

Ramon Llull and the Indispensable Dialogue

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Ramon Llull's aim was to establish a single faith and a single universal religious law (*vera religio*), based on overcoming the differences between the three monotheist religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The path to achieving this objective, as he proposes in the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, is constant and rational dialogue through daily discussion. It is a process in which listening is more important than speaking, just as Llull himself listened to other cultures during his training period, approaching the original Jewish and Islamic sources. Thus he was able to construct his "trialogue" which is not only interreligious but also intercultural, as it rests on the common basis of ancient philosophy. This Lullian vision seeks, in the end, eternal salvation and the reconciliation of the whole of humanity.

In one of his early works, the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, Ramon Llull claims to have invented a new method. And in this new method, dialogue and exchange are the most notable and important features.

Llull's Aim

Llull hoped that his new method would help him to carry out his daring aim that he had already expressed in the prologue of the *Book of the Gentile*: one single faith and one single religious law rather than different opposed religions competing with each other; this was Llull's aim. This aim does not establish any rivalry between the diverse ideologies or religions; it does not know of wars and enemies but rather joint action in the common worship of God. This single universal religion would entail evident advantages; in contrast, the cur-

rent disagreements only offer a great many disadvantages: hatred, enmity and war – in short, without religious peace there is no peace in the world. Yet, the differences are not insurmountable. Llull's aim can only be achieved, as the wise men suggest, through daily discussion following the method of Lady Intelligence: constant rational dialogue. This dialogue is not just based on talking but also on listening! Sometimes listening is the most important part: the pagan wants to listen to the explanations of the three wise men about their respective religions. Llull listened to other cultures during his training period. His aim was not only to be right but to avoid eternal damnation for non-Christians: this is why he constructed not only a dialogue but a "trialogue". Llull was convinced that there is only one *vera religio*, one single true religion that man must choose in order to not lose eternal salvation, and he was convinced that there will be no peace or concord

in the world without prior reconciliation of the religions in the *vera religio*. Moreover, he was convinced that the *vera religio* that the three wise men were ready to search for has a lot in common with Christianity, which can even be identified with it – despite some improvements that can be introduced in the practice of the Christian religion. In Llull’s view, Christianity is closest to the true religion because it can provide the most plausible answers. For Llull, the *vera religio* is not – as later in the Enlightenment – a neutral rational religion. This is in fact part of the charm of Lullian dialogue with the other religions and cultures but it is at the same time its main difficulty. Llull wanted to achieve his aim by mission. How did he manage to make his effort a real dialogue (or rather “trialogue”) and not a more or less disguised form of forced indoctrination? He needed to introduce some presuppositions or prior conditions.

Presuppositions

His *first* presupposition makes reference to our relation and reaction to the Other, to the unknown. The Other, although we see him as different, strange and threatening is also a peer; Llull insists on this: “*Infideles sunt homines sicut et nos.*” (“The infidels are people like us.”) Only in this way can we enter an equal and fair dialogue; only in this way can we discover notable coincidences. Only in this way can we realise that in principle what the others do, think or believe is not bad just because they act, think or believe differently. For the search of the others is also at the service of a common superior objective: to love God, praise him and honour him. In Llull’s view, the faith of the so-called “infidels”, for instance, is also faith. However, each faith is characterised by the absence of doubt. For this reason it can be oriented to truth or to falseness; in contrast, reason critically examines its presuppositions. Llull shows interreligious sensitivity

when he does not assume that what happens in other religions is idolatry or mere fanaticism; he also describes it as faith but as faith sustained in error, yet which must be freed from this error through pertinent explanations.

However, finding these pertinent explanations is sometimes very difficult because as Llull states: “*Infideles non stant ad auctoritates fidelium*” (“Infidels do not take notice of the authorities of the faithful”), such as the Bible, the fathers of the Church or the prestigious theologians; nevertheless, they follow rational arguments. They govern themselves by the reason that God gave to all men (and women) when he created them. With this we reach the *second* presupposition, that of a plausible foundation through reason. Llull is not in favour of arguing based on authorities but on “common sense” because the authorities are fallible and can be interpreted in different ways, as can be seen in the disputations between Christians and Jews based on the Bible. They do not constitute a reliable common base. It is a perspective very different from that adopted by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, where he considers that the authoritative arguments are highly pertinent, and he even warns about the dangers of opening other ways of proving matters of faith. Llull, in contrast, leaves the evidence of authority completely aside.

