

Ramón Llull and the Limits of Inter-religious Dialogue

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Following Llull's own strategy of using fiction to argue his case, I would like to begin with a scenario borrowed from his *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* (1274-1276) in order to argue mine.

The year is 2009, the place a forest outside the gates of the city. Three figures, familiar to anybody who has studied the basic principles of Llull's philosophy, are resting under a tree, slightly bored. 'The Trinity...', the Christian among them begins a new conversation. 'Don't you think the subject is exhausted?' asks the Muslim in return, while the Jew only rolls his eyes. Lady Intelligence approaches. 'You people are getting on my nerves', she says, 'why don't you go on a holiday?' Mildly protesting, the three wise men get up from their comfortable positions and leave the forest, walking towards the city where they find a path leading underground. They descend and soon find themselves with other people in an iron vehicle. A young man sitting next to them reads a newspaper. 'Terror plot foiled', deciphers the Muslim. 'What is this all about?' The young man, a bewildered expression on his face, explains: 'You have not heard? It's those people who tried to blow up the nightclub in Manchester.' 'Why would they want to do that?', the Christian enquires. 'It's always the same thing, isn't it? Jihad and all', the young man replies and mumbles 'bloody Muslims'. 'But who sends these people?', the Muslim asks, visibly confused. 'What do I know? One of those preachers, al-Qaeda, the internet. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury is giving in to them, having shariah in Britain.' The Christian gasps for air.

Once they have left the tube, our three wise men are in the middle of the dense London traffic, buses rushing past them. 'God probably doesn't exist', the Jew reads on one of them. 'Who says such a thing?' 'The Mongols?' offers the Muslim. 'It's those Richard Dawkins people', a woman waiting next to them explains. 'They've made reason their god.'

The three men continue their walk, now in silence. After a while they reach a large, elegant building next to a big river. 'Now what is that?' the Christian asks. 'Houses of Parliament', a man replies and waves at them, red leaflets in his hand. 'Houses of what?' 'Parliament, you know, they represent us.' Puzzled expressions on the three men's faces. 'Us, the people,' the man adds, shrugs and disappears. 'Representation?' The Jew wonders, 'aren't we meant to represent them?' 'I think we should go back to the forest', says the Muslim, and they leave the city.

Translating Llull's model into reality

Obviously, it is difficult to translate the model of Llull's inter-religious dialogue both into the real and into the modern world. Some of these problems must have already been apparent in his day and age. In texts such as *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, Llull presented an ideal scenario which reflected his interpretation of religions and his political and philosophical agenda, rather than offering guidelines which could actually be put into practice. Those who posed the military threat in his era, the Muslims, would probably and for a whole variety of reasons not have agreed with the way they were represented, let alone be convinced by his arguments. To be sure, they were also not the addressee of these writings which were written in Latin or Catalan, but one cannot help but wonder how successful political or missionary enterprises inspired by Llull's approach would have been, given that he was still so much part of the polemical tradition – a tradition, which he sought to overcome.

There are further problems in the modern world connected with the political structures of our societies and nations and the strong presence of secularism. Yet, those who admire Llull in this real and modern world have not given up advocating his philosophy as a possible source of inspiration for interfaith dialogue which can have an actual and positive effect on interactions between members of different religious communities. In my statement I would like to argue not only that the usefulness of Llull's model is very limited, but also that its application in the modern world is potentially detrimental to the most urgent problems of what one may or may not want to label as interfaith relations.

Analysis

First of all, I take it that the problem for which, according to his modern advocates, Llull may offer a solution is not merely a specific doctrinal one such as the Trinity or corporeal resurrection, i.e. issues of interest mainly for inhabitants of ivory towers, but a broader problem of political significance. More precisely, this would be the violence between Muslims and non-Muslims and the continuing failure of the medieval compromise on the existence of the one God to provide a common framework for peaceful interactions. The hope would be that a promotion of Llull's approach offers exactly such a framework – because it is rational and because it is inclusive. This, however, assumes not only that Llull's analysis of his historical situation was correct, but also that our current analysis is accurate, in other words: that in both historical contexts we are dealing with a problem where doctrinal issues are of pivotal importance.

