Ramon Llull and Islam, the Beginning of Dialogue
Ramon Llull y el islam, el inicio del diálogo

Evoking Ramon Llull today is not meaningless because, although he was a product of his time, his spirit goes further. He is located between two worlds: the western and the Islamic Arab. He is at the crossroads of different types of knowledge and influences. He makes his texts dialogue with Arab-Muslim texts, he poses the currently pressing question of religious otherness and expresses an ideal of humanity in his work.

FATIHA BENLABBAH

"Tolerance" is often combined with another concept, that of "interreligious dialogue". But this is still more a privilege of these modern societies capable of looking favourably on diverse options, which in other times and other societies simply did not exist as possibilities.

ANTHONY BONNER

Con la «tolerancia», a menudo se mezcla otro concepto, el del «diálogo interreligioso». Pero este es aún más un privilegio de las sociedades modernas, capaces de ver con buenos ojos diversas opciones que en otro tiempo sencillamente no existían como posibilidades.

ANTHONY BONNER

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Presentació

Com a contribució a la història dels països mediterranis i a l’apropreadiment del diàleg i de la interculturalitat, l’EMed presenta el dossier «Ramon Llull i l’Islam, l’ini del diàleg», que constitueix un important material de coneixement i de debat. L’estudi es fruit de les diferents troballes commemoratives que han tingut lloc amb motiu del 700 aniversari de l’estada de Ramon Llull a Bugia (1507), l’actual Bejaia algeriana. Aquestes troballes han servit d’acompanyament de l’exposició bibliogràfica Raimundus, christianus arabicus. Ramon Llull i l’encontre entre cultures, que, per primera vegada, ha recollit manuscrits i impressos pertanyents a les principals biblioteques catalanes, mallorquines i algerines, amb la finalitat de donar a conèixer internacionalment aquest llegat. 

Al llarg del 2007, Alger, Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca, Bejaia i Perpinyà han estat els punts de trobada d’institucions governamentals, associacions locals i universitaris de les dues ribes. En aquest número de Quaderns de la Mediterrània oferim les aportacions fetes per diferents especialistes sobre el filòsof catalanomalorquí, la ciència i el pensament que va estudiar i desenvolupar, així com les dificultats del diàleg a l’època medieval. Algunes d’aquestes aportacions són també una reflexió sobre l’actualitat que prenen com a pretext la figura lui l’iana. 

Ramon Llull va ser un dels primers personatges interculturals que, amb la seva obra, ens ofereixen algunes pautes de pensament i d’acció que continuen vigents en el segle xxI. Poliglot autodidacte capaç d’expressar-se i escriure en les llengües de cultura d’Europa i la Mediterrània, el llati i l’Àrab, va utilitzar alhora el català com a llengua tant de creació literària com de transmissió científica, i va ser un veritable pioner dins l’Europa medieval. Si bé el seu objectiu era missionari, no croia en el convenciment per la força, en una època molt propensa a la violència. La seva acció pretenia convèr i persuadir mitjançant la raó. Ofereix raons en les controvèrsies o disputes era una arma molt poderosa per mantenir els seus punts de vista. En aquest sentit, no és exagerat afirmar que va ser un precursor no tan sols del diàleg de civilitzacions, sinó també del procés euromediterrani, perquè va viatjar amb una certa freqüència diversos països del nord i del sud, en una època en què els viatges no estaven exemptos de riscos. El seu interès era presentar elements científics convencents en els debats (discursos) entre els savis, ja fos a París, a Pisa, a Tunis o a Bugia. Algunes dels elements d’aquesta debats continuen vigents avui dia especialment en el marc de les relacions interuniversitàries, paradigma del diàleg entre cultures a la Mediterrània. Els sistemes educatius de qualitat i els ensenyaments vinculats a les necessitats locals i econòmiques són repres mortals, i el futur del diàleg passa per un enfoçament i una evolució adequats d’aquests repres.
pas au constituer toutes les formes possibles de combinaison de symboles linéaires, son travail n'est pas de remise en cause mais seulement d'achèvement. Il paraît ainsi convenable de définir une évolution allant de la combinatorie qualitative d'Aristote à la combinatorie quantitative moderne à travers trois siècles : la fusion, par les Arabes, de la première avec la sûriyû (jeux de lettres) sémitique ; la rationalisation, par Lulle, des procédés ésotériques arabes ; la mathématisation complète par Leibniz.

