

Infallibility: Reflections from Roman Catholicism

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Should we be guided by our conscience or obey authority? Should one be loyal to the leader or be honest and straightforward? Both? Such questions have troubled human beings since antiquity.

Unificationists have at times been asked if they would obey the Founders without question with queries such as: "Would you do anything Rev. Moon asks of you?" or "Do you believe Reverend and Mrs. Moon are infallible?" After all, "absolute obedience" is a term found in the pledge regularly recited by Unificationists.

Recently, an article on this site by Dr. Michael Mickler discussing a Unificationist position on birth control referenced the 1968 papal encyclical entitled *Humanae Vitae* and its impact on the Roman Catholic world. As is widely known, Roman Catholics generally do not strictly follow church teachings on birth control and other matters.



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Mickler's article also demonstrated that Unificationists also apply church teachings differently on a variety of issues, including birth control. It can further be assumed that given the international nature of Unificationism, responses to authority vary depending on culture, ethnicity, upbringing, and a variety of other factors.

Regardless of theological differences, it may be helpful to study how Roman Catholics relate to papal statements on matters of faith. This article briefly explores the dogma of infallibility and how it is viewed within Catholicism, and offers some reflections in the hope of stimulating discussion about Unificationism's relationship to conscience, culture and authority.

It has been almost 150 years since the dogma of papal infallibility was proclaimed on July 18, 1870. During the final public gathering of Vatican I, a bishop received from Pope Pius IX's hand the document defining "Papal Infallibility." *Pastor Aeternus* contains the following statement that has been the subject of intense debate to this day:

"The Roman Pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when he discharges his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals, that is to be held by the universal Church, through the Divine assistance promised him in St. Peter, exercises that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed to endow his church."

The dogma of infallibility has profoundly influenced Catholic behavior and responses to issues such as abortion, contraception, the rights of women, and economic policy. In spite of the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s, the doctrine remains intact. Pius IX held the papal chair longer than any other pope before or since and his role in the institution of infallibility was significant.

Two other consequential acts of Pius IX, without the support of the Vatican council, were his definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in 1854, which provided a powerful stimulus to Marian devotion, and the issuance of the "Syllabus of Errors" in 1864 -- a condemnation of 80 contemporary philosophical and theological propositions. Interestingly, the 80th "error" read:

"That the Roman pontiff can and should be reconciled with, and agree to progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

The above, along with the dogma of infallibility, put Catholicism squarely against modernization and virtually petrified the church.

View of Apologists

"Everyone talks about the infallibility of the Pope, but how many understand what it really means? This does not mean that the Pope can tell "infallible jokes" or "sneeze infallibly." The Catholic Church does not insist that the Pope is infallible in each and every statement, piece of action, or item of daily conduct." (Francis Sugrue, *Popes in the Modern World*)

A prominent Catholic view emphasizes that the pope is considered infallible only when he speaks *ex cathedra*, i.e., from the episcopal throne, and this means only when he is speaking as shepherd and teacher of all Christians and defines a doctrine of faith or morals to be upheld by the church, a privilege the pope does not exercise often.

The following five conditions summarize Papal Infallibility:

1. The Pope must be in union with the faith of the Church, and he must be acting as the expresser of the faith.
2. He must be acting in his capacity of chief shepherd and teacher of all the faithful and not just as the bishop of Rome or in some lesser capacity.
3. He must be utilizing his supreme apostolic authority.
4. He must be teaching a revealed doctrine of faith or morals.
5. He must be binding definitively all the faithful.

View of Opponents

Two Catholic opponents of the infallibility dogma were the late Catholic historian, August Bernhard Hasler (1937-80), and systematic theologian Hans Küng.

For some, the dogma of infallibility originates in early Christianity while for others it is a recent development. Hasler claimed that although Jesus himself never spoke of his infallibility, the issue of authority has been a critical one in Christianity's development. He claims a major turning point took place with the merger of church and state during the 4th century reign of Constantine. Without ecclesiastical consensus, the emperor's infallibility was at issue and thus not only was the church's cohesion at risk but also the stability of the state.

Hasler claimed the dogma of papal infallibility was an ideology and that the definition was largely effected through papal pressure that made the Vatican I Council unfree.

Küng, in his monumental book *Infallible? An Inquiry*, attacks what he calls "*a priori* infallibility," which means that church officials are made immune from error prior to the utterance of certain kinds of doctrinal decisions. This immunity from error supposedly derives from the special assistance of the Holy Spirit and ensues whenever the holders of ecclesiastical office desire and pray for it. Küng opposes the dogma's absolutist element since it leads to an inflexible church unable to adapt to new circumstances.

