

## Ramon Llull, a bridge among Christian, Jewish and Islamic cultures

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**Summary.** Disputes among Muslims, Jews and Christians were very frequent during the Middle Ages. Each religion wanted to predominate in the world and was self-proclaimed as the owner of the truth. Is in this difficult environment that the figure of Ramon Llull emerges as the first one trying to solve those conflicts without the use of the force, but by means of the reason. Of course, the mission was very difficult due to the historical radicalization of the three main religions, those religions called “the religions of the book” because their faith is based on the truth revealed by God and written in the holy book (Bible, Koran or Torah). Llull was convinced clearly explaining and demonstrating the reason below faith, people of the three religions could reach a mutual understanding and acceptance. [Contrib Sci 12(1):63-70 (2016)]

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### Introduction

To understand the thought of Ramon Llull and the current set of his ideas regarding a possible inter-religious dialogue we have to consider some simple data of phenomenology of religion as valid today as in the times of Llull.

The three “religions of the book” as Muhammad called Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have in common the unprecedented claim of its origin. The faith of these three religions is based on divine revelation, in a common initial fact of their religious ideology: God communicated with man. In the religious consciousness of hundreds of millions of believers God spoke, once and

forever, for various reasons and procedures. The result of this process is the zeal of the community of believers to save the sacred texts. The security of owning “the truth” is based not only on “truths” contained in these texts, but above all, on the authority of the speaker. God spoke, God gave his word, God himself said which and how “the truth” was. It is “the truth” because he said so (*fides qua creditur*, say the Scholastics) and in what he left “divinely” writing can be read “truths” of that faith (*fides quae creditur*). The practical consequences of that faith, the subsequent behavior of those dogmas or truths constitutes the only “true” law (*lex vera*). The greatness and the cause of the great power of conviction of these religions is this first and original be-

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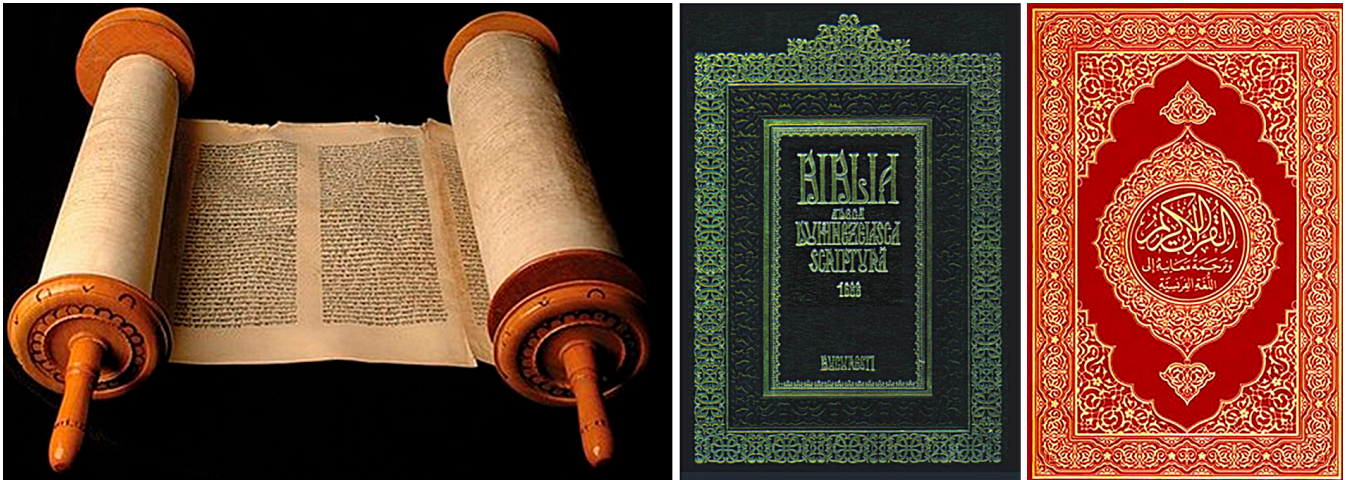


Fig. 1. Tohra, Bible and Koran, the "three books".

lief: God and not man is the source of all truth. The truth is a gift of God, not an intellectual conquest of the human beings (Fig. 1).

