

Identity and Dialogue

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I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for allowing me the opportunity to explore a subject which is of great personal interest, and to be able to do it with reference to Ramon Llull, someone for whom the question of identity was central for the purpose of achieving “real” dialogue, albeit, under his terms.

Modern or post-modern identity is something hard to pin down. There are so many different composites aside from the religious that make up our identity, from where we live, the passports we hold, the schools we attend, our political affiliations, and even the football club we support. Some of these categories also beg questions that complicate the matter even further. Does a person who lives in Barcelona identify more as a Catalan, or as Spanish? Perhaps, in certain situations, she prefers to identify herself as European, at least regarding her geo-political and economic outlook in order to distance herself from anything American. In other words, in our modern and cosmopolitan world our identities are in constant flux and change as we define ourselves against or along with others. For most of us living in the West, we have the freedom to be who we want, as long as we uphold the rule of law and do not hurt others. If religion is central to our lives, it is only one facet of our identity and it faces stiff competition from other sources depending on circumstances time and place.

And if this is not complicated enough, even religious identity in the 21st century poses great challenges. I might define myself a Catholic, but do I identify with the policies of the Catholic Church? Am I happy about the prohibition on the use of condoms, or the place of women in the Church? Do I perhaps identify more with liberation theology or do I think that the decisions of Vatican II are a watering down of traditional Catholicism? Does this make me any more or less Catholic? Or, I might be a Jew, but what kind of Jew am I? Can I identify with any of the different religious streams such as reform, conservative or orthodox? Do I believe in Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith, or am I of the opinion that there are no principles of faith in Judaism? Do I think that women should be counted as part of a quorum in prayer or should they be excluded? And perhaps, given the rise and popularity of what are referred to as new age religions, is it possible to be both a Buddhist and a Jew? I think that you get the drift!

And if you think that this is only a malaise of the 21st century and that things were clearer in the thirteenth century when Lull wrote the *Llibre del gentil*, then think again. Which Jew would have recognized himself in the work, and for that matter, which Muslim? Neither Maimonides nor Nahmanides, one a rationalist, the other a Kabbalist, would have recognized themselves, nor would have Al Ghazzali or Ibn Rushd. There would have been many Christians who would not have been impressed with Lull's Christian in the book. One is reminded of the fact that in many of his works, Lull specifically asked that if there are any doctrinal mistakes, they should be corrected. In addition, in 1294, Lull felt the need to write his *Disputació de cinc savis*, a work which shows just how divided and fractured the Christian world itself was.¹ Lull's *Llibre del gentil* is a wonderful presentation of inter-religious dialogue, but stood no chance even in the reality of thirteenth-century Catalonia. Indeed, from the *Vita coetanea* and other places in Lull's works, we get the impression of what happened when fiction became reality. Lull's apparent tolerance was tested to its limit, and we even find him advocating compulsory education of Jews and Muslims, converting Jewish children by force and planning crusades in order to achieve his objectives.²

Fruitful dialogue can only really take place when one is pretty sure of his or her own religious identity. One needs to feel comfortable and secure in one's beliefs as well as being knowledgeable, in order to be able to present them to others with any sort of conviction. Hence, there seems to be almost an inherent contradiction in the idea that dialogue, in the medieval sense, could bring about conversion. It is only when one is insecure in one's own identity, where doubts arise, that conversion becomes a possibility as one looks for answers elsewhere. However, in the *Llibre del gentil*, Lull's inter-religious dialogue has to take place between men of faith who are certain of their religious beliefs, otherwise the whole premise of the book is undermined. The whole point of the book is that the three wise men continue discussing the virtues of their respective faiths daily and are unable to come to an agreement. Therefore, it is not really surprising that there is no resolution in the *Llibre del gentil*. It is only the Gentile who can choose because he is the only doubter, the only real questioner, the only one who is lost and seeking to find God and then the true faith. Hence it is also clear why the three wise men do not want to wait around to hear what choice the Gentile makes.

¹ See J. Perarnau i Espelt (ed.), 'La Disputació de cinc savis de Ramon Lull. Estudi i edició del text català', *Arxiu de Textos Catalans Antics* 5, (1986) pp. 7-229

² See *Blaquerna, Obres* 9, p. 269; *Doctrina pueril*, vol. 1, p. 155. See also M.D. Johnston, 'Ramon Lull and the Compulsory Evangelization of Jews and Muslims', in L.J. Simon (ed.), *Iberia and the Mediterranean World in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Robert I. Burns S.J.*, 2 vols, (Leiden 1995) vol. 1, pp. 3-37

