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Editing Hildegard: The Creation of a Modern Saint

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Abstract

The twelfth-century saint, Hildegard of Bingen, was officially canonized by the Roman Catholic Church on October 7, 2012, and one can observe the tremendous surge of interest in Hildegard's life and writings over the last few decades leading up to Hildegard's canonization. During the course of the study, the author surveyed contemporary biographies about St. Hildegard and placed them in conversation with Hildegard's own work. From this comparison one is able to observe discrepancies between Hildegard's writings and the words of this saint's modern biographers. This project takes special note of how Hildegard has been lifted from the pages of her own work and time and has been transfigured into a modern saint who now reflects the competing sensibilities of her modern biographers.

1. Introduction

On many levels this study is about images. It is most fitting to approach Saint Hildegard von Bingen through images because she was constantly inspired by the visual. Hildegard's biographers note that Hildegard started receiving visions at the age of three, and she continued to have them for the rest of her life.[1] After she became the abbess of a Benedictine community in 1136 C.E., Hildegard received a call to write down the visions that she was given. Many of these were recorded in three of Hildegard's major works, *Scivias*, *Liber Vita Meritorum,* and *Liber Divinorum Operum*. These texts, which contain descriptions of the visions as well as their interpretations, also reveal stunning illuminations that accompany each vision. Just as Hildegard's visions had to be transcribed into word and art, Hildegard herself has been lifted out of the 12th century and placed into our own era via the interpretations of modern biographers. For the purpose of this examination, this project will focus on ways in which Hildegard has been envisioned, perhaps even reimagined, in texts written roughly eight hundred and fifty years after her death.

One can approach Hildegard much like one might approach an old oil painting of a great master painter. One immediately notices a complex mixture of colors, contours, and moods. Perhaps, under closer scrutiny, one discerns faint lines sketched under the pigment. The painting is not one dimensional, but it consists of layers of color and alterations. So it is with images of Hildegard. Some understandings of Hildegard proceed from selected portions of Hildegard's literary corpus, and they can be compared to the faint sketches underneath an oil painting. The paint itself can be likened to contemporary biographies that shape our experience of Hildegard. It is important to note that even the biographies, the "paint," are not applied with one brush stroke. In fact, they contain multiple applications and perspectives that inform our understanding of Hildegard.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the matrices that constitute current conceptions of Hildegard. I begin this work by exposing a high profile contest involving two very different interpretations within the Hildegard debate between the former Pope Benedict XVI and Episcopal priest, Father Matthew Fox. The second portion of this study includes the results of a survey of popular Hildegard biographies that have been written over the past fifteen years. These biographies are then placed in conversation with Hildegard's own writings. From these comparisons it is possible to pick out particular themes within contemporary work. Some biographers seem to prioritize selected

portions of Hildegard's story at the expense of other sections. Other biographers seem to contradict Hildegard's own statements outright. Some biographies and articles try to explain Hildegard's visions by suggesting that Hildegard was a migraine sufferer or that Hildegard used the visions as a way to wrangle power from the male hierarchy. While Hildegard stressed that her actions were mandated to her by God, in contrast, contemporary writers stress Hildegard's own agency in shaping her life and the world around her. Additionally, many contemporary writers recognize glints of a feminist exemplar which may clash with Hildegard's own thoughts on "feminine frailty." Finally, this project will conclude by thinking through some of the implications of the modern project of interpreting Hildegard in the twenty-first century.

2. Two Contemporary Appropriations in Conflict

Indeed, one witnesses several "groups" that have appropriated Hildegard for their own purposes. This insight is keenly picked up by a religion reporter from the *Huffington Post*, Alessandro Speciale. While reflecting on the canonization of Hildegard this year Speciale writes, "Here are two things that don't typically go together: Pope Benedict XVI and feminist culture. Yet they both share a veneration for Hildegard von Bingen...."[2] Certainly, there are multiple perspectives that fall somewhere between Pope Benedict XVI and "feminist culture," but polarities like these are interesting to examine.

