

# RAMON LLULL

## A Master of Dialogue and Reconciliation

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WE ARE COMMEMORATING in 2016 the seventh centenary of the death of Ramon Llull (1232–1316?), a lay theologian and philosopher from Catalonia who developed an original system of thought which still speaks to us today. He was a prolific writer, with 265 books to his name, written in Latin, Arabic and Catalan, and his thought went in so many directions that any attempt to systematize it becomes quite difficult. Nevertheless, his work falls into three main categories: philosophical works, written with the intention of informing and converting non-believers, which explain his own system, called *Art*, as it took form in various publications (*The Tree of Science*, *Art in Brief*, *Demonstrative Art*); mystical works; and literary compositions in both verse and prose.

As it is not possible in a short article to do justice to the complex and extensive thought of Ramon Llull,<sup>1</sup> the aim here will be to concentrate on one line which runs through it all: dialogue and reconciliation. This is to be found at three levels: between God and creation; between reason and faith; and, finally, between the three Abrahamic religions.

### ***The Art as the Foundation of Llull's Thought on Dialogue and Reconciliation***

The core and heart of Llull's thought is to be found, in essence, in his philosophical work, which articulates the *Art*<sup>2</sup> elaborated as an instrument to convert nonbelievers (Muslims). Convinced as he was of the inefficacy

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the thought of Ramon Llull, see Robert Pring-Mill, *Le microcosmos lullien* (Paris and Fribourg: Cerf and Academic Press, 2008); for a more complete account, see *Selected Works of Ramón Llull*, 2 vols., edited and translated by Anthony Bonner (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985). A more biographical approach can be found in Hugues Didier, *Raymond Lulle. Un pont sur la Méditerranée* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Ars brevis*, in *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader*, edited and translated by Anthony and Eve Bonner (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994).

of preaching relying on the principle of authority, which led to deadlock, Llull worked out a system that relied on reason and was closely linked to reality. He claimed that a series of general principles would follow that could be accepted by all three Abrahamic religions.

His *Art* spreads out from nine attributes of God. These are identified as 'dignities'<sup>3</sup> and from them issues all that is real, which is simply their reflection. This design is not completely foreign to the Platonic vision of pure ideas and reality as their reflection. Llull develops the notion of 'correlatives': the nominal form of transitive verbs allows for derivatives: the present participle is the active form; the past participle is the passive; the infinitive is a link between the two. Each of the dignities, once it is converted into an active force, derives as a triad of its correlatives. For example: *Bonitas* (Goodness) = *bonificativus* (the possibility of performing good acts), *bonificabile* (the possibility of receiving goodness), *bonificare* (to do good). *Magnitudo* (Greatness) = *magnificativus* (possibility of acts of greatness), *magnificabile* (possibility of receiving greatness), *magnificare* (to act with grandeur). The same system of correlatives is applied to the other divine dignities.

It seems likely that Llull developed this dynamic vision thanks largely to his knowledge of Arabic and to the special way in which he will use his verbal forms. In fact, by using the present participle as the active form, the past participle as the passive form, and the infinitive as the link between the two, Llull is trying to go beyond the schema or vision proper to Greek philosophy, which is based on the dualist 'twosome' (*binôme* in French) of essence and accident. Thus, Llull will never say that 'a human being' is 'a rational animal', but instead a 'humanising', 'humanised', 'homifiable', 'a-being-human' animal.<sup>4</sup> By doing this, Llull is saying that the human person is not made up of an essence that 'possesses' accidents (qualifying it), but that these are what actually constitute that essence.<sup>5</sup>

To each of the 'dignities', considered as subject, one may apply the other dignities taken as predicates: Goodness is powerful, Goodness is eternal; Goodness is great; Greatness is good, Greatness is eternal, Greatness is powerful, and so on. The fact that each dignity is qualified by all the others

<sup>3</sup> These are organized in three triads: Goodness, Grandeur, Eternity; Power, Wisdom, Will; Virtue, Truth, Glory.

<sup>4</sup> French has some advantage over English here (*homifiant, homifié, homifiable, homificateur*).