Llull shows interreligious sensitivity when he does not assume that what happens in other religions is idolatry or mere fanaticism

Llull bases himself on “common sense” and, for this to be feasible also in matters of faith, a *third* indispensable presupposition is necessary: the conviction that faith and reason do not contradict each other but are rather at the service of the same cause. For Llull, faith is not blind obedience or thoughtless credulity but an instrument given by God that facilitates understanding. With faith, reason can create hypotheses.

With faith we recognise intuitively what we want to comprehend more exactly through understanding. Llull rejects all three, the restriction of reason as well as the confrontation between faith and reason and the annulment of faith. Faith and reason make up two differentiated moments in a single process of understanding. This already takes place between Christians. In the dialogue with non-Christians reason has an even more important role: the “infidels” do not want to abandon a belief and substitute it with another but rather, starting from believing, they want to achieve understanding: “*Nolunt dimittere credere pro credere sed credere pro intelligere,*” states Llull.

Lullian Dialogue between Mysticism, Rationalism and Orthodoxies: An Example

As an example, I have chosen the core of Lullian thought, the doctrine of God, which is given the most comprehensive treatment in the *Book of the Gentile*, as it presents the most serious obstacles and difficulties for dialogue.

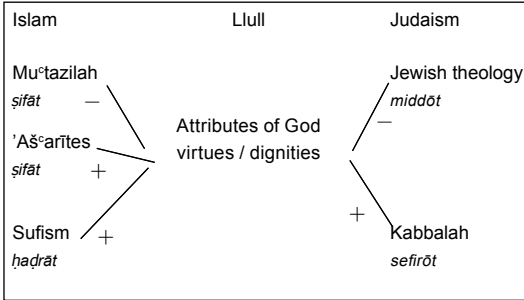
Llull was convinced that the three major monotheist religions shared a common notion of God; at least in all three religions, God is the creator and judge of the world. This is why certain fundamental attributes or dignities are characteristic of God. In Christian theology we achieve knowledge of these attributes, on the one hand, through rational deduction and, on the other, through the revelation by God himself. God, for instance, reveals his name, Jahveh (Ex. 3.14), or his mercy (Ex. 34.6). Llull limits his Christian position to rejecting the arguments of authority derived from revelation and only accepting those attributes which we access through reason. The dignities are those characteristics of God that cannot be conceived in any other way. They even mean that we cannot avoid thinking of the existence

of God. With this conviction, Llull follows the Christian tradition of Anselm of Canterbury.

The other religions, Islam and Judaism, also theologially dispute the attributes of God. They provide very illustrative names of God, which allude to certain eternal attributes such as “the Wise”, “the Almighty”, etc, for example in al-Ghazālī’s book, *The 99 Names of God*. But the notion of the divine attributes also causes theological problems. In Islamic theology, the *kalām*, there are two schools of thought. One, called the school of the Muʿtazilah, considers that the notion of real attributes in God can endanger the unity of God, suggesting a way that leads from monotheism to polytheism. This is why the divine attributes can only be attributed in our perception. Within God himself they are of no consequence. They do not introduce any plurality in his essence, which is absolute unity. To us the attributes only manifest themselves in the works of God and are attributes of his action. But according to the other school, that of the disciples of al-Ašʿarī, some real attributes in God can be taken into account which are not identical to or different from his essence but are “rooted” in it, as al-Ghazālī states. The ʿAšʿarītes can make a distinction between the real attributes in God and the attributes of divine action. Moreover, Sufism, the mystical current, speaks of *ḥaḍrāt*, of presences of God, as a form of self-manifestation of the divine in the world. And it is above all in the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī (1164-1240) where the *ḥaḍrāt* have a certain similarity with the idea of divine attributes, according to Llull.

Jewish theology follows the steps of the Muʿtazilah denying the existence of real attributes in God. Maimonides insists that if, for example, we attribute power to God, we are only saying that God is not weak; if we attribute wisdom to God, we are only saying that he is not a fool, but we do not make any positive statement of an attribute. Moreover, Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah, does not hesitate to

speak of the ten *sefirōt*, the divine emanations whose objective is to create the world. Llull knows all this and he also knows that these issues are widely debated in the respective circles of the Arab and Jewish worlds.



