

Their missionary tenure, however, was not without controversy. Roman Catholic clerics resented the outsiders and their translations into the vernacular. To counteract the opposition, the brothers journeyed to Rome in 867 and there gained the endorsement of the pope. Before they could return to their Slavic mission, however, Cyril died. Methodius returned to the mission but found himself caught between political and religious rivalries for the remainder of his life. Yet, with the help of disciples, he continued to translate the Bible and other literature. Today the brothers are commemorated by both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and are seen as precursors to the translation work of Martin Luther and of translators of the modern missions era.

Raymond Lull

The politically oriented missionary endeavors of the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval period brought many new regions into the sphere of Christian influence. But the church was losing ground at the same time—and not just *any* ground. The Holy Land—the very center of Christianity in the early centuries—was shaken to the core by the invading armies of Islam. “With lightening speed,” writes J. Herbert Kane, “they conquered Damascus (635), Antioch (636), Jerusalem (638), Caesarea (640), and Alexandria (642).” Unlike the marauding barbarians that had brought down the Roman Empire more than two centuries earlier, the Muslims often brought culture with them. It was a time when “Arab civilization was at its height”—a time when “Baghdad boasted twenty-six public libraries and countless private ones.”²⁵

But no amount of culture or civilization could compensate for the losses, which came at a time when the West was barely holding its own against barbarian invasions. But for Charles Martel, whose army was victorious at the Battle of Tours in 722, France and all of Western Europe might have fallen to Muslim control. The Christians were clearly on the defensive. The long-delayed response to this tragic situation was itself a tragedy of monumental proportions—coming in the form of the Crusades. With no strategic planning, the Crusades had a snowball effect, the consequences of which are still being felt today. The swarms of people that set out for the Holy Land over a two-hundred-year period (1095—1291) caused unspeakable damage, and tens of thousands of lives were lost. Though the early crusades were favored with a degree of military success, those gains were lost in the end. So bitter was the animosity of Muslims toward Christians that even today the memory has not been erased.

Not all Christians of this period, however, believed that military force was the appropriate way to deal with the Muslims. During the early thirteenth century, while the crusading spirit was still at high pitch, Francis of Assisi proposed that the Muslims should be won by love instead of by hate. His first two attempts to evangelize them were completely unsuccessful, but his third attempt in 1219 brought him into the presence of the sultan of Egypt. Restricted by language barriers, Francis nevertheless made a feeble attempt at presenting the gospel. Though there is no evidence that any actual conversions resulted from his efforts, his example paved the way for others to view Muslims as potential brothers in Christ. Among them was Raymond Lull, an outstanding missionary of this period.

Lull was born in 1232 to a wealthy Roman Catholic family of Majorca, an island off the coast of Spain in the Mediterranean that had been taken back from the Muslims not long before his birth. As a young man he served in the Spanish court of the king of Aragon. Though married with children, he had mistresses on the side, and “by his own testimony

lived a life of utter immorality.”²⁶ Yet he was recognized for his scholarship and literary talent.

In his early thirties, Lull returned to Majorca, where he underwent a profound religious experience—a mystical experience marked by visions. The first vision came suddenly one evening when he was composing an erotic song. He saw “the Savior hanging on His cross, the blood trickling from His hands and feet and brow, look reproachfully at him.” Though moved by the vision, he returned to his song-writing the following week. Again the vision appeared, and this time he committed his life to Christ. But immediately doubts arose: “How can I, defiled with impurity, rise and enter on a holier life?”²⁷ Consumed with guilt, he decided to forsake wealth and prestige and devote himself to God.

Lull equated God’s call with a call to monasticism. The ultimate demonstration of love for God, he believed, was living a life as a reclusive monk, wholly separated from the temptations of the world. It would take another vision to make him conscious of his responsibilities to others. In his book *The Tree of Love*, he relates the vision that became his missionary call: He is in a forest alone where he meets a pilgrim, who, on learning of Lull’s chosen vocation, scolds him for his self-centeredness and challenges him to go out into the world and bring others the message of Christ. This vision convinced him that God was directing him to evangelize the nomadic Muslim Saracens—the most hated and feared enemies of Christendom. “I see many knights going to the Holy Land beyond the seas,” he wrote, “and thinking that they can acquire it by force of arms, but in the end all are destroyed before they attain that which they think to have. Whence it seems to me that the conquest of the Holy Land ought ... to be attempted ... by love and prayers, and the pouring out of tears and blood.”²⁸