<sup>5</sup> In other words, one can say that the human being does not *possess* a body, an intellect and a soul, but that he or she is body, intellect and soul. It is not possible in this article to delve into the major ontological implications that follow from this view.



Allegory of Llull's Doctrine, from Tomàs Le Myésier, *Breviculum ex artibus Raimundi Lulli electum*, 1321

means that each of them can only exist in relation. For example, Goodness does not exist if it is not great, eternal, powerful, and so on. In other words, the nature of each dignity is made up, not of some sort of essence, but as the result of a relation. In this way, Llull makes clear the relational character of the components or dimensions of reality.

Thanks to this relational character, he is able to build up a global vision of reality—in good mediaeval fashion—but, unlike the other writers of his time, he does not limit himself to making a compendium of things that exist and are

known. One sees that in his book *Arbre de Ciència* ('The Tree of Science'): instead of using the catalogues of animals, constellations or planets that were so common in his epoch, he tries to identify and define the general principles that govern the genesis of the multiplicity of reality. In his view, it is only possible to reach the truth if one takes into account the whole tissue of existing relations.

Organized into an arborescent system, like a genealogy made up of sixteen trees, his *Art* is an instrument by which to grasp and explain these relations. From the Celestial tree, the dignities influence the elements of reality, giving them life in reality. Below the Celestial tree, there are four fundamental trees that point to the material elements of reality. The Elemental tree indicates the nature of matter by referring to the relations between its four constitutive elements: fire, air, water and earth. The Vegetal tree describes and analyzes nourishment and reproduction in so far as these are vital functions. The Sensual tree distinguishes the senses, as much among animal as among human beings. The Imaginative tree points to the human intellect's representative faculties that function thanks to the data supplied by the senses.

This tree-system is used by Llull to explain both the spreading out of the divine dignities in the world and among human beings, and the relations between their different components. For example, Llull establishes an organic analogy between the components of the different scientific disciplines and those of the tree: the roots are the basic principles; the trunk is the structure; the branches are the genres; the leaves, the species; and the fruits, individuals, their actions and their aims. This analogical structure establishes links and correspondences between the different dimensions and components of reality.

### ***Dialogue and Reconciliation between God and Creation***

At the risk of simplifying, one may say that at the end of the Middle Ages the dominant vision, from a philosophical and theological point of view, was the scholastic and Aristotelian theory that conceived God as a motor which became immobile once creation had been set to work. There was, so to speak, a duality, with God on one side and the cosmos and humanity on the other.

The spreading out of the divine dignities in the world, as described in his *Art*, expresses Llull's profound conviction that God is a reality, active and deeply fertile, to the point that God Himself is fertilised and co-created by the world that God Himself has dynamized and set in motion. In fact, this notion goes beyond both a heteronomic understanding of the human (as determined by an outside reality) and the alternative modern notion based on autonomy (self-determination). Instead, Llull's theory is more in the line of what the Catalan-Indian philosopher and theologian Raimon Panikkar has understood as 'ontology'.<sup>6</sup>

With his use of correlatives, Llull attempts to illustrate the active character of the divine: the divine dignities are not fixed or immobile realities, but realities that are alive and active in the world. Contrary to a sort of Aristotelian view, God is not the motor that has stopped after the work of creation, but rather the motor that is always functioning even now in the world, by means of human beings who can take on the role of co-creators, thus fulfilling their destiny.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note the marked coincidence between the vision of St Ignatius concerning the relation between God

<sup>6</sup> Raimon Panikkar put forward this notion in an interview: 'We are not in the hands of destiny, but we do not ourselves hold destiny in our hands. Rather, we are the hands of destiny' (Marc Dueñas and Agustí Nicolau Coll, 'Conversa amb Raimon Panikkar', *Idées* [April-June 2002], 58).

and the human and the latter's *raison d'être*, with that put forward two centuries earlier by Ramon Llull. In the Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius writes:

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. (Exx 23)

At the beginning of 1302, Ramon Llull wrote in his *Libre de mil proverbis* ('Book of a Thousand Proverbs'):

As the human person has been created in order to know, love, remember, honour and serve God, we are writing these Thousand Proverbs in order to teach so that he and she may know the purpose for which they have been created.<sup>7</sup>

One can see that both Llull and St Ignatius place the whole *raison d'être* of what a human being is and does in the wake of the divine will. Neither seems to favour an autonomous view of the person, such that the basis of his or her being and doing would be the person alone. In this they remind us of the divine dimension which constitutes human beings, the foundation and horizon of their existence. Such a position calls into question the supposed autonomy of the human which modern Western thinking has installed as its foundation myth.