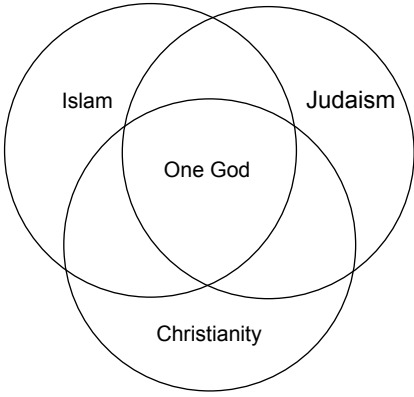
Here we could emphasise and establish the coincidences and also differences in Llull’s lists of attributes, between the ʿAşʿarītes and the Sufi and Kabbalistic mysticisms. But this would take us to overly specific questions. If, instead, we take an overall view of the attributes in the context of each religion and if we compare them to the notion of God of ancient philosophy, we will see that the Christian, Jewish and Islamic context and that of

the ancient world coincide in the fact that all of them speak of one God, who is characterised by his attributes – whether the *şifāt* or *ḥadrāt*, *middōt* or *sefirōt*, *nomina* or *dignitates* of the medieval contexts or the immobility of the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover or the supreme Idea of Good in Plato. The ancient context provides a rational base. The inter-religious context in the table above covers the Islamic and Judaic worlds.

What is decisive is that in all religions they speak of the attributes of God and in all there is at least one current that does so affirmatively. Llull draws a line that goes from the linguistic equivalence (as they speak of the attributes of God) and from the evident correspondence between the three religions until the real unity (as they speak in the same way of the same attributes of God) and from here he moves towards the compatibility of religions. The truth of one God constitutes the premise common to all three religions and is located in the intersection point of the respective doctrines (Figure 1).

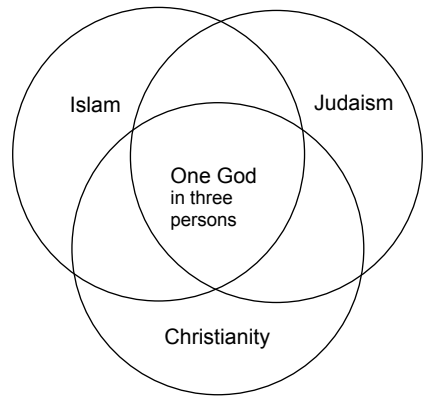
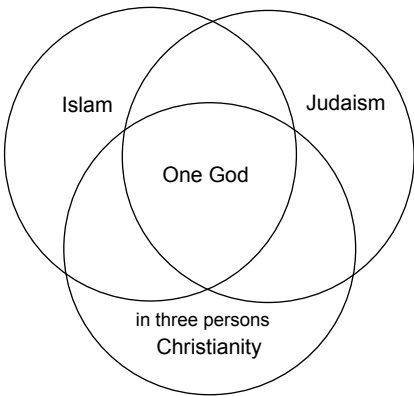
All three religions – at least according to the opinion that each of them has of itself – are

Christian Doctrine of God	Notion of God in Ancient Philosophy	Interreligious Context
<p>One God in three persons.</p> <p>Characterised by attributes (<i>dignitates</i>) / names of God (<i>nomina</i>).</p> <p>Representatives: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Anselm of Canterbury, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, etc.</p>	<p>One God.</p> <p>As Unmoved Mover. Characterised by attributes. Representative: Aristotle.</p> <p>As supreme idea of good. Characterised by attributes. Representative: Plato.</p>	<p>One God. Characterised by attributes / names of God.</p> <p>Islam: <i>şifāt</i> or <i>ḥadrāt</i> / 99 names of God. Representatives: Islamic theology / <i>kalām</i>: al-Ghazālī / Sufism: Ibn al-ʿArabī, etc.</p> <p>Judaism: <i>middōt</i> or <i>sefirōt</i> / names of God. Representatives: Jewish theology: Maimonides / Kabbalah: Nahmanides, etc.</p>



founded on the basic conviction of monotheism. However, Islam and Judaism reject the monotheist position of Christianity because it implies faith in one God with the addition “in three persons” (Figure 2). It does so because of revelation, which for Llull is also manifested in creation and in this way it remains open and accessible not only for Christians but also for the other religions. And it does so because of reason, because the attributes demand an intrinsic action of God and in this way – as Llull strives to demonstrate – they logically lead to the Trinity of the three divine persons. God is not only goodness, greatness, power, etc, but rather God in this goodness is good-maker, good-makable, and the act of good making; he

