Mystical Unity and Hierarchical Difference: Ramon Llull’s Rhetoric of Conversion

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Abstract

Ramon Llull, a thirteenth century Catalan philosopher and theologian, developed a rhetorical and theological system based on the divine attributes of God as recognized and taught by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In an age characterized by religious intolerance, he developed an art of persuasion to convert Muslims and Jews to Christianity.

The spiritual rhetoric of conversion of Ramon Llull (1232-1316) offered a unique intercultural synthesis of Arabic and Christian, Classical and Scholastic views of moralizing and speaking about God. Ramon Llull was a thirteenth century Catalan philosopher, theologian, rhetorician and missionary who sought to develop an art of disputation and persuasion that would convert the Muslims, Jews, Tartars and others to Christianity. In an age of great intolerance and brutality, he proposed a system of conversion-based persuasion consisting of:

1) the study and use of the language and styles of Islam and other Oriental languages;
2) the common ground principles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam about the nature of God (the Dignitaries);
3) an exemplarist theory of signs of semblanca (resemblance);
4) an ars combinatoria (combinatory art) of Absolute principles, Relative principles, questions, virtues and vices that served as a system for invention, truth and memory;
5) a popular rhetoric featuring genres ranging from sermons and hagiography to spiritual quests and mystical allegories.

Since Ramon Llull wrote over 250 works in Catalan, Latin and Arabic, this analysis is based mainly on his Rethorica nova (1301 Catalan; 1303 Latin), Libre de contemplacio en Deu (Book of Contemplation, 1273-4), Blanquerna (1283), Libre del gentil e dels tres savis (Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men, 1274-6?), Ars demonstrativa (1283), Logica nova (1303) and Ars brevis (1308).
Llull’s attempt to convert the Saracens and other non-Christians grew out of several religious visions. To fulfill the calling of his visions to convert others, he learned Arabic and studied a great variety of Islamic theological, philosophical and logical texts. Llull attempted to use some of the rhetorical formats and persuasive strategies of earlier Jewish, Islamic and Christian sources. In doing so, Llull created an unique intercultural rhetoric of conversation that is based on universal religious topics, a hierarchy of resemblance of beings and things as they relate to God, and appeals based on mythic quests and mystical allegories. In order to understand Llull’s rhetoric of conversion, this paper provides a specific examination of Llull’s early life and studies, focuses on the intellectual and philosophical development of his art, explores his missionary work and its implications, and finally reviews his later influence on other Christian rhetorical scholars.

The Early Life of Ramon Llull

Ramon Llull was born on the island of Majorca, in the capital city of Palma, in 1232. His father was granted land as part of the conquest of Majorca by James I. The family’s success is shown by Ramon’s position as a courtier and troubadour in the court of James II after 1246. About ten years later, he married Blanca Picany and had two children. In his autobiography, Vita coaetanea, he notes that while “still a young man and seneschal to the king of Majorca, (he) was very given to composing worthless songs and poems and doing other licentious things.”

Sometime around the year 1263, his life would dramatically change. One night while composing a song of “foolish love” for a woman, he saw a vision of “Christ on the cross, as if suspended in midair.” On successive nights the vision reappeared; finally after the fifth time, he believed that the vision signified that “he should abandon the world at once and from then on dedicate himself totally to the service of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Llull, with the “gift of the Father of Lights,” realized he would please God by “converting to His service and worship the Saracens who in such numbers surrounded the Christians on all sides.” Another “all-encompassing notion entered his heart: that he would have to write a book, the best in the world, against the errors of unbelievers.”

A third goal became evident: that he would have to learn Arabic and to convince the Pope, kings or princes to provide for monasteries where monks could learn the “languages of the Saracens and other unbelievers” to preach and demonstrate the “holy truth of the Catholic faith, which is that of Christ.” After listening to a sermon on the feast of St. Francis, Llull was inspired by the example of how Saint Francis had “abandoned and rejected everything so as to be more firmly united to Christ and to Christ alone.”

