

This model of the meaning of infallibility concentrates on the element of freedom.

From: Sen McGlinn
To: talisman9@yahoogroups.com
Subject: Hello from a newbie
Date sent: Wed, 07 Feb 2007 10:41:14 +0100

> However, I have since realised that the same infallibility
> attributed to Bahauallah as the Manifestation of God is also
> ascribed to Abdul Baha and Shoghi Effendi, and that if I question
> this I could be expelled.

I do not think that even the most ultra of conservatives in the Bahai community would agree to this, because it is directly against the literal sense of the scriptures. There is one infallibility ('isma, the infallible person is ma'sum, literally this is protection and a protected one) that applies to Baha'u'llah and other Manifestations, as part of their essential nature. This is called the Most Great Infallibility, and there is another analogous infallibility which applies to all others, in actuality or potentially (it is an attribute of God, and the human person potentially displays all the attributes of God).

Shoghi Effendi translates 'isma in one place as "FREE from error:" "concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error." (In the Will and Testament). There are various arguments about what "error" is here: clearly it does not include minor factual errors, and from the list of synonyms which Baha'u'llah gives, it looks like a moral error, a sin, and a mistake only in that sense. I think it is also important to think about the "free" part of this expression. I think that this is an infallibility that we all have if we are aware we have it -- not in the sense of never making an error, but in the sense that we are not bound by the errors (sin) we have committed. We are free from sin's bondage, free to say, I was wrong, I did wrong, and to make amends and start again. In this definition, bondage to error (ie fallability) may be experienced as real, but is in fact a mistaken self-perception. Bondage is, for instance, imagining that I, my ego, my identity, could not stand the loss of face of admitting a fault, so I am bound to go on acting as if I did no wrong. Bondage would be the false perception that a new start is not possible (it is, to the last breath), or worst

of all, imagining that I simply could not commit error -- which would in itself be an error, since only the Master is 'the stainless mirror that reflects his light' (WOB 151).

Freedom from error (infallibility) is achieved by realising that errors are inevitable, that new starts are always possible, and that I am not the custodian of my identity, since I have given it to Baha'u'llah. So long as I can live in this spirit, error can never bind me. I am sure at least that the UHJ has this kind of freedom from error, and I hope that I may have it too.

This definition of infallibility has the virtue of explaining the relationship between the Most Great Infallibility of Baha'u'llah and the general infallibility which he refers to in the Ishraqat as "applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like." (no "mistake" there!) Baha'u'llah is the new start in person, looking at him we know that humanity is not bound to endlessly repeat the same old errors (we can make new ones :-)) -- we have not just a clean slate, but the possibility of going in a completely different direction.

Now hath the Truth appeared, and falsehood fled away; now hath the day dawned and jubilation taken over, wherefore men's souls are sanctified, their spirits purged, their hearts rejoiced, their minds purified, their secret thoughts made wholesome, their consciences washed clean, their inmost selves made holy:
(Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 38)

The possibility of anchoring (and letting go of) our identity in a transcendent person such as Baha'u'llah or Christ makes it possible to free oneself from 'what the world thinks' and the need to save face.

If on the other hand you suppose that the root meaning of infallibility is not making mistakes, you have to deal with the problem that Baha'u'llah, the embodiment of the Most Great Infallibility, did make mistakes (and you could then argue that they are not important ones), but you would also have the problem of distinguishing between the Most Great Infallibility and other infallibilities. If infallibility meant not making important mistakes, and the UHJ or the Guardian was infallible in this sense, how are they not partners in the Most Great Infallibility?

Baha'u'llah wrote:

within His realm of supreme infallibility He hath not taken a partner nor a counsellor unto Himself. (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 110)

and

He Who is the Dawning-place of God's Cause hath no partner in the Most Great Infallibility. 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, and ordained for none a share in so sublime and transcendent a station. (The Kitab-i-Aqdas, para 47)

And Abdu'l-Baha explains:

Know that infallibility is of two kinds: essential infallibility and acquired infallibility. In like manner there is essential knowledge and acquired knowledge; and so it is with other names and attributes. Essential infallibility is peculiar to the supreme Manifestation, for it is His essential requirement, and an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 171)

And how does the infallibility of the Guardian and UHJ and Abdu'l-Baha derive from that of Baha'u'llah? There should be a causative relation, as with all of the attributes of God. There is in my definition: I get my freedom (small 'f') from becoming aware of the Freedom displayed by Baha'u'llah ("He doeth whatsoever He willeth"), it is his gift to me. That is why, in the eleventh leaf of the Words of Paradise, Baha'u'llah can tell a new believer "Thou art free from sin and error."

The Universal House of Justice itself refers to its infallibility as applying only when it is "operating within its ordained sphere" (Wellspring of Guidance 82), which endorses the view that Udo Schaeffer put forward. (<http://tinyurl.com/2olh35>) This would mean that the interpretations of doctrine and teachings that the UHJ's letters unavoidably imply are distinctly fallible, as are its administrative and judicial decisions. I agree with Schaeffer that

there are only a handful of UHJ decisions which can be regarded as legislation, though we could argue about which ones these are. It may even be that there are none as yet, that in the future the UHJ will make a decision and say in so many words "this is an act of legislation."

I agree with you about conscience: I suspect that those who suggest it may be possible to surrender one's conscience by an act of will have never experienced conscience. They are speaking as if it is an external thing. For anyone who has a conscience in good working order, the idea is preposterous, but having a conscience is not like having a mind. A mind is part of our genes, conscience grows through the direct apprehension of the presence of God:

"observe with your own eyes and not with those of others, hearken with your own ears and not with the ears of others, and discover mysteries with the help of your own consciences and not with those of others."
(Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 29)

Whoso hath known God shall know none but Him, and he that feareth God shall be afraid of no one except Him, though the powers of the whole earth rise up and be arrayed against him.
(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 126)

"in the realm of conscience naught but the ray of God's light can command, and on the throne of the heart none but the pervading power of the King of Kings should rule..."
(Abdu'l-Baha, A Traveller's Narrative, p. 39)