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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Hildegard of Bingen – 12th Century Feminist Mystic

By Robert F. Stamps

Abstract: Hildegard of Bingen is one of history's remarkable people. Born into German nobility in 1098, Hildegard began having mystical visions at an early age and saw God as light. Hildegard chose a spiritual life and entered a religious cloister at fifteen. There she was educated, studying many subjects, including Latin and music. In 1136 Hildegard became the prioress. The confines of the cloister did not stop Hildegard from becoming a major theological force. She wrote books on theology and medicine, authored plays, and composed music. Theologically, Hildegard contributed to the development of the theological construction of the concept of purgatory. She was a healer, providing medical treatment, particularly to women. Her music is still played and recorded today. Hildegard was also a prolific writer of letters. She engaged in exceptional correspondence with political leaders, priests, bishops, archbishops and even Pope Eugene III. Unlike other women who rarely spoke publicly, Hildegard was a popular preacher who actively denounced clerical corruption. This caused contentious relationships with corrupt clerics. As a mystic, Hildegard received visions. In her visions she obtained divine inspiration. She also used her visions against her opponents. She died in 1179. After her death, many efforts were made to confirm her as a Saint. In 2012, to remove any doubt whether Hildegard was a Saint, Pope Benedict XVI formally declared that Hildegard of Bingen is a canonized saint.

Keywords: Eugene, Bernard, Jutta, Disabod, Mysticism

Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen is one of history's remarkable people. She was a cloistered nun, mystic, author, medical healer, composer, and preacher. Hildegard overcame the barriers to women in an androcentric age and is now honored as an early feminist theologian and revered within the Catholic church as a saint. Born into German nobility in 1098, Hildegard began having mystical visions at an

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early age and saw God as light, which she referred to as “Living Light.”¹ The light was glimpsed in a shining cloud and could “direct her inward gaze here and there in mysterious accord” with the sky and weather, and yet it did not interfere with her normal senses.²

Hildegard chose a spiritual life at a young age, and with her mentor Jutta of Sponheim³ was “solemnly enclosed” in a “hermitage attached to the male Benedictine monastery of Saint Disibod” when Hildegard was fifteen and Jutta was twenty.⁴ Jutta served as anchoress of the women enclosed in the monastery and provided Hildegard’s education, including a “thorough grounding in the Latin Bible.”⁵ Jutta taught Hildegard humility and innocence, as well as teaching her the songs of David and how to play the ten-stringed psaltery.⁶ Jutta was also sympathetic to Hildegard visions.⁷ After Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was chosen to replace her and assumed the office of prioress.⁸ The confines of the cloister did not stop Hildegard from becoming a major theological force, writing books on theology and medicine, writing plays, composing music, and engaging in exceptional correspondence with political leaders, priests, bishops, archbishops, and even Pope Eugene III.⁹ In addition, Hildegard traveled within Germany preaching to great acclaim and denouncing clerical corruption.¹⁰ She died in 1179,¹¹ and many

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 74-76. See also Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation,” *Church History* 54, no. 2 (1985): 165, 168. Hildegard may have garnered her description of the “living light” from Saint Augustine, who used similar imagery in his writings.

² Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation,” 167.

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women: Three Medieval Mystics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 6.

⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 6. See also Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), 54.

⁵ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 57, 65; Ruether, 6. See also Victoria Sweet, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73, no. 3 (1999): 382.

⁶ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 139, 158.

⁷ Silvas, 58.

⁸ Silvas, 79, 111; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 8.

⁹ See Silvas; Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*; Ruether; Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); and Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* (Oxford: University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ See Silvas; Ruether, 28.

¹¹ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 71.