After Ramon “sold his possessions, reserving a small portion for the support of his wife and children,” he set out on a series of pilgrimages in Spain wearing a “lowly habit of the coarsest cloth.” For the next nine years, Llull studied Arabic from a Saracen slave, learned some Latin, and read works such as: the Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud, and studied the writings of Plato and Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, Anselm, Augustine, Aquinas, Peter Lombard, Al-Ghazali, Avicenna, Platearius, Constantius, Averroes, Ibn Tufayl and Al-Kindi.
Llull learned Arabic well enough, by 1272, to write in Arabic a compendium of Al-Ghazali’s logic, which he later translated into Latin. Al-Ghazali’s life of seeking truth in intellectual speculation, theology, logic, and mysticism in many ways parallels Llull’s search for the correct path. In 1274, Ramon went up a certain mountain not far from his home (probably Mt. Randa near Palma), in order “to contemplate God [when] the Lord suddenly illuminated his mind, giving him the form and the method for writing... against the errors of the unbelievers.” So, at forty-two years of age, Llull began writing his Ars major that would begin his art and missionary work. The King of Majorca, James II, hearing of Llull’s work, had the monastery of Miramar built and endowed on the rugged coast so that “Franciscan friars be sent there to learn Arabic for the purpose of converting unbelievers.” In the succeeding years, Llull would refine his art in Majorca, write his novel Blanquerna in Montpellier in 1286, visit Rome, and travel to Paris to lecture at the Sorbonne where he came into conflict with the Averroists. “Because of the weakness of human intellect which he had witnessed in Paris” he simplified and further refined his art.

The Art of Ramon Llull

The Dignitaries. Between 1290 and 1308, Llull would produce an art that would find the truth based on divine attributes accepted in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Llull used this art based on common, seemingly universal attributes, as a means of persuasion to preach to the Jews, the Saracens and others. The Dignitaries would form the bases for rhetorical invention and memory. Llull’s system starts with some fundamental principles such as “God exists. He is one, He is the first cause of all things.” Within a circle, Llull shows the nine divine attributes or Dignities: Bonitas, Magnitudo, Eternitas, Potestas, Sapientia, Voluntas, Virtus, Veritas, Gloria (Goodness, Magnitude, Eternity, Power, Wisdom, Will, Strength, Truth, Glory). Each of the divine attributes is designated by one of the letters B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I,K. The letter A is reserved for the figure of the circle which represents the unity of God. (See Figure 1, below.)

Figure 1: The Dignitaries

For Llull, “these Absolute Principia, as he also called the dignitaries, are in effect ‘relational concepts’ that signify God with reference to the created world.” In Declaratio Raymundi per modum dialgi edita, Llull posits that the “dignitaries are concordant with one another, without any contrariety. They entail no plurality in the Divine being... These dignitaries are real... (they) are at the greatest distance from nonbeing.” The dignitaries represented the Neo-Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius, Au-
gustine and Scotus Erigena in Christianity. The hadras in Islam mysticism and the sephiroth in the Jewish Cabbalistic tradition also seem to be reflected in the Lullian dignitaries. Llull offered an extreme realism in which the dignitaries are real because they are based on the actual structure of reality. As Mark Johnston explained: “Llull’s logical method assumes a ‘natural’ ontology that is extremely Realist and extremely ‘essentialist’ in an ultra-Avicennian fashion. All being exist for Llull as the concrete realizations of real universal substantial and accidental essences or natures.”

For Llull, all creatures reflect to a greater or lesser degree the similitude or the likeness to the divine essences or perfection. Even the lowest creature reflects in some small way the image of God. A hierarchy of being is clearly evident that extends from the perfect Godhead down through the angles, men, women, animals, etc. The hierarchy is often symbolized as a ladder of assent or descent in Felix or as a tree in the Tree of Science.

Ars Combinatoria. Any of the nine Dignitaries can be combined such as “goodness is great” and “greatness is good” so that any subject can become a subject or a predicate. Dignitaries can be combined on a general level or with the particular such as “Peter’s goodness is great, and thus the intellect has a ladder for ascending or descending” from the universal to the particular or visa versa because “whatever exists is reducible to the above-mentioned principles.”