This is already controversial as far as the Middle Ages are concerned, but what about our time? The answer depends on whom we ask. Some scholars of religious studies may readily agree, consider religious differences key to the current tensions and look for a solution exactly in these differences. Others, however, may be more sceptical, and, noting how little the protagonists of the conflict are representative of their respective communities and established religious traditions, declare this an abuse of religion for political purposes. Support for the description of the conflict as an essentially political one may also be found among political and social scientists who identify the unequal distribution of global wealth, the lack of democratic structures in the Middle East, the inferiority complex resulting from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, or confused ideas of masculinity as underlying the current crisis. Others, again, will deconstruct the very existence of a conflict between Christians (represented by and representing 'the West') and Muslims. Such a diversity of explanations is barely surprising. Each of these people we can potentially consult answers the question from his or her point of view as a member of a specific academic tradition, convinced of the significance of their subject and the analytical categories which come with it. This is not merely an intellectual issue – each of these specialists can easily see the advantages involved in gaining authority in the interpretation of urgent problems. Some of the aspects I have just mentioned as examples have, of course, something to do with religion, but the exact significance of religion depends very much on whom within the academic spectrum we ask and what – as individuals – their views on politics and religion are.

As we can see from the fictitious, but hardly unrealistic young man on the London tube and the very real posters on buses in various European countries, religion and its role in modern societies have become the subject of a heated public debate – a debate which takes place beyond research institutes and universities and has conquered important domains in parliament and the lively media market. What I would like to argue in my statement is that even though religion clearly plays a role in the analysis and the rhetoric of the current crisis, it is a political compromise we have to aim at rather than a religious one. The problem concerns all of us; it concerns areas of our lives which, for many of those concerned, are not connected in any meaningful way to religion. As British taxpayers we are supporting the presence of our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, no matter what we think of religion, and those of us who use public transport or visit other public spaces are exposed to threats of terrorism, whether we are interested in the potential existence of God or not. Not all of us are willing to engage in religious debates because we may not be interested in negotiating matters of faith – either because these issues are not relevant for our lives or because we consider them part of our private spheres. What matters to everybody, however, as members of political communities is the political dimension of the present conflict, the rules of co-existence and the solution of conflict and how to implement these rules. In order to make my case, I will focus in what follows on the issue of representation.

Representation

How does representation work in the world of Ramón Llull? As I have already indicated, his model may have been to a certain extent innovative, but it is a fairly simple one. It is completely fictitious and derives its details from the knowledge and interpretation of one single author, Ramón Llull. It is thus clearly not a dialogue. Furthermore, the three wise men represent internally fairly diverse religious communities with suspicious ease. An advantage of such a system in political contexts in Llull's time was that the political entities involved in military conflicts appeared to be religiously more or less homogeneous. Even though Llull was aware of the diversity within both Christianity and Islam, he had every reason to assume that the majority of inhabitants of a land under Muslim rule were also Muslims and that by and large they shared the religious and political interests of their elites. In the modern world, the situation is infinitely more complicated – on a global level as well as in the context of individual multicultural societies in the West. Liberal democracies offer everybody a variety of possibilities for participation, irrespective of the religious community they have been born into. It is irrelevant for one's status as a member of the political community if someone has not been born into a specific community at all or decides at some point in his or her life to embrace a different faith. Even though there is a significant coincidence between ethnocultural and religious identities, such a coincidence cannot always be taken for granted. Islam attracts many 'white' and 'black' converts and because of its reputation as an outlaw or underdog religion has almost become a political protest movement for young men with various misgivings concerning modern Western culture. Although this is not a representative case, this phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that the name of one of the first Muslim radicals to stand trial before a German court is Fritz.

