

Hildegard of Bingen: A Case Study in Sainthood, Authority, and Change

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Religion

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Introduction

The Problem of Authority

In his book *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, Craig Martin writes that “much of what religious practitioners say about absent authoritative figures tells us more about *them* than it does about the authoritative figures themselves.”¹ The religious authority figures of Western history, then – the ascetics, the leaders, the scholars, the holy warriors – may seem to be less representations of real people who were born, walked the earth, and died, but rather more like mirrors held up to the times in which they have been and are revered. In this sense, much of this paper is less about Hildegard of Bingen, the woman, and more about contemporary American Catholicism and its needs and wants, and how those are reflected in the varying versions of Hildegard which it has constructed for itself over the last half a century.

Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth-century prophet and abbess, leaves behind a complicated life and an ambivalent legacy, as most historical figures do. Her vast body of work touches topics as diverse as theology, music, politics, and herbalism, as well as more mundane matters like personal advice given in letters. Taken together, her writings paint a colorful picture of European life at the time and can provide valuable insights on a variety of different aspects of that period in Church history. Viewed from this perspective, the more troubling elements of her worldview, which include attitudes towards women and Jewish people that would now be considered unacceptable in mainstream society, can be analyzed and discussed in context. The various contradictions in Hildegard’s life and work and the complicated role of a female authority in a viciously anti-woman age, looked at historically, can be fascinating. The trouble,

¹ Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 122.

however, is that Hildegard is for many people, including all practicing Catholics, no mere historical figure, but rather a saint and a doctor of the church. As contemporary Christians and non-Christians increasingly attempt to use Hildegard's image, life, and work for different purposes, they navigate an increasingly complicated terrain consisting of questions of authority, historical authenticity, and what it means to be a saint in the twenty-first century.

Understanding Catholic Authority

A perennial problem of any religion is authority, and contemporary American Catholicism is no exception. Before delving into this question, however, it is important to make clear what we mean by Catholic authority. Frank Furedi, in his book *Authority: A Sociological History*, comments that the struggle over authority, and especially the struggle over how the concept should be defined and understood, is nothing new; in fact, questions of authority have been so omnipresent in Western history as to be almost a constant.² Although debates over what constitutes authority and what the origins of authority are or should be have proliferated, *authority* can generally be understood as having the ability to influence the actions of others in a way that is distinct from *power*, in that while *power* requires the use of physical force or violence, *authority* is understood to come from a mental or emotional sense of what is right or legitimate.³

Some twentieth-century functionalist theories of authority, Furedi notes, attempt to “render the issue of authority unproblematic – acts of obedience serve as proof of its existence. The question of legitimacy is immaterial, for what matters is compliance to a command; and the

² Frank Furedi, *Authority: A Sociological History* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

distinctions between legitimate authority, power, and the use of force are lost.”⁴ For the purposes of this paper, the functionalist definition would be inadequate. In many cases, an institution has a share of the monopoly on the use of legitimate force and it becomes easy to lose the distinction between these concepts. From some functionalist perspectives, whether the state can ensure compliance because it has legitimate authority or because it has the threat of violence from its police force is irrelevant. Similarly, distinctions of whether a certain family structure or a racial or class boundary exists because this is understood as the “correct” ordering of society or because the subordinate classes fear violence if they in any way transgress tend to be elided by this functionalist model. Lack of attention to legitimacy in discussions of authority allows force to masquerade as authority and takes away an important analytical tool for understanding subaltern lives and resistance strategies.

An additional problem with functionalist understandings of authority emerges when discussing the particular case of Catholicism, especially American Catholicism – namely, that Catholicism, while it still has authority, for the most part no longer has access to the use of force, so coupling understandings of the two too closely can lead to confusion. From late antiquity until well after the Protestant Reformation, it could be argued that Catholicism had a share in the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence because of its role in governing and lending legitimacy to governance throughout most of that period. Furedi introduces the concept of a *warrant*, which “authorises claims for some form of recognition or entitlement,” and notes that “in its capacity as a form of a foundational statement, a warrant certifies the authority of a claim

⁴ Ibid., 378.

or argument.”⁵ He is also careful to distinguish it from the similar concept of *justification*. He writes,

Authority should not be equated with, or reduced to, the act of justification. It already contains a warrant for influencing and directing behaviour and does not have continually to justify itself: Once authority has to be self-consciously justified it is well on the way to losing its unquestioned status. Authority rests on a foundation that warrants its exercise and for the right to expect obedience. Throughout history, such foundational norms – divine authority, tradition and customs, reason and science, popular consent – provide the resources for narratives of validation.⁶

For Furedi, the explanations or justifications which accompany authority are external to the concept itself. In fact, authority which is in a position where it must make arguments explaining its own legitimacy is likely in the process of becoming less authoritative. An inherent part of authority is that it is mostly unquestioned and accepted as a natural or normal part of society, and a large part of that is achieved by having a strong, unquestioned warrant. In American society today, a close comparison (as Furedi briefly notes) could be popular consent – it is assumed that if an institution has the support of the people, it is legitimate. If the people grant a thing authority, it has authority. Questions of the legitimacy of authority arise not because of sudden doubts as to whether or not public consent is a valid reason to let a particular group or institution rule; rather, these questions increasingly arise when there is question as to whether or not a democratic institution is truly representative of the will of the people.

⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

For much of Western history since it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity, in addition to holding its own authority, also provided the warrant – the “divine right” – that legitimized the authority of European kings. By the time of Gregory VII and the humiliation of Henry IV at Canossa, to be without the support of the Church was to lose the authority of royalty all together. Catholic traditions and institutions have changed drastically since the Protestant Reformation and the Counter Reformation (although Catholicism itself may protest otherwise, as will be discussed below), but much of the Catholic history which the Church now draws upon as the source of its tradition in its art, customs, and myths comes from a time when the Church and authority were almost one and the same.

