

Hildegard von Bingen

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Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), German abbess and polymath, who was canonized and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 2012, belongs in the ranks of church teachers such as Augustine (see AUGUSTINE, SAINT), Aquinas (see AQUINAS, SAINT THOMAS), and Teresa of Ávila. Overlooked for centuries, scholars are now rediscovering her contributions to medieval MYSTICISM, feminist theology (see GENDER AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES), and philosophical, theological, and medical anthropology, as well as to environmental ethics, musicology, the sacred arts, and healing sciences.

Born as the tenth child to a noble family in German Rhineland, 14-year-old Hildegard entered the small women's convent at the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, which became her cultural, intellectual, and spiritual nursery. Having been gifted with visions from early on, Hildegard was reluctant to share them with the public. Then, at the age of 43, she gained support from the influential abbot BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, who read part of her early visionary writings to Pope Eugen III. After securing papal protection, Hildegard grew quickly into the most prolific woman writer, composer, and sought-after counselor of the twelfth century, the founding mother of two Benedictine convents, teacher, healer, preacher, and social critic. She worked relentlessly as an author, letter writer, and prophetic voice until her death, at the age of 81, on 17 September 1179.

Disguising herself as a “poor little female,” a “feather on God's breath,” she calls out the powerful of her time, denouncing the “rotten” state of church and society, where money rules and hypocrites call for war, making people vulnerable to deceit and illusion. To Emperor Barbarossa she writes that he behaves like a child – “even worse, in fact: like a fool!” (Schipperges 1998, 200). By employing this topos of the unlearned woman (Ranff 2015) Hildegard strategically humbles herself under the male hierarchy and at the same time claims divine inspiration and prophetic authority. This rhetorical choice opens the doors – typically closed to women of her time – to writing, teaching, and preaching.

Hildegard's uniquely wide and literary work corresponds with medieval traditions of rational reflection and justification of faith but also goes beyond it, e.g. by reclaiming the place of the Feminine Divine. She leaves behind a complex “polyphony” of writings (King-Lenzmeier 2001), including her visionary trilogy written in the style of medieval *summas*: *Liber scivias* (1142–1151), *Liber vitae meritorem* (1158–1163), and *Liber divinorum Operum* (1163–1172). Her works also include texts on medicine and natural science (*Causa et curae, Physica*); musical compositions (e.g. 77 liturgical songs, and her opera *Ordo virtutum*); various homilies and commentaries and more than 300 pastoral letters to popes, emperors, and laypeople. Her “Testamentum propheticum,” a letter Hildegard left her nuns at Rupertsberg, was reconstructed

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in 2014 from the original Latin manuscript, giving an intimate summary of her life's work (Zátonyi 2016). It is now part of the first complete German edition of Hildegard's collected works edited by St. Hildegard Abbey, Eibingen (*Werke 1–10*; Bingen 2012–2018).

Hildegard's philosophy is grounded in her appreciation of the sacredness of nature, proposing the contemplation of creation as a way to know God (*vestigia Dei*). Educated within the Benedictine spiritual and intellectual culture, Hildegard was well acquainted with early Christian (see CHRISTIANITY) texts, Church Fathers like Augustine (see AUGUSTINE, SAINT) and Jerome, biblical exegesis, and commentaries. Neoplatonic concepts (see PLATO AND NEO-PLATONISM) can be found throughout her work. One can assume Hildegard had access to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, presumably via Eriugenas's translation, as evidenced by her emphasis on the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God (e.g. that one can speak about God only in visual and metaphorical language). Similar themes can be found in the symbolic theology of Hugo von Saint-Victor (Zátonyi 2017, 30–32).

Hildegard's visual hermeneutics, her theocentric use of "rationalitas," and her anthropocentric cosmology distinguish her *summa* from others by enfolding a complex interplay of the visible and invisible world, micro and macro cosmos, body and soul, pointing to the interconnectedness of creation, history, and eschatology. Hildegard ascribes her authorship to her "visio mystica" (a term borrowed from Augustine), visions she perceives with the "eyes and ears of the inner person," thus composing her *summa* as a succession of visions unique in history (Zátonyi 2017, 21–23, 128ff., 35).

Hildegard's visual style correlates with biblical and Benedictine hermeneutics of image and word. Using vivid imagery throughout, mirroring the beauty of creation, the depth of the cosmos, and the mystery of the Divine, Hildegard guides our apprehension into a "hermeneutic spiral of acquaintance and inquiry" (Schipperges 1998, 52), creating a visual rather than a terminological expression of Christian tradition, weaving traditional images into new narratives like a unique work of art. This may explain why Hildegard gained little traction in the following Scholastic age but speaks in new ways to the discourses of our time.

Though Hildegard's reflections on human nature touch on many issues of current philosophy, few systematic studies of her main concepts exist. Newman (1987) portrays Hildegard as the first Christian thinker who seriously and positively reclaims the space of the feminine in the Divine order (e.g. by emphasizing lady *caritas*, sister wisdom, divine motherhood etc.). Newman describes Hildegard's work as the culmination of sapiential thought traditions, which balances traditional masculine creator images with *sapientia* (wisdom), the Feminine Divine, mother of all living, who suffuses the cosmos with life-giving wisdom and healing powers. In her theological *summa*, *Liber Scivias* (Bingen 1990, henceforth Sc: "Know the ways of the Lord"), Hildegard depicts Divine knowledge (*scientia dei*) as a feminine figure: "She is like the sun, which none can contemplate" (Sc III.4.15).