### ***Dialogue and Reconciliation between Reason and Faith***

In the Middle Ages, the dichotomy between reason and faith was a central theme in all philosophical and theological discussions. It became a central preoccupation for Llull as he searched for a creative conjunction of the two terms that would not be the sort of opposition that would render one subject to the other or end up excluding one of the two. He developed a novel approach.

The *Art* of Ramon Llull admits the use of reason to understand reality. However, the reason in question is not a 'rationalistic' reason, one that is speculative and conceptual. Instead, it is a 'realistic' reason, since it reasons using reality by making it 'reasonable', that is, comprehensible.

<sup>7</sup> Ramon Llull, *Llibre de mil proverbis* (Barcelona: Minimal, 2014), 28.

This is the foundation of his *Arbre de la filosofia d'amor* ('Tree of the Philosophy of Love').<sup>8</sup> The starting point for Llull's reasoning here is to be found not in assumptions from authority but in the observation of reality; it is there that he centres his quest for truth. In his age, this idea of reason as a way to understand reality was one of his major contributions. Nevertheless, in contrast with modern reason—of which, according to some, Llull was a precursor—his reason is not simply the fruit of individual human spirit. It



*Illuminated page from Arbre de filosofia d'amor, by  
Ramon Llull, fourteenth century*

belongs rather to a vision of reality presided over by God and by the spreading out of God's 'dignities'. Thus, God is in all and all is in God.

Ramon Llull is looking for a way that goes beyond the limits of the four great European thinkers, who are (more or less) his contemporaries. His position has been summarised in magisterial fashion by the Catalan philosopher Francesc Pujols:

Averroes wanted to dissociate reason and faith; Abelard attempted to submit faith to reason; St Thomas wanted to submit reason to faith. Duns Scotus did what he could to preserve faith, expel reason, and proclaim the empire of the will. Ramon Llull, for his part, dreamed of a marriage of reason and faith because if faith could not be demonstrated by reason, then it could not be true.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that the reason to which Llull refers is a 'love-intellect' (*intellect d'amour*), which is itself the result of an action that unites rather than separates (such as will happen later with

<sup>8</sup> Ramon Llull, *Arbre de la filosofia d'amor*, edited by Gret Schib (Barcelona: Barcino, 1980); in English, *The Tree of Love*, translated by E. Allison Peers (London: SPCK, 1926).

<sup>9</sup> A. Bladé Desumvila, *Francesc Pujols per ell mateix* (Barcelona: Pòrtic, 1967), 67.

modern reason), and of a faith orientated, as St Bernard would say, towards the *Caritas superior* (higher Love). Reason, in so far as it is love-intellect used to study reality, is the path that leads to the truth about things. Llull uses the phrase 'love-intellect' to refer to his conviction that it is impossible to attain to any true knowledge of the real without love.

Access to what is true does not come from the study of the supposed essences of real things but, above all, from the study of the relations between things. Therefore, one can be sure that for Llull what is real is, above all, a tissue of relations. Such a vision, which was avant-garde in its own day, is also a fundamental criticism of the fragmentary vision of reality that modern thought has developed. Reality is not made up of isolated monads and it is impossible to understand it by studying its constituent parts separately. This is shown convincingly by contemporary ecological theory and quantum physics.