In many ways, the early Lull, the one who writes the *Llibre del gentil*, is way before his time in that he created a methodology by which members of the different faiths, each secure in his religiosity, could explore and learn more about the other two faiths while also being able to expound on his own beliefs. Yet, it is extremely unlikely that this was Lull's intention when he wrote the book, and this point is driven home by Lull's insistence in other places that the Gentile chose to convert to Christianity. For example, in his didactic novel *Felix* written in Paris in 1288/89, a hermit describes the events and method of argumentation of the *Llibre del gentil* and says: 'By disputing according to this method (i.e. the framework of the Art), the Christian proved his religion to be true and all the others false',³ and in the *Llibre de amic e amat*, we find the following versicle: 'Tell us fool, how do you know that the Catholic faith is the true one and the beliefs of the Jews or Saracens are in falsehood and error? He answered, "From the ten conditions of the *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis*"'.⁴ This also explains why Lull never repeated this experiment and also why he worked diligently to improve the philosophical / logical base of the Art giving it a much more visibly Christian structure. However, by doing so, the *raison d'être* of the dialogue disappears because by changing the Art, he made it much less universal and more particularly Christian. Though Lull thought that the rules and conditions of the Art were so general as to be a useful starting place for any inter-religious discussion, they actually are biased towards Christianity in that they cannot be used to suggest that Christian articles of faith are perhaps false. That means that while the Art is extremely good for reaching conclusions regarding the Christian faith and for strengthening Christian identity as it leads the practitioner to Christian truth, it can no longer function as a general method for fruitful dialogue between the faiths.

Contrasting fictional dialogues like the *Llibre del gentil* with evidence of real polemics is insightful for understanding how religious polemics help define self-identity. Take for instance the famous disputation held in Barcelona in the summer of 1263 between Nahmanides, one of the foremost Rabbinic figures of the period, and Friar Paul, originally Saul of Montepellier, a Dominican convert from Judaism. It is possible that Lull was present at this disputation though he does not mention it anywhere in his writings, and it is likely that the results of this disputation

³ *Felix*, Book VIII, ch. 79 (See A. Bonner (ed.), *Obres selectes de Ramon Llull*, vol. 2, p. 259 and SWRL 2, p. 942). 'Disputant per aital ordonament, provà lo crestià esser sa lig en veritat, e totes les altres esser en falsetat'.

⁴ *Libre de amic e amat*, no. 287 in *Libre de Evast e Blanquerna*, vol. 3, p. 76. 'Diques, foll: en què has conexença que la fe cathòlica sia vera, e la creença dels jueus e dels serrayns sien en falsitat e error? Respòs: En les .x. condicions del *Libre del gentil e dels tres savis*'. I have used Eve Bonner's translation of the work in A. Bonner, *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader*, (Princeton 1993) and M. Johnston's edition of Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, (Warminster 1995).

influenced the approach Lull adopted in attempting to achieve the conversion of both Jews and Muslims. The methodology set out by Friar Paul avoided discussing the articles of the Christian faith, and focused on the post-biblical Jewish texts and what they revealed about the truth of Christianity. In other words, neither disputant engaged the other's beliefs (though Nahmanides repeatedly tried to concretize and contextualize the debate), but instead focused almost entirely on textual exegesis. Whether the purpose of this public disputation was to bring about the conversion of the Jewish protagonist is debated, yet it did achieve one central aim: it strengthened Christian identity and belief by showing that the authoritative sources of their greatest adversaries, the Jews, demonstrated that truth. For Lull, whose explicit purpose was to achieve conversion of the other, this was not good enough, and he opted for direct engagement with both his own and his Jewish and Muslim contemporaries beliefs with interesting repercussions, at least as far as his Jewish interlocutors were concerned.⁵ However, Friar Paul's methodology, adopted and surpassed by others such as Ramon Marti in the *Pugio fidei*, show how polemic played a crucial role in helping define and strengthen Christian identity.

Lull did not develop his *Ars* for the sake of dialogue, but for purposes of conversion, and therefore, his supposed tolerance and willingness for dialogue were no more than pragmatic. In this sense, Lull's methodology is counter-productive in the modern context where dialogue and not conversion is the ultimate goal. Dialogue leads to understanding, acceptance, and greater tolerance, and should not be aimed at wanting to persuade the other to convert. However, in my opinion, this might also be a reason why, in his own lifetime, Lull apparently had little or no success, as conversions which are the result of intellectual convictions are very rare indeed. Indeed, Solomon ibn Adret, a Jewish contemporary and interlocutor of Lull's wrote in one of his responsa:

“and someone seeking to separate and convert someone from his faith to another faith with which he [the one converting] is unfamiliar, will need, in any case, to present many strong arguments and much investigation till he can overcome [beliefs] to which he is accustomed through his own investigation. He should be taught these [arguments] and he should study and interiorize them in his heart [the soul] many times over and test them faithfully as to whether they are the truth, and that they are not refutable. For without this, it would be lacking in integrity for a person to exchange his God through weak arguments, and not even strong arguments should [bring] him [to convert] until he has investigated them, and finds that there is no more room for doubt”.⁶

⁵ See H. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century*, (Leiden 2000)

⁶ Solomon ibn Adret, *Teshubot ha-Rashba* 1: 215. It is interesting to note that in his *Perushei ha-Aggadot*, Adret seems to infer the opposite saying: "וכל שהקבלה או הנבואה הנחתו לא תנצחנו החקירה, כי החקירה למטה מן הנבואה" "Anything received or accepted via tradition or prophecy will not be contradicted by reason, because reason is inferior to