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Scivias walks us through 26 stunning visuals, telling the story of creation and redemption, each visionary text followed by philosophical and theological reflections. The fourth vision famously portrays the universe as an egg, alluding to the anatomy of human birth. The fifth vision illuminates a child in her mother's womb, receiving the Divine spark like a fireball from heaven. This incarnation narrative presents in a series of panels the journey of the soul and its many trials on its way towards original wisdom. The soul cries out to "Mother Zion" until her laments are answered: my beloved daughter, do not forget that the giver of life has given you wings to leap beyond all obstacles (Sc I.5).

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Opposing dualism as well as the Catharist disdain for the body, Hildegard understands body and soul as unity (*unum opus*). Unlike PLATO she does not consider the soul imprisoned by the body, but praises human corporeality as the complete work of God (*plenum opus*). Using organic allegories throughout her work, she compares the embodied soul to the sap in the tree, and its five faculties of understanding (*intellectus*), will (*voluntas*), passion (*animus*), reason (*ratio*), and senses (*sensus*) to the tree's greening, blossoming, ripening, and fruiting (Sc I.5). Hence reason and faith are not opponents, instead it is Divine "rationalitas" which provides both, and thus wings to the soul. Consequently, a good philosopher is like a gardener, who draws wisdom from the well to nourish interior knowledge (*interior scientia*) in the rational soul (*anima rationalis*) (Ranff 2015, 127–128).

Hildegard's key term, *viriditas* (the greening life force), which she derived from the Latin *viridis* (green), lies also at the heart of her ethical and medical works (see Sweet 1999). The task of the human journey is to restore wholeness by overcoming dryness (*ariditas*) and cultivating virtues (Furchert 2018). Hildegard enfoldes her distinct virtue ethics as dialogue between 35 personified vices and virtues in her *Liber vitae meritorum* ("Book of life's merits"). The dialogue later finds its unique expression in *Ordo virtutum*, probably the first liturgical morality play of her time.

Hildegard's final cosmological summa *Liber Divinorum operum* (LDO; "Book of Divine works"), brings together key terms like *viriditas*, *caritas*, and *rationalitas* into a "final, great synthesis" (King-Lenzmeier 2001, 62). *Viriditas*, the Divine life force, is the "greenness of God's finger" (*viriditas digit Dei*) that burst all creation into being. Love (*caritas*) is the guiding creation principle – the first cause of the world, expressed in a relational act of creation (Zátonyi 2016, 53ff.). In the first vision it appears as a shimmering illumination of a beautiful figure too radiant to look at, clad in a tunic, brighter than the sun, speaking: "I am the supreme life force who has kindled all sparks of life" (LDO I. 1). The two-headed figure symbolizes the love of the heavenly father taking on human form (*caritas*), creating and holding the whole universe in motherly embrace. The great "I am" also identifies as *rationalitas*, the breath of the sounding word, through which all creation was made. Hildegard's theocentric use of the Latin *rationalitas* is a reference to the Greek *logos*, from the creation narrative in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the word," a text that deeply moved Hildegard. For her, *rationalitas* encompasses the entirety of Divine greening power, ordering wisdom, and self-giving love (Zátonyi 2017, 137).

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In the second vision a circling wheel appears at the heart of the same radiant figure which grows into a fiery circle of the elements, holding the whole cosmos, world, and humanity, which in turn is lovingly embraced by the arms of the divine figure. At the wheel's center appears a human, naked, spanning the directions of the world, grounded on the earth and embedded in the cosmological order. Hildegard's anthropocentric cosmology is no anthropocentrism: Mirroring divine *rationalitas*, we perceive and participate in the invisible world, but through our corporeality we also operate in the physical world. Thus, our unique ontological relatedness to the divine creator entails our human responsibility in the Divine order: to live in active harmony with all creation.

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See also: BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX; CREATION AND CONSERVATION; DIVINE HIDDENNESS; GENDER AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES; IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE; INEFFABILITY; MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY, CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION; MYSTICISM; PLATO AND NEO-PLATONISM

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ABSTRACT

Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) was a German abbess and polymath, who was canonized and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 2012. Her uniquely wide-ranging literary work includes her visionary trilogy, texts on medicine and natural science, musical compositions, various homilies and commentaries, and more than 300 pastoral letters. Steeped in medieval symbolism, Hildegard goes beyond it by reclaiming the place of the feminine in the Divine order. Her philosophy is inspired by her visions, her monastic upbringing, and her appreciation of the sacredness of nature. At its heart stands the human as *imago Dei*, embedded in the cosmic order and embraced by Divine motherly love. Hildegard's visual hermeneutics, her theocentric use of *rationalitas*, and her anthropocentric cosmology distinguishes her *summa* from other medieval *summas*, enfolding a complex interplay of the visible and invisible world, micro and macro cosmos, body and soul, pointing to the interconnectivity of creation, history, and human responsibility.

KEYWORDS

anthropocentric cosmology; body and soul; Divine love; Feminine Divine; God's ineffability; rational soul; sapiential philosophy; *viriditas*; visual hermeneutics; wisdom