Returning to the example of the war in Iraq, in Llull's day the region was probably more religiously heterogeneous than it is today, but it would still be obviously too simple to label it 'Islamic' and ignore the Christian population, the internal conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites as well as specific international rivalries – as if Iraq fitted into the same box as Turkey, Yemen, Dubai and Indonesia. On the side of the British invaders, the situation is just as complex. A significant part of those who pay with their taxes for the war in Iraq are British Muslims. British Muslims discuss the issue in parliament, representing their constituencies which include substantial numbers, if not mostly non-Muslims. Muslims even fight in the British army. Even though many perceive the war in Iraq as one example of the increasingly violent conflict between 'Islam' and 'the West', many others will disagree. The 'war on terror' involves thus a number of highly complex moral issues, and our political systems offer each and every individual the possibility to support political parties and NGOs depending on our individual views on these subjects. If we see our rights as citizens violated, we can go to court. To be sure, political life in Britain is not perfect harmony, but how could Ramon Llull

help to improve the existing situation? In the last centuries, numerous luminaries of political philosophy have left their imprint on the way social and political conflicts are analysed and public debates are led. Are there any ways in which Llull can outshine his competition, Hobbes and Locke, Marx, Freud, Habermas, Walzer and Rawls?

Beyond a very general appeal to use reason and be peaceful, I cannot imagine what contribution could come from his work that would change the present circumstances in any meaningful and positive way. On the contrary, I believe that 'returning' as it were to Llull's work would mean abandoning some of the achievements in democratic and egalitarian Western societies – at least most of us would call them achievements – of the modern world as far as inter-faith relations are concerned. Returning to Llull's framework, a framework created in a world of much more clear-cut identities would only reinforce the phenomena of segregation, alienation and marginalisation – phenomena which have greatly contributed to the problems which some may hope to solve with the help of Llull's system.

But there are other problems involved apart from religious, cultural and political identities, and I would like to address here another problematic aspect of representation. This problem concerns those who are happy to get involved in religious debates. While, as I have mentioned earlier, already in Llull's day and age religious representation was contested – as is obvious from the numerous conflicts in Islamic history, but also from the various Latin crusades against fellow Christians – in the modern world religious affiliations have become even more flexible and individualised. Returning to Llull's model of representation means reinforcing established hierarchies and institutions which are usually not democratic, which is obvious, for example, in the fact that they do not fully represent the gender of their followers. Llull's scenario with its three wise men discussing issues of faith with a male pagan is not too far away from the fact that inter-religious dialogue today is mostly led by men. One should give Llull credit for introducing at least a 'Lady Intelligence' and some of today's policy-makers for taking gender issues seriously, if only as indicating the seeming or actual incompatibility of the Islamic religion and Western cultures. Because of the lack of flexibility both within the Catholic Church and within Islamic institutions (and the same is true for most other religions), there is little hope that representation will be more balanced in the near future. One way chosen to redress this inequality in debates with Muslim representatives of leading organisations has been to include prominent internal critics (for example in the 'Islamkonferenz' taking place in Germany). This, however, leads to further problems of representation and democratic legitimacy since dissenting voices are not automatically more representative than those with more solid, but partial support. Not surprisingly then, one of the most engaged public debate in political philosophy concerns the ways in which liberal multiculturalism has to struggle with the difficulty that minority groups demand tolerance for their religious otherness without embracing liberal values.

As I have said earlier, not least because of the rhetoric employed, the present conflict clearly does have a religious dimension. I am not suggesting here that this dimension is imaginary or superficial and should not be discussed. What I would like to contest is that the main debate should take the form of an inter-religious dialogue – not only because of the problems involved in representation. It strikes me as unlikely, for example, that, after centuries of debates, a compromise can be reached between Christians and Muslims regarding the Trinity, and it also strikes me as unlikely that, equally after centuries of conflicts, peaceful discussions among theologians with ecumenical tendencies and esoterically-inclined people will change the minds of those who are determined to fight with other means. Having said that, since there is obviously a significant group of people who do see inter-religious dialogue as an important, if not the central component of the way in which this conflict should be solved, I believe that even secularly-minded people should listen to what religious representatives have to say in order to get a better grasp of the complexity of the problem.

If, however, we are looking for a framework which offers common ground, the debate has to become a political one. Political participation is unconditional in liberal democracies. It is the right of every citizen.