, ideally, human) punishment: the answer he or she has found is at least right for him in the sight of God. This is significant when we consider what is meant by isma' being given to every holy soul. (SAQ 172) Khata' in this context means being blameworthy.

In Shiah theology, the `ismat or sinlessness/infallibility of the prophets and imams means their freedom from khata' in the sense of moral shortcomings. `Ismat is an attribute attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams, and the Prophet's daughter Fatimah. They were called the "chahardeh ma`sum" the fourteen Pure Ones, of Shi`ism. Some Shi`ite thinkers such as Ibn Babuya thought that prophets and Imams could commit minor sins or lapses (as did Ibn Taymiyyah in Sunni theology) while others thought of them as morally perfect in every respect.

In criminal law, khata' means unintentionality, it is a mitigating circumstance in this world, and is supposed to be an exonerating circumstance for God's justice. Yet all four schools of Sunni law agree that someone who kills an animal (except in ritual sacrifice) in the sacred territory of Mecca, whether with ʿamd (deliberately) or from khata' (unintentionally), has to make the prescribed atonement. Khata' does not reduce liability for any injury done to another. Khata' here means a wrong done through failure, accident, or unawareness.

In Baha'u'llah's writings, one key text is paragraph 47 of the Kitab-e Aqdas:

He Who is the Dawning-place of God's Cause hath no partner (shirk) in the Most Great Infallibility (ʿismat al-kabrii). He it is Who, in the kingdom of creation, is the Manifestation of "He doeth whatsoever He willeth". God hath reserved this distinction unto His own Self (to God's nafs), and ordained for none a share in so sublime and transcendent a station. This is the Decree of God, concealed ere now within the veil of impenetrable mystery. We have disclosed it in this Revelation, and have thereby rent asunder the veils of such as have failed to recognize that which the Book [of God] set forth and who were numbered with the heedless.

The first thing we can see here is that the Most Great Infallibility of the Manifestation is not shared with anyone -- thus there is no Bahai equivalent of the imams or immaculate ones in Shi'ism. Paragraph 42 of the Aqdas says that charitable endowments revert (are under the control of) Baha'u'llah, and after him to the Aghsan or male descendants of Baha'u'llah, and after them to the Universal House of Justice. What he says in paragraph 47 shows that they are not his successors in the full sense: they do not succeed to the Most Great Infallibility. This is why Shoghi Effendi is so emphatic that he (the Guardian) "is not a stainless mirror" -- that is, he is not like the immaculate ones of Shiah Islam. While Baha'u'llah contrasts his teachings to the Shi'ah doctrine of infallibility, he also says that this teaching is revealed clearly now, which implicitly absolves those, such as the Shi'ah, who have in the past made other people partners with the Prophet.

The second point to note is that "he (God) does what he wills" is

treated as a privilege of God (a thing true only in reference to God), which is manifest in the world uniquely in the Manifestation. God is free to do what God wills, and God is infallible. The Manifestation of God is unique in manifesting the Most Great Infallibility and is the earthly manifestation of "God does what he wills." God's radical freedom from constraint means that God is free to change (or more properly, it means that if we imagine something to be a constraint on God, we are wrong). And the Manifestation is also free free, in the context of the Kitab-e Aqdas, to change the law of God, the shariah.

Baha'u'llah identifies himself here as the self or nafs of God, which is not the essence (dhat) of God but the actualised totality of the divine names and attributes. God has an unknowable Essence, but a manifest Self, and the manifest is manifested in the Manifestation. Next we should look at the Ishraqat, in Tablets of Baha'u'llah page 108, and then at the section in Some Answered Questions, in which the questioner asked about paragraph 47 of the Aqdas, but the answer draws on the Ishraqat.

As for your question:

- > is it possible that the House was intended to be the recipient of
- > divine guidance when legislating new laws but not for those
- > functions they have assumed that should have been under the pervue
- > of Shoghi Effendi and not for administrative functions?

If the House of Justice has assumed functions that should properly have belonged to Shoghi Effendi ... has it still the right to be called the House of Justice? I do not think it has done this; rather some Bahais who are not well informed about the covenant (some of whom may be UHJ members) may have attributed some of the Guardian's functions to the UHJ, and some may have attributed the UHJ's power of making laws to the Guardian. We can do this explicitly, but also implicitly. If we act or even think as if the Guardian's word is law, or as if the UHJ's word is an authoritative interpretation of scripture, we have (by mistake, khata') placed ourselves outside the covenant. The responsibility here does not rest on the Guardian or the UHJ, who cannot supervise all our thoughts and words. It rests on us as readers and doers, to keep the distinction clear.

The Guardian has a distinct sphere of authority, and is infallible only in that sphere (Udo Schaeffer cites the sources); the UHJ has a distinct sphere of authority -- but is its infallibility limited to that sphere? I know of no source text that says so: it is an argument from analogy which is weak, because we cannot be sure that we have identified what properties the analogy applies to.

- > Is it possible that, being the recipient of divine guidance
- > therefore means that the House would make infallible decisions for
- > not necessarily omniscient or valid reasons?

I am not yet sure that infallibility and guidance are always linked. Consider our sunni mujtahid above, who is not guided, but is free from khata' (blame) if he or she has been diligent.

But more broadly, yes, you are right. Any act can be s.awaab, right and proper, working for the good, even though the actors are not intending a good outcome. The exile of Baha'u'llah to Akka for example, where the unguided decision led to a pre-ordained outcome. But also the persecution of the Iranian Bahais that led them to go to Ishqabad and found a community. In this case, the unguided decisions of the persecutors led to an outcome that was not (so far as we know) pre-ordained, but the outcome was made good through the responses and initiative and energy of the exiles, through the inspiration of the Spirit. In the parable of the talents, the wicked servant accuses his master/God of reaping where he has not sown: turning to good what was never intended for good.

- > - is it masuum or massum?

It is ma`sum. The root is `s m, the person who has it or benefits from it is ma`sum, the abstract noun is `ismat or `isma (depending on whether you show the silent h/t letter at the end) and is translated as infallibility, immaculacy, freedom from khata' and so forth.

- > how can the UHJ make an infallible decision when they are using lies
- > and half-truths as their information source?

The UHJ has said "the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient, and the friends should understand that there is a difference between infallibility and omniscience. Like the Guardian, the House of Justice wants to be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision, and like him it may well change its decision when new facts emerge, or in light of changed conditions at some point in the future.

(The Universal House of Justice, 1996 Jun 14, Infallibility, Women on House of Justice)

People are free to give the UHJ false or incomplete information in order to elicit the reactions they want. Those who do so, demonstrate that they have no respect for the UHJ: they use the House and its members as means to their own ends.

God, however, is still able to reap where he has not sown