

# On the *Book of the Gentile* and the Doctrinal Coherence of Ramon Llull

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It has been rightly said that Lullian dialogue is not free of conflict. The stay in Bejaia in 1307 and the defiant attitude that Ramon adopted there, as well as multiple passages gleaned from all his work, show that confrontation forms part of the range of possibilities with which Llull confronted the contact with the religions other than Catholic. The act in 1307, when in the middle of the main square of the city he publicly affirmed the falseness of the Muslim faith, was one of the harshest and most intransigent known, but it responded to Llull's conviction of the superiority of the Christian faith over other religions. Not in vain, one of the three objectives he had marked at the moment of his conversion to the penitence was "to write a book against the errors of the infidels," as he recalled, almost fifty years later, in the *Vita coetanea*. When Llull dictated his biography to the monks of the Carthusian Monastery of Vauvert, in 1311, and after having written not one but many books against the errors of the infidels, this conviction continued as fundamental to his missionary strategies.<sup>1</sup>

However, some of his texts, with a less combative and even amiable tone, have recently contributed to creating an image of Llull distanced from the apologist of Christianity that I have just outlined, and that attribute to the Majorcan a much more conciliatory and tolerant attitude towards the beliefs of non-Christians than the historical data we have, and the works he left, allow us to suppose. In the dissemination of this vision, in which it is clear that various aspects should be examined and revised, a determining role has been played here by a work written in the first years of his production, the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*.<sup>2</sup>

This work uses a narrative fiction in which a gentile who has no knowledge of God, but does have some philosophical training, is indoctrinated by three wise men, one a Jew, one a Christian and one a Muslim, who justify to him the necessary existence of the divinity. Once the gentile declares that he is convinced and consoled by this belief, at the end of the first book of the work, the wise men tell him that

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1. For the *Vita coetanea*, see A. Bonner (ed.), *Selected Works of Ramon Llull (1232-1316)*, 2 vols., Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1985; and specifically for the stay in Bougie in 1307, the recent catalogue of the exhibition *Raimundus, christianus arabicus. Ramon Llull and the Meeting between Cultures*, Barcelona, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2007.

2. The writing of this work must be placed between 1274 and 1283, years corresponding to the first artistic cycle of Lullian production. For this text, see Ramon Llull, *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis*, critical edition by Anthony Bonner, "Nova Edició de les Obres de Ramon Llull", vol. II, Palma de Mallorca, Patronat Ramon Llull, 2001 (English translation by A. Bonner, in A. Bonner [ed.], *Selected Works of Ramon Llull [1232-1316]*, 2 vols., Princeton [NJ], Princeton University Press, 1985).

it is not, however, so simple, as they belong to different religions. Then, the gentile listens to the explanations that each one of the wise men gives of his own beliefs in the three following books. While one of them sets out his reasons, the other two remain in silence and never interrupt or refute the affirmations made; thus, the only one who asks questions to clarify aspects perhaps not very clear is the gentile – who, in principle, we must consider impartial. Finally, after the wise men have explained to him the main articles of their respective religions, they refuse to hear which of the three the gentile has decided to adopt in order to continue their discussions on religious issues with the same cordiality and friendliness they have shown throughout the work.

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The respectful attitude of the wise men and, above all, the apparently open end of the book have contributed, as mentioned, to creating an image of Llull as tolerant and ready to accept the belief of the other if he is capable of demonstrating it, that is, justifying with necessary reasons. Only from a superficial reading of the work, however, can it be suggested that Ramon considers all three religions equally valid. Moreover, this possibility would be contradicted by the rest of his production in which, with some exceptions, such as the *Book of the Gentile*, when speaking of Jews and Muslims – or Saracens, as Christians then referred to them –, he uses largely denigrating

and often directly insulting terms. One only has to read the names, so politically incorrect, that he gives them in a text such as the *Doctrina pueril*, written shortly before the *Book of the Gentile*, where he dedicates whole chapters to the old law and to Mohammad. In the passages of these chapters, with a markedly controversial tone, his scorn for determined basic aspects of the Hebrew and Muslim religions is made explicit, such as the hope of the Jewish people in the coming of the Messiah and the condition of prophet that Islam attributes to Mohammad.<sup>5</sup> According to Llull, the Jewish faith is vain and unjustified, and the Muslim belief is absolutely without foundation.

Let us return, however, to the *Book of the Gentile*. The amiability of the outward forms of this work, rather more complex than the *Doctrina pueril* and in which Llull largely uses his own formulations and argumentations of his Art, must not confuse us. Cordiality in any case does not mean doctrinal tolerance. And any attentive reader who has followed and correctly understood the reasoning developed by the three wise men in the respective books can have no doubt about which of the three religions is finally chosen by the gentile. In the end, Llull seeks to persuade the readers, by making an effort to understand the arguments set out, to follow the same path as the gentile, and realise that only one of the three is the true one. In other words, Ramon does not offer the readers an explicit solution to the problem put forward at the end of the first book but obliges them to try to understand the reasoning of the wise men and evaluate how far this reasoning is correct so that they themselves reach the desired conclusion which, as we will see, can only be one.

