

# Ramon Llull and His Islamic Undertaking

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Ramon Llull was an emblematic figure of the 13th century, known for the extraordinary life he led, his indefatigable evangelical work and his prodigious output of written works in Arabic as well as in Latin and Catalan. He was born in Majorca, biographers putting his date of birth somewhere between 1232 and 1235, although the precise date is not known.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the most reliable source for charting his life is *Vita coetanea* (“Contemporary Life”), which was dictated by Llull himself to one of his Parisian disciples, a Carthusian monk from Vauvert, in Paris in 1311. Nevertheless, whilst this autobiographical work contains much rich information about his life, certain gaps are filled thanks to other Lullian writings, including the *Book of Evast and Blaqueria*, the *Book of Contemplation* and *Felix or the Book of Wonders*.

Bearing in mind everything that has been – and continues to be – written about Ramon Llull, this article simply aims to shed some light on his evangelical missions and his journeys to Barbary (Tunis, Bougie).

In *Vita coetanea*, we are told that Ramon Llull left his position within the royal house-

hold after beholding several apparitions of Christ. These experiences led him to believe that God was asking him to leave his life behind and devote himself to the service of Christ.<sup>2</sup> At this time, therefore, he made three resolutions:

- He decided to take the Catholic faith to Muslims living in Majorca,<sup>3</sup> despite the risk of death that this entailed.
- He undertook to write the best book in the world (which was ultimately to be his *Ars*).
- He resolved to ask the Pope and Christian princes to establish monasteries for the study of Arabic and other eastern languages with a view to being able to preach in these languages and, thus, to teach infidels the truth of Catholicism.<sup>4</sup>

The precise date of his conversion is uncertain, but it unquestionably took place after 21 August 1262, the day on which James II of Majorca was crowned King. Biographers place it somewhere between 1262 and 1265. Following his conversion, Llull sold all his worldly

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1. F. Benhamamouche, *Ramon Llull y el mundo islámico, una relación apasionada*, thesis presented in 1987, Oran University; F. Benhamamouche, “Ramon Llull y el mundo islámico”, *Revue d’Histoire Maghrébine*, no. 77-78, May 1995.

2. A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l’action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 83.

3. “In the third and fourth parts of the 13th century, non-Christians made up almost half of the total population of Majorca. Estimates suggest that around 1300 AD, there were approximately 25,000 Muslims and that between 1264 and 1272 AD, there had been many more.”, Ch.-E. Dufourcq, *L’Espagne catalane et le Maghrib aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, Paris, PUF, 1966, pp. 68-69.

4. A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l’action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 83.

goods, leaving some of the proceeds to cover the needs of his wife and children.<sup>5</sup>

The first of his decisions – namely his plan to take Catholicism to the Muslims living in Majorca, accepting the risk of death that this entailed – obliged him to undertake a period of study during which he learned Arabic and Latin. Knowledge of languages played an extremely important role within the pervading climate of ambiguity of the 13th century, about which Dominique Urvoy notes: “The West was convinced of its own superiority at the same time as being aware of the responsibility it therefore carried to evangelise the rest of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

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During this period, Llull produced writings in which he confronted the misguided beliefs of other religions, such as Islam, with the truths of Christianity. Without a doubt, the 13th century was an era of reconquest throughout Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and there was no way he would have been able to remain untouched by this social, cultural and religious phenomenon. As Menéndez Pelayo observes: “He believed, like everyone else [...], that the Mosaic religion was the Ancient Law and that Mohammed had plagiarised the positive elements of Islam from both the Ancient Law and the New Law. For this reason he set about trying to convert Jews and Muslims.”<sup>7</sup>

His attitude was not out-of-keeping with the prevailing views of his time, given that the 13th century saw a general move to try to restore and reinforce Christianity, which for so long had been merged with Islam and Judaism. Ramon Llull was part of this resurgence and emerged as a key figure in the evangelisation of infidels through philosophy. In the 13th century, interest in philosophy and its relationship with religion was maintained through two distinct schools of thought: apologetics, on the one hand, and the harmonisation of faith and reason, on the other. The former aroused the passion of scholars, since three different communities – those of Christians, Muslims and Jews – coexisted in Spain. Once recourse to war as a way of imposing faith had been rejected, following the failure of the crusades, there remained no other option but to demonstrate Christian superiority through reason.<sup>8</sup>

Llull's first three works from this period of study, in which he put into practice this idea of convincing people of the superiority of Christianity, were *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, *Liber contemplationis* and *Compendium Logicae Algazelis*. It is thought that the latter was influenced directly by a well-known Muslim text, al-Ghazali's *Maqāsid al-falāsifa* (*The Intentions of the Philosophers*). Although all these books were originally written in Arabic, then later in Latin and Catalan, the originals have not survived, and neither have any other books written in this language.