Over the last several centuries, however, the Church’s relationship to – and hold on – authority has changed significantly. The worldly authority of the pope and of the Church and the legitimacy of the divine right of kings would gradually erode and be replaced by different forms of authority in Europe.⁷ For our contemporary world, Furedi posits that the two most stable sources of authority might now be democratic consent and the cult of expertise/science.⁸ Drastic changes in forms of government, political and economic organization, and even the level of technology and the lifestyle of the general populace now separate most of the West from the period of time in which Catholicism held the most sway over it. Catholicism itself, however, still works primarily within frameworks of authority which, while still socially present, no longer hold the same unquestioned status to which they once had access: divine authority and the authority of the past. According to Francis Oakley, writing on authority in Catholic modernity, a good part of Catholicism’s claim to authority rests on the idea that Catholic doctrine is divinely

⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁸ Ibid., 323.

inspired and thus immutable and infallible.⁹ The Church's self-perceived role as an institution in the world can be understood as analogous to the role of the pope within the Church. One of the pope's titles is "Vicar of Christ" – that is, the pope is understood to be a representative of Christ and, by extension, of Christ's will in the world. The pope also claims a line of apostolic succession which traces back to Peter, an apostle of Christ – he holds the "Throne of Peter." The pope, then, acts as worldly representative and steward of a divine will, as well as the heir to a tradition of people who have performed the same function. The legitimacy of the pope relies on both divine authority and on the authority of the past. The Church, similarly, sees itself as holding a direct divine mandate from God. Catholic rituals are understood as being imbued with holy power, individual Catholics – especially priests – are thought to have some sort of relationship with God, and many Catholic writings and traditions – including the writings of St. Hildegard of Bingen – are understood to have been the product of direct divine inspiration, with some going so far as to understand certain writers as having been merely transcribing the Word of God. (One late nineteenth-century defender of Hildegard, Johann Schmelzeis, responded to claims that her writings must have been forged because it was impossible for a woman to create such a body of work by arguing that her "extraordinary knowledge" was received directly from God and that she was only responsible for writing it down.)¹⁰

Although Catholicism has gone through numerous changes over the years, its central claims to authority have remained relatively constant. There has doubtless been significant doctrinal and ritual change over the centuries; the Second Vatican Council is for many

⁹ Francis Oakley, "History and the Return of the Repressed in Catholic Modernity: The Dilemma Posed by Constance," in *The Crisis of Authority*, edited by Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Barbara Newman, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, 1 (2013): 40.

emblematic of the major shifts the Church saw in the twentieth century. One could argue that over time, the ideal persona of the priest has come to rely less on divine authority but has instead shifted towards the expertise-based warrant for authority mentioned above. Better training for priests and increased requirements from study have turned them from charismatic holy men to theological experts, or at least to local bureaucratic administrators. The reliance on a hierarchical structure and the emphasis on the keeping of written parish records (which any Catholic trying to get married within the Church has likely encountered) also lend the modern church an aura of expertise.

These changes are, however, sometimes somewhat superficial and, in the case of the change in the status of the priest, very recent. James Carroll reflects on the loss of status of priests, especially due to the sex abuse crisis, within twentieth-century American Catholicism in his memoir *An American Requiem*: “By the 1990s the pathetic exploitation of the young and the weak by priests had become an old story, but in the 1950s this pathology was deeply hidden. As the secret became exposed, Church officials would work hard to make the misbehavior of priests seem marginal, yet it was central. The pathology was and is central to the repressive, deceit-ridden culture of celibate clericalism.”¹¹ In the episodes of childhood and adolescence which make up the first part of the memoir, the priest is remembered as a figure almost akin to the figure of the saint, possessing a blend of divine and worldly power; for Carroll, however, as for many Catholics, these memories are tainted by more recent recollections of revelations of the sexual abuse of children by priests. The idea of the priest as an expert is not enough to protect the role from the fallout of this scandal; the authority of priests and by extension, of the Church still bears the mark of that sin, and it is unlikely, given the Church’s reluctance to do penance for its

¹¹ James Carroll, *An American Requiem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 71.

wrongdoings, that the trust between the clergy and laity necessary to recuperate this authority will be regained any time soon. The priest, as one who exercises divine authority, is held to a certain standard of behavior which befits the warrant for his authority. For priests on a wide basis to be associated with acts which are not only not divine but truly reprehensible constitutes a major blow to their ability to exercise divine authority. Although the abuse of power is nothing new, its exposure in the mass media is; this situation can also create the sense that the clerics of the *past* were pure, saintly, and trustworthy, while the clerics of the *present* are debased, perverse, and evil. This contrast between a seemingly holy past and a sinful present also serves to cut contemporary American Catholic priests off from the ability to exercise the authority of the past. This major loss of status and the ability to exercise authority in its representatives cannot help but be a blow to the authority and status of American Catholicism overall.

The Church's unwillingness or inability to change its claims to authority constitutes a problem for it for a few reasons. As discussed above, views on authority have changed, and valid authority today is mostly – although not entirely – concentrated in scientific or democratic warrants, not in the divine and traditional warrants in which Catholicism is invested. Beyond this, there is also the phenomenon of a broad-based postwar mistrust of authority in general¹² and Catholicism in particular in the wake of the horrors perpetrated by authoritarian states in the Second World War – and the complete capitulation of the Catholic Church, supposedly the defender of what is moral and right, to the Nazis, which Carroll also comments on.¹³ Furthermore, social mores have changed drastically in the last century and the Catholic Church has found it hard to keep up. Although twentieth century American society was characterized by

¹² Furedi, 376.

¹³ Carroll, 74-75.

great social change and progress in areas including civil rights, women's rights, and sexual freedom, the Catholic Church's stubbornly conservative stances on many issues – especially issues that pertain to the status of Catholic women – has in many ways created a situation where the world has moved on but Catholicism has not. Although Catholic social teaching has in some ways evolved for the modern day, with more consistent support for the poor, the canonization of left-wing cardinal Óscar Romero as a saint and martyr, liberation theology, and Pope Francis's pro-environmentalism encyclical *Laudato Si* as examples, these highlights are often lost in the Church's continued opposition to contraception, abortion, women's rights, gay marriage, trans rights, and so on. The ecclesiastical cover-up of rampant sexual abuse of minors by priests very publicly exposed by the Boston Globe early in the 2000s, mentioned above, constituted a moment of crisis for many Catholics; the continuous revelation of new abuses and coverups over the past two decades has in many ways created an ongoing state of moral agony for many who wish to remain affiliated to the Church but find the Church's actions abhorrent. The Church's weak reactions to moral horrors as diverse as the Holocaust, nuclear war, and the behavior of their own priests has also created a situation where many Catholics, former Catholics, and non-Catholics increasingly view the Church as a morally bankrupt institution.

