It Takes Three to Tango: Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret and Alfonso of Valladolid Debate the Trinity

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Abstract
Ramon Llull used what he called “necessary reason” to prove the truth of Christianity in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. He appropriated contemporary Kabballistic ideas about the Godhead in order to demonstrate that their reasoning implied the existence of a Trinity and that Christianity was the true faith. Solomon ibn Adret was forced to use Kabbalistic teachings to contradict Llull’s arguments and show that sefirotic imagery did not imply a Trinitarian structure in the Godhead. Alfonso of Valladolid, a Jewish convert to Christianity, utilizes Llull’s arguments and translates them into a Jewish context and language in a way that supersedes and dismisses Solomon ibn Adret’s response. Unlike Llull who was not familiar with the intricacies of the Hebrew language, Alfonso was able to translate Llull’s arguments about the Trinity into a language that would be immediately recognizable and more difficult to refute for his Jewish contemporaries.

Keywords
Trinity, Sefirot, Kabbalah, Judaism, Christianity, conversion, Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret, Alfonso of Valladolid

The “trialogue” described here did not take place on a particular day, but is one that reflects the interaction between Jewish and Christian thinkers living more or less at the same time, having to deal with similar existential issues and find solutions that enable them to make sense of their particular historical circumstances. What links these three figures is that the issue considered here is central, intricate and critical, and cannot be swept aside or ignored without consequences for broader circles of co-religionists. Ramon Llull, the instigator, was driven by his desire to convert Jews and Muslims, inspired by the belief that he was the recipient of a divinely
revealed Art, a science based not on authoritative texts, but on necessary reason, which could conclusively demonstrate the truth of Christianity. Solomon ibn Adret, a leader of his community and the disciple of one of the greatest religious figures of the thirteenth century, Nahmanides, felt obligated to react and respond to the challenge, in order to preserve the authenticity and relevance of his Jewish faith for his co-religionists. The third figure, Abner of Burgos, otherwise known as Alfonso de Valladolid, is perhaps the most interesting. He moved between Judaism and Christianity for many years, before opting, at least formally, for the latter faith. Yet, his engagement with the arguments of the former two figures, both Christian and Jew, shows an ambivalence that blurs the boundaries between the faiths and raises interesting issues about identity in a multi-confessional society.

Ramon Llull (c. 1232-1316), born and raised in Majorca, recently recaptured from the Muslims, wrote some two hundred works in Latin, Catalan and Arabic, many of which were attempts to refine the divinely revealed Art which he believed encompassed all knowledge and led to the necessary conclusion that Christianity was indeed the true faith. To prove the existence of the Trinity, one of the main stumbling blocks between Judaism and Christianity, Llull focused on the internal workings of the Godhead and the divine attributes in the same way that some of his Jewish contemporaries were developing the concept of the Sefirot, the divine attributes or Dignities (See Scholem; Idel, Kabbalah and “Dignitate”). These Kabbalists were attempting to offer an alternative understanding of the nature of the Divine Being, creation, the exile and the relationship between man and God to that proposed by Maimonides and his followers. They posited the existence of the ten Sefirot emanating from within the Ein sof (‘the Infinite’) as revealing different aspects of the Divine and His presence in creation and allowing man to ascend to God.

Llull, like many of his Jewish contemporaries, claimed that each of the Dignities is simultaneously present in all the others and that their activity is both within and outside themselves. In other words, the Dignities represent the creative element of the Godhead. Over some thirty years, Llull developed and refined his theory of the correlatives of action, which explained how creation could have taken place without any change in the Godhead, a concept that preoccupied the thoughts of his Jewish contemporaries as well. The basis of his theory is that if one wants to avoid change in the Godhead, one must admit the existence of a triad of agent-patient-action within each of the Dignities, which are the divine essence.