To a secular observer in religious matters the weak point of the secure possession of truth is not the initial revelation, but the absolute security of owning the original text revealed by God himself. What criteria are given to assume that the text we read today reproduces exactly the divine words? We know that critics of the text can be both from a safe lawyer as from a hard and unappealable judge. The certainty provided by faith does not require evidence or rational demonstration of what God has said and, therefore, carries itself a great danger. We know from experience that consciousness of the distant divine origin can be solidified in a strange and literally inhuman body. Revelation tends to appear as a stone block fallen from the sky on the roof of mankind. The believer must accept it as it is written because God said so. The truth becomes immutable writing fixed forever without regard to the interests and needs of human beings in their particular circumstances, immune to the vicissitudes of history. The original divine manifestation, call it Bible or Koran, by the grace of their faithful guardians, becomes a faithful *depositum* (in this way it was the Bible defined in scholastic terminology) a "tank", a pool of standing water that is transmitted intact from generation to generation. Inevitable consequence of this is fundamentalism or religious positivism, that is, the words of the holy book read like a divine dictation is taken literally, it does not matter if talks of biology, astronomy, and although in the name of God wars and murders are committed. Closely linked to this precarious vision is dogmatism, i.e.,

the truths of the book become dogmas in unappealable truth endowed with absolute literal immutability, although their language, their symbols and concepts are incomprehensible because they have been far away from the time and space where they were made.

To break these fixations has always been the task of enlightened religious consciousness that, according to the requirements of each generation interprets the text. The fundamental function of theology is to interpret how strange and contradictory is the original message translated the archaic concepts, myths and symbols to the current language in its poetic, sublime and profound religious dimension. The relationship between truth or truths revealed and enunciation in the varying circumstances of time and space is the foundation of all "reasonable" religious discourse and is, without doubt, the origin of all the grandeur and all the misery of religion in the history of thought. This theological task has always been subtle and complex as it affects the deepest and most delicate of faith. All that can be said of religion is reduced, for better or worse, to that intricate dilemma: the oral update dogmatic and ethical content of a belief transmitted by an ancient scripture with claims of sustainability. It is not that revealed religion loses its immutability and is subject to the variables of time and space. The reading of the holy book is done individually or collectively in a particular circumstance reflects inevitably the reality of a text written in the limited ways of subjectivity, of a society, and of a time and a certain culture where every book and every sentence have the specific date. "Say (religiously) the true" involves adapting

that word of God, set *in illo tempore* in a book, to reasonable and variables laws of language. Religion is inevitably exposed to all the risks of interpretation and cheerful “connivance” with philology.

This simple postulate of the “religions of the book” is not a matter that we have discovered in our hermeneutics age and it cannot be considered as the result of enlightened reason. This perspective accompanies and dominates the history of religions.

### The search for a universal language beyond the particular discourse of every religion: The "Illuminated Doctor" Ramon Llull writes, with God's help, a new book

From the point of view of the phenomenology of religion it is enormously significant that the three religions born in the Middle East have chosen writing as a key element of its origin, constitution and means of communication across generations. To preserve the truth in a book carries, as well as Plato said (in his dialogue *Phaedrus*), the multiplicity of readings and possible interpretations. It is natural that faced with such a dilemma, religions have wanted to determine who must be the qualified and competent interpreters among the endless reading of a text. The relationship between the content of scripture and written manifestation is in Judaism and in the Islam clear and crisp: the word and writing is a unique language considered that in which God spoke and the writing he set until his last sign. In the Koran and the Torah, the Hebrew and Arabic languages are manifested in a harmonious fusion: the study of this language and that writing is a divine office and those exercising that office are the true interpreters and authorized transmitters of that message (Fig 2).