Pope Benedict XVI officially canonized St. Hildegard of Bingen on October 10, 2012. But he has been speaking of hers for years. In 2010 he spoke of her pertinence to modern the modern age:

> This great woman, this "prophetess',…speaks with great timeliness to us today, with her courageous ability to discern the signs of the times, her love for creation, her medicine, her poetry, her music, which today has been reconstructed, her love for Christ and for his Church, which was suffering in that period too, wounded also in that time by the sins of both priests and lay people…thus Saint Hildegard speaks to us.[3]

In his article, Speciale notes that Pope Benedict XVI uses Hildegard to assess the damage done to the church by the sex abuse scandal.[4] Indeed, it seems Pope Benedict XVI believes that Church is suffering some sort of crisis, but what does he say about Hildegard's relation to it? The pontiff writes,

> She [Hildegard] harshly reprimanded them [the clergy] for seeking to subvert the very nature of the Church, reminding them that a true renewal of the ecclesial community is obtained with a sincere spirit of repentance and a demanding process of conversion, rather than *with a change in structures*. This is a message we should never forget.[5]

While acknowledging Hildegard's challenge to clergy in her day, Pope Benedict notes that Hildegard was not demanding a new hierarchical system. Pope Benedict XVI seems to be enlisting Hildegard to defend the position of his own group. In this case she has become a symbol of Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

Theologian and author Matthew Fox has taken a strong interest in Hildegard. Rev. Fox is another high profile advocate of Hildegard. He has traveled through Europe and the United States lecturing on Hildegard's legacy, and his works are referenced by most of the Hildegard biographers examined in this paper. He too, believes that Hildegard is relevant to the modern world. Fox states:

> Hildegard's message is remarkably on target for our era – over eight centuries after her passing! In this 21st century, when time is running out for our species unless we make drastic changes to how we function on this planet, Hildegard's voice is sorely needed, for she speaks to the core issues that are ushering us down the path to oblivion.[6]

For Matthew Fox, Hildegard addresses the most pressing of our contemporary concerns. "She is a woman for our time, a teacher for our time, a Doctor and a saint for our time."[7] In fact, Hildegard is so contemporary that Fox names the chapters of his new book, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times*, by relating Hildegard to prominent feminist authors, like Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes and Dorothee Soelle, the Pulizer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, and the paradigm shifting scientist, Albert Einstein.[8]

It is no accident that Fox's book was released the same month that Pope Benedict XVI canonized Hildegard. In fact, Matthew Fox has written numerous books, including one called *The Pope's War: Why Ratzinger's Secret*

Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and What Can Be Saved. Most certainly Fox wants to counter the Pope's vision of Hildegard with a vision of his own. "What do the Vatican, the Taliban, and Pat Robertson all have in common? It's what fascism and fundamentalism share as deeply held values: The fear of the feminine."[9] Therefore, Fox summons Hildegard, "Come and bring some of your feminist dynamism alive again in our tired, cynical, military-ridden, self-pitying world – a world that patriarchy built."[10] The Pope's opportune canonization of Hildegard is especially meaningful for Fox because Fox sees Hildegard as a "Trojan horse entering the gates of the Vatican".[11]

This particular case is fascinating not only because both Pope Benedict XVI and Father Fox make the claim that Hildegard is relevant for our time period, but because they employ Hildegard in the defense of their own varied positions. These positions seem to be antithetical to each other, and yet they both claim Hildegard as defense. The next portion of this paper will look at the claims of modern biographers in relationship to the Hildegard's own statements regarding herself and her world. We will discover that there are some blatant tension points between Hildegard's statements and the claims of Hildegard's biographers.

3. A Visionary Career

Most biographies begin Hildegard's story at the point where she is dedicated to a monastic community as early as the age of eight[12] or even as late as the age of fourteen[13]. It may be difficult for many to imagine what it must have been like for the young girl as she was left behind by her father and mother and was entrusted into the care of strangers. The reasons behind Hildegard's dedication are unknown. There is speculation that she may have been a sickly child and this route was determined by her ill health.[14] Or perhaps Hildegard's dedication was in reaction to the early recognition of spiritual gifts. We simply do not know the reason behind her dedication. Nevertheless, we do know that Hildegard was placed under the care of an anchorite named Jutta at the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg.

