

# INFALLIBILITY IN MORALS

GERARD J. HUGHES, S.J.

*Heythrop College, University of London*

**D**ESPITE THE considerable amount of discussion about the teaching authority of the Church in morals both before and after the appearance of *Humanae vitae*, and despite the reawakened interest in the theology of infallibility in general since the publication of Hans Küng's *Infallible?*, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the particular problems posed by the notion of infallibility in morals.<sup>1</sup> There have been few attempts to analyze exactly what might be expected of the Church as an infallible teacher in morals; and it has been assumed, I think, that the dogma of infallibility has more or less the same consequences when it is applied to morals as it has when it is applied in the field of dogmatic teaching. I believe that this assumption, though in one sense it is perfectly true, can be shown to be misleading, and that some of our expectations and attitudes towards the moral teaching of the Church are, correspondingly, ill-founded. I shall therefore try to set out some preliminary considerations in favor of the view that there are considerable differences between what is involved in infallibility in faith and what is involved in infallibility in morals—differences which are significant for the whole question of method in moral theology. And I shall preface this with some remarks on the meaning of “infallible” and “irreformable” quite in general.<sup>2</sup>

## “INFALLIBLE” AND “IRREFORMABLE”

Vatican I predicated infallibility of the pope and of the Church, and irreformability of certain of their teachings. It has, unfortunately, become common practice to describe not merely persons as infallible, but also their teachings. Thus, Küng is quite happy to speak of “infallible propositions,” “infallible and immutable propositions of faith,” “propositions that are a priori infallible,” and, most unhappily of all, of “propositions that are not regarded as self-evident in the philosophical sense, though theologically infallibility is attributed to them.”<sup>3</sup> Al-

<sup>1</sup> Though Küng takes *Humanae vitae* as his starting point, his subsequent discussion deals with infallibility quite generally. The recent debate has, in the main, followed the same pattern, as can readily be seen from the articles and bibliographies provided in *Concilium* 3, no. 9 (March 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Some of these general remarks have been made before—notably by P. McGrath in his admirable “The Concept of Infallibility” in the above-mentioned issue of *Concilium*; but my approach is somewhat different.

<sup>3</sup> *Infallible?* pp. 117, 123, 124, 139–40.

though one might be tempted to admit this usage as a natural extension of the terminology of Vatican I, it leads to a disastrous blurring of the distinction between an infallible person and an irreformable truth, and to a consequent misunderstanding of both terms.

Consider the following two statements (where  $p$  is any proposition): (1) If an infallible person teaches that  $p$ , then it necessarily follows that  $p$  is true. (2) If an infallible person teaches that  $p$ , then  $p$  is a necessary truth. Confusion between 1 and 2 is surely behind Küng's talk about "infallible propositions," "propositions that are a priori infallible," and the contrast he makes between propositions which are *not* philosophically self-evident but *are* theologically infallible. But 1 and 2 are very far from being synonymous; it is clear that 1 is true because of the very meaning of the word "infallible," and that 2 is in all probability false.<sup>4</sup> And, in any event, 2 is certainly not a corollary of the definition of Vatican I. Confusion between 1 and 2 leads to the suggestion that there are infallible truths, and that these truths are necessary truths which are true a priori.

Vatican I certainly did not wish to restrict the scope of infallibility to the teaching of necessary truths. Consider:

- a)  $2 + 1 = 3$ .
- b) Murder is wrong.
- c) Nothing can be red and green all over.
- d) The Son of God died on a cross in the first century A.D.
- e) There are seven sacraments.
- f) Christ redeemed man by His death and resurrection.

The first two of these are necessary truths because, given the definitions of the symbols in *a* and the definition of "murder" as "wrongful killing" in *b*, they are both tautologies. I doubt whether it could be plausibly maintained that *c* is a tautology, but a good case could be made out for the view that it is a necessary truth, given the causal relations which hold in our world. In somewhat different ways, then, *a*, *b*, and *c* *could* not be other than true.