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efforts were made to confirm her as a Saint.¹² In 2012, to remove any doubt whether Hildegard was a Saint, Pope Benedict XVI “formally declared that Hildegard of Bingen is a canonized saint.”¹³

Hildegard’s Mysticism

The study of mysticism relies on principles set out by philosopher William James.¹⁴ He opined that the mystical experience is extra-rational and takes place on the “verge of the mind”.¹⁵ It is in his view “ecstatic, emotional, passive, ineffable and overwhelmingly unintelligible” to others.¹⁶ However, James’ view has been challenged as to female mystics whose visions are “active, intelligent *and* intelligible.”¹⁷

A good description of mysticism is that it “contains something mysterious...[not reachable by] ordinary means or intellectual effort...”¹⁸ Often called the “great spiritual current that goes through all religions,” it may be called the “consciousness of the One Reality—be it... Wisdom, Light, Love or Nothing.”¹⁹ For Hildegard, the consciousness of the Divine was both a fiery light and wisdom.²⁰

Although some mystical experiences may not have their origin in the spiritual or divine, examples of mysticism need to be tested.²¹ This is because many mystics are “truly creative” and

¹² Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 252-257.

¹³ Catholic World News, “Pope formally proclaims sainthood of Hildegard of Bingen.” Catholic Culture, May 10, 2012, <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=14269>.

¹⁴ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies: Hildegard of Bingen, Mysticism and the Vagaries of the Theoretical,” *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 3 (2003): 375.

¹⁵ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 375, quoting William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Collins, 1903), 406.

¹⁶ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 375, quoting James, 367-368.

¹⁷ Jones and Neal, 376, citing Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995); italics in original. See also Jane Duran, “Hildegard of Bingen: A Feminist Ontology,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 2 (2014): 155-167, arguing that Hildegard’s visions “taken as a whole, are either inconsistent or incoherent,” 157.

¹⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 35th anniversary ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press [1975] 2011), 4.

¹⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 4.

²⁰ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 139, 157-158.

²¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 16.

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provide ideas that bring new spiritual life.²² Christian mysticism has been described as a “conscious growing life of a special kind” that is the “essence of holiness.”²³ Some Christians sought through self-denial or pain to experience mysticism, or to at least subdue the passions that frustrated their journey to the Divine. Jutta, Hildegard’s mentor, had visions that originated from practices of extreme fasting.²⁴ Jutta also bore the marks of her self-discipline on her body and wore a chain so tightly wrapped around her body that it left “three furrows right around her body.”²⁵ In her role as mentor for the nuns, Jutta emphasized individual, ascetic, and penitential values.²⁶ Hildegard’s visions, however, were not produced by the self-infliction of pain or torment; and they began at a young age.

The nature of mysticism in children is uncertain, for “the visionary world of imaginative children...[may have] a spiritual form.”²⁷ But Hildegard knew from her earliest childhood that she had “luminous visionary experiences” that gave her a “second sight into hidden realities.”²⁸ However, she kept silent about her visionary experiences and communicated them only to Jutta.²⁹ For many years, Hildegard kept her visions secret once she realized that other people did not also see them.³⁰ Her visions were often accompanied by debilitating illnesses.³¹

Later, as a grown woman, Hildegard was divinely warned not to delay writing down her visions.³² Hildegard wrote in her book *Scivias* that she saw “heaven open” and a “fiery light of great brilliance” filled her heart and brain with a flame that did not burn, but instead warmed her like the sun.³³ One writer believes Hildegard’s visions had three characteristics: a direct experience with God;

²² Underhill, 21.

²³ Underhill, 22.

²⁴ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 74-75.

²⁵ Silvas, 80.

²⁶ Silvas, 111.

²⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 153

²⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 7.

²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 7.

³⁰ Ruether, 7; Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 224.

³¹ Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 167.

³² Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 141.

³³ Silvas, 139, quoting the introduction to *Scivias* by Hildegard of Bingen. Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 167, writes that in 1917, science historian Charles Singer opined that Hildegard suffered from “‘scintillating scotoma,’ a form of migraine characterized by hallucinations of flashing, circling, or fermenting points of light.” See also Barbara Newman, review of *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179: A Visionary Life*, by Sabina Flanagan, *Daughters of Sarah* 17,