Christian Ramon Llull (1232–1316) had lived since his childhood between Jews and Muslims and knew the priority of the written content for understanding the language of the divine writ. For orthodoxy in Islam divine revelation in the Arabic language exists from eternity, i.e., the Koran. Despite being the last of the three books, was not a temporary creation or the result of a particular act of literary inspiration. In Islam, the role of the prophet is secondary, it is the word communicated by God the center and reason of life of the believer. One can speak of boundless adoration of the Koran and all its letters, the book itself is the only divine manifestation and has a primary and fundamental role. The most significant difference with Christian revelation is, however, that the Koran is just God's word in Arabic. In Islam, its translation into another language is not prohibited, but is no longer the Koran, but an interpretation of it. In Judaism there is a similarity in the treatment of the sacred text. In the Hebrew tradition the foundation and starting point of rabbinical science was always the reading and interpretation of the Torah. It is noteworthy that contact with Islam led to a significant rise of Hebrew science and it was in Cordoba where Judaism developed a grammatical and philological science which left decisively to the further understanding of the Torah.

Llull understood well the greater complexity (and inherent difficulty) of the relationship among word of God and his writing in Christianity. The fundamental and decisive character in relation to the word of God in Christianity is its extratextuality, i.e., the overcoming of the book through the “incarnation” (humanization in the flesh) of that word. Christianity confesses, “the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That Word (the word) is not only true, but “truth and life” (John 14:6). The word of God is alive, is not only written, affordable and understandable philologically, but personal



Fig. 2. The symbols of the three "religions of the book".

communication. No wonder, then, that the final formation of a canon of sacred scriptures in Christianity has had a long history accompanied by the difficult acceptance of the Hebrew Torah. In Christianity the word of God written in Hebrew is his "Old Testament" that was translated into Greek. The new canon, the "New Testament" although was drafted partly in Aramaic, was also fixed in Greek. Very soon, however, for Western Christendom was necessary to translate their divine writings to the language of the Roman Empire. For fifteen centuries and for almost twenty in Catholic confession, the word of God was communicated in Latin, the sacral-liturgical language that was not the original and that the people neither spoke nor understood. From the 16th century, the Reformed churches were translating the Christian Bible into all languages, while the Catholic Church prevented direct access to the original divine message. But all these translations are made without the limitations of Islam who judges all translation as betrayal to the word of God and as such insufficient.

In Christianity the unique and important element of the communication of the texts is the translation. While in Judaism and Islam "to tell the truth" is taken literally repeating in the liturgy the same words with which God revealed His truth, the Christians first translate them into another language giving more importance to its meaning than to the oral reproduction. This process of translation (and interpretation) was accompanied by decisive controversies for configuring the Christian religion as a whole.

It is known that the reading of God's revelation through translations has enormous implications for understanding the message. Christianity tends to formulate truths in propositions or in dogmas, that is, it tends to "tell the truth" with other words and concepts although these have their foundation in the original word. In the other two religions it is clear that God is the author of the book and that the hagiographer is a mere instrument. Christianity, however, sees the Bible, especially as a *locus theologicus*, a place where to find their dogmas, the principles of theological argument and the fundamental truths of faith.

Religious controversies in our time, as in the time of Llull, focus on the recognition or not of "the truth" contained in religious texts. Llull clearly knew the religious phenomenon and when intends to write a better book than all other religious books is opening a gap in the rigid intellectual structure around him. He wanted to break a dialogue of the deaf avoiding the religious language of each religion. He thinks that can break the rules and try to that believers discuss the contents deduced from the revealed texts and not

just its literal formulas. His book, a new one, must be the norm of contact and dialogue between different religions. Above all has to insist on the importance of the two distinctive dogmas of Christianity from other religions, the "incarnation" of the word of God, the second person of a "trinity". Ramon Llull will make all efforts to demonstrate the rational necessity of these specific dogmas of the Christian religion. All his work had no other purpose. Llull reflected deeply on the Christian communicative way and clearly saw a profound difference to the two religions that spread religious influence in the Mediterranean. Muslim message was communicated in one language without translation into any other. This was precisely the crucial point for the new Lullian rhetoric.