In contrast, none of the last three sentences expresses a necessary truth. Presumably Christ could have died at a different time and in a different manner; there could have been a different number of sacraments; and no doubt man's redemption could have been accomplished by some other means. It just so happens that *d*, *e*, and *f* are true, but they

<sup>4</sup>It is perhaps worth stressing that 1 is true simply on what one might describe as lexicographical grounds, and not because of anything to do with theology. Thus, if an infallible tipster says that Long John Silver will win the Derby, then it necessarily follows that Long John Silver will win the Derby. We may not believe that there *are* any infallible tipsters, but 1 states what would have to be true of them if they did exist.

could have been false. On the other hand, it is surely clear that *d*, *e*, and *f* could be infallibly taught, and some might well wish to say that each of them is being infallibly taught. It follows that Vatican I can hardly have wished to maintain that everything infallibly taught by pope or Church was a necessary truth.

Once one has made the mistake of speaking of infallible truths, and of supposing that infallible truths are necessary truths, it is but a small further downhill step to suppose that these infallible truths must be "timeless truths" or "true for all time." The notion of a timeless truth is somewhat more complex. Consider:

*g*) Murder is wrong.

*h*) There are three persons in God.

*i*) Britain is a member of the Common Market.

The first of these, being a definitional tautology and a necessary truth, is therefore a timeless truth in the sense that it is not true at one time rather than another. In the case of *h*, we have a truth which is timeless in rather a different way. The "are" in *h* is concerned with the timelessness of the eternity of God, and *h* is a timeless truth in that it is an eternal truth. Now, in comparison with *g* and *h*, it would appear that *i* cannot be described as a timeless truth at all. After all, there was a time when Britain was not a member of the Common Market, and there may well be a time when Britain will no longer be a member. Yet if, in 1973, it is true to say that Britain is a member of the Common Market, it will remain true for all time that, in 1973, Britain was a member of the Common Market; and from time immemorial it has always been true that in 1973 Britain would be a member of the Common Market. This holds good despite the fact that one could not say that at all times Britain is a member of the Common Market. Similarly, it is true for all time that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, although it is not true that at all times Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. There is thus a weak sense in which one might say that any truth timelessly-is true. If something is true, it can never turn out to have been false, although it may not always have been true, and may not always be true in future. It is most important to distinguish this weak sense in which any truth timelessly-is true from each of the other two kinds of "timeless truth" already mentioned.<sup>5</sup> It would be disastrous if, having grown accustomed to speak of infallible

<sup>5</sup> One might profitably at this point introduce a distinction between sentences, statements, and propositions, and discuss of which of these truth is a property. I have avoided these technicalities for the sake of simplicity of presentation both here and in the discussion of irreformability below, without, I hope, falsifying the position. On the weak sense of "timeless" and its connection with one sense of "necessary," see G. E. M. Anscombe, "Aristotle and the Sea Battle," *Mind* 65 (1956) 1-15.

truths, we assumed that they had to be necessary truths and therefore timeless in the strong senses mentioned. The notion that "infallible truths" have to be "true for all time" can easily lead to serious mistakes in connection with the idea of irreformability.

I therefore suggest that, in order to avoid such confusions in future, we return to the usage of Vatican I and restrict the term "infallible" to persons. There is no special class of truths which are infallible truths. In principle, and so far as the notion of infallibility itself as given by 1 is concerned, any truth whatsoever *could* be infallibly taught, be it about God, Caesar, or the Derby. Now, of course, it is no part of Catholic belief that the infallibility of the Church extends beyond the sphere of faith and morals. But it is still worth pointing out that, so far as the logic of infallibility goes, any truth whatever about faith or morals could, in principle, be the content of an infallible teaching. There are many truths in these realms which are not necessary truths and which are timeless truths only in the weak sense in which any truth timelessly-is true. All that should be claimed when it is said that the Church has infallibly taught that *p*, is that *p* is true—not that it is some specially privileged *kind* of truth.

Similarly, when it is said that a truth infallibly taught is irreformable, what should be meant by this, I suggest, is quite simple. What is infallibly taught is irreformable precisely in the sense that *any* truth is irreformable. At no future time can it turn out that what was infallibly taught was false, just as at no future time can it turn out that Caesar did not cross the Rubicon if it was ever true that he did. But the irreformability of the truth that Caesar crossed the Rubicon does not entail that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon now.

#### REFORMING AND REFORMULATING

The argument as so far developed might give rise to a certain uneasiness on two rather different grounds. The first difficulty might be expressed rather crudely by saying that the truths of the faith are surely very different from truths about Roman history or Britain's position in Europe. Sorting out this difficulty will, I believe, take us to the heart of the difference between infallibility in faith and infallibility in morals. But before tackling that question, a few remarks are necessary about the second possible ground for uneasiness about what has so far been said.