In the Ars brevis, the second figure labeled T shows three triangles that consist of the relative principles that are clustered as: Differentia, Concordantia, Contrarietas (Difference, Concordance, Contrariety); Principium, Medium, Finis (Beginning, Middle, End); and Majoritas, Aequalitas, Minoritas (Majority, Equality, Minority). Llull looked at this second figure as a heuristic device for the individual so that the “intellect acquires knowledge” by determining how one item relates to another.

Other aspects of the art of combination are presented as questions, subjects, virtues and vices. A multitude of combinations are possible for the artist to discover. For example: What is justice? Whether justice is good? How does justice relate to each of the virtues? etc. (See Figure 2, below.)
Llull's *Ars combinatoria* function like *topoi* or commonplaces as in the classical rhetoric of Aristotle or Cicero, or in the medieval rhetoric of Boethius. However, no other system seems to offer as complex, flexible or movable a system of invention. Circles of movable combinations and Tables of possible permutations are part of the Lullian mystic/hermetic tradition.

Llull used the art of combination for "remembering, understanding, willing, believing, contemplating, discovering, guiding, preaching, interpreting, solving, judging, teaching, disputing, counseling, accustoming and healing." In the *Ars demonstrativa*, he explained guiding as going toward the "path of truth; for this Art is common to all Gentiles, Jews, Christians, and Saracens alike ... This is because the principles of the Art are completely general, and they can be used to judge clearly which people are on the true path and which are in error." The art of combination at times appeared like a calculus of thought as in the *Ars demonstrativa*, where questions like "Whether God exists" were at first answered by the notational solution of "[ A A \ being perfection \ privation imperfection\ S V \ Y Z ]" Even in the prosaic account of the *Book of the Gentile*, the basic idea of combining by working from universal principles to answer particular questions is shown. For example, the wise man in answering a question about the relationship between power and love said: "the love residing in man can love as much as it wants to want, but it cannot have as much as it can want."

**Semblance -> <- Signification.** Llull views the Dignitaries as exemplary archetypes in the Neo-Platonic tradition. Origin, being, relationships between entities, and meaning, are based on the participation or the "identification of all created entities with the eternal Divine Ideas"; therefore, all entities existed on hierarchies based on their similarities or "derivations from the Divine exemplars." Llull's exemplarist theory of signs/metaphysics consists of two elements: *semblanca* and *significacio*. "Semblanca (resemblance or similitude) designated the relationship or correspondence between all beings," or, as Foucault would explain in the *Order of Things*, *semblanca* "enable[s] one to distinguish the location of the signs, to define what constitutes them as signs, and to know how and by what laws they are linked." *Significacio* are signification or, as Foucault states, "skills that enable one to make the signs speak and discover their meaning." The *semblanca* and the *significacio* have an "active and transitive nature" in which "All beings, man included, were constantly propagating interpretations of themselves by means of their *semblances* ... for all being ultimately interpreted themselves --signified their status -- as exemplars of their archetype ... this process comprised the reductio of all being back to their source, God." The Lullian art consist of participation by resemblance along a hierarchy of more or less similarity from the perfection of God as represented by the Dignitaries. Platzeck has noted that this Lullian similarity occurs in four forms: "likeness between ... Divine Dignitaries ... likeness between individuals of the same species ... likeness between the three correlative aspects of any entity," (agent, patient, act) and "the likeness between the more general superior and the less general inferior."

In the novel/sermon *Blanquerna*, the art of combination and the notion of semblance is used to show the unity of God (as described by the Divine Dignitary of Goodness):
Sovereign Good! Alone in thy Goodness is infinite greatness and in eternity and in power, for there is none other goodness such as can be infinite, eternal, and of infinite power; wherefore, O Sovereign Good, I adore thee alone in one God who is Sovereign in all perfection. Thou art one only Good, whence all other good descends and springs. Thy Good of Itself alone sustains all good beside. Thy Good alone is the source of my good, wherefore all my good gives and subjects itself to the honor, praise and service of Thy Good alone.\(^{36}\)