Reflections

From a Unificationist perspective, Pius IX was going against the flow of history which was moving toward democratic forms of government. This act caused the church and societies it influenced to be hindered in their progress. Fortunately, Roman Catholic experience in America and the horrors of Nazism and fascism in Europe helped the process of curing the church of its fear of democracy and eventually led to its support for religious freedom.

Unification teaching views the period from 1789 until 1914 as the era of the maturation of politics, economy and ideology, and Pius IX falls within this time. In *Divine Principle*, we read:

"...[T]he society centering on the pope turned out to be the society of absolute monarchy on the Satanic side... The society of absolute monarchy which fettered freedom of faith under Christian democracy since the Religious Reformation, went contrary to the attainment of the purpose of the Abel-type view of life." (pp. 465-66)

As the papacy was losing its temporal power, Pius IX insisted on reaffirming his power in religious matters by making a desperate effort to secure his position and preserve an ideology of the past. However, the era of absolute monarchy had passed and thus infallibility caused stagnation in Catholic realms influenced by the church.

What can Unificationists learn from the Catholic experience? The possibilities are endless. A focus on the following can be a start:

- Theological
- Cultural
- Role of conscience

Unification Christology differs from traditional Christian theology in that Christ is seen as a mediator between God and humanity and not the Creator. Although Unification teaching emphasizes the spiritual authority of the Messianic couple, it does not support a doctrine of infallibility in the Catholic sense.



Another factor is the international and intercultural nature of the Unification Movement that is similar to the Catholic Church. Analyzing cultural differences in Europe and elsewhere and the various responses to doctrines such as infallibility can be helpful. Unificationist experience demonstrates that Koreans, Japanese, Africans, Europeans, and Americans view and process statements by the Founders very differently.

Try telling a joke using British idioms to an audience that is primarily Asian or sharing Spanish anecdotes with a unilingual English-speaking American. Someone not familiar with the cultural expressions and colloquialisms of a given language will not easily understand its nuances.

Sociologist Victor J. Willi's comments in a late 1970s article in a Swiss-German newspaper on cultural and sociological aspects of infallibility struck a chord given my own heritage. He argues that infallibility is one thing north of the Alps and another to denizens of southern Mediterranean regions:

"Italians typically make no connection between recognizing an authority as such and obeying it unconditionally or, still less, identifying themselves totally with it. There are many indications that southern Europeans have never taken the Church's doctrinal opinions as seriously as Northerners are forever doing.... In the final analysis, however, this is a battle between the spirit of authority and the spirit of freedom – which is why so many Catholics have gotten so heated over it. They see danger threatening the principle of authority and consequently, the foundations of their own inner security as well. For the same reason even Protestants may be seen as supporting each other's authoritarian system."

Some Italians may not share the above view because it may be an over-generalization, yet it leaves us with something to ponder.

Most Unificationists have noticed the profound differences between the way things are said and done in the East as compared to the West. The Unification Movement has strong roots in Korea and Japan and it is no secret that there are profound differences between Europeans, Americans, Africans, etc., in the way doctrines and dogmas are interpreted.

For Unificationists, the Founders are considered God's representatives on earth and their authority is generally not challenged. There may be differences of opinions and tactical disagreements as testimonials from many Unificationist elders demonstrate, but ultimately their authority is accepted. There are concerns, however, about preserving authority once the Founders have passed.

Will the Unification Movement adopt a more authoritarian approach to governance or a more collegial and democratic form guided by councils that will exercise ultimate authority? Clear guidelines are imperative.

Some Unificationists emphasize that one's conscience is supreme. Translating conscientious behavior into forms of governance provides for even greater challenges – not to mention abiding by a constitution.

Rev. Moon did share some thoughts on all of the above over 40 years ago:

"Human lies are everywhere because lies are very convenient. Without lies, commercial people practically couldn't continue in business. What about God? He does not lie, and does not hear lies because He knows they are lies. He sees through them. Often we listen to lies without knowing it, but not God. We are exposed as we really are before God because our lies cannot hide anything from Him. This means you cannot even trust me 100%. I have human weaknesses. That's an honest and frank statement. However, I am introducing you to a person you can trust 100%: God." (January 2, 1977)

He clearly emphasized that our trust should be in God. Such a statement does not provide a simple solution, however it does provide an impetus for further research and study. And although the dogma of infallibility as found in Roman Catholicism differs from the trust Unificationists place in the authority of the Founders, there is still much to learn.

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Graphic at top: *A depiction of St. Peter's Square in Vatican City*