At the age of 30, Llull had a vision that earned him the sobriquet *doctor illuminatus*. In one of his lands, Randa, where he had gone to practise the art of meditation, a logical vision came to him. This vision was to become

5. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

6. D. Urvoy, “Ramon Llull et l'Islam”, *Islamochristiana*, no. 7, 1981, p. 140.

7. M. Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1978, p. 543.

8. J. Vernet, *La cultura hispanoárabe en Oriente y Occidente*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1978, pp. 186-187.

the central idea behind his celebrated *Ars generalis ultima* (Ars Magna) or *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem*.<sup>9</sup> A work conceived as part of his fight against infidels, Lull wanted this to be a tool for the people that everybody could access – including those who could read neither Latin nor Arabic. We know that this constituted “a massive project designed to teach people how to discover first principles and how to bring together in one place the whole range of knowledge in existence. To underscore this hypothesis, it is important to add that the idea of God being a centre around which human beings revolved was a basic principle of 13th-century theology and mysticism.”<sup>10</sup>

As for his third resolution, this began to take shape around 1275, when King James II of Majorca authorised the founding of a college in Majorca, in an area belonging to the Abbey of Santa Maria la Reial.<sup>11</sup> Lull asked for the college to be donated to the Order of Friars Minor (Sons of Saint Francis), who would, through it, receive adequate preparation to be able to evangelise Muslims in the lands of Islam.<sup>12</sup> Nothing concrete is known of the role that he himself played within this Miramar monastery, despite his being the key proponent behind the idea. Some biographers assert that he ran the college personally; others, that he played no active part since he was not himself a Franciscan.<sup>13</sup>

## Disputations in Catalonia

The religious disputations that marked Catalan spiritual life during the 13th century differed in both character and origin depending on

whether they were directed at Jews or at Muslims. Disputations concerning Jews were not new to Spain. In 1263, for example, James I had organised, at the behest of Ramon de Penyafort, a public disputation against Judaism in which the key player, a converted Jew, gave an unconvincing performance when confronted by the Rabbi of Girona, Moshe ben Nahman. James I ended the debate by establishing a committee of theologians, through which Ramon de Penyafort was able to embark on a detailed analysis of rabbinic books. This anti-Jewish campaign led to the emergence of a controversial school of apologetic literature – in particular that of Ramon Martí. Martí himself described, in his *Capistrum Judaeorum*, how, as a result of royal privilege, he had personally preached in the synagogues of Catalonia and held disputations against the rabbis. In 1278 he wrote *Pugio Fidei contra Judeos*, which inspired the inquisitor Nicolás Eymerich in his *Directorium Inquisitorum*. The disputations continued apace with Ramon Lull, who was authorised by James II of Aragon to preach in Catalonia’s synagogues and mosques, after which he went on to write *Liber praedicationis contra judaeos*.

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Thanks to an army of missionaries, anti-Muslim disputations were spreading right across Spain. These disputations took the form of a concerted attack on Islam under the auspices of the Dominican and Franciscan orders, who founded a number of centres for the preparation of missions. Given the demands

9. He wrote this in rhyme in Catalan; no Arabic version was produced.

10. *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, Paris, 1926, pp. 1092-1117.

11. A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l'action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 95.

12. S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Lull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, pp. 123-125.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

of preaching and engaging in disputations in the lands of Islam, a new form of Christian apologetics was born. Its model is outlined in *Summa contra gentiles*, which Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote at the instigation of Ramon de Penyafort, with the aim of preparing the Dominicans in Spain's convents.<sup>14</sup>

Ramon Llull operated within this climate, all the time pressing for the spiritual crusade against Islam and its encroachment on Christian culture to become one of Europe's greatest concerns. The disputations, both oral and written, with Muslim scholars constituted one notable feature of this crusade that would be touched on in several of his works. Although these debates hinged above all on the truths of faith, the way in which they ultimately evolved led him to employ rational – that is to say, philosophical – arguments. This technique was not unique to the 13th and 14th centuries; indeed, it had already been seen as early as the 12th century. At this time, Peter the Venerable, the great reformer of Cluny, on a visit to the monasteries of his order in Spain, had been profoundly impressed by the superiority of Jewish and Muslim culture and had decided to translate and refute, with Jewish and Muslim help, the Talmud and the Koran. In 1142, at his request, astronomers Robert Ketton and Hermann of Dalmatia translated the Koran into Latin. From these translations, Peter the Venerable produced his summary of the teachings of Mohammed, *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* (“The Summary of the Entire Heresy of the Saracens”), followed by a refuta-

tion entitled *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim Saracenorum* (“The Refutation of the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens”). These are considered to be the first learned texts on Islam written in Latin, other than the dialogues. In the middle of the 13th century, the *Vita Mahometi* was also written from a Christian point of view.<sup>15</sup>