It has been suggested that Llull’s system is really an onto-theological structure. As Llull notes in *Ars demonstrativa*: “the object of this Art is therefore the end that is the first intention, which end is to know and love” God.\(^{37}\) This very important notion was also expressed in *Doctrina pueril* written to his son: “God wishes that one act to serve, love and know in Him the first intention. . . . you should love Him because He is good, because He created you, not because He will give you Paradise.”\(^{38}\)

This art of discovering the truth was “based on the actual structure of reality, it was a logic which followed the pattern of the true universe.”\(^{39}\) This pattern was based on the natural order, the natural ontology, the nature of semblance in which all of creation was a reflection of the divine dignitaries. Or, as Pring-Mill has stated, “the search for truth by means of the Lullian Art is always a search for congruence with God.”\(^{40}\) In this Lullian Art signification could occur by the senses, the imagination, memory, reason or will.\(^{41}\) “Knowledge depended on pursuing a chain of significations.”\(^{42}\) Since the “Lullian world is one of analogy and symbols, a translucent universe in which the least thing is a living token of the presence of God” everything has participation by resemblance or by composition.\(^{43}\) Even though this participation can be “manifested, demonstrated, revealed” in a variety of ways, the relationship between signifier and signified was not arbitrary (as in post-Saussurian linguistics) but instead “all beings were Augustinian signa naturalia” because “one referent alone existed for all signs. . . . God, who resembled only Himself and could not be fully represented or manifest by any significatio.”\(^{44}\)

**The Rhetorical Art.** While Ramon Llull wrote only a few books that specifically dealt with rhetoric, his Art and its application were based on persuasion and a particular rhetorical point of view. As a leading Lullian scholar, Anthony Bonner, has noted: “First we must understand that Llull was primary and perhaps uniquely interested in persuasion, and this at all intellectual and social levels of society.”\(^{45}\) Hillgarth supports a similar view when he writes that “Lull’s art and his whole philosophy and theology are apologetic and Franciscan in inspiration, aimed at conversion by peaceful persuasion.”\(^{46}\) Yates simply states that a “passionate missionary aim was paramount in Lull’s life and work.”\(^{47}\) A brief examination of his ideas on rhetoric, his rhetorical approaches in this writings, and his actual missionary activity should provide a clearer view of his systemic rhetoric.

In *Ars brevis*, Llull defines rhetoric as “the art with which the rhetorician adorns and colors his words.” Preaching consists of instructing the people so they will “have good conduct and avoid bad conduct.”\(^{48}\) Despite these narrow and somewhat limiting formal
definitions, Lulls’ discussion and practice of rhetoric was central to his Art and the missionary work he pursued. In the Rethorica nova, he broadens the definition of speech to be “the means and instrument by which speakers and listeners . . . are joined agreeably in one end.” This joining occurs by ordered, ornate, and beautiful speech developed by four distiniones of order, beauty, knowledge, and love. Mark Johnston, who has extensively studied Lull’s works, interprets these four allegorical interpretations or distiniones, by noting that order refers to dispositio (arrangement) and word-order or the “order of things” because “words are tokens of things for Llull.” Under Llull’s art, the word must reflect the theo-centric universe. Beauty uses vocabulary, comparison, examples, and other ornaments to reflect the “dignity, or the nobility that a creature bears according to its relative approximation to the Creator.” Knowledge is gained by the use of the Ars combinatoria under the principle of Christian love that is similar to Augustine’s view that the end of rhetoric is charitas or charity. Throughout, Llull uses various conditions, exemplum, and proverbs that historians believe were directed to the spiritual instruction of pious laity, friars and religious groups such as the Franciscan or Carthusian. This form of popular spirituality may explain why Llull’s rhetoric lacks some of the typical classical and medieval rhetorical ideas expressed in the Scholastic-university system. Overall, Llull offers a moralizing rhetoric where “verbal caritas” would make “all speech one great sermon or moral exhortation.”