Author and professor of medieval studies, Carmen Butcher, describe Hildegard's experiences with Jutta as follows:

> Jutta herself may have added challenges to these early monastic years. She was a severe practitioner of asceticism, including penitential self-flagellation. She wore a chain under her clothes, prayed barefoot in the extreme cold of a German winter, and refused the allowed (and encouraged) modifications to the Benedictine diet for those who were sick.[15]

Perhaps because of Jutta's extreme asceticism, Butcher also notes that there is no evidence that Hildegard reacted "with passion" when Jutta died in 1136. "We can wonder how close they really were, despite their intimate proximity over three decades."[16] Butcher continues her discussion of this formative period in Hildegard's life as an opportunity to contrast Hildegard's "balance" with Jutta's extremism.[17] However, other authors emphasize Jutta's "pivotal" role in Hildegard's life.[18] Perhaps this is due to the academic nature of their relationship. Matthew Fox stresses the fact that Jutta was Hildegard's *primary* teacher.[19] The education provided was not equal to the education afforded to male monastics;[20] however, it did provide Hildegard with "a reading knowledge of Latin."[21] Later, Hildegard would point to her own limited education and remark that she was taught by an "unlearned woman."[22] What is most important in regards to Hildegard's relationship with Jutta is that some scholars attempt to contrast Hildegard sharply with other religious figures of her age, while other scholars emphasize the restrictions placed on Hildegard's education.

In 1136 Jutta died and Hildegard was elected to take over the leadership of the small community of about one dozen women.[23] Four to five years later Hildegard received the call to write down her visions for the world to read. Fox describes this as a celebration of Hildegard's spiritual awakening "in which she took command of her vocation and creative life."[24] Helen John, S.N.D., writes: "For Hildegard, who seems to have known no woman author before herself, the prophetic calling served to energize her own natural gifts of symbolic imagination, analogical reasoning, understanding of what she read, and observation of nature and observation of nature and human experience."[25]

Nevertheless, it is not clear whether Hildegard herself would have used the words "took command" to describe this moment or whether she would have seen her call as having anything at all to do with "symbolic imagination," "reasoning," or even the result of her own literacy. All of these place agency within Hildegard. Here is how Hildegard describes her call in her work, *Scivias*:

> And behold, in the forty-third year of my life's course, when I had fixed upon a celestial vision with great fear and trembling attention, I saw a very great splendor, in which sounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me: "O frail mortal, ashes of ashes and dust of dust, say and write what you see and hear. But since you are fearful of speaking, artless at explaining and untaught in writing, speak and write not according to human words nor following the understanding of human intelligence, nor according to the rules of human composition, but according to what you see and hear in the heavens above and in God's wondrous works…So, O mortal, shall you speak what you see and hear."[26]

It would appear that Hildegard believed that the call emanated from outside of her and that she did not have any choice in writing out her visions. This becomes more evident when she explains what happened when she did not immediately respond to the call. She confesses: "But I, though I saw and heard these things, refused to write for a long time…until, laid low by the scourge of God, I feel upon a bed of sickness; then compelled at last…I set my hand to writing."[27] It was only when Hildegard wrote out of obedience to her call that she was made well.

It is interesting to note how contemporary writers respond to Hildegard's visions. Helen John, who agrees with the position of Elizabeth Petroff, quotes Petroff by saying:

> Visions led women to the acquisition of power in the world while affirming their knowledge of themselves as women. Visions were a socially sanctioned activity that freed a woman from conventional female roles by identifying her as a genuine religious figure…Her visions gave her the strength to grow internally and, to change the world, to build convents, found hospitals, preach, attack injustice and greed, even within the church.[28]

For writers like Petroff and John, Hildegard's visions are couched in terms like "the acquisition of power" and self-knowledge. Additionally, John, who wants to distance herself from Dr. Sabrina Flanagan's 1989 critique on Hildegard, suggests that ultimately Flanagan questions Hildegard's intentions in regards to claiming divine visions as being "cynically manipulative" or "intellectually dishonest."[29] In other words, some regard Hildegard's visions as a tool towards greater agency and notoriety.