Je pense qu'il est préférable de ne pas parler tant en termes d'« influences » arabo-islamiques sur Lulle, même si elles sont loin d'être négligeables, qu'en termes de presupposés communs entre lui et ses interlocuteurs.

Le tableau qui se voit en équilibre montre que l'étendue de Lulle vis-à-vis de la pensée arabo-islamique est paradoxale. Quand il se réclame ouvertement de modèles, on s'étonne que leur impact soit faible superficiel. Lulle n'est pas un souffle chrétien, même s'il vante les shatâk (expressions d'extase) des soufis ; il ne se situe pas dans la perspective musulmane ordinaire envers les Noms divins, avec sa connotation ésotérique de révélation privilégiée ; il n'est pas un disciple d'al-Ghazâlî ; et même on peut dire que quand il suit ouvertement l'exemple des Mozarabes, cela le met en contradiction avec l'aspect principal de son Art. En revanche, on voit, tout au long de son œuvre, nombre de correspondances, de correspondances entre deux processus très différents, non avouées avec des positions arabo-islamiques, ou incrédules, coincidences qui ne peuvent être dues au hasard : la classification des Noms divins selon le modèle aussi arabe ; les « sujets » et les « questions » d'Ibn Sînîn ; les présupposés combinatoires qu'il se contente de rationaliser par une distribution des rôles des figures. On a vu également qu'il pouvait éviter d'une manière très significative, celle d'une position à l'interface qui lui apparaît comme plus représentative, de ce qui renvoie sous-entendu à un but stratégique. Et non seulement il n'avait pas tout cela, mais il agit en tendant à désavouer, obsédé qu'il est avant tout la réalisation de son Art, son perfectionnement, la façon de le rendre accessible et efficace sur les esprits.

C'est pourquoi je pense qu'il est préférable de ne pas parler tant en termes d'« influences » arabo-islamiques sur Lulle, même si elles sont loin d'être négligeables, qu'en termes de presupposés communs entre lui et ses interlocuteurs. À ce titre, le cas des relations entre texte, présenté à la fois sous forme latine ou catalane et avec une référence explicite à la structure même de la langue arabe, est à dire en fait à la structure de la mentalité de l'interlocuteur, me semble caractéristique tout l'esprit hulleen envers l'islam.

that is, someone who through the use of reason comes to understand the necessity of the existence of a God creator and, with the addition of intuition, comes to have a mystical vision of Divinity. All of this in a state of complete isolation; that is, without any influence from other men, as Habbay b. Yaqqaz grows up alone on a desert island where he had been abandoned after his birth.

Ibn Tufayl, native al-Andalusian from Guadix, introduced Averroes in the Almohad court and his interests coincided greatly with those of the philosopher. However, Ibn Tufayl was above all a mystic, highly influenced by two eastern mystics, Avicenna (d. 428/1037) and al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111). The latter’s influence can be seen in the fact that he includes two versions of the birth of Habbay b. Yaqqaz: one that had him born by spontaneous generation and another in which he was born of a father and mother.

The first version has Avicennan roots and the second is what Averroes would have supported, who expressed his total disagreement with the possibility of spontaneous generation. Ibn Tufayl also includes in his book the fact that Habbay b. Yaqqaz achieves knowledge of God through rational effort without the help of language; that is, through thought formulated from within without the help of words. Having grown up on a desert island, Habbay has no one to learn how to speak from. It is only once he has obtained the highest level of knowledge of God that he makes contact with another human being, Abas. The latter, seeking withdrawal and distance from society, arrives on the desert island inhabited by Habbay and meets him there and teaches him to speak when he is 50 years old. Ibn Tufayl describes what happens as follows: “Seeing [Abas] that Habbay did not speak, he felt reassured about the dangers to which a new companion could expose his devotee; he took it upon himself to teach him language, science and religion, with which he would obtain great reward and come closer to God. Abas began to teach him how to speak; first he showed him objects, saying their names, and then he repeated them and made him reproduce them. Habbay spoke them as they were shown to him, and in this way he came to teach him all the names and gradually managed to teach him how to speak in a short period of time.”