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unmediated truth; and public validation.³⁴ She may even have been “a prophet rather than a mystic,” because Hildegard wrote that she “never suffered from the ‘defect’ of ecstasy.”³⁵ Hildegard wrote in her seventies that “from earliest childhood she had luminous visionary experiences [that provided] a second sight into hidden realities.”³⁶ Her visions were both “pictorial” and interpreted to her in Latin, so that she could clearly remember them.³⁷ This “living light,” while turning her sight inward, was never allowed to “distract her from material reality.”³⁸ Hildegard herself explained that she did not see her visions in a sleeping state, but was awake.³⁹ In a letter she wrote to Guibert, a monk of Gembloux, Hildegard described her visions, writing:

I have always seen this vision in my soul...I do not see these things with my outward eyes or hear them with my outward ears or perceive them with the thoughts of my heart or through any contribution of the five senses, but only in my soul, for my outward eyes remain open...[and] I see them wide awake, by day and night.⁴⁰

After Jutta died and Hildegard assumed the role of prioress, she instituted an ethos unlike Jutta’s self-denial and penitence and focused instead on encouraging the nuns to engage in community life that emphasized discernment and moderation.⁴¹ It was also after Jutta’s death that Hildegard decided to reveal her visions.

no. 5 (1991): 45. Newman writes that Flanagan attributes Hildegard’s visionary experience to the ‘auras’ that accompany migraine attacks which do “no permanent harm...and are sometimes followed by remarkable bursts of creativity.”

³⁴ Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 164.

³⁵ Newman, 167. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 6, concurs that Hildegard was able “to exercise her extraordinary creative powers...(as an) abbess and prophet.” Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 381, speculates that her denial of ecstasy may have been a “pre-emptive strike” against a charge of being a hysteric.

³⁶ Ruether, 7.

³⁷ Ruether, 7.

³⁸ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 381.

³⁹ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 114.

⁴⁰ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 150, quoting Hildegard’s letter to Guibert.

⁴¹ Silvas, 111.

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After Hildegard took control of the nuns and turned forty, she revealed her visions to Volmar, the monastery provost.⁴² Volmar encouraged her to write down her visions.⁴³ At this time there was also a “heavenly voice” telling her to “say and write what you see and hear.”⁴⁴ Few modern writers doubt that Hildegard’s visions were real. However, she ensured her ability to spread her views in an androcentric society by adopting a near submissive posture as a weak female serving as a vessel for the divine.⁴⁵ Although Hildegard was submissive as to her person, she was adamant about the inerrancy of her visions.⁴⁶

One of Hildegard’s most powerful tools to obtain her goals was convincing the most powerful political and religious people to support her. In this regard, Hildegard cultivated an attitude of prudence by being neither too severe nor too easy-going.⁴⁷ In this way she appeared to those around her as irreproachable, pleasing, and worthy of emulation.⁴⁸ Among her supporters was Bernard of Clairvaux, the greatest monk of her day; she was also supported by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick I Barbarossa.⁴⁹ Hildegard wrote to Bernard in 1146 seeking approval of her visions and authority.⁵⁰ Bernard did so, and he supported Hildegard when prelates from Mainz asked Pope Eugene for an apostolic judgment on Hildegard.⁵¹ This occurred while Pope Eugene was visiting the Archbishop of Trier, and to settle the matter the Pope sent a delegation to visit Hildegard at the monastery. The delegation interviewed Hildegard, collected copies of her writings, and reported favorably to Pope

⁴² Silvas, 225; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 7.

⁴³ Ruether, 7.

⁴⁴ Ruether, 8, quoting Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*.

⁴⁵ Ruether, 11.

⁴⁶ Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 175.

⁴⁷ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 112.

⁴⁸ Silvas, 112.

⁴⁹ Joan Cadden, “It Takes All Kinds: Sexuality and Gender Differences in Hildegard of Bingen’s ‘Book of Compound Medicine,’” *Traditio* 40 (1984): 151. See also Victoria Sweet, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine,” 383. Hildegard, according to Sweet, also corresponded with Henry II of England, Louis VII of France, and the Empress of Byzantium.

⁵⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 16; Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 268. Silvas writes that Hildegard engaged in correspondence not only with Bernard, but she also communicated with the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Magdeburg, as well as the patriarch of Jerusalem, bishops, abbots, provosts, and prelates.

⁵¹ Silvas, 143-144. See also Ruether, 16-17.