Additional issues for the maintenance of Catholic hierarchy are created by the fact that authority within Catholicism has its own peculiarities borne of its incubation in a long period in which it had near total power in addition to near total authority. While the Church of past centuries had temporal, social authority as a body which owned land, could raise armies, and excommunicate princes, the modern-day Church's authority is in many ways much more cultural. American Catholic diocese still participate in politics and in the economy by dealing in real estate, organizing marches and protests, and in displays of power like refusing politicians the

Eucharist. The real difference, possibly, is that the Church no longer shares with the state a monopoly on legitimate violence. A Catholic who strays from the Vatican – or outright challenges the Vatican – cannot be burned as a heretic or exiled to the desert. Our hypothetical dissenter can be excommunicated; they can lose their job if it is through a Catholic institution, or face social backlash, but they won't be imprisoned, exiled, or killed. In the past, the Church shared with the state those powers, and in a sense, the particular way in which institutional Catholicism understands its own authority can be said to have been formed under those conditions. Now, the Church seems to pay relatively little attention to its moral authority, refusing to give up stances which are increasingly seen as backwards by the American public while also failing to address corruption and child abuse within its own ranks, as if it does not realize that it can no longer enforce its rulings through the use of violence.

That the authority and perhaps relevance of the Catholic Church is waning, especially in America, is a widely understood and widely discussed topic. Furedi writes that “persuasion through the use of argument is alien to the concept of authority. The very need to persuade is a testament to authority’s absence.”¹⁴ For him, both coercion and persuasion negate authority – if an institution feels that it must do these things to ensure compliance, it has already lost the trust of the subordinates whose cooperation it needs.¹⁵ Seen in this light, both Catholicism’s self-conscious efforts at self-defense in the face of a changing culture and its attempts at wielding coercive authority (such as the denial of Eucharist to Catholic politicians who support abortion

¹⁴ Furedi, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

access¹⁶) look more like the death throes of the old beast than any sort of effective shoring-up of its authority.

Discussion of the validity of authority can also in and of itself be a sign that said authority is losing its vitality. Writing on the emergence of the concept of authority (or *auctoritas*) in the Roman Republic, Furedi notes,

The need for a concept of authority only emerges when communities are forced to contend with uncertainty about questions about who to believe, trust, follow, or obey.

Sheldon Wolin argued that the ‘problem of political obligations emerges when conflicting considerations are recurrent, when it is seen that the acceptance of authority involves the individual in real choice between competing goods, as well as competing evils.’¹⁷

When authority is totally unquestioned – when the authoritative institution seems to be the only option – the idea of choice itself, the idea of rejecting one authority or one truth in favor of another, seems to be entirely impossible. Within this worldview, the idea of discussing authority might seem almost unnecessary, if not impossible. When analysis of authority is happening, something has to have happened to expose the authority as being a part of social reality rather than an unquestioned and unacknowledged part of the atmosphere to begin with. In order to truly look at authority, its grip must first have become weak enough for one to break free for a moment and step back to get a better view. Moreover – for public critique and discussion of authority to emerge in a large-scale and meaningful way implies some loss of control over public

¹⁶ “Pastor’s denial of Eucharist to Biden stirs up recurring debate,” NCROnline.org, National Catholic Reporter, October 31, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/pastors-denial-eucharist-biden-stirs-recurring-debate>.

¹⁷ Furedi, 52.

discourse. That this discourse of authority is taking place is undeniable. From the individual justifications of the many Catholics who quietly ignore Church precepts regarding everything from fasting to Mass attendance to contraception, to the publication of books attempting to analyze contemporary Catholic authority, Catholics increasingly wonder at the extent to which the Church hierarchy is really in control. The two books which I've cited in this thesis which deal with the topic in their titles (*The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity* edited by Francis Oakley and Michael J. Lacey, and *Women and Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority* by Phyllis Zagano) are but drops in a sea of works attempting through various approaches to tease out the tangled knot of questions surrounding authority, legitimacy, and power in contemporary Catholicism.

If the Church is so rapidly losing authority due to outdated practices, one might ask why it doesn't simply reform itself. Reform is certainly difficult, but the dissolution of the faith can't be a preferable option. This in large part comes from the problem of the authority of the past and from the way in which change is usually produced in Catholicism. Above, it was mentioned that Catholic doctrine is often seen as being immutable and infallible. This is, of course, not true; for the most part, Catholic doctrine does not even claim for itself infallibility, and doctrine can and has changed over the years. Many Catholics, though – both due to the authoritarian nature of many diocese and to popular misunderstandings of papal infallibility – understand the Church's law to be unchanging and, in many ways, unchangeable. (Papal infallibility was defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870 and means that pronouncements made by the pope on faith or morals *ex cathedra* or “from the chair” of his official role as pope are considered “infallible” or

incapable of being incorrect.¹⁸ The meaning of *ex cathedra*, however, and to which statements of the pope that label truly applies, are contested.) The Church hierarchy itself uses the power to declare things infallible in order to end debates on topics which they consider dangerous; as recently as the 1990s this tactic was used in an effort to close discussion on the matter of women's ordination; whether the proclamations on the topic were truly infallible and thus whether or not devout Catholics are actually allowed to continue to debate this topic is, itself, up for debate.¹⁹ This idea of Church law resting on texts and interpretations of texts which are understood as incapable of being wrong creates a situation in which, when change must happen, one must first prove that, in actuality, things were always like that. Catholicism generally cannot go back and take a text previously understood as beyond criticism – as divinely inspired – and say that it is incorrect without risking the basis of its authority. Instead, it must create new interpretations which allow for change but suggest that the original piece was always meant to be read that way. Oakley writes,

Under certain circumstances, moreover, casual forgetfulness has betrayed a disagreeable tendency to mutate into a proactive politics of oblivion reflective of the Orwellian conclusion that if he who controls the past controls the future, then he who controls the present would be well advised to control the past.²⁰

A lack of clear understanding of the past, combined with the projection of current “infallible” institutions unchanged into an infinite future, combine to create a strange eternal present in Catholicism. In this “politics of oblivion,” changes in the Church through the years are ignored

¹⁸ Phyllis Zagano, *Women and Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-93.

²⁰ Oakley, 32.

in favor of the assumption that the way it was is the way it is and the way it must always be. *As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen.*

Looked at closely, the “casual forgetfulness” Oakley cites is not entirely aberrational, but rather part and parcel of how Catholicism constructs its own warrants to authority. It is also not entirely unique to Catholicism, although I argue that Catholicism struggles with this issue in particular due to its attachment to its long-lived hierarchy. Throughout this introduction the concept of the “authority of the past” has been referred to several times. Furedi traces this particular type of authority back to Rome and its obsession with foundation and origins as a source of legitimacy; this obsession was inherited by the early Catholic Church, he argues, because the Church based many of its hierarchies and models of authority on Roman ones.²¹ Furedi in general considers Rome to be the source of many of the West’s conceits and issues regarding authority. The Romans didn’t discover authority and it doesn’t originate with them, but Furedi considers them the first in the Western tradition to truly and self-consciously analyze it. They also, as most modern sociologists do, distinguished between power (*potestas*) and authority (*auctoritas*). Roman history and experience is still the matrix through which many explorations of authority take place; thus, modern people share some of Rome’s concerns about authority, especially the concerns related to its antiquity.²² It is thus not coincidental that Rome is still site and symbol of authority for *Roman* Catholicism; beyond the frequent use of the city Rome as a synecdoche for all Catholic hierarchy, an important part of Catholicism’s particular claim to authority is the idea that it constitutes an *unbroken* lineage going back to early Roman Christians. Throughout the middle ages, Furedi writes, the authority of the past reigned supreme:

²¹ Furedi, 100.

