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Abstract

Hildegard von Bingen, a Christian mystic, influenced theology, philosophy, and music during the Middle Ages. Some people today claim her as a forerunner for women's rights because her works gained such prominence people assume she had the authority to teach men in the church. However, this assertion places unnecessary strain on Hildegard, misreading her works and her place within the structure of the medieval Catholic church. Hildegard's writings did not seek to equalize men and women. Rather, in her life and in her works, she appealed to her humility, virginity, and close relationship with the Holy Spirit to minister. This conception of her role is reflected in her musical works: *Symphonia virginum* and *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*. Each of these works is a set of multiple songs on theology and relationship. These songs, her training, and her other works demonstrate her sanctioned ministry only extended to women at the convent. This was allowed by the Catholic church. She did have a sort of authority, but it was only under the ministry of grace, not ordination, that her works reached outside of the convent to both genders. Thus, the modern conception of Hildegard as feminist cannot be employed because her works did not reflect modern ideals of feminism, as she did not believe in the equality of men and women and she only officially ministered to women, not men. The work of feminist criticism can still have a place in reflecting on Hildegard's story, but she is not feminist herself. To be feminist, Hildegard would have needed to push the boundaries of what the Catholic church allowed for women.

Keywords

Musicology, feminism, Catholicism, historical theology, Hildegard von Bingen

Hildegard: A Trailblazer?

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A Christian mystic, polymath, and visionary, Hildegard von Bingen influenced theology, philosophy, and music during the Middle Ages. As she gained prominence through her music and writings, Hildegard worked within the hierarchical system to gain authority in a unique manner. Hildegard's writings did not seek to equalize men and women's roles in the Church or in their ontology. Rather, in her life and in her works, she appealed to her humility, virginity, and close relationship with the Holy Spirit to minister. She made these appeals not only in her written works, but also in her music, whether it be through the text or melody. Her sanctioned ministry only extended to women at the convent, which was allowed by the Catholic Church. It was only under the ministry of grace, not ordination, that her works reached outside of the convent to both genders. Thus, Hildegard worked within the authority structure of the Catholic Church to gain authority to teach women, as was expected, but unexpectedly became a teacher from grace for men.

Despite being a woman, Hildegard was considered an authority on theology, philosophy, and music over women, although not over men and not as a bishop or pope. The medieval Catholic conception is nothing like the modern, secular concept of authority. A modern framework might consider expertise and training to be the basis of authority, but the medieval Catholic Church based authority on a connection to God, something affected by humility, celibacy, and the Holy Spirit. Hildegard's works fulfill the modern framework of authority because she produced well-researched and well-written works based on her training with Jutta of Sponheim. Gerda Lerner, Austrian-born American women's historian comments,

[Hildegard's] protests of her ignorance ("since I am uneducated") have been generally discounted by modern historians, for the internal evidence of her vast literary output suggests that she must have been well educated in patristic literature, biblical exegesis, philosophy, astrology, natural sciences, and music. She was well acquainted with the Latin Bible and she stated that she heard the divine voice speaking in Latin. Her medical books are so closely grounded in the theories of Galen that it is inconceivable that she did not have knowledge of his work. Her conventional reference to herself as an uneducated woman undoubtedly was designed to strengthen her claim to divine revelation.¹

Hildegard's copious works did not allow her to be disregarded, but did not alone give her a voice in the Catholic Church. Caroline Walker Bynum, professor emerita of Western Medieval History at the Institute for Advanced Study, comments, "No modern theorist would explain women's religious options or opinions as biologically determined. [There were, however,] institutional and educational constraints not rooted in biology that were constant throughout the later Middle Ages."² The medieval church fathers considered women unfit for theological positions because they thought of women as weak and made in the image of man, not God. In agreement with the medieval church fathers, Hildegard wrote in *Liber divinorum operum*,

The man and woman were thus complementary, in that one works through the other. Man cannot be called "man" without the woman, in the same way as the woman cannot be called "woman" without the man. Woman is the work of man, and man the consolation of the woman. Neither can exist without the other. Man signifies the divinity of the Son of God, in the same way that the woman signifies his humanity.³

Hildegard's perspective does not argue for the advancement of women's role in society and the Church. Rather than viewing women as made in the image of God, along with men, Hildegard wrote that women are made in the image of man. Hildegard's writings purport women are made in

¹ Lerner, 53–54.