## Travels and Disputations in the Maghreb: Tunis and Bougie

Ramon Llull planned his evangelical mission to Tunis between 1292 and 1293, during a stay in Genoa. However, after the initial flush of enthusiasm, he began to fear for his life and worry about lifelong imprisonment.<sup>16</sup> His dream of evangelising in the land of the infidels scared him. This crisis may be explained by the fact that Ramon Llull was by now 60 years old and had never travelled outside Europe.<sup>17</sup> However, he did eventually succeed in conquering his fears and set off for Tunis in search of disputations with Muslim scholars.

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It is likely that his journey was motivated by a number of different factors. On the one hand, Ramon Llull was undoubtedly aware that there were a large number of Christians in Tu-

14. T. and J. Carreras y Artau, *Historia de la Filosofía española. Filosofía cristiana de los siglos XIII al XV*, 2 vols., Madrid, Real Academia de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales, 1943. On the disputation of Barcelona, see C. Roth, “The Disputation of Barcelona (1263)”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, XLIII, 1950, pp. 117-144. On Ramon Martí, see: A. Berthier, *Raymond Martin, Frère Prêcheur*, Paris, 1931; J. Vincke, *Zurvergeschichte der spanischen Inquisition*, Bonn, 1941 (cited by A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l'action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, pp. 62-64.)

15. *Vida de Mahoma según un códice latino de mediados del siglo XIII*, published by M. Serrano y Sanz, Madrid, Erudición iberoultra-marina, 1935, pp. 365-396 (cited by A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l'action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 65).

16. *Vita coaetanea*, 19 (AB, p.156).

17. *Vita coaetanea*, 20 (AB, p.156).

nis, that Catalans occupied a privileged position there and, moreover, that, under the Treaty of Monteagudo, the sultanates of Bougie, Tunis and Tremecen were Catalan spheres of influence. Furthermore, a consul had been appointed and a Christian apostolate was being established in Gelves. It is important to remember that Tunis already had experience of missionaries: since 1230, friar preachers had been learning Arabic, Friar Minors had been going on missions and both believers and Christian militias had their own chapels. This was all thanks to a treaty signed in 1285, under which the sovereign of Tunis formally acknowledged Christians' right to worship. The state of Hafsid thus enjoyed something of a religious renaissance thanks to the law schools in Tunis, Bougie and Kairouan.

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Malikism and Sufism were both very widespread in the second half of the 13th century and continued to thrive until the 14th century. We equally must not forget that a number of families from al-Andalus had settled in Bougie and an al-Andalusian elite was forming around the King of Hafsid. Abu Zakaria, formerly the governor of Seville before his reign in Tunis, had opposed Almohad rule by declaring independence for the Hafsid kingdom of Tunis and subsequently annexing Constantine, Bougie and Algiers.<sup>18</sup> We know that Ramon Llull was reported to the authorities and imprisoned for contravening the pact agreed between Tunis and Catalonia, which clearly stated that Christianity

would be accorded respect as long as Islam was equally respected. However, the King of Tunis later released Llull and he boarded a ship bound for Naples.

Llull travelled to Bougie for the first time in 1307. At that time, the kingdoms of Majorca and Bougie were both independent of their continental dynasties: respectively Catalonia-Aragon (1276-1349) and the Hafsid dynasty of Tunis (1284-1309). The two were united under a 1302 treaty, which granted Majorcans special marketplaces for grain in Bougie and in other ports located within the Sultanate, each of which was represented by a consul. There were also chapels for Christians. It is worth recalling that, in eastern Barbary, Bougie was second only to Tunis in terms of its size and level of intellectual development.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it seems likely that Llull's journey could have been determined by the impact of a number of eminent figures deciding to convert to Christianity and indeed by the belief that he could convert the sovereign, a belief that had previously instigated the San Luis crusade. All these factors prompted Ramon Llull to engage in dialogue and pursue his theological disputations with Muslims. He then decided to preach the Catholic faith in public, a move that meant he was in breach of the pact agreed between the two kingdoms, which decreed that there could be no preaching against Islam in Muslim lands. As a result, he was once again imprisoned. Were it not for the intervention of the city's mufti, certain Catalans and the Genoan population, Llull would have been sentenced to death. In *Vita coetanea*, we read that the author was badly beaten during the journey between his house and the prison and that he spent six months behind bars. He received frequent visits from clerics sent by the mufti to try to convert him to Islam. However, Llull, by now 62 years of

18. A. Dhina, *Les États de l'Occident musulman aux XIIIe, XIVe et XVe siècles*, Algiers, Office des Publications Universitaires, 1984.