The need for revelation was extended to include the origin of all the human sciences and arts because man alone could know nothing.

However, once he has taught him the language, what Abas discovers is that in science, religion and mystical knowledge of God, Habbay has great advantage over him. It is then when Abas himself becomes a disciple of the “self-taught philosopher.”

Reason Does Not Exist in Man without Language

We now know the impossibility of language being acquired in circumstances similar to those imagined by Ibn Tufayl (or by the author of Taras in the Apses). But our ideas about language are not the same as those held at that time. Consider the famous experiment attributed to Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) in order to discover the “natural” language of the human being; he confined several newly-born children so that they would grow up without contact with any adults. All the children soon died, despite being fed, and none of them spoke. This would not have taken the Cordoban Ibn Hazm by surprise, who one century earlier had already warned: “Without language there is no way that even one man can exist and survive.”

For Ibn Hazm too, as for other medieval Muslim thinkers, the origin of language had to be necessarily divine. The need for revelation was extended to include the origin of all the human sciences and arts because man alone could know nothing; “[…] we know with certainty that sciences and arts could never be acquired by man, guided only by his natural forces and without the help of teaching […] So it is with language, without which education, the subsistence of individual life, or social relations cannot be conceived; it is impossible that it would have been invented by common agreement of men, if it were not through another language; therefore it is clear that a first notion of any language has been necessary […] It is impossible for all this to have been invented without teaching. Therefore, perfine, we must affirm that, by necessity, there must have existed one man or more who God first taught all of this, without the intervention of a human master, but through direct inspiration, which those who received it were sure of. However, this is the definition of prophetic revelation, therefore, the existence of one or several prophets is necessary. Apocryphal confirmation of this reasoning is the following: for any man lacking this experience of all this knowledge and art it is absolutely impossible to ever invent them himself. This occurs with those born deaf and dumb, who can never educate themselves to speak or even articulate the consonant sounds.”


10. ibid., pp. 254 and 255.
For Ibn Hazm, a situation like that of Ibn Tufayl was inevitable. Impossible the self-taught philosopher would never have been able to know God with only the help of his reason and, above all, without acquiring language.

Al-Ghazali and the Murcia grammarians Ibn Sida (d. 458/1066) concur with Ibn Hazm in refuting those who believe that language could originate from mutual agreement between men with the same argument (that is, some prior language is necessary to establish human convention as the origin of language). Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sida deal with the mechanism of gestures and signs, considered as a substantive preface of oral language. This issue emerges when Al-Ghazali approaches the three possibilities of the origin of language; that is, that it had originated through divine teaching, that it had emerged through mutual agreement between men or that it had been invented by one person: “Even one intelligent man could have imagined how to fulfill that need and the possibility of naming the things through the grouping of letters, thereby inventing the language that he would later make known to others through signs and simultaneously repeating the words, again and again, as parents do with a small child, or as the deaf person communicates his state of mind through signs.”

We have here the same process through which Absal teaches Hayy. Ibn Sida also reflects the arguments of those who deny that it has been possible to produce language through divine teaching, saying: “it is indispensable for the start of languages to be through mutual agreement, based on observing objects and gestures. However, it is impossible to say that the Eternal agreed with any of the men, that such an agreement would have to be a sign and a gesture, which is only done with certain members of the body, which God does not possess.”

A Curious Work by Averroes: How a Deaf Person is Invited to Enter Islam

The deaf have a distinguished presence in the texts we have just seen. Sign language has traditionally been used to attempt communication between the deaf and those who are not. In the medieval Islamic world, there are references to legal texts in this language under the expression isarat mu'afa: it was a language necessary in matters related to the repudiation and marriage of deaf people, but there was no security on its validity.

The versified pedagogical works became popular, which helped the memorisation and transmission of knowledge. I have said traditional and rational knowledge because the Almohads did not confine themselves to reviving the faith but also gave a great thrust to philosophy and the so-called “knowledge of the ancients”.