²² *Ibid.*, 70.

Marc Bloch, the famous French historian of this era, summed up the orientation of the medieval imagination as one of ‘vast indifference to time.’ According to Le Goff, at ‘the level of the collective mentality, past, present, and future were mixed together in a fundamental confusion. The past was highly valued, indeed its authority was so influential that references to it ‘were almost obligatory in the middle ages.’²³

The historical mindset of the middle ages which made little distinction between the past and the present tended to generally ignore the idea of significant change over time; because the past was understood as substantially the same as the present, systems which were authoritative and effective in keeping social order and stability in the past should also be effective at doing the same in the present. To deviate from what was understood as traditional or ancient was to risk disaster. Quoting Weber, Furedi notes that new laws and institutions in medieval Europe could only be legitimized by successfully claiming that they were “valid of yore” but had been somehow lost or ignored.²⁴ After the Protestant Reformation, there would also be the growth of a more sophisticated historical consciousness and a greater awareness of societal change. With this change in how history was understood came the gradual deterioration of the authority of the past in most of Western society.²⁵ As noted earlier, science and popular consent are now usually considered more valid warrants for the exercise of authority.

Within Catholicism however, the orientation towards the authority of the past has seemingly survived. This has to do both with how religion in general constructs its authority in a way that is different from secular society and the unique relationship which Catholicism has to European history. Traditional authority has by no means entirely died out. To some extent or

²³ Ibid., 125.

²⁴ Ibid., 128.

²⁵ Ibid., 174.

another, many institutions call on it in order to shore up their validity: from the claims of states to any given historical lineage to the ubiquitous “Serving Customers Since...” signs which adorn the fronts of restaurants, banks, and insurance companies alike, the idea that if a thing has done well enough in the past to survive in the present, it must have some merit is still very much present in our society, and in some areas more than others. The imagery of fascist parties from the early twentieth century through to the present tends to borrow heavily from Rome and other ancient societies and relies very heavily on the authority of the past.²⁶ In religion as in politics, tradition and the past are still highly valued, often much more than democratic or scientific values. Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, writing in their introduction to the volume *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, note that religion stands in contrast to many other areas of modern life in that, rather than attempting to be contemporary or innovative, it instead *relies* on being ancient for its authority.²⁷ The antiquity of religion, however, need not necessarily be based in reality. They write that “tradition can rest simply on the claim that certain cultural elements are rooted in the past. Claim and documented historical reality need not overlap.” Later on the same page they also note that within different religions “historically verifiable traditions coexist with recent innovations whose origins are spuriously projected back into time.”²⁸ Although Weber and Furedi in the passage quoted earlier on the concept of being “valid of yore” were discussing the process of legal change in the particular context of medieval Europe, the process of “inventing” sacred tradition in the contemporary world is much the same.

²⁶ Furedi, 80.

²⁷ Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

Catholicism in particular has difficulty changing or separating itself from the authority of the past. Although not as ancient as some other world religions like Judaism, Roman Catholicism could perhaps be described as more monolithic, with much emphasis placed on the idea that as an institution it has existed continually since the beginning of Christianity. Hammer and Lewis note that “the traditional Christian perspective of an unbroken tradition with the church as its caretaker has repeatedly had to face outside skeptical voices,”²⁹ and they are correct. Even a cursory look over Christian history would demonstrate to one that the tradition is *not* unbroken. Many different and contradictory threads of Christian thought and practice have existed since well before the Protestant Reformation; in fact, the existence of non-canonical gospels and other early Christian writings which were suppressed over time would suggest that discord has been with the faith from its very earliest roots. Close analysis of the writings of Paul would suggest that the concept of “church” was *not* a feature of early Christianity, and thinking too long on the various schisms, popes, and anti-popes of Roman Catholic history is enough to give a modern Catholic pause. How *do* we know that the authority we ascribe to is the “correct” one? These problems, however, tend to dissolve in the face of a simple fact: Catholicism still subscribes to much the same medieval view of the past discussed above, where the past becomes an indifferent and unchanging stretch of time and the process of change is largely ignored. The Church draws authority from the past, but it is a carefully constructed past. Without an understanding of change and how institutional change happens – or that it can happen at all – broad-based, sudden change becomes very difficult. This can be seen clearly in Catholic response to Vatican II, which is still viewed very negatively by many conservative voices in the Church. For change to happen without drawing significant backlash, it seems one must go gradually, being careful all the while

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

to cultivate the appearance of not innovating but returning to older, better ways that have been lost. One mechanism through which this can happen is through projection onto a particular type of authoritative figure within Catholicism: the saint.

Saints and Authority

The cult of the saints in modern Catholicism grew out of the cult of the martyrs in early Christianity. The earliest use of the term in Christianity seems to be in the writings of Paul, where he uses it to describe members of the general community in the early Jesus movement.³⁰ The experience of intermittent persecution by the Roman government throughout the third century until the time when Christianity was legalized in the early fourth century, however, introduced a radical change in how the term was understood.³¹ A significant body of martyrdom accounts, such as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* or *The Passions of Saint Perpetua and Felicitas*, were written during this period; these texts serve as early precursors to the literary genre of hagiography, or writings about the lives of saints.³² In this period as well, the martyr would come to be understood not only as the ideal type of Christian – one so devoted to the faith that they would lay down their life for its sake – but also as a figure possessing special holy powers and the ability to intervene with God on the behalf of living Christians who invoked their memory or interacted with their remains, which became known as *relics*.³³ After legalization, there were no more martyrs, so there came to be the expanded category of *saint*, which included a variety of different types of holy people including ascetics and, later, monastics; this diverse body of

³⁰ Lawrence Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³² *Ibid.*, 14-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

people was all united by the attribution to them of holy powers, and thus the continued importance of the cult of the saints in Christianity was secured.³⁴