Following this vision, Lull studied the Arabic language—a nine-year ordeal that was marred by an unfortunate incident that almost ruined his future missionary career. To aid in his study of the language he purchased a Saracen slave, who one day lashed back at Lull by cursing Christ. Lull lost his temper and hit the slave, who grabbed a weapon and severely wounded him. For that crime the Muslim slave was imprisoned and soon afterward committed suicide, fearing his fate would be worse. It was a traumatic ordeal for Lull, but it gave him an even greater passion to reach the Muslims for Christ.

Lull was past the age of forty when his actual missionary career began, and in later life he recalled what sacrifices that decision entailed: “I had a wife and children; I was tolerably rich; I led a secular life. All these things I cheerfully resigned for the sake of promoting the common good and diffusing abroad the holy faith.”²⁹ He set aside funds for his wife and children and gave the remainder to the poor.

Lull’s missionary outreach was three-pronged: apologetical, educational, and evangelistic. “He devised a philosophical ... system for persuading non-Christians of the truth of Christianity; he established missionary colleges; and he himself went and preached to the Moslems.”³⁰ His achievement as a Christian apologist to the Muslims was immense—some sixty books on theology. His mission, as he perceived it, was to “experiment whether he himself could not persuade some of them [to believe in] the Incarnation of the Son of God and the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity in the Divine Unity of Essence.” He sought to establish “a parliament of religions, and desired to meet the bald monotheism of Islam face to face with the revelation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”³¹

In the area of missionary education, Lull, in the tradition of Columba, viewed monasteries as the ideal training ground for evangelists. He traveled widely, appealing to church and political leaders to support him in the cause. King James II of Spain was one of those who caught his vision; and in 1276, with his enthusiastic support and financial contributions, Lull opened a monastery on Majorca with thirteen Franciscan monks and a curriculum that included courses in the Arabic language and in the “geography of

missions.” His dream was to establish training centers all over Europe, but to do that he had to convince the Roman Catholic hierarchy of their value—no easy task. When he visited Rome on various occasions, his ideas were either ridiculed or ignored by a church hierarchy that was more interested in worldly pleasures and personal aggrandizement than in missions. He was successful, however, in influencing a decision at the Council of Vienna to have Arabic offered in the European universities—a step that he believed would open up dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Lull’s own missionary career did not begin with the flair that one might expect from this visionary missions enthusiast. It was one thing, he realized, to preach missions to others, but it was quite another to go forth himself. He was at the port in Genoa, ready to sail for Tunis. His belongings were on board ship. Crowds of well-wishers were preparing for a rousing send-off. Then at the last moment he was “overwhelmed with terror,” as he later recalled; he was paralyzed “at the thought of what might befall him.”³² His belongings were unloaded, and the ship left port without him. Almost immediately he was overcome with remorse, and he determined to go on the next ship no matter what the consequences. Though racked by fever—probably caused by the emotional turmoil he was suffering—he was placed aboard another ship, and thus began his missionary career.

Lull’s fears about conducting mission work in Tunis were certainly not unfounded. Tunis was a powerful center of Islam in North Africa that had held off repeated invasions. The crusaders were viewed with hatred and bitterness. His arrival was not greeted with as much hostility as he had expected, however. He made his presence known to the leading Muslim scholars and then called a conference to debate the relative merits of Christianity and Islam, promising that if Islam were demonstrated to be superior, he would embrace it as his faith. The Muslim leaders agreed to his terms.

The reaction to Lull’s defense of Christianity was mixed. A number seemed to accept his arguments or at least showed an interest in hearing more, but the majority were stung by the verbal attack. Not surprisingly, he was thrown into prison, where he waited in terror, fully expecting the death penalty. Instead, he was stoned by a mob and ordered out of the country—an order he secretly defied. For three months he “concealed himself like a wharf-rat” in the coastal town of Goletta.³³ Frustrated by his lack of freedom, he returned to Europe, where he spent several years in Naples and then France, lecturing and writing books on his “New Method,” always seeking new recruits to join his mission.