In his various writing, such as Blanquerna, Book of the Three Wise Men and the Gentle, Felix, The Art of Contemplation, or the Book of the Lover and the Beloved, Llull employed a wide variety of rhetorical genres such as the sermon, narrative, hagiography, spiritual quests, mystical allegories, and dialogues, among others. Llull was able to show a great deal of rhetorical flexibility that used form and style to adapt to diverse audiences. The overall goals of conversion, love of God, unity of all creation as a semblance of a theo-centric world, and the basic nature of the Art remained fairly constant. The principal divisions of the sermon often included: the intention, the lesson, authority based on revelation, human reason and personal experience, amplification that offers cases and examples of the doctrine, and amplification that invited the listener to reflect, convert and act. Of particular importance was the exemplum as a form of moralizing narrative used to edify and entertain the reader. Parables and allegorical examples were also used by Llull. In Three Wise Men and the Gentle, the five trees of virtues/vices were explained by Lady Intelligence. In other books, narrative and exemplum are based on the passion of Christ, the preaching of the apostles, the lives of the saints, or the confessions of sinners who have converted. In Blanquera, the dramatic action is maintained by various interesting characters such as Blanquera, the Lover and the Court fool.

The imagery of love pervades many of Llull’s works. Blanquera provides this metaphorical example:

The keys of the doors of love are gilded with meditations, sighs, and tears; the cord that binds them is woven of conscience, contrition, devotion, and satisfaction; the door is kept by justice and mercy.
For Llull, the spiritual journey in the ascent to God follows the many paths of the senses, of the intellect, and finally in the ecstasy of mystical union with the divine. Petry notes the recurring themes of mysticism in general, which are also represented in Llull’s works: “awakening or conversion; self-knowledge or purgation; illumination with its attendant voices and visions; surrender and, on occasion, the dark night; finally union, that is consummation.” Some of the language and themes used reflect the early Christian, the Neo-Platonist, the Franciscan and the Sufi tradition of mysticism.

Llull’s views on conversion are reflected in his writings. *Three Wise Men and the Gentile* shows an optimistic rationalism, *Blanquera*, a utopian vision, while later works focus on the method of the Art. Using a wide variety of genres, Llull offered a moralizing rhetoric that internalized popular themes of mysticism and common life into a multitude of appeals to love God. The “great advantage of Llull’s moralizing procedure” is that “it is endlessly capable of offering yet another analogical explanation of the same idea or concept, or of restating the same truth in different terms.”

Taking his “moralizing procedure” on the road, Llull went on several missionary journeys in his life. His *Vita* described his first mission to Tunis in 1293, as, beginning with fear but then transformed into hope and joy, he entered into a debate with the Islamic religious leaders on the logical merits of Christianity and Islam. He uses his Art of the Dignitaries to attempt to show that Christianity is more complete and congruent with the divine essences than is Islam. Llull notes the areas of common agreement that exist between Islam and Christianity that had been spelled out in great detail in *Three Wise Men and the Gentile* and attempts to logically discuss the areas of greatest disagreement such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. Llull reports some success in his talks with the Muslim scholars, before the king expelled him from the city.

Llull’s other missions were to Cyprus, Armenia, and to Bougie and again to Tunis in Northern Africa. More localized missions included disputations with Jewish scholars and with the Moors still in Spain. Some of these missions nearly cost him his life, as for example when he was almost stoned to death in Bougie. The accounts of his missionary activity seems to focus on reason, persuasion and at least attempted dialogue. This differs from the famous missions of Ramon Marti who believed that “the Christian faith cannot be proved, but here is the creed in Arabic, accept it.” His method and missionary activity do not seem to be based on the ignorance or the hatred of Islam common in his time period. Unlike the other Scholastics (with the exception of Roger Bacon), he knew Arabic, had read many important Arabic writers and even used Arabic genres and styles in persuasion. He does not seem to attack Mohammed by using invective or by placing Mohammed in the lowest level of hell as Dante would in the *Inferno*. As Hillgrath notes, “he always speaks of their philosophy and learning with respect.” Llull’s concept of rhetoric based in love, the theology of grace, and unity of being illustrates “a tolerance and objectivity rare for the age and an emphasis on the necessity for free, not forced, conversion.” This analysis questions the views of Pauline Watts, who sees “Llull’s Art as a vehicle, not for tolerance and convivencia, but
for conquest and conversion of spiritual ‘others.” This analysis also calls into question Sebastian Palou’s claim that Llull is a precursor of modern ecumenicism. Zwemer argues that “he did not study other religions with the purpose of providing from them ideals which Christianity was supposed to lack. Nor did he propose to reduce out of all religions a common fund of general principles” for an “ultimate religion”; rather, he studied other religions to better understand how to persuade and convert others to Christianity. Llull’s rhetorical stance was based on conversion by persuasion through better understanding of other cultures, the natural order of things, and the resemblance of all creatures in a hierarchical union with the divine.