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Eugene. Pope Eugene read the writings to the Archbishop, the Cardinals, and prelates that were present and ordered that Hildegard's writings be publicly presented.⁵²

In 1147 Hildegard used her powerful connections in the church and nobility to move her community from the monks of Saint Disibod to Rupertsberg near Bingen.⁵³ The monks of Saint Disibod were not enthusiastic about the move and many of them opposed it; however, once the monks became convinced that the move was divinely inspired, they ceased their opposition.⁵⁴ Hildegard chose Rupertsberg where the Nahe river flows into the Rhine after it was "shown [to her] by the Spirit."⁵⁵ The move was probably prompted by the growing number of noble young women who were joining her, and the grounds of the Disibod monastery were running out of space.⁵⁶ Whatever the motive, by moving her community Hildegard was able to govern its external affairs and control its pastoral liturgical life.⁵⁷

Creativity

Hildegard's first book, *Scivias*, took her ten years to write.⁵⁸ *Scivias* included Hildegard's visions in both text and painted form.⁵⁹ The text and paintings were also described as interpreted by the heavenly voice.⁶⁰ The visions described in *Scivias* include creation of the world by God, Lucifer's fall, Adam and Eve, the incarnation of the Word as Jesus, and many other Biblical stories and prophecies.⁶¹ Another of her books, *The Book of Divine Works*, explored the salvation drama as a whole from the perspective of God standing outside time.⁶² Reviewing creation, incarnation, and redemption, *The Book of Divine Works* focuses on the role of wisdom as love mediating between God and creation.⁶³ In her last

⁵² Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 143. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 17.

⁵³ Joan Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds," 150. See also Ruether, 28.

⁵⁴ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 145-146.

⁵⁵ Silvas, 144.

⁵⁶ Silvas, 123.

⁵⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 28.

⁵⁸ Ruether, 8.

⁵⁹ Ruether, 8.

⁶⁰ Ruether, 8.

⁶¹ Ruether, 9.

⁶² Ruether, 9.

⁶³ Ruether, 23-34.



book, *On the Activity of God*, she correlated her visions with her delicate health, believing that the visions were the cause of her suffering infirmities.⁶⁴ She is also believed to be the first person to write a morality play.⁶⁵

Hildegard's medical writing was extensive and candid. She wrote at least two books on medicine: *The Book of Simple Medicine* and *The Book of Compound Medicine*.⁶⁶ Unlike her contemporaries, Hildegard "wrote extensively and frankly about sex differences and sexual behavior."⁶⁷ Her medical writings emphasize natural rather than religious aspects; however, Hildegard wrote that Divine creation and procreation both impact the understanding of "bodily parts, the soul...gender and temperament."⁶⁸ On many occasions Hildegard is credited with healing fevers, tumors, and convulsions; ending psychic yearning and pain; easing the labor of childbirth and restoring sight; and casting out demons.⁶⁹

Hildegard tried to recreate the music of paradise that was "lost in the fall, but partly restored with the aid of musical instruments."⁷⁰ Her reputation as a composer is so profound that she is the only composer of her era whose name is known.⁷¹ She was known to compose "chant of the sweetest melody with a wonderful harmony."⁷² However, it is probable that some, or all, of her songs were not written down until the end of her life when a patron may have "paid the considerable sum necessary to employ the services of a musical scribe."⁷³

Hildegard's awareness of the corporeality of music and its relationship to the human body provided a means for exploring and voicing "the female body and all of its fleshly senses in a manner

⁶⁴ Barbara Newman, "Visions and Validation," 167.

⁶⁵ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, "Negotiable Currencies," 379.

⁶⁶ Joan Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds," 151.

⁶⁷ Cadden, 149.

⁶⁸ Cadden, 151.

⁶⁹ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 182-183, lists twenty-six miracles.

⁷⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 25.

⁷¹ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, "Negotiable Currencies," 379.

⁷² Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 155.

⁷³ June Boyce-Tilman, "Hildegard of Bingen at 900: The Eye of a Woman," *The Musical Times* 139, no. 1865 (1998): 32.