Indeed Lull himself states repeatedly and emphatically that true conversion cannot occur by force or without a logical and rational understanding of the arguments.⁷

However, it is, perhaps, the perceived failure of his method which is what makes it so attractive today. The paradox is that the methodology set out by Lull in the *Llibre del gentil* may actually have some benefit for achieving better understanding and tolerance of the other. While Lull wanted to achieve the conversion of Jews and Muslims to Christianity, he was unable to achieve that goal. However, he set up a framework whereby the members of the other faiths learned more about the beliefs of the other. Using the leaves of the trees and the rules governing the dialogue set out by Lady Intelligence, the Jew, Christian and Muslim, albeit with the help of the Gentile, were able to elaborate on the principles of their faith without interruption and without feeling threatened. In itself, and even if it was in a fictional and utopian setting, this was a remarkable achievement. If perhaps mirrored to some extent in the twelfth century *Kuzari* written by Judah ha-Levi, this was a far more elaborate and tolerant debate in the presence of all the representatives of the three monotheistic faiths.

As witnessed daily, religion still plays a major role in today's world for better and for worse, and one of the most troubling and dangerous aspects of its role is the move towards fundamentalism. The moderates are losing ground to the extremists in their faith traditions who portray themselves and tend to be viewed by many as the true representatives of the faith. Fundamentalist attitudes also tend to create greater distrust and suspicion between members of the different faiths, and this, more often than not, is from ignorance about the "other's" religious traditions and beliefs. It is here that the Lullian method of the *Libre del gentil* could perhaps prove itself useful for both inner and inter religious dialogue, the former being no less important than the latter. By creating a framework and space for dialogue and by setting some ground rules that all sides can accept, the niceties and different interpretations of dogma can be explored by members of the same faith, and members of the different religions can meet and set out their respective positions while also learning more about the truth claims of the other faiths. [Richard Dawkins might make a good Gentile].

prophecy" (103). He also says that: "אבל שיהיה דבר מוכרח מקובל בידינו למה נבטל הקבלה, ואף על פי שהתחייב החקירה הפילוסופית ביטולה" "received lore even if philosophical reasoning shows it to be wrong, should not be abandoned" (105).

⁷ *Liber de convenientia fidei et intellectus in obiecto* (2). On this point, see the remarkable first part of *Disputatio fidei et intellectus* in which Intellect persuades Faith of the importance of being able to prove via necessary reason the truth of the Christian faith (1–7). Intellect tells a story about the missionary (probably Ramon Martí) who manages to convince a Muslim ruler of the errors in Islam, but who is unable to prove the Christian truths and thus earns the scorn of the ruler who feels that he has lost everything and gained nothing. Lull ridicules this approach and strongly emphasizes the need to be able to prove convincingly the Christian faith. See *De acquisitione Terrae Sanctae* (126–27).

On the eve of the visit of the Pope Benedict XVI to Israel there have been many articles in the international press about the Catholic community living in Israel. One of the articles focused on two figures, Father David Neuheus, a Jesuit who teaches at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, and the other, a priest, Grzegorz Pawlowski, a 78 year old Holocaust survivor, who lives in Jaffe. Both are converts from Judaism; Father David, as a 28 year old, and Grzegorz, as a child after the war because he was afraid to continue living as a Jew. What is of interest is that while both are Catholic priests with all that entails, they still see themselves as fully engaged with Judaism. At one point in the interview Grzegorz said: "I am a Catholic priest, and I also see myself as Jewish. I am connected to the Jewish nation. On Yom Kippur, I fast. At Passover, I eat matzah". And Father David, an impressive and very knowledgeable man, mentioned that he often goes to the Friday night services in a reform synagogue which welcomes non-Jews. "I'm not exactly a non-Jew," he says. "In a certain sense, I'm worse than a non-Jew. And yet I've been welcomed for who I am, and with sensitivity to this tension". He is referring to the fact that for Jews, there can be nothing worse than a convert from Judaism, yet he still finds a large part of his religious identity in the synagogue on Friday nights. Father Neuheus' religious identity is even more complex in that it was a "powerful mystical" Russian Orthodox nun who convinced him to convert, yet his conversion was to Catholicism.⁸

I have had the pleasure of meeting Father Neuheus a number of times and he is also involved in what is referred to as inter-religious dialogue, trying to create greater understanding between Christians and Jews in the Holy Land and beyond. And herein lies the nub of the problem: Here are two figures who would have been an anathema for Lull, and for whom, the Lullian system of argument would not have worked. The nature of the modern world is such that there are very few who match the clear-cut categories of Jew, Christian, Muslim in the Lullian sense, and those that do are generally not interested in dialogue, as they are sure about where the truth lies. Lull's three wise men would not have recognized these two Catholic priests and would have found it difficult to fit them into their world view. And here lies the challenge in the 21st century: finding ways to accommodate those who defy categorization and providing frameworks for creating greater understanding and tolerance of the religious "other". How would Ramon Lull have gone about it today?

⁸ Taken from Tim Franks, "Jerusalem Diary", http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8032339.stm , 4 May 2009