If Hildegard's visions will come under such scrutiny, even from authors who admire her, it should come as no surprise that Hildegard's sickness would be scrutinized as well. Dr. Flanagan, for example, boils down certain aspects of Hildegard's visionary experience by suggesting that Hildegard may have been a migraine sufferer. Dr. Flanagan describes this as a "wonderfully adaptable instrument" in regards to Hildegard's prophetic role.[30] Other authors, like Ann Story[31] and Carmen Butcher[32], speak about Hildegard's migraines as well. Butcher adds that while Hildegard may have suffered from them, this does very little to explain away Hildegard's prophetic role.[33]

Still others place Hildegard's visions and her illnesses within the context of social pressures and the oppression of women. Ann Storey suggests:

> Her [Hildegard] life and work reveal conflicts that brought on the emotional and physical distress often found in women who defy society's norms. Hildegard suffered from ill health throughout her life, including short-term paralysis, migraine headaches, and several near-fatal illnesses. She also endured self-doubt and fear of ridicule.[34]

Matthew Fox also relegates Hildegard's illnesses to social anxieties:

> She is a woman in a patriarchal culture and a male-run church who strove to be heard, who struggled to offer her own wisdom and gifts borne of the experience and suffering of women in the past. In a letter to St. Bernard of Clairvaux she complains of the burden she carries as a woman in a patriarchal culture. "I am wretched and more than wretched in my existence as a woman;" she complains. Like any member of the "anawim" or oppressed peoples anywhere, she struggled for years with the "I can't" or "I shouldn't" or "Who am I to…" feelings that she had been taught. She relates how often she was confined to a sickbed because she succumbed to this covering up of her talents and her voice and her conversion….[35]

It is not the aim of this paper to deny the oppression of women nor is it in my interest to de-humanize Hildegard's experiences. However, I do want to question interpretations that clearly contradict Hildegard's own understanding. Certainly Hildegard did not consider her visions and subsequent writing as a revelation of "her talents" or of "her

voice." Additionally, it is doubtful that Hildegard would have blamed her illness upon social pressures alone. Here is Hildegard's explanation as she describes her visions in *Scivias*:

> Indeed, the visions that I see I perceive not in dreams, nor while I am asleep; not in ecstasy and not with my bodily eyes or external ears; I do not see them in hidden places, but I behold them openly, awake and alert, purely with the eyes and ears of the mind, *according to the will of God. How this may be is difficult for some people to comprehend* [emphasis mine].[36]

While it may be incomprehensible to some that Hildegard's experiences were the result of her encounter with God, one wonders if it is disingenuous to contradict Hildegard's own words.

This initial disjunction between Hildegard and her contemporary biographers may at first seem to be rather subtle, perhaps so subtle that they do not warrant the critique offered here. However, it is important to consider the differing points of emphasis. For Hildegard, her experience of the *mysterium tremendum* was central to all that she did. Hildegard seems to have responded to this out of great humility and awe. On the other hand, modern biographers want to consider Hildegard's visions in an attempt to explain away this experience as either an act of creativity or a cunning act of agency. In essence they have written the experience out of the narrative. Imagine reading the *Bhagavad Gita* or the words in *Isaiah* without fully recognizing the centrality of the numinous within the lives of its characters. The texts would take on an entirely different perspective, and this is what can be observed in modern biographies of Hildegard.

4. Editing Hildegard

What are "Hildegard's own words"? In researching this topic I frequently referred to Hildegard's writings via the work of Carmen Butcher. In Butcher's preface she states that "the words that fill these pages are not literal translations that skewer art with their precise woodenness. Instead, I tried to let Hildegard's poems sing with double and triple meanings as they do in the Latin."[37] Butcher also alludes to Hildegard's relevance to the modern day by stating that Hildegard "deserves the gritty, vibrant, and sinewy contemporary voice you will find in these pages."[38] In Butcher's estimation, Hildegard needs to be reinterpreted into a contemporary figure. It is of course not fair to critique an author who acknowledges artistic license. However, it is appropriate to wonder how much license is given in current reproductions of Hildegard's work, especially if artistic license may be used to reconstruct Hildegard's theology to benefit a particular viewpoint.