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that would not have been possible through the written word alone.”⁷⁴ Hildegard’s music emphasized corporeality and femininity and expanded the contemporary melodic norms, allowing the music to “open up and resound...”⁷⁵

Purgatory

Purgatory in its “traditional theological sense” is the “condition of suffering, both punitive and redemptive” that occurs for select souls “between the moment of death and their eventual admission into heaven.”⁷⁶ The concept of purgatory began with the “Acts of Thecla and...[the] Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas” who believed their impending martyrdom provided a way to “deliver the helpless dead from torments by their prayers.”⁷⁷ Hildegard contributed to the development of theological construction of the concept of purgatory with her text “*Liber vitae meritorum*” centering on a full treatment of purgatory.”⁷⁸

Hildegard’s vision of purgatory in *Liber* envisions “Christ as Cosmic Man” in a series of debates of vice against virtue.⁷⁹ In these debates Hildegard “‘sees’ the purgatorial pains to be suffered” and the “penance that sinners on earth can do to escape those pains.”⁸⁰ Hildegard views purgatory as a place for souls that will eventually be saved, “provided they have died in a state of contrition but without completing the penance owed for their sins.”⁸¹ Hildegard views the torments in purgatory as including “darkness, fiery lakes, stinking marshes, loathsome toads and serpents, [and] demons with instruments of torture.”⁸² She distinguishes purgatory from hell because no mortal can see the oblivion of hell.⁸³ There are, according to Hildegard, five possible locations for the dead: heaven, which is reserved for the

⁷⁴ Bruce Wood Holsinger, “The Flesh and the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179),” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 1 (1993): 92-125, esp. 96.

⁷⁵ Bruce Wood Holsinger, “The Flesh and the Voice,” 107.

⁷⁶ Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen and the ‘Birth of Purgatory,’” *Mystics Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1993): 90.

⁷⁷ Barbara Newman, “Birth of Purgatory,” 90-91.

⁷⁸ Newman, 91.

⁷⁹ Newman, 91.

⁸⁰ Newman, 91-92.

⁸¹ Newman, 92.

⁸² Newman, 92.

⁸³ Newman, 92.

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Saints; earthly paradise; limbo for infidels who die without baptism, yet without having committed great sins; purgatory; and hell.⁸⁴ Hildegard's motive was pastoral, believing that the disclosure of vices promotes moral discernment; and knowing the torments of purgatory would inspire fear, she wanted people to know penance is helpful to avoiding purgatory.⁸⁵ For the modern reader concerned with the environment, Hildegard believed that human behavior affects the world's climate; and "sin creates adverse weather conditions which in turn leads to plagues and blights, producing an earthly Purgatory by a process that is at once divine judgement and natural law."⁸⁶ In short, human wickedness kindles "unquenchable fires in the air."⁸⁷

Controversies

Hildegard did not shy away from controversy, and she tangled at various times with her superiors, with her subordinates and, vicariously, with future historians. Hildegard saw her visions as both a "medium of divine inspiration and as a source of vindication against...opponents." After Hildegard left the monastery of St Disibod to establish a new residence at Mount St Rupert, she engaged in a dispute with Kuno, the Abbot of St Disibod, over the right of the nuns to control their wealth and status.⁸⁸ He questioned not only her authority but her sanity.⁸⁹ While he did not question Hildegard's

⁸⁴ Newman, 92.

⁸⁵ Newman, 92.

⁸⁶ Barbara Newman, "Birth of Purgatory," 93. That sin may affect climate change is such an intriguing belief that I downloaded Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et Curae*, cited by Newman and found at <http://home.kpn.nl/i.w.c.emmens/pdf/causcur.pdf>. A passage appearing to support this belief is in Book 2, section 124, at pages 35-36 and reads: "Revenge of God. If at any time by God's judgment the elements project their terrors in a chaotic way, they inflict many dangers on the world and men. And is that the fire is like a spear, the wind like a sword, water as a shield and earth like a javelin called to punish men. For the elements are subordinate to man and as they concern the actions of men, so fulfill their own duty. Indeed, when men engage in battles, catastrophes, hatred, envy, and improper sins, then the elements behave differently and adversely in regard to heat, cold, heavy rains, or floods. And this is so according to the first disposition of God, which established that the elements behave according to the works of men, that affect the actions of men and that man acts in them and with them. When men are on the right track and do the good and the bad in moderation, then the elements do their duty by the grace of God according to the needs of men."

