

What does the doctrine of infallibility add to the Bahai teachings? What does it mean? This posting suggests that it is about freedom to change, which makes it a necessary corollary of progressive revelation (freedom to change the laws of religion) and of the authority of the Universal House of Justice to make and change laws.

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Subject: Infallibility
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On 12 Sep 2007 at 22:49, XX wrote:

- > For over five decades I've tried to get a grasp on the concept of
- > infallibility. Mainly, I've never clearly understood why followers
- > of any religion need to have it as an operational tool.
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- > Is it necessary to have something we're told to be infallible, and
- > is there proof of the infallibility of a thing? Or is it a cozy
- > tool to have to beat doubters over the head with absent of any
- > verifiable? I keep hearing folk toss around the word infallible as
- > though it's catholic to all religious thinking and if it means more
- > than my Uncle Beauchamop in Louisiana used to say: "If they right
- > they infallible; if they wrong they fallible." Or is that bit of
- > logic too simple for the theological mind. In future will there be
- > infallibility wars between Baha'i factions?

Well, no wars I hope. Only people who are terribly certain of their own rightness will go to war for it, and only a few Bahais are that certain. If they held a war, nobody would turn up.

I think YY has explained why people want to get hold of something infallible, in the sense of its never being wrong. It is so that they can be not-wrong themselves, it is a way of short-circuiting the critical faculty and banishing doubt and reflection. The inerrancy of scripture in Protestant doctrine is the clearest example: the claim is usually not used as a statement of humility in the face of scripture, but as a claim of superiority: it generally says, "I have the scriptural faith which cannot be wrong, so everyone different is wrong." Infallibility is also an assurance that something will be constant: it is used as a crutch for people who are having difficulty

in coping with a world of constant universal change.

Infallibility in the sense of never being wrong is simply a non-existent thing. Arguments about its general nature are therefore futile, and it cannot be proved or disproved in any specific case. What we can say is that, for infallibility in this sense to exist in the world, there would first have to be one universal standard of "rightness" and then one contingent thing or being which somehow escapes contingency and always has and always will be "right" against this one standard. Which standard then? The will of God? Scientific accuracy? effectiveness in maximising human happiness? Effectiveness in some other respect? If there is no universal "rightness" there cannot be anything which is universally and always right.

Infallibility in the Bahai writings does not mean never being wrong. Baha'u'llah for instance was wrong on some historical and scientific matters. Bahai infallibility is in the first place an attribute of God, and as such is shared with the whole creation, and its meaning is defined as "free from sin" that is, not bound by sin, free to do otherwise. Infallibility is a statement that sin does not reign -- except when we allow it to. It is an attribute of empowerment, a statement of our liberty from what seems to us to bind us. At every breathe, we are free to start again with a fresh slate. That is why the new believer is assured by Baha'u'llah:

Thou hast mentioned Husayn. We have attired his temple with the robe of forgiveness and adorned his head with the crown of pardon. ... Say: Be not despondent. After the revelation of this blessed verse it is as though thou hast been born anew from thy mother's womb. Say: Thou art free from sin and error. Truly God hath purged thee with the living waters of His utterance in His Most Great Prison.

(Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 76)

This is infallibility at the individual level.

In the same way, sovereignty is an attribute of God, and the individual can choose sovereignty for himself:

"Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereign ancient, imperishable and everlasting
(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words)

Each of the attributes of God takes different forms at different levels. So the kings are called "the manifestations of affluence and power and the daysprings of sovereignty and glory" (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 30), and in the Aqdas are told: "Arise, and serve Him Who is the Desire of all nations, Who hath created you through a word from Him, and ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty." At the same time, the founders of religions exhibit a different kind of sovereignty: "by sovereignty is meant the all-encompassing, all-pervading power which is inherently exercised by the Qá'im whether or not He appear to the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion. ... That sovereignty is the spiritual ascendancy which He exerciseth.." (Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Iqan, p. 107)

The same is true of infallibility: it takes different forms in the individual, in institutions, in relationships and so on.

"Know thou that the term 'Infallibility' hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like. However, the Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions." (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 108).

I will puzzle out the details of this below, but we can note now that it includes "every soul" but not all in the same sense, and that it says NOTHING about not being wrong: it is all about not ****doing**** wrong. And we can look to the next page and see that the example of the Most Great Infallibility which Baha'u'llah gives is the designation of Mecca as the place of pilgrimage. Muhammad puts Mecca in place of Jerusalem. He changed the Law of God. "Consider thou the blessed, the divinely-revealed verse in which pilgrimage to the House is enjoined upon everyone. It devolved upon those invested with authority after Him to observe whatever had been prescribed unto them in the Book. Unto no one is given the right to deviate from the laws and ordinances of God..." (There's a critique here of the Umayyid Caliphs in Damascus, who tried to make Jerusalem at least a rival place of pilgrimage). So the example of infallibility is that Muhammad changed the place of pilgrimage, and all after him had to obey that change. Except we do not go to Mecca on pilgrimage, do we? Baha'u'llah changed the Law again.

It is not just that infallibility means "being always right but only within one dispensation" -- which would be nonsensical anyway. It is stronger: infallibility actually MEANS freedom from bondage and therefore the freedom to change. In the case of the Manifestation, it means the freedom not to be bound by the Law of God as it was up till then. In the case of House of Justice, it is bound by what is revealed in the Book, but it is free to change its own rulings. It can say, "sorry, that is wrong" or "that is no longer best" and head off in another direction. The UHJ is not bound by its own history, or by the need to appear consistent to the world. It is FREE, in a way that the Pope is not. He, like the Shaykh al-Azhar and the Shi`ah Mujtahids, dare not be seen to change what the authorities before them have laid down. They are prisoners of history, and of the expectations of the faithful.