Sabina Flanagan begins her preface with a quote that she attributes to Gebeno, prior of Eberbach who wrote in 1220: "Many people shrink from and avoid reading the books of Hildegard because she writes in such a difficult and unusual style."[39] Because of this difficulty, Flanagan states that Gebeno made a "short selection of what he took to be the most important passages from a few of Hildegard's works. He chose them according to his particular preoccupation – the approaching end of the world."[40] It is important to note the importance of Flanagan's critique. Flannagan claims that Gebeno shortened Hildegard's work in light of his own interests.

It is also important to note that Flanagan, Butcher, and Fox have also created a condensed version of Hildegard's work. In fact, Matthew Fox's work, which combines Hildegard's visions with the corresponding illuminations, contains so much of his own commentary, as well as quotes from other "mystics," that is sometimes difficult to tease out Hildegard's actual sayings from the rest. Additionally, Fox created new titles for each of Hildegard's illuminations making it quite difficult for the reader to go back and match Hildegard's own descriptions to their corresponding illumination. Fox writes, "The brief titles given each illumination are my own since Hildegard does not name them so succinctly."[41] There are important questions raised when one tries to determine why an author might edit Hildegard and why certain texts were chosen over others.

If Hildegard is difficult to understand then why write about her or translate her work? It seems that many are drawn to Hildegard due to her rather beautiful visions. A popular vision, one that Butcher,[42] Flanagan,[43] Newman,[44] and Storey[45] all chose to share, is one in which Hildegard sees the "divine feminine" in the character of "Caritas" or the Holy Spirit. It is found in her other major work, *De Operatione Dei*.

> And I saw as if in the midst of the southern airs, in the mystery of God, a beautiful and wondrous figure of human form. Its face was so beautiful and radiant that I might more easily look at the sun than upon it. A large golden ring encircled the top of its head. In the circlet above the head another face appeared, like that of an aged man, whose bearded chin touched the crown of its

> head…And it was clad in a tunic which shone like the brightness of the sun, and in its hands it bore a lamb, shilling like the light of day….[46]

This being, which is referred to by the gender neutral pronoun as "it" in both Flanagan and Butcher, speaks to Hildegard saying:

> I am the ultimate fiery force igniting every spark of life. My breath knows nothing of death. I see you as you are and I judge you. I fly through the most distant galaxies of space on wings of wisdom, creating order wherever I go. I'm the divine flame of life, I burn above the golden fields, I sparkle on water, and I shine like the sun, the moon, and the stars. Together with the loving, hidden power of the wind, I make everything come alive. Remember that I'm also Reason. I inform the wind of the first Wind that created all things. I'm your breath, I'm the breath of all things, and none die because I am that Life.[47]

Hildegard sees this image as a being "in the mystery of God," and it is that which "makes everything come alive."[48] Fortunately for us, Hildegard oversaw illuminations that were based upon her visions. This vision comes to us as a complete package, as words and illumination. Ann Storey writes about the significance of both the vision and the illumination in the following manner:

> Hildegard has boldly inserted a woman into the traditionally male Trinity. Since the lamb refers to Christ and the bearded male is certainly God the Father, the female figure in the center is the Holy Spirit, the personification of love. The generation of God the Father from the Holy Spirit's head explicitly implies that male divinity derives from the female intellect.[49]

Hildegard's visions do "boldly" point towards a feminine face of the Divine. In fact, Barbara Newman has devoted an entire chapter considering the divine feminine in Hildegard's visions of Caritas, Scientia Dei, and Sapientia.[50] They are feminine personifications of "charity" or "virtue," "the knowledge of God," and "wisdom" respectively.

Certainly, it is worthwhile to note any time a medieval theologian, especially one who is a Doctor in the Roman Catholic Church, ascribes "feminine" characteristics into a traditionally masculine understanding of God. Therefore, it is not a surprise that many biographers have picked up on it. Biographers will then build upon this vision as a way to suggest that Hildegard thought of femininity in revolutionary ways.