⁸⁷ Newman, 93.

⁸⁸ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, "Negotiable Currencies," 381.

⁸⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 18.

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visions, he did accuse her of suffering from hallucinations, which forced Hildegard to take to her “sick bed” where she refused to write or speak.⁹⁰ This “divinely inspired illness” caused Kuno to relent and allow the nuns to move; however, their dispute continued in regard to Hildegard’s right to choose their own provost (i.e., supervising priest).⁹¹

One of her last struggles was with the prelates of Mainz over her refusal to exhume the body of a man in her cemetery who died in an excommunicated status.⁹² Even in her old age, Hildegard remained firm in her views, even as the bishop silenced her for months and forbade her to sing because she would not follow his instructions. Hildegard threatened the prelate with divine judgment.⁹³ She warned the bishop that people who silence God’s music on earth will not hear the songs of the angels in Heaven, so the Bishop relented.⁹⁴

One of Hildegard’s controversies arose through her practices as head of the nuns. Hildegard was criticized because her nuns wore beautiful robes and crowns, which Hildegard justified “because of their high calling as brides of Christ.”⁹⁵ Hildegard was also criticized for accepting only women of noble birth to her monastery.⁹⁶ Hildegard enforced this rule even though it “was contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.”⁹⁷

After Hildegard died in 1179, her reputation continued to grow. Popes, including Gregory IX, Innocent IV, Clement V, and John XXII referred to Hildegard as a saint.⁹⁸ But even though Hildegard was honored as a saint for centuries, it was not until 2012 that Pope Benedict XVI “formally declared that Hildegard of Bingen is a canonized saint.”⁹⁹

⁹⁰ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 381.

⁹¹ Jones and Neal, 381-382.

⁹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 15.

⁹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 15.

⁹⁴ June Boyce-Tilman, “Hildegard of Bingen at 900,” 36; Victoria Sweet, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine,” 383. Sweet says that the dispute over the burial was with the Pope.

⁹⁵ June Boyce-Tilman, “Hildegard of Bingen at 900,” 34

⁹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 23.

⁹⁷ Nicholas Watson, review of *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman, *Church History* 68, no. 4 (1999): 984-985.

⁹⁸ Jeff Mirus, “New Doctors of the Church: St Hildegard, John of Avila,” *Catholic Culture*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/new-doctors-church-st-hildegard-st-john-avila/>.

⁹⁹ Catholic World News, <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=14269>.



Feminist Perspective

Hildegard viewed herself as a “poor little female figure.”¹⁰⁰ She probably adopted this pose in recognition of the dominant androcentric nature of her society and the church itself. To do otherwise may have diminished her effectiveness and earned animosity from the exclusively male hierarchy. Despite this, there is evidence that Hildegard believed she lived in an “effeminate age” where indolent men acted womanish, so “God had to save his honor by making women virile.”¹⁰¹ Hildegard’s view that she lived in an effeminate age was not unique. Bernard of Clairvaux, in his *Sermons on the Songs of Solomon*, commanded his monks to “sing correctly...not wheezing through the nose with an effeminate stammering, in a weak and broken tone, but pronouncing the words of the Holy Spirit with becoming manliness and resonance...”¹⁰² Aelred of Rievaulz, an English Cistercian monk and contemporary of Hildegard and Bernard, shared their view of contemporary singing and wrote that singing should not sound like “...the whinnying of a horse...[lacking] manly power...[and having] the shrillness of a woman’s voice...”¹⁰³

Hildegard has “exercised a peculiar fascination on the contemporary movements of feminist and creation-centered spirituality.”¹⁰⁴ In fact, “early feminists promoted her as the ‘first woman physician.’”¹⁰⁵ However, Hildegard’s self-image runs contra to the modern feminist perspective that views “self-affirmation as crucial to women’s well-being.”¹⁰⁶ Feminist authors speculate on whether Hildegard’s image of herself was “internalized self-hatred or a rhetorical trick.”¹⁰⁷ As a subjugated woman in both Biblical—reflecting the fall of Eve in Genesis—and social status in a male-dominated society, Hildegard would have been unable to teach theology without her “subjugation...[being]

¹⁰⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 10.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 174, quoting Hildegard of Bingen, Fragment 4.28, p. 71 and other sources.