In an effort to build consensus among all religions Llull would envy the unifying role of the Koran in the Arabic world. The Bible praying by Christians was not written in the same language and the same characters as had come out of the mouth of God. Christians could not compete with Arabics and Jews in regard to the unity of revelation and oral expression. The deep knowledge of the revealed message to their innermost linguistic problems was much higher among Arabs than among Jews and Christians. They converted philology in a divine service. Llull rejected the sacred books as the only source of truth and was aware of the superiority of the sacred writings of Arabs and Jews, at least in its literary quality compared to those of Christianity, whose content had been translated with no linguistic expression fixed and immutable.

The higher consideration of these writings did not imply for Llull a judgment about the value of their religious content. The superiority of Christianity over other religions is founded on the content and not the in the way formulated, in the sense of their dogmas and not on the beauty and consistency of the revealed message. Lullian idea of unity among religions was no competition between the sacred books, but the substitution of the particular religious language by one common, and to overcome the language barrier with translatable and understandable basic concepts in all languages and for all three forms in which the only God reveals. The program of Llull for the conversion of infidels serves both for Christians and non Christians, because all that reject the dictates of reason, which is above every religion, are infidels.

It is not strange that Llull finished rejecting a literature espoused with beauty. He put the open book of nature above the books written. The *liber naturae* and his interpreter, the reason, are the norm and not the beautiful and philologically impeccable holy books. The growing



development of literary Lullian expression towards almost algebraic language forms, express his conviction of ephemeral nature of literary forms against the pure and rational message that anyone can verify reading eighty percent of his writings.

## Advocate of the “infidels”

Llull, unlike his coreligionists, was aware of a very contemporary fact, that most Christians do not know the Christian truth and can not order life according to that truth. They have some beliefs, but not the whole truth. If the Christian God is the true God almighty, He can not consent that most of humanity live in error. God revealed His truth through Christ, and Christians are obliged to keep that truth worldwide. Llull is convinced that, if the majority of people live in error is because Christians do not put the means and strive to fulfill the gospel commandment of Jesus “Go into all the world and preach the gospel ...” (Matt. 28:19). This is the starting point of all Lullian work, that is, to do that commandment (Fig 3.).

The Christian Church (like other religions) judged misunderstanding and rejection as recalcitrant stupidity or wickedness of the “infidels”. It was not easy to the theologian to explain why the infidel would condemn himself without having heard of Christ. Llull became “lawyer of the infidels” defending the rationality of their rejection. The Christian hierarchy wanted that the infidel would change his faith by another without providing any rational basis. Although the Church obstinately demanded that the infidels had to accept the proposed principles, because that is how it is written in the book, the infidel had the full right to reject them.

Llull demands of the Church and of himself an effort of approximation through rational postulates. He thinks that all communication strategy of Christianity has to adapt the language of the recipient, that is, convert the message revealed to the linguistic repertoire of the “infidels” and not, as was done, to preserve power structures. It has to meet the material needs of fellow believers. Llull does not want to act with the cultural or ethic superiority of the missionary. Christian religious content must be considered an information vehicle translatable to the knowledge of the recipient.

For the Church, the preaching of the Gospel is a mandate received from its founder and is understood as a duty and a right. To the medieval mind this second aspect could justify recourse to arms. Promotion and training of missionaries compete church officials. Llull proposes a new model of mission, based on dialogue and discussion, following his method



Fig. 3. Ramon Llull "preaching the Gospel".

the Art. The proposed model takes into account the personal life of the missionary and his understanding of faith. Presupposes not only the intellectual preparation but contemplation (reflection and not only liturgical repetition of formulas) and when possible considers the dialogue as dispute, when necessary, and with the help of the force of arms if inevitable.

The Christian theologians demanded to the “infidels” submission to the truths and not understanding them. For centuries the Christian homiletics devoted themselves to remind the Christian, in weekly sessions liturgical, the theological terms in a submissive acceptance. The Christians that did not meet their obligations stated by the clerical establishment are excluded from the Christian religious process and thus also from the civil society. Llull autodidact and sure of his theological philosophical knowledge is not willing to accept the comfortable attitude of the clerical and political establishment that consider natural enslaving the “infidels” and that they abandon all their cultural background. Llull did not agree to reduce the transmission of the Christian message to rhetorical figures and concepts to sustain a poor argument in favor of traditional institutions. He, like the new secular bourgeoisie, requires a deeper understanding and a higher level of rhetoric and theological competence of the Christian message to avoid appearing ridiculous to non Christian intellectuals.