² Bynum, 3.

³ McGrath, 355–356.

the image of man, not God. Her idea of the role of women in the Church is not one of authority, but rather of humility.

Women were considered humble because of their lower status. Because the Bible states that those who were humbled were exalted, however, humility was key to being respected. Matthew 23:12 reads, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”⁴ Hildegard leaned into this theological concept when she remarked, “ego paupercula feminea forma” (I am a poor little figure of a woman) in response to a letter regarding her work *Scivias*. *Scivias* is a record of Hildegard’s visions, prophecies, and writings. It reads as a combination of visions and theological treatise. “I heard a voice from heaven” is an oft repeated opener followed by theological exposition. In *Scivias*, she extends her discourse on the humility of women when she wrote,

O frail human form from the dust of the earth, ashes from ashes: cry out and proclaim the beginning of undefiled salvation! Let those who see the inner meaning of Scripture, yet do not wish to proclaim or preach it, take instruction, for they are lukewarm and sluggish in observing the justice of God. Unlock for them the treasury of mysteries, which they, the timid ones, bury in a hidden field without fruit. Therefore, pour out a fountain of abundance, overflow with mysterious learning, so that those who want you to be despicable on account of Eve's transgression may be overwhelmed by the flood of your profusion.⁵

Hildegard regarded herself as a lowly servant of God, only able to convey what he wished. She often wrote, “I am uneducated” before she proceeded into an extensive discourse on a complicated subject. Hildegard wished to proclaim the way of salvation, admonish priests, and reveal the mysteries of Scripture, something she accomplished because of her lowlier status as a woman.

Hildegard also strengthened her relationship to God, and thus her authority in the Catholic Church through perpetual virginity—like Mary, the mother of Jesus. Virginity gave people additional connection to God in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Hildegard’s virginity was often

⁴ Matt. 23:12 (NASB).

⁵ Hildegard, 8.

compared to the supposed perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary. One of the four Marian doctrines of the Catholic Church, the perpetual virginity of Mary is the doctrine that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ.⁶ The belief originated in the second century when Catholics argued that sex and marriage were a result of original sin and that the only begotten son of God should also be the only begotten son of Mary.

Among her many works, *Symphonia virginum* (Symphony of Virgins), a set of songs, explores the concept of virginity bringing one closer to God. Specifically, the song “O dulcissime amator” (Oh lover, sweet), from *Symphonia virginum* (Symphony of Virgins) discusses the concept of how staying celibate and unmarried allowed one to better reflect the marriage of Christ and the church and to be more committed to service to God. It was non-liturgical and may have been performed when a new nun was professed into the abbey. The conventional bridal imagery included symbolism from Song of Solomon intertwined with a connection between virgins at the convent and the two virgin mediators, in Catholic theology, between God and humanity: The Virgin Mary and the Virgin church. The ten strophes are primarily syllabic and begin on E before returning to E or E transposed depending on the manuscript. The second strophe introduces the sin of Adam, “Nos sumus orte in pulvere, heu, heu, et in crimine Ade.” (In dust we were begotten—alas!—in Adam’s guilt.)⁷ As shown in Example 1 below, the melody begins in the lower register, reflecting the plight of sin and temptation that began with Adam.

⁶ Greene-McCreight, 485.

⁷ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

Example 1: Hildegard von Bingen, “O dulcissime amator” from *Symphonia virginum*.⁸

The image shows three staves of musical notation in G-clef, 8/8 time. The lyrics are: "Nos su - mus or - te in pul - ve - re he - - u he - - - u et in cri - mi - ne a - - - de". The music features a melodic line with various note values and rests, including some tied notes and slurs.

After acknowledging possible temptation, Hildegard writes of purification in Strophe 4, “Tamen confidimus in te, quod tu desideres gemmam requirere in putredine.” (Yet we have put our trust in you, for you desire to seek again a gem in putrefaction.)⁹ Hildegard begins the comparison between Jesus as the Savior of the church and Christ the bridegroom of the church, a theme she picks up in Strophe 5.

Nunc advocamus te, sponsum et consolatorem, qui nos redemisti in cruce.