Among the works written by the 12th-century Muslim wise man Ibn Rushd there is one with a strange title: How to Invite a Deaf Person to Enter Islam (Kayfa yudh 'al asaanah dal-djuj il-ilaham). Having not been preserved or a work of which I know any equivalent, or can only speculate about its possible content.

10 For Ibn Hazm, a situation like that of Ibn Tufayl was inevitable. Impossible the self-taught philosopher would never have been able to know God with only the help of his reason and, above all, without acquiring language.
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al-Mahdi), using the same expression as in the aforementioned work. How to Invite a Deaf Person to Enter Islam (Kayfa yud`al-asamam ilah l-dajjal fi l-islam). In the case of this last work (remember that it must be considered lost), of which Averroes talks, was it a metaphysical or a real deaf person?

Was it a Real Deaf Person?

Averroes might well have posed the question of how to teach a deaf person to understand the concept of God, because this question goes hand in hand with one of the central concerns of the time: the achievement of an adequate knowledge of God. In general, the question must not have been considered relevant if the deaf person had been born in a Muslim context. By imitating those close to him, he would learn to pray and to behave as the Muslims behaved, in such a way that they would take him for a Muslim. But the question becomes complicated if the aim was to know if he really believed in what Muslims must believe to be considered as such, especially in a period like the Almohad, in which learning a profession of faith considered orthodox was a crucial aspect. One must keep in mind that the Almohads imposed on the Muslims who lived in territory governed by them the memorisation of the Almohad creed, whose dogmatic content had to distance them from the danger of anthropomorphism and therefore of infidelity. How could one be sure that a deaf person understood the subtleties between a correct formulation about divine unity and an incorrect one?

Another possibility, always within the supposition that the deaf person in Averroes’ work was a real one, was that what was under discussion was the conversion of a non-Muslim person to Islam. Let us suppose that we are dealing with a Christian who for some reason had lost the capacity to hear how would he be taught the concept of divine unity in order to start from it the “theological” dialectic. Could such a thing be done without using words, language? Linking with the text of Ibn Tufayl, would it be possible for thoughts to exist without language?

Was it a Metaphorical Deaf Person?

But as the work has not survived, there is another possibility that the title refers to a metaphysical deaf person, someone who does not want to hear the message of the true religion and convert to it. These deaf people are spoke of in a Koranic alega which was especially so by the Almohads (Koran, 8:22)

20. O you who believe! Obey Allah and His Apostle and do not turn back from him while you are here...
21. And be not like those who said, We believe, and they did not obey (wa-La takhu la alladha qa la sani, na wa-ham la yasna,ana).
22. Surely the vision of animals, in Allah, sight, are the deaf, the dumb, who are not understanding (inna sara al-dawla, inna Allah al-asam al-bakm, alladha yaqiluna).
23. And if Allah had known, any good in the He would have made them hear, and if He makes them hear they would turn back while they withdraw.

doctrines? Was it also about how to Islamise Jews and Christians, within that dark force of Almohad history, which was the forced conversion of those who lived in Muslim territory as dimmies; that is, under statute of protection which guaranteed that they could continue with their beliefs and rituals?