¹⁰² Bruce Wood Holsinger, “The Flesh and the Voice,” 106.

¹⁰³ Bruce Wood Holsinger, “The Flesh and the Voice,” 106.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Newman, review of *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179*, by Sabina Flanagan, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Victoria Sweet, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine,” 386.

¹⁰⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Ruether, 10.



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overridden by...God...to raise her beyond both her female condition and the human condition in general.”¹⁰⁸

Feminist Luce Irigaray has observed that mystical experience provides a public forum for women in which “consciousness is no longer the master” and men must “give up [their] knowledge in order to attend to a woman’s madness.”¹⁰⁹ However, Hildegard is not in the category of madness. Instead, “Hildegard was a talented and sophisticated politician and manipulator of discourses, a woman wily enough to take full advantage of...medieval European ecclesiastical politics.”¹¹⁰ For Hildegard, mysticism served as a “political currency” that let her enter and participate at the uppermost heights of the medieval church and society.¹¹¹

As a prophet, Hildegard spoke not in her own name, but in the name of God. This validated her prophecies.¹¹² Her visions “obliquely sanctioned a role reversal by presenting men as negligent or weak, woman as prophetic or powerful, and aspects of God as feminine.”¹¹³ Hildegard wrote that “wisdom teaches me in the light of love.”¹¹⁴ Wisdom, traditionally viewed as the feminine aspect of God, was Hildegard’s inspiration in many visions. In the same vein, Hildegard wrote that her words were from “true wisdom who tells them about me, and this is how she spoke to me...”¹¹⁵ Describing another vision, Hildegard again wrote that “Wisdom showed me certain secrets...”¹¹⁶ By emphasizing Wisdom, the feminine side of God, Hildegard established a spiritual precedent for modern feminist theologians.

Hildegard was the only medieval woman known to preach to laity and clergy with the Pope’s approval.¹¹⁷ Although Hildegard preached to great acclaim, the androcentric church leadership, perhaps

¹⁰⁸ Ruether, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 377-378, citing Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 192.

¹¹⁰ Jones and Neal, 379.

¹¹¹ Jones and Neal, 381.

¹¹² Barbara Newman, “Visions and Validation,” 170. Newman notes that “in an age when...[androcentrism] was rigorously enforced, only through visions could a religious or intellectual woman gain a hearing.”

¹¹³ Newman, 175. See also Jane Duran, “Hildegard of Bingen: A Feminist Ontology,” 156, 158. Duran argues that portions of Hildegard’s work are gynocentric; specifically at 158, she observes that Hildegard’s “personifications of the Virtues...are...highly feminized figures.”

¹¹⁴ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 158.

¹¹⁵ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 158.

¹¹⁶ Silvas, 177.

¹¹⁷ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, “Negotiable Currencies,” 379.

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in reaction to Hildegard's denouncing of clerical corruption, denied other women the same privilege. One hundred years after Hildegard's death, it was "hard to imagine...[acceptance of] public preaching by a woman, even a well-connected abbess and acknowledged prophet."¹¹⁸

Within the feminist community is a strain of analysis that seeks to impute same-sex attraction to Hildegard. This view is presented most forcefully in terms of her music, which included perceived "homoerotic bonds between women...[and] brings these bonds to the center of devotional practice."¹¹⁹ This view is enhanced by the lyrics of her songs that "suggest that female homoerotic sensuality was much more central to her symbolic expressions of religious devotion than were heteroerotic images."¹²⁰