The irreformability of a truth in the sense in which I suggest it be understood is not directly linked to the unchangeability of the way in which such a truth might be expressed. Thus, merely because a given sentence was once the proper way to express a truth, it does not follow that simply repeating that sentence will enable us to go on expressing

that truth. Had an English-speaker been present at the crossing of the Rubicon, it would have been proper for him to describe what was happening by saying "Caesar is crossing the Rubicon." In so saying, he would have expressed a truth. But for me now to say "Caesar is crossing the Rubicon" would be for me to say something which is false. To express the same truth, I should have to reformulate my sentence somewhat and say "Caesar *crossed* the Rubicon." Quite generally, we can say that repetition of the same sentence *could* express the same truth only in the case of those truths which are timeless in the strong sense.\* The sentence "There are three persons in God" might serve to express a truth no matter when it is uttered, because the truth that it expresses is timeless. There is no need to reformulate this sentence by changing the tense of the verb, as had to be done with the Rubicon example. I hope it will become clear in the sequel that this apparently trivial kind of reformulation is far from being unimportant.

There are, of course, still further reasons which might lead us to reformulate the way in which truths are expressed. I might, for instance, wish to translate the sentence into another language. And in this connection one might remark that the technical language of theology is a different language from the current idiom of every day, and that moving from the one to the other raises all the problems of translation, even if it does so less obviously. Thus, a theologian might wish to say in theological English that Christ was not a human person; and yet to repeat this sentence in everyday English might tend to mean that Christ did not have a fully human nature. In everyday English we might do better to say something like "Christ *is* a fully human person, just as He is fully God; but He is not two individuals." Other examples of the same kind can easily be found. The general point is that formulae, sentences, might *have* to be reformulated precisely to enable us to continue to express a truth which itself is irreformable.

To be sure, there will no doubt be endless arguments about the propriety of certain reformulations, and whether or not a suggested translation or reformulation does express the same truth or not. And this in turn might raise difficult questions about precisely what the truth was that the original formula expressed. Even if we know that something is being infallibly taught in Scripture or in a conciliar definition, for example, and that therefore *some* truth or other is being expressed by a given form of words, it may not be a simple matter to determine precisely

\* Even in the case of timeless truths, as will appear, repetition of the same sentence will not *guarantee* continued expression of the truth. The point is that apart from timeless truths, mere repetition of the sentence could not possibly serve to continue to express the truth.

*which* truth is being expressed, as the history of exegesis and dogmatic theology makes abundantly clear. But it should be obvious that nothing which I have said about the irreformability of truths should be taken to foreclose any question about the reformulability of the ways in which those truths are expressed. The very real and difficult questions concerning *when* something is being infallibly taught, and precisely *what* is being infallibly taught, should not be confused with the irreformability insisted upon—and quite rightly, in my view—by Vatican I.

#### INFALLIBILITY IN FAITH AND IN MORALS

##### *The Truths of Faith*

If what has so far been argued is correct, it makes no sense to ask whether the truths of faith are not somehow more irreformable than the truths of morals; for I have argued that, in the only sense of “irreformable” which is not misleading, all truths are equally irreformable, since they are all equally timeless in the weak sense of “timeless” with which irreformability is concerned. Irreformability is a property of truths in faith *and* in morals, as the definition of Vatican I would suggest. Nevertheless, it does make sense to ask whether the truths of faith and of morals are, typically, timeless in one or other of the stronger senses I have discussed. If they are, it would follow that at least one reason for having to reformulate the way in which they are expressed need not normally concern us. We would not have to consider the kind of reformulation in tense from “Caesar is crossing the Rubicon” to “Caesar crossed the Rubicon”—a reformulation imposed upon us by the time-bound nature of the truth in question.

Many of the truths of faith are both timeless in the strong sense and necessary (even if we have no adequate insight into the ontological ground of this necessity). Thus, that there are three persons in God is both eternally true and necessarily true. That man stands in need of redemption is timeless in a different but still strong sense; it will continue to be true, and there will never be a time when we shall have to alter the tense of the sentences in which this truth is expressed. But that man stands in need of redemption is not a necessary truth in any sense. Many of the central truths of Christianity are not necessary truths, but are timeless truths—those concerning, for example, the need for grace, the redemptive power of Christ, the Church as a means of salvation. It is this timelessness of many dogmatic truths, I believe, that has led people to consider them to be totally unlike truths about Caesar and the Rubicon, and then has led them to misinterpret infallibility and irreformability as Küng does.