19. S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, p. 210.

age, responded to such attempts with the words: “If you wish to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and abandon your misguided law, I promise you untold riches and eternal life.”<sup>20</sup> While in prison, he also wrote *Disputatio Raimundi christiani et Homeri saraceni*.

In *Vita coetanea*, Llull notes that, while in prison, he wrote out in Arabic the arguments put forward during the disputations and, once he had finished the book, sent it to the mufti of Bougie, requesting that he and his theologians read and respond to it. It appears that Llull suggested to one of the clerics that together they write a book setting out the arguments in favour of and against the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Creed.<sup>21</sup> In fact, he was the sole author of the work, setting out both the refutation and the opposing argument.<sup>22</sup> His contemporary biographer explains quite clearly that, once the book was finished, the sovereign of Bougie, Halid I, issued a written dictat from Constantine<sup>23</sup> ordering Llull’s expulsion from the city. In *Vita coetanea*, we read that this book was lost in a storm while Ramon Llull was aboard a ship bound for Pisa. Once there he wrote in Latin – and from memory – the book that he had penned in Arabic in Bougie. This is the only text that remains. It is curious that he never re-wrote the book in Arabic, especially since he tells us that this is the language he used for the first draft. While in Pisa, he unsuccessfully attempted to organise a crusade in the Holy Land. He later left for Avignon to present his work *Liber de acquisitione Terreae Sanctae* to Clement V, though this yielded no result.<sup>24</sup>

Ramon Llull was to set off for Tunis for a second time on 6 October 1314, where he stayed until the end of 1315. The sovereign of Tunis, Ibn al-Lihyani, and Sancho I, King of Majorca, had signed a 12-year treaty. Ibn al-Lihyani, whose mother was Christian, had been helped to the throne by support from the Catalan states and from King Frederick of Sicily. Following his accession, the sultan gave everyone the impression that he wished to die a Christian and planned to be baptised.

*Ramon Llull endeavoured to convince the King of Sicily to organise exchanges between Sicilians and Tunisians so as to bring Christians and Muslims closer together*

This must have been one of the reasons why Ramon Llull endeavoured to convince the King of Sicily to organise exchanges between Sicilians and Tunisians so as to bring Christians and Muslims closer together.<sup>25</sup>

Although there is no firm evidence that Llull played an active role in Ibn al-Lihyani’s conversion, it seems unquestionable that his trip was no coincidence. Furthermore, he was quick to ask James II to recommend him to the sultan, which the king duly did in November 1314.<sup>26</sup> Once in Tunis, Llull stayed in contact with a number of Muslim scholars, whom he attempted to convert. Between 1314 and 1315, he wrote some 30 tracts, some in Catalan and others in Arabic. His writings in Arabic included *Liber de Deo et suis propriis qualitatibus infinitis*, *Liber de bono*

20. *Vita coetanea*, p. 72, n. 40; p. 74, n. 38 (cited by S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, pp. 213-214).

21. *Vita coetanea*, pp. 78-80 (cited by A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l'action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 117).

22. *Vita beati*, p. 72, n. 40 (cited by S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, p. 215).

23. S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, p. 414.

24. A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l'action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, pp. 117-118.

25. Ch.-E. Dufourcq, *L'Espagne catalane et le Maghrib aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, Paris, PUF, 1966, pp. 488-489.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 490.

*et malo, Liber de participatione cristianorum et sarracenorum, Liber de inventione majore, Liber de agentia majore, Ars consilii and Liber de Deo et de mundo.* Little is known about the actual content of these tracts.<sup>27</sup>

In 1315, with the help of James II, Llull was able to send one of his disciples, Friar Simon de Puigcerdà from the convent of Lleida, to Tunis. This disciple was to translate into Latin some fifteen essays that had already been written.<sup>28</sup> During his stay, he dedicated a number of works to the “very wise” Muslim *cadi* (judge), Abu Yahya Zakaria al-Lihyani, and his *clericis sapientibus* (wise clerics). However, whilst we do not know whether it was because the sovereign’s apparent desire to convert did not come to fruition – the implication being that the whole enterprise amounted to a political ploy by the sovereign to secure the Catalan treaties – we do know that, around this time, Llull returned to Majorca to die.