The 13th Century and the Dream of Conversion

In the Almohad era, one of the most debated questions was the existence of different religious opinions and beliefs, inside and outside Islam, a question that was seen, in general, as a problem to be resolved.28 If, on the one hand, as we have seen, the intention was to oblige the Muslims to respect the profession of Almohad faith and there were attempts at forced conversion of the Jews, on the other it was also in the Almohad era when among the Sufis an open vision of religious pluralism developed, as happened in the case of the mystic Muhyi l-din Ibn 'Arabi, who died in the Orient in 658 of the Hegira/1260 AD, after having abandoned the Iberian Peninsula many years before.29 His complex doctrine, about which so much has been written, has as one of its central theses the relationship established between reason and imagination: “Through reason man may know, but not see; through unveiling man may see, but not know” and his acceptance of the need for the revealed religions to be different because the dispositions of human beings are different.30 This is also the case of the mystic Ibn Hud, another Al-andalusian who migrated to the Orient (d. 699 of the Hegira/1500 AD), disciple of Ibn Sab‘in and a follower like him of the doctrine of the “unity of existence” (wadhat al-wujud) and interested in medina and philosophy.31 It is said that Ibn Hud had the custom of inviting Christians and Jews to attend his classes and he offered the possibility of following the path of Moses, of Jesus and of Muhammad, which does not mean that Ibn Hud was willing to offer guidance in accordance with the Jewish or Christian religion, Moses and Jesus are recognised prophets in Islam. Moreover, it is said that Ibn Hud used to make the sign of the cross, that in his teaching he used the works of Maimonides and religion was indifferent to him; in other words, he seems to be a defender of an inter-confessional doctrine.32 Another case is that of al Hafri (d. 567 of the Hegira/1171 AD), a mystic who sent a letter to the religious authorities of Tarragona, where several members of his family lived in captivity. In the letter he exhorted the unity of the human race, saying that if people were conscious of their mental and physical truth, they would not kill one another’s blood, and he added that in the religion of Abraham there was a common base for Muslims and Christians. The doctrine he based this on was that of the wadhat al-wujud, according to which the historical religions are no more than the manifestations of the same truth.33 

When Ramon Lull went through his own personal process of conversion, one of the goals proposed was to convert Jews and Muslims to Christianity, which is why he developed his famous Art over a period of forty years precisely with this objective. His approach to the conversion of the infidels was based on the need to find principles common to the members of the three monotheistic religions, principles which could then be used for the dialogue which had to lead to the conviction of the truth of Christianity. The development of these principles presupposed knowledge of the other religions and this is why Lull made the effort to learn Arabic.34 Lull realised that the controversy based on scriptural texts made no sense, because each part would cling to its own hermeneutics and therefore there could be no real debate.35 In order to have a real debate, each party had to be prepared to test the veracity of its own religion and this posture, together with the combination of the rational and the mystical, separates Lull from his other contemporaries, like Ramon Marti, who were also set on achieving “the dream of conversion.”36 For Lull, Christians, Jews and Muslims participated in a common culture and common issues and he believed, therefore, that there was common ground to establish a debate. His Art is demonstrative and therefore sufficiently general to be able to be addressed to as wide an audience as possible. Given that the cloister AD, a mystic tradition were versed in philosophy and were rational peoples, and given that, for Lull, reason was


32. On the existence of a relativist atmosphere (there is no way of proving which religion is the true one) and its positive influence on the conversion of Jews to the dominant religion, Islam, see S. Shimoni, “On Jewish Intellectuals Who Converted in the Early Middle Ages”, The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity, Leiden, 1995, pp. 179-197.

33. P.S. van Keresveeld, “Muslim Slaves and Captives in Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages”, Islam and Ottoman-Muslim Relations, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, pp. 5-23.

34. In his book entitled Desacoronte (Invisible), the following is stated with reference to this process: “Ramon, how can you believe that through preaching I the Sancho shall be baptised? I because according to what Muhammad has commanded / those who speak ill of him none shall remain / and his reasons none will want to hear? It seems to serve little to go there / if what is more, the man who knows not / the Arabic language, through interpretation / little can achieve with them, and / the language is learned, long can it be. I advise you, therefore, to go to God to pray and on a high mountain with me to celebrate: Ramon Lull, Obra escogida. Vida colectiva. Libro de maravillas. Arbol ajimal. Desacoronte (bilingue). Canto a los filósofos (bilingüe), introduction by Miquel Baillot, translation and notes by Pema Ginter, Madrid, Alianza, 1961, p. 475.