Important to understanding the history of interest in Hildegard and her use as an authority figure is the somewhat complicated history of how canonization was formalized in the Roman Catholic Church. To be canonized literally means to be added to the list of people given liturgical honors at Masses.³⁵ The process of becoming a saint was comparatively informal up until the eleventh century under Pope Gregory VII; until then, the formal canon of saints had remained static since the seventh century, while local, informal canons burgeoned with an abundance of regional holy figures.³⁶ In 1234, the *Decretals* of Pope Gregory IX made it so that only the pope had the authority to canonize new saints; by this point, most of the bureaucratic process of achieving sainthood that is familiar to modern Catholics had also been put in place.³⁷ There was, however, a problem with this: a number of the most important, well-known, and oldest saints in Catholicism, because they had been venerated well before the creation of these rules surrounding canonization, have never been formally canonized.³⁸ There was a resulting confusion around who is actually considered a saint in Catholicism and who is merely venerated as one which persists to this day. Among the ranks of the semi-saints – not formally canonized, but widely worshiped – was where, for a long time, Hildegard herself resided. This history of canonization helps to make sense of the contradictions inherent in that while Hildegard was not formally canonized until 2012, she has been consistently called a saint and venerated as one

³⁴ Ibid., 23-27.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 38.

since the time of her death in 1079.³⁹ In the following chapters, Hildegard's long road to canonization and the complexities of her status within the canon of the saints will be discussed.

Hildegard, beyond being a saint, occupies another important sub-category in the hierarchy of Catholic authority figures: she is also a doctor of the church. This particular title has a long and storied history. It appeared in early Christian writings with some regularity but wasn't formalized until Pope Boniface VIII established a feast day for the four saints understood as doctors of the church at that time in the thirteenth century: Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Jerome. Over time, more doctors were added to the list, but it remained relatively static and included only the most ancient saints whose orthodoxy was wholly unquestioned until after the Protestant Reformation when more names – and more recent names – began to be included among the doctors of the church. In 1970, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila became the first women to be named doctors of the church.⁴⁰ Currently, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes thirty-six doctors of the church. Hildegard, having been named a doctor of the church a few short months after her canonization in 2012, is the second most recent addition to the list, with the most recent being Saint Gregory of Narek, named a doctor of the church in 2015.

Saints in Catholicism – especially the doctors of the church, who are understood to have special theological insights relevant to the lives of believers – serve as absent authority figures and are important in the construction of Catholic tradition and moral authority. One of the linchpins of authority in religion is the absent authority figure onto which a given worldview can

³⁹ George Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Beverly Maine Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 305.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, 87-89.

be projected. If the authority figure is “absent” – frequently because they’re long dead – they can’t necessarily speak up for themselves to contradict the claims of believers who ascribe one stance or another to them. In many cases, if an authority figure is far enough back in the past, it’s unlikely that they’d even have a response to any given modern issue, making it less likely that something in their life or writings that might go against the authoritative claims. Projecting modern debates onto ancient figures has other advantages as well. Craig Martin in his textbook *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* writes on projection,

Projection often takes a very specific form, which scholars call a ‘return to origins’ narrative. A return to origins narrative involves positing a ‘pure’ origin of a religious tradition, which was followed by a ‘corruption’ of the original message. The narrative is used to authorize one’s own position as ‘pure’ while portraying one’s opponents’ position as ‘corrupt.’⁴¹

Catholicism, as a worldwide religion, has within its ranks a number of dissenters around a number of issues. Catholics, like other people, engage with everything from ritual to politics to the rights of women, and the opinions of individual Catholics and Catholic groups on these matters land all over the ideological board. As part of the problem posed by Catholic authority and Catholicism’s claim to the one “true” unbroken tradition in Christianity, all the different ideological stances contained within Catholicism have a significant incentive to bill themselves as the one “true” Catholicism and every other iteration of the same debate – including, often, the institutional Church itself – as “corrupt” or “misguided” forms of the faith. Saints and doctors of the church, because they are usually (although not always) situated comfortably in both the authority of the institutional Church, which grants them their titles, and in the authority of the

⁴¹ Martin, 121.

past, are especially ripe for this kind of projection. To claim that a given saint's message has been ignored, even as they've been honored and venerated by Catholics worldwide, is a powerful rhetorical tool. The proliferation of saints, too, means that each individual saint is generally less studied and less familiar to the average Catholic than more universal authority figures, like Jesus or the Virgin Mary, would be. To point to some episode in the life of Saint Francis or some saying attributed to Saint Gregory the Great and claim it as a basis for reform, either radical or reactionary, is a much less difficult task than to point to a passage from the Gospels, which most adult church-going Catholics would have heard read and interpreted numerous times over the course of their religious lives, and do the same. Hammer and Lewis write specifically of the benefit which people who are "inventing" sacred tradition may derive from projection:

The authority gained by projecting one's tradition into a legendary past, whether this past is recent or ancient, can serve several purposes. It strengthens cohesion within the group, by allowing individual members to identify with a common history ... It provides the doctrines and practices with an aura of plausibility ... inventing one's history enables religious innovators to shape the tradition of which they are a part by ascribing at times radically new ideas to ancient, founding figures.⁴²

The historical association of Catholic parishes with a patron saint and the fact that many saints are themselves founders of religious orders within the Church (St. Benedict and the Benedictines, St. Francis and the Franciscans, St. Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits, and so on) may predispose Catholics towards organizing under the banner of a given saint. St. Hildegard herself was the founder of an abbey. Projecting a viewpoint onto a founder like this gives modern Catholics, especially progressive Catholics, who might feel that their cause is disjointed a

⁴² Hammer and Lewis, 5-6.

common source of group identity. The historical accuracy of such claims doesn't necessarily need to come into play for them to be effective tools for the creation of group identity.

Saints also have a rhetorical role in the “politics of oblivion” which prop up the authority of the past in Catholicism. Saints and the stories of their lives often serve as a didactic and pedagogical tool for Catholics, held up as examples of how to live a holy life. However, these stories make little distinction between eras of the past: in the visual language of the Church, not much separates the dress and appearance of St. Peter in the first century and St. Benedict in the sixth, or St. Perpetua in the third century and St. Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth. For those who don't specifically study Christian history, the tales – told on the Church calendar of feast days or as exemplars of specific moral lessons, not in chronological order – tend to blend together in time and place. Is it Santa Lucia or Saint Lucy, and was she a medieval Italian princess or a late Roman noble? Who came first, St. Teresa of Ávila or St. Therese of Lisieux? They're both doctors of the church, anyway. When did the age of martyrs end, or did it end at all? The Church of the past as a dynamic, changing institution slowly disappears and is replaced by a history of homogenous holiness – nostalgic, morally appealing, but utterly useless to anyone looking for proof that change is possible.