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It is traditionally accepted that he died in 1315. Although there is a school of thought that he could have died while travelling from Tunis to Majorca, a 15th-century manuscript, currently in the British Museum, reveals that: “In the year of our Lord MCCCXV, master Ramon passed away in the city of Majorca, according to the information found in a very

old book or treatise known as consolation of the hermit.”<sup>29</sup>

As Sheikh Bouamrane has pointed out, it should be acknowledged that Ramon Llull’s mission to the Maghreb was an utter failure, as one might have envisaged, because he failed to understand that philosophical reasoning and dialectic arguments were not going to be able to sway his opponents’ conviction in their own faith. Furthermore, he chose difficult questions to debate in the discussions – areas where agreement with Muslim thinkers was impossible, such as the divine attributes, the Incarnation and the Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

## Towards a Dialogue between Civilisations: Ramon Llull and the Muslim World

Although we cannot claim that Ramon Llull’s evangelical undertaking was a success, what has been found to be of particular interest is Llull’s ability to engage in dialogue with himself and others around him. This demonstrates the extent to which he was endeavouring to forge links that might bring cultures and religions closer together.

It is quite clear that Llull’s own relationship with his religious world was contradictory. While he was adamant in his convictions about the Incarnation, he rejected certain manifestations of his own religion. Instead of using the Bible, he proposed one of his own books – the *Ars*, or the best book in the world. And, since he did not concur with some Christian practices, he called for wholesale reform of the Church,

27. S. Garcías Palou, *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca, Planisi, 1981, pp. 103-105.

28. A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l’action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 124.

29. Ms. Add. 16431 from the British Museum, f. 24 (J. Tarré), cited by A. Llinarès, *Raymond Lulle, philosophe de l’action*, Paris, PUF, 1963, p. 126.

30. Sh. Bouamrane, “Raymond Lulle et l’Islam maghrébin”, lecture given at the second International Congress on Lullism, Majorca, October 1976.

as he expresses clearly in the *Book of Evast and Blaquerna*.<sup>31</sup> A number of his works also contain expressions of admiration for Muslims and, in *Liber de doctrina puerili* and the *Book of Evast and Blaquerna*, he holds them up as an example for Christians to follow. Indeed – having noted that worldly objects prevented prayer and that leading a Christian life did not simply mean following rituals and being devout, but also required one to fast, to dress humbly, to live frugally and not to eat too much meat – he stated that, in this regard, Muslims were more sensible and judicious than Christians.<sup>32</sup> In both books, he also dealt with the question of prayer, explaining the gestures one had to make, the words one had to follow and the intentions one had to harbour. Once again, he cited Muslims as good examples: “They pay more attention to sermons, during which they cry because they are being told of infernal suffering and heavenly glory.”<sup>33</sup> In the *Book of Evast and Blaquerna*,

he does not overlook the Jews, to whom he pays homage for the respect that they show to their law, whilst once again calling to mind the great piety of Muslims. Moreover, in the prologue to his work *100 names of God*, he proposed that, in Church, Christians sang his verses – in other words, “the names of God” – just as the Saracens chanted the Koran in mosques.

This attitude, which demonstrates that Llull was critical, observant and passionate, makes his character all the more multi-faceted. He was truly a man who wished to devote his boundless energy and extreme impulsiveness to a cause. He chose religion. Largely self-taught, he must have been blessed with extraordinary intelligence, which enabled him to understand, to consider and to capture with great lucidity the phenomena both of his era and of the future. It is this that goes a long way to explaining why this Majorcan scholar was such an important figure.

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31. Lulle. *Arbre de philosophie d'amour. Livre de l'ami et de l'aimé*, translation, introduction and notes by L. Sala-Molins, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1967, p. 444.

32. A. Llinarès, “Algunos aspectos de la educación en la Doctrina pueril de Ramón Llull”, *Estudios Lulianos*, XI, Palma de Mallorca, 1967, pp. 201-209; D. Urvoy, *Penser l'Islam. Les présupposés islamiques de l'“Art” de Llull*, Paris, Vrin, 1980, p. 165.

33. D. Urvoy, *Penser l'Islam. Les présupposés islamiques de l'“Art” de Llull*, Paris, Vrin, 1980, pp. 185-188 and 288.