35. The same posture is that not to use scriptural arguments and limit ourselves to the rational is found in the Islamic world: see on this the article by M. Cook in Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam (2007), to be published, as well as the collective volume The Magics: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam, H. Lazzaro-Fish et al. (eds.), Westfalia, 1996 (with previous bibliography). Another issue is to be born in mind is the unequal relationship of power that existed between those who preached to convert and their audience, an aspect dealt with by M. Barba”, “...Per una preghiera / che tu possa predicare a audizioni captivas”, Studia Generalis. Estudios interdisciplinares sobre la historia y cultura de Europa y Asia / Iusocietati de Filosofia Catalana, Girona, Col·legi Universitari de Girona, no. 9, 1999, pp. 117-131. Lull’s attempt to attract Muslims within their own territory (stays in Bélgica and Tunis) perhaps tried to avoid this inequality, along with Lull’s writings on the greatness of his method.

the innate capacity that permits human beings to find truth, the debate was the only way of being able to convert these elites, those who the rest of the population would follow.17

If truth is the same and if reason, together with imagination or intuition — as the Sufi and philosopher Ibn Tufayl wanted to show — allows access to this truth, for those who thought that reason does not exist in man (at least in the common man) without language all that was needed was to find the words to transmit this truth that had to be by definition comprehensible for all. Lull’s Art can be understood as the search for those words translated into distinct languages, among them Arabic and Latin, but also Catalan, in the same way that Alfonso X would use Galician and Castilian to carry forward his cultural and political projects.

The common people must also access truth, something already practised by the Almohads, when using the Berber to address the non-Arabic-speaking masses.

Lull failed in his missionary efforts. On the one hand, his method came up against resistance from scholastic theologians of the University of Paris, for whom the doctrine of the Catholic faith was not rationally possible.18 On the other, he did not manage to convince the Muslims when he visited Boğç and Tunis, even though he learned Arabic and used a method rooted in Islamic civilization.

His attempt is another reflection of how the relationship between reason, language19 and conversion was conceived in the 15th century by Raymond Lulle. Lull has been proposed as a model for the development of a rational method in philosophy, religion, and politics.

Raymond Lulle a été un maître paradigmatic qu’on appelait « docteur éclairé », en donnant ainsi à ce titre un sens ambigui de clarté et de foi. Il a été connu grâce à son livre de la remise des trois sages qui, bien que comportant quelques divergences, a été reçu comme un essai de dialogue. Lulle positionne ses textes dans cette œuvre les trois religions autochtones en tant que représentantes de l’humanité. Dans son Ars combinatoria, il tente de répéter une rationalité médiévale pour nourrir, classifier, organiser et inventer. L’œuvre de Raymond Lulle, bien que répondant à une rationalité particulière, a été plus sociale de ce que l’on pouvait penser jusqu’à notre temps.

Toutefois, avant d’initier le débat, je souhaite proposer pour ma part quelques définitions. L’appellation d’éducation médiévale ne correspond qu’à un calcul de la logique et la logique (à l’origine, ratio veut dire calcul), employée pour résoudre des problèmes posés à l’esprit, n’est que la description d’un phénomène. La rationalité est l’histoire d’une éducation entre une infrastructure (descriptive, explicative) et un réalisme empirique.

La rationalisation est la construction d’une vision cohérente, totalisante de l’univers, à partir de données partielles, d’une vision partielle, d’un principe unique. Ainsi, la vision d’un seul aspect des choses (l’actualité, l’efficacité), l’explication en fonction d’un facteur unique (l’économique ou le politique), la croyance que les maux de l’humanité sont dus à une seule cause et un seul type d’agents, constituent autant de rationalisations. La rationalisation peut, à partir d’une proposition de départ totallement absurde ou fantasmatique, édifier une construction logique et en déduire toutes les conséquences pratiques.

L’aventure de la raison occidentale, depuis le xviie siècle, a produit, parfois simultanément et indistinctement, rationalisme, rationalisation et rationalisation. Il nous semble aujourd’hui rationnellement nécessaire de répeter toute fois cette rationalisation, c’est-à-dire toute raison auto-suffisante. Nous devons considérer la possibilité d’une évolution de la raison.

La raison est évolution

La raison est un phénomène évolutif qui ne progresse pas de façon continue et linéaire, comme le croyait l’ancien rationalisme, mais par mutations et réorganisations profondes.

Pas que l’idéologie ait fini par s’imposer à une petite minorité de chercheurs [...] que la raison elle-même ne constitue pas un invariant absolu, mais s’élaborer par suite d’une construction opératoire, créatrice de nouveaux et précaires par une série ininterrompue de construc-