While the Muslims were the primary object of Lull’s missionary passion, Jews also caught his attention. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were marred by horror stories of anti-Semitism. Jews were blamed for almost every ill in society, and as a result were expelled from France and England—mild punishment compared with that meted out by the Spanish Inquisition. Here and there, out-spoken individuals defended the Jews, and among them was Lull. He reached out to them as he had the Saracens, presenting Christ to them as their Messiah.

Lull’s travel and varied activities kept him busy in Europe, but in 1307, at the age of seventy-five, after a fifteen-year absence, he returned to North Africa—this time to Bugia, east of Algiers. As in Tunis years earlier, he immediately sought a forum for public debate, and he boldly challenged the Muslims to compare their religion with Christianity. Though he claimed to reach out to the Muslims in love, his message was often very offensive and may have further embittered the Muslims toward Christianity. One of his arguments, as Samuel Zwemer relates, was to hold up the Ten Commandments “as the perfect law of God, and then [to show] from their own books that Mohammed violated every one of these precepts. Another approach was to portray the seven cardinal virtues and the seven deadly sins, only to show subsequently how bare Islam was of the former and how full of the latter!” Again, Lull’s public debate did not continue long. He was sent to prison, and for six months his captors “plied him ... with all the sensual temptations of Islam.”³⁴

Following his imprisonment, he was sent back to Europe. His career as a foreign missionary, however, was not over. In 1314, when he was past the age of eighty, he returned to Tunis, where his age alone apparently brought him some protection. Perhaps too, he had mellowed over the years, for he was granted more liberty than before. He won some converts, though ever more conscious of the difficulty of the task. “For one Saracen who becomes a Christian,” he wrote, “ten Christians and more become Mohammedans.”³⁵

Although Lull’s stay in Tunis was rewarding, he did not win the ultimate reward—the crown of martyrdom. To die in the service of his Master would be the highest privilege. So in 1314 he returned to Bugia to see his little band of converts and to put his defense of Christianity to the final test.

For over ten months the aged missionary dwelt in hiding, talking and praying with his converts.... At length, weary of seclusion, and longing for martyrdom, he came forth into the open market and presented himself to the people as the same man whom they had once expelled from their town.... Filled with fanatic fury at his boldness, and unable to reply to his arguments, the populace seized him, and dragged him out of the town; there by the command, or at least the connivance, of the king, he was stoned on the 30th of June, 1315.³⁶

He died shortly thereafter.

Lull’s missionary focus was primarily that of apologetics—to persuade people to accept the Christian faith because it was true. He was convinced that true understanding was built on systematic teaching and rational arguments. Other Catholic missionaries would focus on social justice and good works.

Bartholomew de Las Casas

The age of discovery that began in the late fifteenth century ushered in an era of overseas missions for the Roman Catholic Church. The New World was viewed in terms of territorial expansion, and both popes and political leaders were eager to do their part to bring it under Catholic domination. Queen Isabella of Spain regarded the evangelism of the Indians as the most important justification for colonial expansion, and she insisted that priests and friars be among the first to settle in the New World. The Franciscans and Dominicans (and later the Jesuits) eagerly accepted the challenge. In some areas mass conversions were commonplace. In 1529 a Franciscan missionary in Mexico recorded that he and another monk baptized “upwards of 200,000 persons—so many in fact that I cannot give an accurate estimate of the number. Often baptized in a single day 14,000 people, sometimes 10,000, sometimes 8,000.”³⁷

The greatest obstacle to missions in the New World proved to be the colonists themselves and their cruel treatment of the native Indians. Though Queen Isabella had decreed that the freedom of the Indians was to be honored, they actually were treated inhumanely in a system that fostered their virtual slavery. Such treatment did not go unnoticed by the missionaries, and some risked their lives to protect the native people. Among them was Bartholomew de Las Casas, who though slow to recognize and admit the evil, became the greatest champion of the native Indians during the Spanish colonial period.

Las Casas was born in Spain in 1474, the son of a merchant who had sailed with Columbus on his second voyage. After receiving his law degree, he sailed to the island of Hispaniola to serve as the governor’s legal advisor. He quickly settled into the affluent lifestyle of the colonists, accepting the conventional view of the native population, participating in raids against them, and enslaving them on his plantation. In 1510, in his