However, not all the truths of faith are timeless in this strong sense,

and this fact is reflected in the tense changes we have to employ in order to continue to express them. Christ, who *died* for our sins, *having* once risen from the dead, *will* never die again (cf. Rom 6:9). Nevertheless, many even of the time-bound truths of faith have the quality of the *hapax* about them: they refer to events which took place once and for all. They reflect the immutability of the saving plan of God which continues to be effective at all times. These truths, then, though they are time-bound, are bound up with realities which are continually effective at all times, despite the changing circumstances of our world. As a result, even in the case of the time-bound truths of faith it has been easy for us to pay little attention to the tense-changes in the formulae in which they are expressed, and hence to assimilate them to the genuinely timeless truths of faith. It has been easy to build up a global impression of the timeless necessity of the truths of faith, and to go on to suppose that this is intrinsic to the concept of infallibility itself. But I hope it will be clear that not all the truths of faith are either timeless or necessary, and that in any case infallibility has nothing to do with necessity or with timelessness in these senses. It should not require much further reflection to show that this global impression, erroneous as it is even in the realm of faith, can be even more dangerously misleading when it is carried over into the area of morals.

### *Truths in Morals*

Now there certainly are some moral truths which are necessary truths. "Murder is wrong" expresses a necessary truth, simply because it is a definitional tautology. Perhaps the same can be said of the well-known *bonum est faciendum, malum vitandum*, which many scholastic moralists took to be self-evident and analytic.<sup>7</sup> There are, indeed, very many of these tautologies in morals. Take, for example, "Love is a moral value." The tautologous interpretation that we place upon this statement is apparent from the fact that alleged counterexamples are dealt with by saying that such-and-such conduct is not *really* love. There have been similar attempts to insist that "lying is wrong" is always true by defining "lying" in such a way that the statement then becomes tautologously true. However, to the extent that such statements are necessary truths, they are in themselves unhelpful. And to restrict infallibility to the teaching of such necessary moral truths would be a self-denying ordinance indeed.

<sup>7</sup> I think a good case can be made out for the view that in Aquinas's moral theory this is not to be taken as an analytic statement at all, though I do believe he considered it to be self-evident; but this depends on what one takes to be the meaning of *bonum* in Aquinas, and on an analysis of his theory of obligation generally.

It follows that there are also timeless moral truths, since any necessary truth is also a timeless truth. Moreover, there are also moral truths which are timeless in the sense of being eternal truths, such as that God is just. But for the most part, moral truths are neither timeless nor necessary in any of these ways, although since moral truths are truths, they will all be timeless in the weak sense in which any truth timelessly-is true.

In order to show more easily that moral truths typically are not timeless truths in any strong sense, I wish to introduce the idea of a "normal form" for the expression of moral judgments, on the analogy of "normal form" as this term is used in logical theory. In saying that a moral judgment is expressed in its normal form, I do not mean that it is expressed in the way that we would usually express it, or in the way that we would find it most natural to express it. I mean that it is expressed in such a form that its structure and implications are made especially perspicuous. I wish to lay down three conditions which, taken together, define the notion of "normal form" for the expression of moral judgments: (1) The main verb of the sentence must be in the indicative. (2) The predicate must be a properly moral predicate. (3) The moral predicate must be asserted or denied of a subject which itself is nonmorally described.

Condition 1 excludes sentences which are cast in the grammatical form of imperatives, wishes, expressions of emotion or attitude, and the like. Condition 2 ensures that predicates like "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," and "just" are being used in a properly moral sense, rather than in a nonmoral or premoral sense such as might be appropriate in speaking of a good idea, a good kettle, or when using a moral term in a conventional sense such as that described by R. M. Hare in *The Language of Morals* as an "inverted-comma" sense. Condition 3 is rather more complex in that it suggests that there is a clear line of demarcation between descriptive, evaluative, and morally evaluative terms—which very probably there is not. For the purposes of the argument it will suffice if those using the terms in question, or party to any argument in which they are being employed, can reach agreement that no moral issues are begged by the very way in which the subject of the moral judgment is described. If such agreement is not forthcoming about a given set of terms, I think it will always prove possible to find an alternative description of the subject of the judgment such that this new description is agreed to leave the truth of the judgment an open question.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>It might be helpful here to distinguish between nonmoral terms and morally neutral terms. I should wish to say that "killing Jones" is a nonmoral term (in contrast to a moral term such as "murdering Jones"). But I should not wish to regard "killing Jones" as a description which is morally neutral, because it seems to me as a matter of fact that it is