Ramon Llull preserved until the end of his life the utopian belief that, by following his method, all believers, regardless of individual religious languages, could achieve harmony among world religions.

Llull had direct knowledge of Christian missionary activity

because since childhood he could see the way in which Arabic substrate established until the conquest of the island of Mallorca when it was Christianized. And he understood the need to preserve fundamental aspects of that culture that, being enslaved and subdued, was disappearing. The Christian invading army and the subsequent colonization imposed its culture while it destroyed the the Muslim one.

Llull does not consider the infidel, the non-Christian, an abstract figure within their philosophical and theological arguments, but something concrete active and equal in the act of believing. “The infidels are men, like us.” That is, they are not non-believers, they believe—like the Christians—but in a different object of faith. The act of believing is the same but faith as an act of believing is common to both believers and unbelievers. This is a critical starting point in the Lullian vision of the infidel. Llull respect the Muslim faith to realize that the so-called non-believer (infidel) believe more deeply and intensely than the Christian. The Muslim follows and fulfills the obligations of their religion with more rigidity and therefore than Christian. This will be an important reality in the implementation of the Lullian dispute to the conversion of infidel. A Muslim must be taught not to believe, but to direct his faith to, what is for Llull the true faith, the Christian.

Llull would continually put himself questions that any Christian thinker had been raised earlier: how is it possible that the infidel, no Christian, believes more intensely than the Christian believer?; how is it possible that true faith does not move so wills effectiveness as beliefs considered false?; how is it possible that those who are not in truth believe deeper than those that have the truth? These issues, which have not lost its topicality, are considered by Llull under a radical perspective. Since the Muslim overcomes the Christian in the strength of his faith, his conversion must not be to make him a weakly believing Christian.

The conversion of the infidels should not change their character or their will, but the content of their faith. Muslim culture, besides deeper convictions, also follows a better physically and morally healthy life. Muslim believers, which for religious reasons do not drink alcohol or eat salted meat, preserved until their old age—according to Llull—a clearer understanding than Christians (*Felix*, chap. 50). Llull ends up sympathizing with the oppressed Muslim population and openly declared himself “advocate of the infidels” (*procurator infidelium*), not in an anachronistic-revolutionary social sense but as a defender of the Christian obligations trying they did not forget them. This compassion with the infidel decisively determined his vision of the temporal power and of the function of the spiritual strength.

## The criterion of religious truth

The observation of the surrounding reality makes him to establish a clear principle, i.e., that Christians, Jews and Muslims have something in common: they all believe. If most people believe something false, then faith is not a criterion of truth. Only believing, no one comes to the truth. For Llull the sole criterion of truth is the reason. Besides to believe it must reasonably demonstrate that what is believed is true.

Llull demands to the Christians to understand and demonstrate the truths of their faith, especially the differential dogmas that separate them from Jews and Muslims: the Trinity and the Incarnation. But Llull also requires this rational demonstration of the faith from Jews and Muslims. All they must be willing to talk. This is extremely important for Llull, who believes possible to achieve all believers that love true are willing to discuss and submit their beliefs to the judgement of reason. Llull is convinced that through a healthy and rational religious dialogue, truth will be necessarily imposed.

The nine years of study after his conversion is the Lullian effort to reach an understanding of their faith. In the *Book on the Contemplation in God (Llibre de contemplació en Déu)* he shows the way forward to reach a rational understanding of their beliefs, it constitutes his spiritual exercises, his litmus test. This contemplative experience of rational understanding of their faith is what Llull wants to make available to Christians and non-Christians. He talks about his method in terms of “enlightenment”. That is why he is known since the Middle Ages as “*Doctor Illuminatus*”. This reference to a divine gift allows him to avoid, during his long life and his immense work, any reference or reverence to the sacred books (auctoritates). Thus all that is deduced or induced by means of reason can be attributed to intellectual rigor. Llull is convinced that authorities are not necessary to legitimize his knowledge or to demonstrate the viability of his project. And where everyone mentions the words of Isaiah (7:1), “Unless you believe, you will not understand”, Llull says “if you do not understand, you can not believe”.