5. Hildegard's Subversion

Certainly Hildegard's visions are very exciting, but so too are the events in Hildegard's life. Barbara Finlay, in particular, has connected Hildegard's visions to Hildegard's considerable influence and textual output. Finlay, quoting from Barbara Newman, writes:

> Hildegard was the only woman of her age to be accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine; the first woman who received express permission from a pope to write theological books; the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity, with the full approval of church authorities; the author of the first know morality play and the only twelfth-century play write who is not anonymous…; the first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and gynecology from a female perspective; and the first saint [informal?] whose official autobiography includes a first-person memoir.[51]

There is much evidence in this text to suggest that Hildegard's actions may be considered quite subversive. Certainly other examples can be given as well.

In 1150, despite considerable opposition in the monastic community, Hildegard moved the nuns and the funds they generated out of the male-centered monastery of Disibodenberg.[52] After this move, Hildegard founded addition monastic communities. Additionally, towards the end of her life an interdict was placed upon her convent which stemmed from Hildegard's refusal to obey her bishop.[53] Although the ban was lifted in 1179, this is one example where Hildegard challenged the male hierarchy of the Church. These two events are examined by virtually every author this study examined.

6. Hildegard as Feminist and Ecumenist

Understandably, due to the extraordinary features of Hildegard's visions and Hildegard's actions, many writers hold Hildegard in high regard. Barbara Newman writes, "We may boldly claim Hildegard as the first Christian thinker to deal seriously and positively with the feminine."[54] Anny Story[55] and Helen John[56] also pick up Newman's quote and use it to prove Hildegard's relevance for feminists. Matthew Fox writes in his chapter entitled "Hildegard's Gifts for Our Times," that Hildegard's work presents readers with a feminist perspective on political and social activism[57] as well as a "radical opportunity for global and religious ecumenism."[58] Such statements lead Carmen Butcher to observe that Hildegard's "original-yet-orthodox self has been appropriated by many camps. New Age reformers invoke her name over crystals, and feminists see her as their Mother." This observation causes her to wonder, "What is it about Hildegard's work that invites us all in? And who is she really?"[59]

Based upon these sentiments alone it certainly seems as though Hildegard was really quite progressive. But are we offered a complete picture? How exactly did she feel about her role as a woman? What did she say about the role of women in general? What did she have to say in regards to other religions?

Let us first look at her attitudes about women. Thus far we have looked at her incredible images that point towards "the divine feminine." However, Hildegard has more to say about femininity, especially in regards to herself as a woman. In 1147, in her first correspondence to Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard seeks reassurance from Bernard that her visions are real. Hildegard writes, "Father, I am most troubled about this vision which appeared to me in the spirit of mystery….I, wretched and more than wretched in that I bear the name of woman, have seen great miracles."[60] Similarly she refers to herself as "a poor little woman – a fragile vessel" in a letter to Elisabeth of Shönau in the year 1154.[61] Why then does Hildegard often speak boldly in front of men? Hildegard states that she must speak because the men in leadership positions refuse to do so in such a "womanish" age.[62]

Hildegard was not any kinder when she spoke of women in more general terms. In a letter to Tengswich of Andernach, Hildegard wrote: "The Living Fountain says [note that Hildegard does not believe that she is speaking on behalf of herself here]: 'Let a woman hide herself in her chamber and preserve her modesty, because the serpent breathed great perils of horrible lust into the first woman'".[63] Nevertheless, Hildegard goes on to praise the modesty of her "virgins" and concludes that they do not need to follow the normal rigors of modesty [i.e. wearing head coverings].[64] Additionally, in Hildegard's *Causes and Cures*, Hildegard analyzes the birth process. She says that both virtuous and non-virtuous men are born out of intense love or from the result of strong seed. Women are the result of weak seed or of weak love.[65]

Just as Matthew Fox suggests that Hildegard gives readers a perspective on feminist political and social activism, Fox also suggests that Hildegard may point towards ecumenism. Fox has advocated ecumenism throughout his prodigious writing career, but why does he point to Hildegard as an example? He writes, "Hildegard offers a radical opportunity for global religious ecumenism because she is so true to her own mystical roots and creative process."[66] Unfortunately, Fox does not defend this position by quoting Hildegard.