has the capacity to make great, to be great and is the act of making great; and this applies to any divine attribute. Llull even invents new verbal forms to express that God is always at once subject, object and action. Otherwise he would need the world to be active and this would make him dependent on his own creation, which is impossible. From Llull’s point of view, the idea that Judaism and Islam have of the divine attributes is deficient because they do not presuppose that the essence of God is active in itself and because they do not link the attributes with the correlatives. Llull insists that, as they do not do this, neither can they draw the Trinity from them as a conclusion. Lullian argumentation through the divine attributes tries in this way to achieve the effect that the Christian expression “in three persons” forms part, in the future, of the doctrinal field common to the three religions (Figure 3). The attributes represent for Llull the pragmatic starting point for his missionary enterprise. In his turn, he links, from a Christian perspective, a Biblical base from antiquity with the Judaic and Islamic continuation. Llull uses models from the respective religious worlds and, in order to make his theses more credible, he bases the models on common convictions that come from ancient philosophy. Considering this common ancient base it is more plausible to speak of an intercultural dialogue than an interreligious dialogue.



The Lullian Method of Intercultural Dialogue: An Outline

Llull bases himself on and exploits the reciprocal influences between cultures and religions that existed historically; he “artificially” provokes what with the passage of time otherwise takes place by itself through mixing and interchange. We could call this process a conscious and directed “fusion of horizons,” to use Hans Georg Gadamer’s words, who notes that “understanding is always the process of fusion of apparently distanced horizons.”

But, if the intercultural dialogue takes place following Llull’s method it is not only necessary to merge the horizons to understand the other cultures but also to have a prior common base. Llull strives to sound out the coinciding points in order to make his position comprehensible and plausible to the others. If we analyse Llull’s methodological process we discover five different points or steps:

- Llull is perfectly familiar with his own point of view and can explain it clearly. Llull realises that he always argues from a concrete perspective: his own. This reflection is important but only represents one side of the coin. Llull’s originality lies in fact in continuously cultivating exchange. As a consequence, the other side of the coin emerges:
- He seeks to deal fairly with the others through reciprocal knowledge of points of view. Llull achieves this by himself listening to, learning about and entering other cultures. He suggests that the other representatives of Christianity should do the same. With the world of Islam, for instance, he attempts to start exchange programmes with scholars or guest professors.
- The third step consists of the reliable reproduction of the others’ point of view. This serves to test that he has understood and, at

the same time, for his interlocutor it is the evidence that Llull strives to take his fears seriously and avoid misunderstandings.

- In a fourth step, Llull integrates positions of the others into his own point of view to show their coincidences. However, in his case, this never implies the denial of his own position. Llull starts from a firm Christian perspective, to which he remains immovably faithful. His maxim reads: the Other also has his place in the Christian world but he must not damage or ever endanger the fundamental Christian convictions.
- The last point consists of making the paradigms borrowed from their original representatives recognisable again. Llull uses a *modus loquendi arabicus* and he is a polyglot for strategic reasons; he also uses didactic stratagems: for instance, he represents his divine attributes in circles and figures that come from Arabic sources.

This method based on five steps allows Llull to present his own positions and sustain them, yet in such a way that they sound familiar to the others. This means reviewing and transforming the borrowed paradigms in order to integrate them into one’s own culture. For Llull, it is not enough to copy other cultures or borrow occasionally from them.

While acknowledging some of Llull’s exaggerations with reference to his self-stylisation as a *christianus arabicus*, *procurator infidelium* or fighter against the Averroists, we must recognise his great achievement to move so successfully between different cultures, linking them and finding comparable and, on some occasions, even coinciding paradigms. How can we benefit from what Llull did for dialogue today?

For any dialogue between cultures it is essential to know the interlocutors because, if there is no reciprocal knowledge, the possibil-

ity of misunderstandings and even of violence increases. Today, dialogue is as indispensable as it was in Lull's time. If today in interreligious dialogue we speak of Abraham as our common father, we must realise that when tackling the figure of "Abraham" we can only understand each other in a quite marginal sector in comparison to the issue chosen by Lull, the doctrine of God. This already means some progress but we must go even further.

With all this, we must avoid an error that, in my opinion, Lull made, which has many

coincidences with the Socratic error: "Knowing good is doing good," thought Socrates; "Knowing and understanding Christianity means becoming a Christian!" thought Lull. Or, put in a more impersonal way: "What cannot be thought in any other way unites and leads to Christian faith." Understanding the contents of Christian faith, however, does not automatically imply conversion. Understanding a culture or a religion does not necessarily mean making it one's own. Lull also had to suffer this painful experience.