His *Ars generalis* tried to be a new universal science, a new easy method to learn and communicate. This claim against specialization too narrow and elitist explains the background of his ideas. Llull wanted theological science (in the Middle Ages science par excellence) come out of the traditional intellectual circles and came to wider social sectors, including non-Christians. This would be the way to allow the natural union of religions avoiding what was a remora and brake, i.e., clerical technicality and specialization (priests, rabbis or muftis), linked to the letter of the holy book. There

were necessary new literary techniques instead the rigid theological and philosophical literature. Llull wanted a method to make understandable and plausible Christian faith to all fairly skilled people (Fig. 4).

All speculation requires putting into literary practice what has been learned. It is not possible to separated absolutely faith and reason, intellectuality and religiosity, the ontological and the ethical. Llull strongly believed to have found a method for communicating the truths of their religion in an understandable language directed at the mind, regardless of the sacred books that, in principle, are an obstacle to rational argument. He did not reject those books but is clear for him that God is not manifested through the Holy Scriptures to hinder our knowledge, but to facilitate it. Starting from the secure possession of revealed truth, Llull believed to possess the method to prove it. The truth as revealed, and not its scientific demonstration, is a hindrance for other believers, the reason is no obstacle to faith but its natural complement.

The Lullian Art is conceived by Llull as a substitute of the whole medieval system of university education in theological and philosophical matter or, at least, a new orientation of it. This would sound as a presumption and unacceptable arrogance in a man that would no be Ramon Llull—the Enlightened Doctor—who considered his Art as revealed by God as the Scripture itself. His failure in contemporary intellectual circles and the subsequent formal education is the best explanation of his claim that would necessarily be opposed by

established science. On the other hand, it also explains the attraction and fascination of this *phantasticus* man, especially in certain reformer sectors influenced by the spiritual Franciscans who disparaged the pride of university science and, later, in the Renaissance, when criticism to scholastic science became more acute. No wonder either that Llull in Paris saw the key obstacle to the spread of his new conversion program and that was there where developed a more constant and intense theoretical activity .

The fundamental characteristic of the Lullian work is its radical break with institutionalized forms of communication. Llull requires congruence between the religious message and the rational system of knowledge. Merely religious acceptance is inadmissible to him. He did not accept a dissonance between the religious message and the recipient rational criteria.

A connoisseur (even that not expert) of the Middle Ages and of the scientific principles of a society founded on the three religions of the book knew the effect it would have a science which postulated dispense the sacred books and study the structure of nature to reach the knowledge of the truth hidden and only open (disclosed) in the holy book. Neither Jew nor Christian, nor Muslim could accept any knowledge and any understanding that formally avoid the divine revelation.

We will not insist on this crucial tenet of Lull's thought, however we need to take into account as it determines the marginal nature of Lull philosophy and is, basically, the *rai-*