An example may perhaps serve to make the force of these conditions clearer. "Never tell lies" violates 1 (and, I imagine, 2 and 3 as well), because it is not cast in the indicative mood. As a result, it cannot as such be either true or false. We will have to reformulate it as "Telling lies is always wrong." In this form the judgment will satisfy 1. It will also satisfy condition 2, provided that "wrong" is not being used in a merely conventional sense ("People always say that one shouldn't tell lies, but is it *really* wrong?"). However, whether "Telling lies is always wrong" satisfies 3 or not will depend on whether we can identify what behavior is to count as telling a lie without having to make any further moral judgment. It seems very unlikely that this is the case. Is the principle as now reformulated meant to cover leg-pulls, "Not at home," and mental reservations? The principle will not satisfy 3 unless and until all these possible ambiguities in the subject term have been clarified by replacing any unclear expressions with nonmoral descriptions of the kind of conduct which the principle is intended to cover, so that we can see to which cases the principle applies without any further moral ado. This may be a long and cumbersome process. But it follows from this that any moral judgment expressed in normal form will be synthetic, not analytic.<sup>9</sup> In what follows I shall be speaking only of principles and judgments expressed in normal form, and I shall leave out of account moral judgments made about God.

I submit that any moral judgment expressed in normal form can be shown to be inadequate in two ways.

For a moral judgment to be adequate, it will have to have in its subject term nonmoral descriptions of a potentially infinite number of morally relevant circumstances—all the possible accounts, in nonmoral terms, of behavior which could count as lying, for example, including all those factors which either make a morally relevant difference or are alleged to

---

*prima facie* wrong to kill Jones (whereas on my definition of "murder" it is *absolutely* wrong to murder Jones). "Shooting a gun," on the other hand, is both a nonmoral and a morally neutral term. My conditions for normal form require that the subject term(s) be nonmoral, but not that they be morally neutral.

<sup>9</sup> I think that there is no difficulty in showing (though space prevents me from doing so here) that all moral judgments can be expressed in normal form. Moreover, despite appearances, I think that my requirement 1 does not beg any important metaethical questions such as a noncognitivist might wish to raise. I intend condition 1 to be making no more than a linguistic requirement; it is perfectly open to a noncognitivist to argue that moral judgments are neither true nor false and that the indicative form in which they are expressed is misleading. He will say this of our ordinary way of expressing them, and of those expressed in my normal form, in just the same way. My normal form is, in this respect, no more contentious from his point of view than our ordinary language is. Nor is condition 3 question-begging, for the reasons suggested in the text.

make one. It will not do, for instance, to try to take a short cut by defining "lying" as "not telling the truth when the person has a right to it," since this includes the moral term "right," which violates 3. One might think that there were only a limited number of such factors. But I see no way of showing that this is the case. On the contrary, if one considers the development of casuistry, not merely in moral theology but also (and perhaps especially) in the civil and criminal law, it would seem that we can never come to the end of listing facts which could be material facts, which could make a difference to the scope of a law or of a moral principle. Thus, to continue with an example from the area of truth-telling, to give an exhaustive formulation of the present state of the law of perjury would be an immensely long undertaking; and, of course, there is absolutely no reason to suppose that the present state of the law will suffice to deal with all future cases.

Perhaps the impression that laws or moral principles (which, in their normal form, have at least this in common with laws) can be adequately formulated in a finite number of words derives from the fact that in many cases we *can* apply some brief formulae without the need to make any further *controversial* moral (or legal) judgments. Nevertheless, we *are* still making further moral or legal judgments, however obvious they may seem. We are saying, in effect, that it is obvious that such-and-such conduct is "lying" or "perjury" as we have defined those terms, even though the description of precisely *this* conduct nowhere occurs in our definition. But were the moral principle, or the law, to be expressed in normal form (where no further judgment is required in order to apply it), precisely this behavior simply would not be covered at all. It follows that the principle in its brief and currently used form is inadequate as a *statement* of what we take to be wrong, or illegal, even though it might be satisfactory as a *guide* for settling the case in point. And, of course, if the further judgment required *is* controversial, the previously formulated principle will not be adequate even as a guide.