Hildegard, Sainthood, and Authority

Hildegard's relation to authority (or, at least, authoritativeness) within Catholicism is complicated and not always closely related to the actual structure of the Church, but rather to how lay Catholics – scholars, activists, and ne'er-do-wells all – attempt to construct meaning and order within their own respective Catholic movements. Although interest in Hildegard within Catholic circles was certainly intensified by her being named a saint and a doctor of the church

in 2012, the process of setting Hildegard up as an authoritative figure – a sort of “patron saint” for the various movements claiming her – began long before.

The appeal of using Hildegard as a mascot for any given cause within Catholicism stems from several sources. Because Hildegard is so far back in the history of the Church – not so buried in antiquity as to be completely indecipherable to the modern reader, but sufficiently distant from most modern issues familiar to a typical American practitioner - she exists in a past that can be idealized, that can be viewed as a truer, purer, and less complicated Christianity. She is at both a point of origin and a point of possible nostalgia for American Catholics distressed with the moral complications and choices of modern Christianity. Additionally, Hildegard, as a Western European figure, is located within a history which may be more familiar – or at least more comfortable – for a white American audience than, say, the writings of the desert fathers and mothers, which could also have themes which connect to contemporary environmentalist and feminist movements. Hildegard’s works, as the product of an individual rather than a group – all discussions of medieval co-authorship and the role of secretaries, editors, and compilers put aside for the time being – fit more neatly into neoliberal American assumptions than other Catholic or Christian works produced by groups or orders over time, or by anonymous authors. Hildegard’s particular social and historical location makes her unknown enough to be an easy target for the type of projection discussed by both Hammer and Lewis and by Martin, but incorporated enough into a familiar history to be able to take advantage of the authority of the past which Furedi discusses.

This paper works with sources that analyze or summarize Hildegard’s life and work, with a focus on pieces that specifically claim that Hildegard’s teachings align with one of several contemporary Catholic or Christian movements. Both Catholic and non-Catholic sources are

incorporated because although Hildegard is a Catholic figure, there are enough non-Catholics discussing her that their voices have significant impact on the overall conversation. People from other Christian denominations and from New Age spiritual movements also draw on Hildegard just as Catholics do, and Catholics, in turn, are likely to have as much access to those sources as to those written by Catholics. James G. Crossley's book *Jesus in An Age of Neoliberalism*, in which he attempts to analyze different eras in New Testament scholarship is also a major source of inspiration. Crossley suggests that, ultimately, more is learned about the scholar than the subject in reading these pieces and that the neoliberal political and social climate needs to be taken into account when analyzing contemporary Jesus scholarship; this same lens can be applied to studying Hildegard scholarship which is also heavily influenced by contemporary concerns. Crossley notes that he, instead of studying the Gospel itself, instead looked at "scholarly texts *and* general scholarly positions in their modern contexts."⁴³ Similarly, this thesis spends most of its length discussing not Hildegard's works themselves, but rather attempts to explore case studies from different periods of devotional, scholarly, and popular interest in Hildegard.

Understanding authority in contemporary American Catholicism, which draws on many different and often contradictory warrants to claim that authority, is a complicated business. Because American Catholicism's dependence on the authority of the past requires a compression of different eras of history and a deliberate misunderstanding of the process of historical change, creating change in Catholic communities and scholarship often relies on projecting contemporary ideas into a distant and poorly-understood past. This problem, endemic though it is to

⁴³ James Crossley, *Jesus in An Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5.

Catholicism, is also present in other religious groups and in society at large. Many Catholics, as well as some non-Catholics, engage either intentionally or unintentionally with this mode of knowledge production when writing about Hildegard.

Chapter One

How Hildegard Was Remembered: Legacy and Manuscript Distribution Through the Late Medieval Period

Among Hildegard scholars, the idea that Hildegard was an entirely “forgotten” figure has been quite thoroughly refuted on multiple counts. Although it was commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s when the study of Hildegard’s life and works was first coming into vogue in English-language circles to lament the lack of attention paid to Hildegard over the years, in more recent studies, the reader is far more likely to see scholars decrying the inaccuracy of these earlier claims. A sub-genre of Hildegard studies seems to have emerged dedicated almost solely to proving the assorted ways in which she was, in fact, *not* forgotten. Pieces can be found detailing the history of her local cult, her appropriation as a nationalist figure during German unification, interest in her writings in late medieval England, the importance of pseudepigraphal writings done in her name, and the resurgence in her popularity during the Protestant Reformation due to the claim of some that, due to her criticism of clerics, that she should not be seen as a Catholic figure but rather as a proto-Protestant. Although a good part of the growth in Hildegard’s popularity over the last decades has involved attempts to recover a “true” or “original” Hildegard based on reading her twelfth-century texts directly, analyzing the dissemination of and interest in Hildegard’s work throughout the pre-modern period through to the present day can help in understanding the many different and seemingly contradictory appropriations of her work that we see now. Specifically, the history of the transmission of Hildegard’s texts shows readers that her work has, in general, almost never been read in its entirety. Rather, it has been distributed and received in various anthologized versions that have allowed other scholars to focus only on

particular parts of her legacy. This tendency, although most pronounced in the medieval period, continues to influence understandings of her work today.

Hildegard of Bingen, who lived from 1098 until 1179, did not begin to produce the writings for which she is so well known until the age of 43.⁴⁴ The sickly and somewhat peculiar tenth child of a wealthy family, she was given at the age of eight to an anchoress named Jutta, with whom the family was connected, as a pious offering to God.⁴⁵ Although initially Jutta and Hildegard lived alone in their holy seclusion, over time other women would come to join them, forming the Benedictine nunnery attached to the nearby monastery of St. Disibod.⁴⁶ In 1136, after the death of Jutta, Hildegard would become the abbess.⁴⁷ Five years later, the visions which she had experienced since childhood would reach a new intensity and would be accompanied by the prophetic call to “cry out and write,” prompting her to spend the next ten years of her life working on her visionary compilation *Scivias*,⁴⁸ or *Scito Vias Domini* – “know the ways of the Lord.”⁴⁹ In the winter of 1147-1148, the completed *Scivias* was read aloud by Pope Eugenius III at a synod in Trier and there received the papal approval necessary to both cement her status as an orthodox prophet and to protect her, a woman in a distinctly anti-female institution, from any backlash for her writing and, later, public preaching.⁵⁰ In 1152, she went on to found the Rupertsberg monastery;⁵¹ during the following years, she would write many of the letters which constitute a large part of her surviving work, as well as two medical texts, and her fame would