I only found two references in Hildegard's writings that referred to another religion. The first reference is found in Hildegard's first letter to Bernard of Clairvaux written in 1146. Hildegard praises Bernard as the Father "who with burning love for the Son of God and great fervor wonderfully enlist men in the army of Christ under the banner of the holy cross for the worthy struggle against the ferocity of the pagans [i.e. the Muslims during the second Crusade]."[67] In this instance it would seem as though Hildegard's correspondence reflects her own understanding regarding the destiny of those outside of Christianity. "God consumes by the fire of His vengeance all those who are outside the true faith, and those who remain within the Catholic faith He purifies by the fire of His consolation."[68]

A second, and perhaps more powerful, example of Hildegard's teachings regarding other faiths is recorded in *Scivas*. Vision five begins with a description of woman who is "pale from her head to her navel and black from her navel to her feet."[69] Hildegard is told in her vision that the woman's name is "Synagogue" and that she is blind:

> That image has no eyes, and has put her hands in her armpits for the Synagogue did not look on the true light, since she held the Only-Begotten of God in despite, and she conceals the works of justice under the apathy of her laziness, remaining in her torpor and negligently hiding them as if they did not exist. She stands next to the altar that is before the eyes of God, but she does not touch it; for she did in fact know superficially the Law of God, which she received by divine precept and divine visitation, but she did not plumb its depths, for she shrank from it rather than loved it neglecting the sacrifice and the devout prayers to God.[70]

Barbara Newman briefly summarizes vision five, although she uses the words "somber" and "majestic" to describe Synagogue.[71] Additionally, Newman expands the vision to incorporate all of humanity. "This profoundly symbolic materfamilias, reminiscent of Eve, Mary, and Ecclesia at once, embodies the whole drama of blind, faithless, yet expectant humanity…."[72] No one other than Newman chose to analyze vision five. Therefore, one cannot engage in a dynamic critic of Newman's broad interpretation of Synagogue. However, at least on the surface, it seems as though this vision was particularly damning of Judaism.

7. The Transfiguration of Hildegard

If this paper has succeeded in its argumentation that the statements made by some contemporary authors differ from Hildegard's own writings, then one must wonder what accounts for the difference. Although a full analysis of the question lies beyond the scope of this current study, one can arrive at some answers from Oliva Espin's analyses of biographies of St. Rose of Lima.

Dr. Espin, Professor Emerita in the department of Women's Studies at San Diego University, explains that she has had a lifelong fascination with the saints, particularly St. Rose of Lima. She confesses, "What I wanted most in the world was to be a saint," and the saints who most appealed to her were women.[73] Espin's interest continues even today:

> The intricacies of these women's lives have stayed with me: their courage as well as their weakness, their childishness as well as their maturity, their loves and fears, and above all, their focus on doing what they believed God wanted from them regardless of the opinions of others, including the male authorities of Church and family.[74]

Espin notes that the intricacies and "contradictions" inherent within the lives of women saints were missed by some of their biographers.[75] Here Espin is particularly emphasizing how biographers failed to pick up on how women saints transgressed the established norms of female virtue in their "hagiographic romances." Could it also be said that some biographers have failed to pick up on ways in which saints have modeled conformity to Medieval Latin Catholicism?

Returning to Hildegard, we can see several strong examples where Hildegard's vision affirms the existing social order and shuns new ideas. The first example is found in *Scivas* where God the Father says:

> Those who vaingloriously embrace novelty and, bored with My precepts, trust in themselves. But though an old garment is vexatious to human minds, I in My gifts must not be spurned, for in their simplicity they are always new, and the older they are the more precious they are.[76]

Later in this vision God says that he casts "down innovations in the sight of humanity", and sometimes He tolerates them in order to judge them at a future date.[77]

A second set of visions which confirm the existing ecclesiastical order occurs in *Liber Vitae Meritorum*: "Disobedience is the worst evil. It does not want to fear God or honor men….Let whoever wants to hope in God lay hold of blessed submission and let him obey the commands of those greater than himself."[78] The social structures of obedience and submission are further clarified in vision six in Scivas. "For God has allowed one kind of person to rule and another to be subject….because if the example were not given by fearing and honoring human beings, the people would be lazy, and not know how to acknowledge God."[79] Although neither vision is referenced or quoted by modern biographers, it is clear that in some ways Hildegard affirms the discipline of obedience to a hierarchical social order at the very same time she subverts it.