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3. These are chapters 69 and 71 of the work; see them in Ramon Llull, *Doctrina pueril*, critical edition by Joan Santanach, "Nova Edició de les Obres de Ramon Llull", vol. VII, Palma de Mallorca, Patronat Ramon Llull, 2005, pp. 177-179 and 182-185.



*Apostrophe Raymundi* (Barcelona, Pere Posa, 1504).

Llull frequently focuses his efforts on proving the need of the central dogmas of Christianity – the Trinity and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ –, which serve to individualise it with respect to the other religions.<sup>4</sup> If we focus on the second, we see that in the *Gentile* he not only justifies the divinity of Jesus Christ but inevitably introduces doubts into two questions that, as I have already pointed out, he had fully rejected in the *Doctrina pueril*: the Jewish hope

in the advent of the Messiah and the prophetic character of the figure of Mohammad.

When speaking of the coming of the Messiah, in the second book of the work, the Jewish wise man justifies the situation of subordination and of captivity that his people suffered in the 13th century for their love of God; God, in his turn, would take pity on them and send them a Messiah, so that they would be freed from captivity and worship the divinity as they should; if not, the goodness of God would not be perfect in terms of greatness, power and love.<sup>5</sup> However, the gentile asks him a question and makes a comment that demolishes his arguments. In the first place, he asks him how long they have been in this captivity, and the wise man responds that it has been more than 1,200 years, which puts us around the year 70 AD, the moment of the fall of Jerusalem. The wise man adds, moreover, that this is the third captivity that they have had to suffer and that, although they know the cause of the first two – that of Babylonia and Egypt –, they do not know the reason for the present one.

The comments by the gentile, who the wise man no longer responds to, propose a possible cause for the captivity. It could be, affirms the character, that the Jews have, without being aware of it, committed a sin by having acted against the goodness of God, and that they cannot liberate themselves from their captivity until they recognise this fault and ask for forgiveness. Clearly, the gentile, who we must suppose still knows nothing of Christianity – the Christian wise man speaks in the next book –, offers a decontextualised situation, but which any reader who is minimally familiar with the Gospels must relate and identify with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In accordance

4. For an analysis of the argument developed around the Trinity in the *Book of the Gentile*, in which, moreover, the close relationship in the work between the artistic and literary elements is emphasised, see L. Badia, "Poesia i art al *Llibre del gentil* de Ramon Llull", within her *Teoria i pràctica de la literatura en Ramon Llull*, Barcelona, Quaderns Crema, 1992, pp. 19-29.

5. See Book II, chap. 4, flower 2, "De bonea caritat", in the cited edition of the *Book of the Gentile*, pp. 67-68.

with this then, the reader must understand that the Jews can only be liberated from their captivity when they recognise that the crucifixion of Christ was an act against divine goodness and, consequently, when they convert to Christianity.

Much the same happens when justifying the condition of prophet attributed by the Muslim wise man to Mohammad, in the fourth book. The Jewish and Christian wise men still remain silent while the gentile asks various questions that, although being formulated from the respect that any disciple must show the master, serve to warn the reader.<sup>6</sup> In the end, when the Muslim wise man explains his articles of faith, the gentile has already heard the explanations of the Christian and has been able to see the artistic validity – in the sense of being founded in the Art – of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a decisive point in the creation and overcoming of original sin. And the response that the gentile makes in this case to the Saracen about Mohammad goes precisely in this direction; that is, emphasising a logical inconsistency in the reasoning of the wise man, who would have fallen into contrariety between two divine dignities. And this, according to figure A of the Art, is impossible.<sup>7</sup>

In short, there is cordiality, but absolutely no ideological or doctrinal concessions to the rival. The *Book of the Gentile* is a complex and difficult text, which Llull wrote thinking about

a public capable of understanding the mechanisms of the Art and, therefore, with a sufficiently rooted philosophical and theological training to understand the subtleties. Nothing to do with the *Doctrina pueril*, aimed at readers with a far more inferior training and incapable of correctly evaluating the arguments of the three wise men – something which explains that Llull, in the *Doctrina*, heavily simplifies the positions and, therefore, avoids any doctrinal confusion.

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Although this analysis of the *Book of the Gentile* waters down the tolerant and dialoguing image that today we tend to associate with Ramon, it is only through a profound and attentive knowledge of the meaning of his work that we can correctly evaluate his contribution. This does not, of course, undermine the fact that Ramon Llull was one of the medieval authors who took contact with the other most seriously and who made most effort to establish points of dialogue. But he did so with marked cards.

6. See Book IV, art. 3, flower 1, “De bonea granea”, in the cited edition of the *Book of the Gentile*, pp. 162-163.

7. See Book III, art. 6, flower 1, “De bonea granea”, in the cited edition of the *Book of the Gentile*, pp. 116-117.