⁴⁴ Barbara Newman, “Introduction,” in *Scivias* of Hildegard of Bingen, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990), 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

grow to the point that pilgrims seeking prophecy and miraculous healing sought her out in significant numbers.⁵² In 1158, in addition to her existing work as an abbess, writer, prophet, and healer, she began work as an itinerant preacher,⁵³ a role held by precious few Catholic women before or since. Over the rest of her life, she would pen two more prophetic works, compose numerous pieces of devotional music, criticize her own royal patron over his involvement in the Cathar heresy and the appointment of an antipope, and, in her old age, be interdicted and denied access to the Eucharist for a period of six months that ended less than a year before her death in 1179.⁵⁴ From this alone, one can glimpse part of the reason behind the renewed interest in Hildegard in recent years: her large body of surviving writings, the wealth of biographical information available, and the active and interesting life which she led all make Hildegard a fruitful area of study for the modern scholar. Hildegard stands out among her contemporaries – especially her female contemporaries, about whom very little information generally survives. Reasons for continued interest her in the centuries which immediately followed her death, however, differ slightly from the motivations of the modern Hildegard scholar.

The reasons for interest in Hildegard after her death were not static. What started as an interest in her divine authority as a papacy-approved prophet morphed over the centuries to include an interest in her as a figure having the authority of the past. The process of changing Hildegard from a flesh-and-blood person to a saint and a figure of authority began with those who knew her almost immediately after her death, and as a result of their efforts Hildegard's legacy certainly did not die with her. An active and well-known figure in the region, she generated significant interest and was well-known as a holy woman even during her life. It is

⁵² Ibid., 14.

⁵³ Ibid., 14-15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 14-16.

likely, based on her writing of two medical texts, that she practiced medicine in some capacity, and as a result a number of her devotees came to believe in her miraculous healing powers. She was frequently consulted as a prophet and was known as the “Sibyl of the Rhine,”⁵⁵ not only for her acumen in matters of theological or political significance but also regarding mundane matters⁵⁶ which, while possibly not as interesting to most modern readers, were of great importance to the people asking them. The process of preserving and glorifying Hildegard’s work seems to have begun before she even died. Her third and final secretary, Guibert of Gembloux, who was initially drawn to Hildegard due to his own curiosity about her famed prophetic and visionary powers, encouraged her to write in more detail about her visions themselves and began the process of creating a codex of Hildegard’s prophetic works – the Riesencodex.⁵⁷

Knowing Hildegard’s reputation during life, the growth of the cult surrounding her sainthood after death seems quite natural. Jennifer Bain describes the evidence of the existence of Hildegard’s cult in the decades following her death: her relics, both physical remains and contact relics, were preserved and venerated by the local population for centuries after her death and have been preserved to this day.⁵⁸ (Bain also notes, however, that some scholars have questioned the authenticity of some of these artifacts, in spite of the unusually detailed records of the various translocations of Hildegard’s remains).⁵⁹ A papal inquiry into Hildegard’s possible sainthood was begun by Gregory IX in 1227, resulting in a report on her life and the miracles attributed to her which was completed and returned to the pope in 1233. It was judged to be

⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Bain, “Was Hildegard Forgotten?” *Journal of Musicological Research* 34 (2015): 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

lacking adequate detail in 1237, prompting the pope to request that the inquisitors behind the original report update it with more evidence. Pope Innocent IV requested again that the report be finished in 1243, but to no avail, as a completed version was never sent to the papacy, with the result that it would be more than seven centuries before Hildegard would be formally accepted as a saint in the Church.⁶⁰

Several *vitae* of Hildegard would also be written, including one now lost but referenced by other writers which may have been written by her secretary Volmar, one by Theodoric of Echternach (which is now the earliest complete *vita* of Hildegard which still exists), and a hagiography by Guibert of Gembloux. Guibert would never complete his *vita*, seemingly due to some ambivalence towards Hildegard and his relationship with her; throughout his letters to and about her, he moves from a sense of awe, to one of collegial respect, to an ambivalent stance where he seems to see the dying Hildegard as little more than the elderly, overworked, and overwhelmed abbess of a struggling convent.⁶¹ Most accounts of Hildegard written during her life and following her death seem to be overwhelmingly positive, although their areas of focus would differ: most of the *vitae* seem to have focused on Hildegard as a prophet, whereas Guibert of Gembloux's incomplete *vita* suggests that Hildegard is more important as a role model for the ideal monastic life than as a visionary.⁶² Even those who knew her in life seem to have felt the need to pick only one aspect of her life and focus on that above all others in order to claim her as an authority in a particular field. Bain again also makes note of evidence of the celebration of

⁶⁰ George Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Beverly Maine Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014) 305-307.

⁶¹ John W. Coakley, "A Shared Endeavor? Guibert of Gembloux on Hildegard of Bingen," in *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 58.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 48.

Hildegard's feast day as early as 1324, in spite of the failure of the movement to have her canonized. John W. Coakley in his book on authority and medieval female saints notes that there's precious little difference between those canonized as saints and those venerated as saints, and that sanctity was a much more widely distributed resource in the medieval period than official recognition of it. Although technically many holy women (like Hildegard) were not formally made saints, in practice, the cults of canonized saints and the cults of "unofficial" saints operated in much the same fashion, and Hildegard's memory was kept alive just as well as if she had received formal approval at that time.⁶³

When studying Hildegard's legacy, the importance of her veneration as a saint should not be overlooked. Although it is tempting in the current moment of scholarship to see her primarily as a theologian, as a composer, or as a proto-scientist, the saintliness ascribed to Hildegard and the great admiration that some held for her after her death had an undeniable mark on the circulation of her works. The impact of religious sentiment and of Hildegard's cult on the distribution and reception of her works post-mortem is especially clear in the motivations of the compiler, Gebeno of Eberbach, who would create the most circulated version of Hildegard's writings in the Middle Ages. The admiration that he and many of Hildegard's other later readers and proponents had for her was based not only in a scholarly respect for her work, but also in the religious and political priorities of medieval Europe, where Hildegard's antiquity was itself a source of powerful authority.