I said I would puzzle out the passage from the Ishraquat about infallibility in more detail. In Taherzadeh's translation of the Ishraquat, a new paragraph begins here:

When the stream of words reached this stage [maqam, station], the sweet savours of true knowledge [irfan] were shed abroad and the day-star of divine unity [tawhiid] shone forth above the horizon of His holy utterance. Whoso faileth to quaff the choice wine which We have unsealed through the potency of Our Name, the All-Compelling [al-qayyum - better would be -- the Self-Subsisting], shall be unable to discern the splendours of the light of divine unity or to grasp the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the sovereign Ruler of this world and of the world to come. Such a man shall be accounted among the faithless in the Book of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

There is no mention here of infallibility, but there is in the following paragraph, and the theme of the oneness of God forms a link. I am inclined therefore to think that it is not the sum of the foregoing Ishraquat, but rather the specific statement that the Manifestation has no partner in the Most Great Infallibility, which gives us 'true knowledge.'

Before answering the question, Baha'u'llah explains that he has delayed unveiling the doctrine because it will elicit opposition from the `ulamaa' and persecution for the faithful. Then he prefaces the actual explanation with a restatement of the sovereignty of the

Manifestation, and the threat this represents to existing religions:

... thou didst firmly adhere unto seemly patience during the days when the Pen was held back from movement and the Tongue hesitated to set forth an explanation regarding the wondrous sign [al-ayah al-`azmii], the Most Great Infallibility [`ismat al-kabrii]. Thou hast asked this Wronged One to remove for thee its veils and coverings ... We restrained the Pen for a considerable lapse of time in accordance with divine wisdom [hikmat] and for the sake of protecting the faithful ... The All-Merciful is come invested with power and sovereignty. Through His power the foundations of religions have quaked ... Know thou that the term 'Infallibility' [`ismat] hath numerous meanings and divers stations [ma`aan shattaa wa maqaamat shattaa = diverse meanings and diverse stations].

The reason why infallibility (in its Bahai meaning) causes the foundations of religions to quake, is that in Bahai teachings infallibility entails change and freedom to change, whereas in previous religions and even in the minds of some Bahais, it is used as a buttress *against* change. (!!) The parallel construction in the last sentence links the diversity in meaning to the different stations or levels at which infallibility applies, as we have seen above. Taherzadeh's translation continues

In one sense it [infallibility] is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error.

'In one sense' does not appear in the text, and the capitalisation of One, implying that this is the first station, the most great infallibility of the Manifestation, is an inference by the translator. In my view it is incorrect: this sentence and the following one are talking about the general use of the term, and its Arabic etymology. What it says literally is:

Where there is one whom God guards (`s.mahu) from slipping (az-zalal), he (God) confers upon him this name (infallible) as a station [fii maqaam].

Baha'u'llah is emphasising that the word `ismat comes from the verb `sm, to guard or protect, and the concept 'infallible' means that God has protected someone from something - in the first case, from a slip.

Zalal is a simpler term than khataa', it means a lapse, slip or mistake. Coincidentally, this explanation works in English: in-fallible means 'saved from falling,' as if God is beside us and catches our elbow when we are about to fall. The English etymology in this case is false, but the coincidence gives us a mnemonic for one meaning of the term.

The text continues, in my translation:

Similarly where God has guarded anyone from sin (khataa'), rebellion ('isyaan), impiety ('iraaaz) disbelief (kufr), joining partners with God (shirk) and the like, God grants each and every one of them the name of 'infallibility.'

In short, where God guards anyone from anything, this guarding is called 'ismat.

However, the Most Great Infallibility belongs to the One Whose station is a holiness above ordinances and prohibitions and an exemption from sin (khataa') and forgetfulness (nisyaan).] Indeed He is a Light which is not succeeded by darkness and a suitability [s.awaab = rightness, fittingness, perhaps righteousness here?] that is not subject to sin/failing (khataa'). Were He to pronounce upon water the decree of wine (i.e., that it is forbidden) or upon heaven the decree of earth, or upon light the decree of fire, it is the truth [haqq = truth, reality, legal right] and there is no doubt about it; and it is not for anyone to object to it (or, against him) or to say 'why and wherefore?.' If anyone objects, he is one of the objectors in the Book of God, the Lord of the worlds. Truly, he is "He shall not be asked of His doings, but they shall be questioned."

The Qur'an verse (21:23) refers to God, but the subject of this paragraph is the Manifestation of God. The last sentence asserts that the Manifestation is in this respect like God: free to do as he (or she) wills, without having to answer to others. This freedom includes changing laws, of which the extreme example would be to forbid the believers to drink water. It includes changing the language and symbols of the religions, in which, for instance, fire has been the symbol of punishment and disgrace, and light symbolises insight and purity. What is meant by pronouncing the decree of earth upon heaven? We imagine the physical and metaphorical heavens to be unchanging, while the earth (or the sub-lunar realm in medieval cosmology) is the

realm of change, relativity and conditionality. The Manifestation has the authority to introduce change into "heaven" -- into religion.

He is come from the invisible heaven (or: the heaven of concealment), and with him the banner 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth' and the hosts of power and authority (ikhtiyaar, which is authority in the sense of being able to *choose*) while it is the duty of all besides Him to hold fast to the religious laws (shari`ah) and ordinances (ahkaam) that have been enjoined upon them. Should anyone transgress them, even to the extent of a single hair, his work will miscarry.

The last sentence need not mean that one who ignores the religious laws will not prosper in this world -- the opposite is quite likely. The worst sort of people generally rise to the top. It seems more likely to mean that respect and obedience for the religious laws is a condition for the acceptability of good works in the eyes of God, and for the success of the mystic's efforts.

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