Now unto you we cry, our bridegroom and our consolation, who has redeemed us on the Cross.¹⁰

Christ the Savior delivers them from temptation so they can better reflect the picture of the church as a pure (virginal) bride in Strophe 6.

In tuo sanguine copulate sumus tibi cum desponsatione, repudiantes virum et eligentes te, Filium Dei.

For in your blood we are betrothed to you— your blood our wedding gift; for mortal husbands we refuse, choosing you instead, the Son of God.¹¹

Hildegard, and those at the convent, remained unmarried to give themselves in service to church and maintain a closer connection to God.

⁸ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

⁹ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

¹⁰ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

¹¹ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

The cry for deliverance from sexual temptation, the deliverance granted from God, and the supposed closer relationship it brought them to God is represented by a higher vocal range in Strophe 10 (see Example 2).¹²

Example 2: Hildegard von Bingen, “O dulcissime amator,” from *Symphonia virginum*.¹³

Da no-bis so-cie-ta - tem cum il - la
 et per-ma-ne-re in te o dul-cis - si - me spon - se
 qui ab-stra - xi - sti nos de fau-ci - bus di - a - bo - li
 pri-mum pa-ren - tem nos-trum se - du - - cen - tem

Grant us her company to dwell with you, O bridegroom sweet, who saved us from the devil’s jaws, who dragged our primal parents into death.¹⁴

These verses depict the close relationship that the women will have with God in heaven after they eschew the earthly temptations of sex and marriage. They are looking forward to dwelling in the celestial city at the culmination of history, referenced in Strophes 8 and 9, a concept she also writes about in her song *Io Jerusalem*. Hildegard remained unmarried to be a spotless bride for the bridegroom (Christ). This perfection brings her closer to God and gives her a more authoritative voice in the Catholic Church.

In addition to her acceptance of women as lowlier and her virginity symbolizing her close relationship with God, Hildegard believed that her visions were from God and wrote about the role of the Holy Spirit. As a part of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit both communicates between the Father and Son and applies the plan from the source of the Father and

¹² Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

¹³ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

¹⁴ Campbell, “O dulcissime amator.”

the word of the Son. Because the Spirit is relational, part of Hildegard’s claim to authority comes from the relational influence of the Holy Spirit. Hildegard spends most of “O ignis Spiritus paracliti” (Sequence for the Holy Spirit) praising the influence of the Holy Spirit. The powerful imagery of the poem brings the Holy Spirit to life, establishing him as an authority. The five strophes are organized into musical echoes. Example 3 shows an echo from Strophe 1.

Example 3: Hildegard von Bingen, “O ignis Spiritus paracliti” from *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*.¹⁵

O ignis Spiritus paracliti

vita vite omnis creature

These echoes continue until Strophe 5 which illuminates the Holy Spirit’s pentecostal function in the church. The language becomes less metaphorical and more practical. Strophe 5a reads, “Tu etiam semper educis doctos per inspirationem Sapientie letificatos.” (You are the teacher of the truly learned, whose joy you grant through Wisdom’s inspiration).¹⁶ The music breaks away from the echo, just as the words break away from the metaphorical (see Example 4).

¹⁵ Lomer.

¹⁶ Lomer.

Example 4: Hildegard von Bingen, “O ignis Spiritus Paracliti” from *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*.¹⁷

The image shows a musical score for Hildegard von Bingen's "O ignis Spiritus Paracliti". It consists of three systems of music. The first system is labeled "Riesenkodex" and features a vocal line with the lyrics "Tu e - ti - am sem - per e - du - cis doc - tos". The second system, also labeled "Riesenkodex", continues the lyrics with "per in - spi - ra - ti - o - nem Sa - pi - en - ti - e". The third system is labeled "No b in R" and concludes with the lyrics "le - ti - fi - ca - tos". The music is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

Here the music reflects the inspiration that Hildegard claimed from the Holy Spirit in her visions. She was known, not for her own wisdom, but for the wisdom that she received from God.