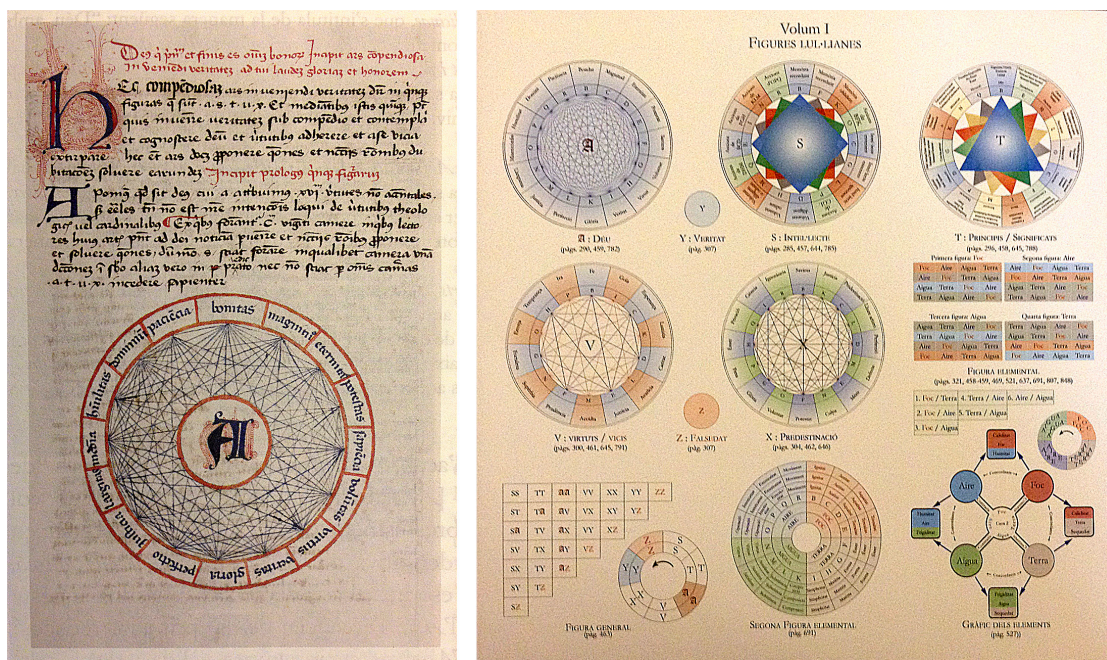


Fig. 4. *Ars lulliana*.





Fig. 5. Portrait of Jakob Brucker (1696–1770).

*son d'être* of all refusals and enthusiasm generated by his thinking the last seven hundred years. That's why Jakob Brucker (1696–1770), the first historian of philosophy could write "*primus philosophiae reformator Raymundus Lullius*".

Finally, if the main problem Llull wants to solve with his philosophy was the irreducible plurality of religious beliefs, his Art seeks diaphan, understable and universal reasons so that everyone can reach the truth over religious beliefs, confessions and schools. His science was a practical and affordable science to all willing to learn, without authorities or interpretive determinants.

In his time, as in ours, ideologies, worldviews, philosophies and theologies faced and acted with the sole purpose of submitting, enslave or annihilate the enemy. While these opposing views did seek only the defeat of the other and not struggling to find their common roots and solve their common problems, peace between peoples and religions could not reach. But the more we penetrate in his work, the better we understand that what he wanted was to get men of

different origin would fight to join in a common future program without sacrificing their reason and give up their freedom.

With his method, Llull also not intended to provide a definitive solution to all the problems affecting the social and religious plurality of his time, but the dynamics of his thinking tends clearly to unite, to iron out all the differences that separated the persons of his time.

Llull was convinced that it was possible and necessary to prove by natural reason that God is the highest expression of love in which everything happens and through whom everything happens. He only admitted the difference between the divine reality that acts and the union that naturally follows between that action and passion. The God of Lullian theological philosophy was, it had to be a "trinitarian". But the exposure of this Christian dogma in the context of his philosophy could not express all that the Christian New Testament and ancient interpreters said about the mystery of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Llull understood, however, that philosophy and theology could agree in love, so he also meant that the need for the incarnation of the Son of God by which the union with the world was made created by him could be understood in some way by natural reason.

Anyone can not align Llull among the thinkers who aim to separate. Life was not limited to the world of plants, animals or human compound; in the matter he finds and highlights the active force of the elements and their combinations to show that nothing, not even the stones are inactive.

And above cosmic reality he distinguished various forms of spiritual activity: one united to the impressions of the senses and the imagination and another liberated from those bonds; one that accepted believing the manifestation of God through His word and another identified with the word understanding it. But, for Llull, those double realities were not mutually exclusive. He thought that being and thinking, matter and spirit, sensual and intellectual reality, the finite and eternal reality were in opposition but united in the same understandable reality by faith and reason. ■

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