### ***Dialogue and Reconciliation between the Three Abrahamic Religions***

One of the most well-known and appreciated aspects of the thought and work of Ramon Llull concerns his promotion of interreligious dialogue between the three Abrahamic religions. Admittedly, Llull takes part in this dialogue in order to convince others of the greater truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, one has to point out that his way of doing this is completely different from that common at his time, in two respects especially. He does not try to conquer, imposing his doctrine by argumentative force or authority; instead he tries to convince [*con-vaincre*]<sup>10</sup> by reason and dialogue. And he does not set up the dialogue starting with a confrontation between different authoritative principles, but instead he uses the principles—set out in his *Art*—which he considers universally valid and not specifically Christian, Jewish or Muslim.

It is in his book *Le livre du gentil et de trois sages* ('The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men')<sup>11</sup> that Llull outlines the policy he follows in interreligious dialogue. It contains a dialogue in which a Jewish sage, a Muslim sage and a Christian sage take part along with a non-believer (a pagan), the latter posing questions to them on a wide variety of subjects.<sup>12</sup> The meeting takes place in a forest outside the city,

<sup>10</sup> The French *convaincre* allows the word-play: *con* (together with) *vaincre* (to conquer) so that both are victorious. [Tr.]

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Lulle, *Le livre du gentil et de trois sages* (Paris: Cerf, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Llull, it should be noted, had learned Arabic in order to read the Qur'an in the original, which was not at all usual among the theologians and philosophers of his time.

an area thus considered neutral, not Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. This forest stands for a world in the imagination, still unknown, towards which the three speakers have to journey, leaving behind their respective and common spaces. The three wise men do not dialogue or dispute with one another; they listen silently to what each has to say as each replies to the questions put to them by the 'gentile' (pagan). Then, in the epilogue, the gentile states that he has found one of the three religions to be the true one, although he does not disclose which he has chosen.

A detailed analysis of this rich set-piece is not possible here, but two major features are specially relevant for their contemporary value.

The motivation driving Llull does not come from any hankering after 'religious power', but from a sincere seeking for truth. This compels him, while not abandoning his own convictions, to learn about another religion in all its individuality. No condemnation or struggle against Islam or Judaism appears in *Le livre du gentil*. Any evangelical zeal that Llull may have springs not from the desire for religious power, nor from the wish to win heaven for himself as a reward for what he is doing. He is convinced of the superior perfection of the evangelical message and he wants the greatest number to profit from it. Motivated as he is by love, he cannot tolerate the use of any violence—physical, intellectual or spiritual—on those whom he wants to convert.

The gentile plays the part of the mediator, someone who prevents the three sages from discussing among themselves; thus they can remain open to listening to what the other has to say. Their attitude is one of welcome to whatever may be new. By remaining outside the space of the three religions, the gentile stands as a symbol of the possibility of dialogue for the three wise men, provided that this dialogue starts from a sincere testimony that is not apologetic. This is what each of the three has shared with the gentile, inspired by a desire for mutual service and respect. And if the gentile is capable of playing such a role, it is because, before speaking, he has drunk in the forest from the spring of water that is Lady Intelligence.

For our part, we have the right to ask, however, if it is possible to have access to Lady Intelligence without the mediation of a religion or a culture, as the book of Llull seems to suggest. Was he really claiming that, or insisting, rather, on the fact that unless faith draws on reason it becomes unintelligible? In any event, the reason to which Llull invites is not abstract and speculative, made up of concepts that often have no relation with what is real. The reason in question is in dialogue with reality, and



therefore we can be sure that the philosophy proposed is realist, although not materialist. In actual fact, this is an invitation to go beyond all -isms, whether material or spiritual, which are the two aberrations to which any Christian is exposed.

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Seven centuries after his death Ramon Llull is putting before us a triple challenge. He invites us to adopt a vision of the world in which God materialises Himself and matter spiritualises itself; then there is a constant dynamism which prevents us falling into two possible aberrations, both contrary to the Christian faith: spiritualism and historicism. He urges us to go beyond a reason of 'rationalisations', one based on the supposed autonomy of thought. Instead, he proposes a reason that is 'ontonomous' (*ontonome*), that is, one that is interlinked with faith. And, finally, he exhorts us not to use religion as a weapon, spiritual or ideological, but rather as a constitutive dimension of reality, a solid bedrock on which to establish dialogue with the other.

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