**Llull’s Influence**

Ramon Llull is an enigma. His influence is difficult to gauge because of the banning of many of Llull’s works, in 1376, by the Dominican inquisitor general of Aragon, Nicholas Eymerich. This made many people who might have referred to Llull’s views reluctant to do so. His influence is also hard to determine because of the pseudo-Lullian works attributed to him as an alchemist or a Cabbalist. Despite these difficulties, it seems clear that Llull influenced Thomas le Myesier, Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples, and Bernard de Lavinheta through his humanistic art of universal knowledge based on rhetorical invention and memory techniques. Llull’s art was seen as an encyclopedic art of discourse that offered a universal symbolism. These pan-sophistic interests were followed by “such prominent Renaissance figures as Casanus, Pico, Agrippa, and Bruno.” Both Lavinheta and Agrippa, in their works on rhetoric, specifically refer to Llull. In the seventeenth century, Leibniz studied Llull in his attempt to find a universal language. Llull’s influence spread from Spain, France and Italy, to Germany, and east to Russia.

In this century such diverse writers as Andre Breton and Kenneth Burke have paid tribute to his influence, while deconstructionist critics have found parallels with his methodology. For Llull, all forms are real as semblances of the theo-centric universe. All texts refer and relate to each other, except for God, who has no referent. For Llull all creatures are resemblances of God by the divine essences. For Burke, identification is a personalized perception of the resemblance with the other.

**Conclusion**

Llull offered an art of moralizing rhetoric that could realize an intercultural means of conversion and discourse. This art recognized the need to study other languages, to find the common ground principles of other systems, to view the world as interconnected as a theo-centric resemblance, to have a combinatory art of invention and memory, and to use a wide variety of appeals and genres. Ramon Llull’s early licentious life was transformed by a vision of Christ. His spiritual rebirth involved extensive reading in philosophy and religion and a desire to convert the Saracens by learning Arabic and by studying these rhetorical forms. The Llullian rhetorical and theological system was based
on the divine attributes of God as accepted in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Attributes such as Goodness, Magnitude, Eternity, Power, Wisdom, etc., formed the bases of an inventional system to construct arguments for conversion that had the possibility of transcending cultures. Llull’s art of combination joined the dignitaries with basic relationships (difference, concordance, contrarity, beginning, etc.), universal questions (whether, what, of what, why, etc.) the hierarchical subjects (God, angel, heaven, man, etc.) and the Christian virtues and vices. This combinatory process functioned to create ideas, to create knowledge, and to seek the truth. For Llull, all entities existed in a hierarchy based on their similarity to or differences from the Divine as revealed in the dignitaries. Hence, truth was always congruent with God. Llull applied his rhetorical and theological theories in a series of missions of conversion. He used moralizing narrative, love metaphors and other rhetorical formats borrowed from earlier mystics to reach Christians and non-Christians alike.

Notes


4. For an English translation of his autobiography, see Bonner, p. 13.
8. *Vita*, section 6, p. 15.
10. *Vita*, section 9, p. 16.
11. *Vita*, section 9, 10, 11, p. 16-17.
12. This list is based on the work of Bonner, p. 18-19.
20. See Bonner, p. 60.
23. *Ars brevis*, p 582.
27. *Ars demonstrativa*, p 425.
28. *Ars demonstrativa*, p 444, where A stands for God, S stands for the intelletive soul, V for the virtues and vices (in this case privation), Y stands for truth and Z for falsehood.
55. Bonner, *Vita*, p. 36.
57. Hilgarth, p. 25.
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