A second way of demonstrating that most moral principles must be inadequate when expressed in their normal form is to ask what happens when we subscribe to more than one such principle. If we do—as, for instance, if we believed that it is wrong to say what is not true and that it is wrong to do something which results in someone's death—it will necessarily follow that they cannot both be adequately stated, unless we can prove independently that no situation could arise in which the two principles would yield conflicting judgments on what should be done. I do not see how such a proof could possibly be constructed. At best, then, one might be able to order the principles so that, in cases of conflict, the first was always to be followed rather than the second, and the first and

second rather than the third, and so on. At best, then, only the first principle could be regarded as adequate. At worst, we might not even be able to order them in this way, and as a result could regard none of them as adequate.<sup>10</sup>

It follows from this, I think, that moral principles are of their very nature time-bound; for some of the morally relevant considerations which would have to be included to make the principle more adequate will have to be described in terms which become available only at a later date. Thus, any adequate (or more adequate) expression in normal form of the principle of the just war would have to include nonmoral descriptions of weapons, combatants and noncombatants, possible alternative means of recourse, etc. And in, say, the fourteenth century several very important descriptions in each of these categories simply were not available, nor is there any reason whatever to suppose that *all* of them are available to us now. Similar considerations will apply, obviously, to medical ethics, to the problems of pollution and population control, and to the problems raised by developing technology generally. No moral principle in normal form, then, can be either a timeless or a necessary truth.

### *Irreformability in Morals*

A more adequate and a less adequate version of the same moral principle will necessarily yield contradictory results when they are applied to at least one particular case, since any development in adequacy necessarily involves a change in scope. There will therefore be at least one action A which will be judged wrong at one time and right at another: depending on whether the principles are expressed positively or negatively, A will be judged permissible on one version of the principle and not permissible on another, or obligatory on one version of the principle and not obligatory on another. We can expect moral principles to be adequate as *guides*; and we can expect them to be reasonably adequate as statements of our obligations relative to the state of our factual knowledge at any given time. But I do not see that we can expect judgments of every particular action, nonmorally described, to remain unaltered.

In the sense of "irreformable" which I have proposed, then, it would appear that moral principles of their very nature cannot be completely irreformable. I do not mean simply that they will be reformulable with regard to their expression, language, and phraseology, though this, of

<sup>10</sup> Neither of the principles here used as illustrations, of course, is usually taken to be adequate. But the reader who still remains unconvinced of the generality of my conclusion is invited to try to produce even two adequate principles in normal form.

course, is true. I mean that up to a point they will necessarily be reformable with regard to their *content*. The application of the theory of infallibility to morals must take account of this characteristic of moral principles. A moral principle may be said to be "true as far as it goes" in a way in which it would not make sense to say that "The Son of God died on a cross" is true so far as it goes. Of course, there is a good deal more to be said about the redemptive death of Christ than is said in this brief statement, which can therefore be supplemented without in any way being intrinsically altered. But in the case of a moral judgment, it is intrinsically altered by being more adequately stated. Hence, whereas irreformability in dogma is the irreformability of truth, irreformability in morals can only be the irreformability proper to truth-as-far-as-it-goes. Irreformability in morals must therefore mean that if a moral principle ever was true, however inadequately, then it will at all times remain the case that it was true, however inadequately. Irreformability in morals cannot, I think, mean that the moral predicate which is deemed appropriate to some action A (say, that it is right, or wrong, or permissible) can never be altered.

It is of the utmost importance to note that this thesis has nothing whatever to do with the view that human nature is forever changing, still less with the view that moral values are shifting or that one must adopt a moral relativism. The thesis depends simply on the fact (as I assume it is a fact) that our factual knowledge at any given time is incomplete, and on the metaethical assumption that moral judgments are made in the light of factual knowledge—an assumption which I believe to be a correct one.

I conclude, then, that what is meant when we say that an infallible teacher has taught that *p* in the field of morals can only be that *p* is true but inadequate; and perhaps that *p* is as adequately stated as is required at a given time for the solution of normal cases. We can therefore also go on to say that *p* is irreformable, in the sense that it will always remain the case that *p* was true though inadequate. What I do not think we can say is that no further intrinsic modification of *p* is possible or desirable; and hence we cannot say that if a particular nonmorally described action A is judged in one way with reference to *p*, it will necessarily be judged in the same way with reference to a more adequate principle *p*\*.