Despite those with humility and virginity being closer to God, nuns teaching men or those outside the convent was uncommon. In the medieval era, the Church gave two theological justifications for people to teach in the church: through ecclesiastical approbation (clergy bishops or popes) or as teachers from grace (laypeople). Ecclesiastical approbation specifically is official permission to practice ministry from an ordained clergyman, a priest or pope. Though the tradition at the time excluded women from teaching, Hildegard still managed to teach from grace, although not ecclesiastical approbation. Around 1290, Parisian master Henry of Ghent wrote, “speaking about teaching from divine favor and the fervor of [caritas], it is well allowed for a woman to teach just like anyone else, if she possesses sound doctrine.”¹⁸ Hildegard was well respected because of her sound doctrine that was reflected in her music. She wrote “O vis eternitatis” (Responsory for the Creator and Redeemer) to reflect the incarnation of Christ, a key belief for Christians.

¹⁷ Lomer.

¹⁸ McGinn, “The Changing Shape,” 209.

The score is primarily neumatic, with some short melismas and one long melisma.¹⁹

O vis eternitatis que omnia ordinasti in corde tuo, per Verbum tuum omnia creata sunt sicut voluisti, et ipsum Verbum tuum induit carnem in formatione illa que educta est de Adam.

Et sic indumenta ipsius a maximo dolore abstersa sunt.

O quam magna est benignitas Salvatoris, qui omnia liberavit per incarnationem suam, quam divinitas exspiravit sine vinculo peccati.

Et sic indumenta ipsius a maximo dolore abstersa sunt. Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui sancto.

Et sic indumenta ipsius a maximo dolore abstersa sunt.

O power within Eternity: All things you held in order in your heart, and through your Word were all created according to your will. And then your very Word was clothed within that form of flesh from Adam born.

And so, his garments were washed and cleansed from greatest suffering.

How great the Savior's goodness is! For he has freed all things by his own Incarnation, which divinity breathed forth unchained by any sin.

And so, his garments were washed and cleansed by greatest suffering. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

And so, his garments were washed and cleansed by greatest suffering.²⁰

Musically, Hildegard places distinct melodic gestures on the verbs, causing an emphasis on what God did in history. The musical gesture is first placed on the verb "ordinasti" (see Example 5).²¹

¹⁹ Campbell, "O vis eternitatis."

²⁰ Campbell, "O vis eternitatis."

²¹ Campbell, "O vis eternitatis."

Example 5: Hildegard von Bingen, “O vis eternitatis” from *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*.²²



The musical phrase repeats on the words, “per Verbum tuum” (see Example 6).²³

Example 6: Hildegard von Bingen, “O vis eternitatis” from *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*.²⁴



The musical gesture emphasized the verb and then the same gesture connects that action to the method by which God held and created. The musical emphasis on action and connection between lines is characteristic to her style. Addressed to God the Father, the words reflect the doctrine of the eternal predestination of Christ to become the Messiah through incarnation as a fulfillment of what was planned before the foundation of the world. Belief in the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Christ is required to be an orthodox Christian, beliefs Hildegard affirms in this song.

Given her orthodox beliefs, relationship to the Holy Spirit, virginity, and excellent works, why couldn't Hildegard have a clergy-sanctioned place in the Church that allowed her to minister to both men and women? Parisian master Henry of Ghent also writes women should only teach, “other women and girls, not to men, both because their address might

²² Campbell, “O vis eternitatis.”

²³ Campbell, “O vis eternitatis.”

²⁴ Campbell, “O vis eternitatis.”

incite the men to lust (as they say), and also would be shameful and dishonorable to the men.”²⁵

Despite the limits placed on her by the Catholic Church, Hildegard excelled. She humbled herself through perpetual Marian virginity, an unbreakable connection to the Holy Spirit, and her astute, orthodox writings. Her humility and authority poured out into her music, demonstrating a level of excellence tied to her theological beliefs. Thus, she became influential in the Catholic Church and beyond. Not only did she function within what was expected of her, but she also slightly pushed the boundaries by teaching men and gaining authority outside of her women-only convent. Thus, Hildegard worked within the authority structure of the Catholic Church to gain authority to teach women, as was expected, but unexpectedly became an authority figure outside the convent—unusual for a woman in her time. Hildegard did not humble herself in order to be exalted, but she was exalted because she humbled herself, a perfect example of Matthew 23:12.²⁶ Even with pressures from the church, Hildegard persevered. Her works became influential for both men and women because they respected her close relationship with God. So yes, Hildegard was a trailblazer.

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²⁵ McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 1.

²⁶ “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” Matt. 23:12 (ESV).

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