As Espin pointed out, it seems that when writing about women saints, some biographers have missed intricacies and contradictions within the saints' stories. In the case of St. Rose of Lima, these intricacies and contradictions were largely missed when St. Rose became *a symbol* of devotion and tool used to advance particular agendas. This, writes Espin, "is the unavoidable destiny of anyone who becomes 'famous'."[80] Therefore, it requires no stretch of the imagination for one to observe that the same processes hold true for St. Hildegard. Nevertheless, if Hildegard has indeed become transfigured into a symbol on a grand scale, there is no consensus as to what "she" might symbolize.

8. Concluding Remarks

Hildegard's story has been envisioned by various communities and authors in numerous ways. While other authors[81] have offered only passing references to the range of interpretive discourse in Hildegard biographies, this study is the first attempt at a broad analysis of modern Hildegard biographies. I have endeavored to show how contemporary authors prioritize particular moments in Hildegard's biography, as well as in Hildegard's visions, that best represent feminist, ecumenical, or sometimes "orthodox" viewpoints. In the process of prioritizing and negating, however, these authors have created an uncomfortable dissonance when they are analyzed alongside Hildegard's own writing.

This analysis has raised some important questions. First, one wonders how other biographies, especially of saints who have composed a large literary output, compare to the Hildegard biographies studied here. Certainly other studies have been conducted regarding the construction of hagiographies. However, I wonder if there are new trends emerging among modern, popular saint biographies. If new trends are emerging, how do they compare to the claims being made about Hildegard today?

Secondly, if it can be said that the words of a particular saint have been appropriated via contradictory statements about her, are these authors guilty of dominating, within the light of feminist critique, the message of that particular saint? Or does the freedom of religious interpretation, whereby one creates meaning wherever it is found, take precedence? This is an important question in terms of ethics, even if our line of questioning ventures into the realm of religious devotion as it does for some of Hildegard's biographers. Although it can certainly be said that we are not privy to all of Hildegard's thoughts and motivations, we do have an ample amount of original sources to contend with here. Therefore, we need to be concerned when the original sources conflict with information presented in the secondary sources. When we find authors moving beyond evidence available to us, it is important to wonder if devotion or even a strong scholastic admiration for Hildegard has morphed into something very different. Indeed, it does seem as though Hildegard has become obscured behind the agendas of some of her promoters. This critique becomes especially difficult when one supports some of the agendas being promoted. Nevertheless, we must be diligent about asking ourselves: "Who is Hildegard really? What does she have to teach us in the twenty-first century?"

9. Acknowledgements

It may seem odd to thank the very scholars who are being critiqued in one's paper. It is no secret that Father Matthew Fox's work on Hildegard of Bingen has been cited frequently and has been critiqued repeatedly over the course of this project. One reviewer was even lead to comment, "Who could listen to this man!" However, it was the writing of Matthew Fox that first introduced me to St. Hildegard. I find that I return to many of his writings time and again for inspiration and guidance. Therefore, I confess that I am sympathetic to his endeavors and those of many of the authors I cite here. Therefore, I must thank Father Fox and others for their boldness and their willingness to infuse progressive values into Christianity. I must also thank the students of RELS 490 who provided feedback and support during this process, particularly my friends Rachel Pagan and Khari McElrath. To Dr. Katherine Zubko and Dr. Rodger Payne I owe so very much! Their humor, enthusiasm for religious studies, and their compassionate guidance brought me to this point. Finally, it is the support of my loving family, particularly my husband, Brad, that has allowed me to freely pursue my dreams. Ultimately my academic endeavors would have been unattainable without that support.

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