On a less esoteric plane is Hildegard's friendship with Richardis von Stade.¹²¹ Richardis was an aristocratic nun who, although close to Hildegard, was moved from Rupertsberg and appointed abbess of a new religious establishment.¹²² Hildegard opposed the move and wrote to members of Richardis' family and to ecclesiastical hierarchy, including Pope Eugene III, to have it rescinded.¹²³ In one letter to Hartwig, Bishop of Bremen and Richardis' brother, Hildegard revealed she was emotionally devastated by the move; but "when she reacted...as hysterical and therefore as feminine [as opposed to revealing divine instructions], she became powerless...and her demands...[were] dismissed by the authorities."¹²⁴ However, as Richardis was a key collaborator with Hildegard in her creative endeavors, Hildegard's frustration with Richardis' departure may have had a completely innocent origin as merely the loss of an esteemed colleague.¹²⁵ Another aspect of Hildegard's relationship with Richardis is clarified because Hildegard used the same translation of *diligentis intentionis*, or "loving," to describe both her friendship with Richardis and her friendship with the monk Volmar.¹²⁶

Conclusion

¹¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 29.

¹¹⁹ Bruce Wood Holsinger, "The Flesh and the Voice," 109.

¹²⁰ Holsinger, 109.

¹²¹ Sharon Jones and Diana Neal, "Negotiable Currencies," 382.

¹²² Jones and Neal, 382.

¹²³ Jones and Neal, 382.

¹²⁴ Jones and Neal, 382-383.

¹²⁵ June Boyce-Tilman, "Hildegard of Bingen at 900," 36.

¹²⁶ Anna Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*, 133.



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Researching the life, mysticism and talents of Hildegard of Bingen was a delightful, eye-opening journey into the twelfth century realm of a spectacular, creative, and resourceful person. From an early age Hildegard was comfortable with her visions and her parents' plan to give her, as the tenth child, "to the church as a tithe at the age of eight."¹²⁷ Apparently quite content to be cloistered Hildegard, a native German speaker, became fluent and literate in Latin, learned to play and write music, understood medical practices and techniques, and was an expert in theology. To achieve her many talents, Hildegard must have spent her time as a youth and young adult reading, practicing music, discussing medical techniques with midwives and healers, and writing essays. Finally, near the age of forty Hildegard literally burst forth into ecclesiastical and political society. The fortuitous interventions of Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugene to validate her standing as a mystic in commune with God ensured her future and may have even prevented her, as so many intelligent women of her time were, as being perceived as a witch.

Hildegard was unique because her mystical visions did not involve an ecstatic experience. In the century after Hildegard, Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1283), another German-born mystic, wrote the book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*.¹²⁸ Like Hildegard, although much less powerful ecclesiastically and politically, Mechthild challenged the "Christianity of her day as corrupted by sinful clerics..."¹²⁹ However, unlike Hildegard, Mechthild's visions were an "intense...ecstatic flight to God..."¹³⁰ Hildegard was unlike Antony of Egypt and other mystics who abandoned society,¹³¹ and was unlike those such as English mystic Julian of Norwich (1343-1416) who, upon taking vows, "was enclosed in a room [in the church in Norwich] for the rest of her life."¹³² Hildegard, although entering the shelter of a cloister, did not abandon society nor seek ascetism on a mountain top or desert. And the illnesses that accompanied Hildegard's visions were not as physical as the injuries Antony experienced

¹²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 6.

¹²⁸ Ruether, 31.

¹²⁹ Ruether, 33.

¹³⁰ Ruether, 34.

¹³¹ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 45-48.

¹³² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 44.

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in his visions as he imagined demons attacking him. Antony's injuries during his visions were "so severe ...[that they] caused...agony."¹³³

That Hildegard is being rediscovered by modern writers, theologians, and feminists is a benefit to modern culture. Expanding the audience for her music, writings, and the accompanying images drawn by her nuns at her direction to mimic her visions will nourish and educate those who seek Hildegard's company. While feminists have taken the lead in resurrecting Hildegard's memory, her talents, writings, and greatness transcend her gender. As society becomes less androcentric and more inclusive, Hildegard's contributions to music, theology, medicine, and other disciplines should provide fruitful dialogue and opportunity for all scholars to mine and refine.

¹³³ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 48.

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