#### INFALLIBILITY AND CERTAINTY

The distinction I have drawn between the force of infallibility in faith and the force of infallibility in morals depends on the difference in subject matter between faith and morals, and not on the theology or the logic of infallibility itself. From one point of view, it is a consequence of

my argument that the dogma of infallibility can be expected to have less far-reaching results in morals than it does in dogma. On the other hand, however, I think that the difference between dogma and morals makes it easier to *apply* the theory of infallibility in the area of morals than it is in dogmatic theology. I shall conclude with some brief reflections on why I believe this to be the case.

The theory of infallibility will provide us with certain answers to our own problems if, and only if, we can be certain *when* something is being infallibly taught, and *what* it is that is being infallibly taught. I take it that the general criteria for deciding when something is being infallibly taught are the same in faith and in morals—criteria such as being formally defined, being taught *ubique, semper, ab omnibus*, and so on. Not, indeed, that the application of these criteria is free from difficulties; but the difficulties apply equally to faith and to morals. In other ways as well, faith and morals stand here on the same footing. What has been infallibly taught may need amplification and supplementation; the formulae in which such teaching has been expressed will no doubt require adaptation and translation, and may need to be thoroughly recast in order to continue to express the truth and to protect against error and misunderstanding. But when we come to ask *what* it is that has been infallibly taught and expressed in a given formula, I suggest that the question is in principle somewhat easier to answer in the area of morals than it is in dogma.

Dogmatic theology must ultimately rest its arguments on an appeal to revelation—that is to say, on something which is given to man by God and which is not otherwise available. For this reason, there are built-in limitations to the critical efforts which we can direct towards understanding what it is that a particular dogmatic formula teaches us—such as Romans 9–11 on who shall be saved, or the New Testament generally on the precise nature of the Incarnation.<sup>11</sup> The nature of God is a mystery to us, and His wisdom is inscrutable. No man has been His counselor. There is a built-in difficulty in distinguishing between our lack of critical acumen in understanding the meaning of the text and our inability fully to comprehend the ways of God.

In morals, however, the situation is rather different. I take it that one corollary of the enduring adherence of the Church to the natural-law tradition in ethics is that it must be in principle possible to establish moral truths without reference to revelation as such in our arguments, even when it happens that such truths are also part of revelation. Hence,

<sup>11</sup> I am not, of course, assuming that revelation comes only through words and not also through events. But even events do have to be described and interpreted in words.

our critical attempts to understand what it is that is being infallibly taught about ethics in, say, the Sermon on the Mount, or parts of the Pauline corpus, or later moral tradition in the Church, can be guided by criteria which at least in principle are adequate to the subject matter under examination. We do not need authority in ethics in the same radical sense in which we need it to discover the saving plan of God. In so far as we have developed a sound ethical theory, we can use it to establish what is the meaning and point of those ethical formulae which have expressed the infallible teaching of the Church, in a way which is not open to us in dogmatic theology to anything like the same extent.

The upshot of all this is that the main problems in the area of infallibility in morals are problems of ethical theory, not problems with the theology of infallibility itself. It is ethical theory which determines the sense and the extent to which moral principles are adequate and true, and the extent to which we must expect them to be susceptible of being reformed as well as reformulated. And it is ethical theory which provides the best way of discovering what it is that the Church has infallibly taught in morals, since it is only by ethical theory that we can establish whether or not a moral statement is true; and infallibility is concerned with no less and no more than the truth. There is therefore less justification for using the dogma of infallibility in an authoritarian way in morals than there is in dogma; and it seems to me that this has great importance for the way in which moral theology should be conducted. If my arguments are sound, moral theology should be concerned not merely with the formulae of Christian tradition, but above all with the attempt to develop its ethical theory wherever that may lead. It will be sensitive to the obvious need to reformulate the ways in which its teachings are expressed; in particular, it will recognize the somewhat more limited sense in which ethical statements are irreformable. But most of all, the moral theologian will be well aware of the pitfalls in confusing irreformability with necessity or with the view that if any statement ever was true it must still be true. To accept this is not to cross a very formidable Rubicon; but it might be quite an important step all the same.

#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.