The complete surviving body of texts left by Hildegard is genuinely impressive in terms of sheer quantity. Although Gebeno of Eberbach's abridged version, which will be discussed

⁶³ Coakley, John W., "The Powers of Holy Women," in *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 8.

below, was important in securing Hildegard's legacy and his particular interests and biases left a significant mark on how Hildegard was understood throughout the medieval period, the scope of her complete works should also be recognized. She is responsible for three major prophetic works: *Scivias*, already mentioned above, *Liber vitae meritorum* ("The Book of Life's Merits"), and *Liber divinorum operum* ("The Book of Divine Works"). Of great interest to many modern readers are her two medical and scientific works, *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*, which were probably meant for her own private use but were nevertheless preserved by the nuns at Rupertsberg. In addition to these major texts, she also left behind a wealth of minor works. Her *Lingua ignota* writings constitute a puzzling modification of medieval Latin that continues to fascinate modern scholars. The enormous body of her letters, apparently preserved by her secretaries, are of both theological and political interest due to their combination of visionary prophecy and commentary on the goings-on in the lives of the emperors and popes with whom she corresponded. Finally, Hildegard also left a large body of musical composition which has, in recent years, enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, leading to new performances and new recordings of these twelfth-century pieces. Taken together, Hildegard is remarkable for both the amount of writing which she produced in the thirty-eight years between her visionary call and the time of her death and for the excellent preservation of her works. Although the originals of some of her works have regrettably been lost (such as the original illustrated version of *Scivias*, which has not been seen since the 1945 bombing of Dresden⁶⁴), faithful copies exist even of these destroyed works. Given the wealth of material which scholars have to work with, the amount of study dedicated to Hildegard – and the cries of good fortune at the discovery of a "lost" figure when she initially came back into the academic vogue – are quite understandable.

⁶⁴ Newman, 25.

However, for many centuries after Hildegard's death, her works were not known for their impressive length or scope, and were in fact almost never circulated in their entirety. Rather, for many years, the most influential version of the works of Hildegard of Bingen would be a heavily abridged one.

Hildegard's work was rarely if ever transmitted in its entirety during the medieval period. This can, in large part, be traced to simple practicality: accurately copying and distributing such a large body of text would have been both difficult and costly prior to the advent of the printing press. Jennifer Bain notes that the *Revelationes* of a contemporary female figure, Elizabeth of Schönau, in one manuscript takes up 153 moderately-sized folios. The Riesencodex started by Guibert of Gembloux which contains most of Hildegard's writings with the exception of her medical writings, by contrast, takes up 480 much larger folios, and Bain estimates that Hildegard's *complete* works are around six times as long as Elisabeth's complete works.⁶⁵ Hildegard, it seems, may have had some awareness of the fact that the length of her texts may lead to some anthologizing, and in an effort to prevent any such pruning of her work wrote in the last vision of her *Book of Divine Works* the following: "Therefore, let no one be so rash as to alter in any way the content of this book – either by adding to it or by diminishing it by omissions – lest such a person be blotted out of the book of life and out of all good fortune under the sun!"⁶⁶ This passage, as Jennifer Bain again notes, mirrors a similar passage in the Revelation of John and is in general in keeping with the apocalyptic subject of both Hildegard's and John's visions.⁶⁷ John Coakley notes that Hildegard in her letters even seemed discomfited with the possibility of her secretary and collaborator Guibert of Gembloux, who she seems to

⁶⁵ Bain, 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

have regarded as more of a colleague than a subordinate, editing her writings while compiling the Riesencodex; she rarely allowed him to make any changes beyond the correction of grammatical or stylistic errors, and when she did, she took great care in her letters to give specific instructions on what was and was not permissible to change, with the end result that there was little if anything that Guibert *was* allowed to alter.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, after her death, an abridged compilation of her prophecies would still be created.

One man, a German monk known to us as Gebeno of Eberbach, can be credited with much of the work of securing Hildegard's legacy as a prophet and a writer due to his compilation of a more compact anthology of her prophetic and visionary texts after her death. As compared to the meticulous records we have of Hildegard's life and death, the available biographical information on Gebeno is quite sparse, limited to mentions in a handful of monastic records and what can be gathered from his own writings on Hildegard. Unlike Guibert of Gembloux, who, while just as coupled to Hildegard's legacy as Gebeno, is often referred to as a co-author or collaborator to Hildegard, Gebeno is a mere compiler. To many scholars, he is also something of an annoyance. Certainly, there is reason for this: as Hildegard might well have feared, Gebeno's own interests, especially his own eschatology and beliefs on clericalism, significantly influenced which of Hildegard's writings he privileged in his compilation.⁶⁹ In spite of all her efforts and dire warnings, Gebeno of Eberbach still took up the task of compiling and anthologizing Hildegard's works into his *Speculum futurorum temporum siue Pentachronon sancte Hildegardis*, which can be translated as "The Mirror of Future Times or the Five Times of Saint

⁶⁸ Coakley, 61, 64.

⁶⁹ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Hildegard and the Male Reader: A Study in Insular Reception," in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1996) 5.

Hildegard.” (For brevity’s sake, most scholars seem to refer to it simply as the *Pentachronon*.) In his prologue to the *Pentachronon*, Gebeno explains that the book is named for the five future times which Hildegard describes in her writings, but that the book contains not only prophecy but also advice on how to best live knowing of the coming apocalypse and Antichrist.⁷⁰ Gebeno himself produced two versions of the compilation and a significant number of other versions were created and circulated over the centuries.⁷¹ He was quite aware of Hildegard’s desires regarding changes to the text, as were, it seems, her nuns after her death; he writes to the nuns of Rupertsberg,

Lately when I was with you, and we held that book in our hands, and we also spoke together of that which I have compiled concerning the five future times from the books of your holy mother, one among you voiced the words of St. Hildegard from the end of the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, namely, ‘let no person be so bold as to add something to the words of this writing, or remove anything from it, lest he be deleted ... from the Book of Life’, reproving me indirectly, as I think.⁷²

In response to the criticism of this unnamed nun, he attempts to defend his work by comparing it to glosses of the Book of Revelation, which, as mentioned above, bears a similar warning, and quotes a passage from *Scivias* in which Hildegard herself permits the reproduction of her prophecy in clear and understandable ways.⁷³ For Gebeno, it seems, the task of anthologizing Hildegard was both justified and spiritually necessary. Gebeno saw his own work as spiritually-sanctioned by Hildegard herself, as in the *Epistola ad clerum* to the clergy of Trier from 1160 or

⁷⁰ Magda Hayton, “Prophets, Prophecy, and Cistercians: A Study of the Most Popular Version of the Hildegardian *Pentachronon*,” *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 29 (2019): 126-127.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷² Kerby-Fulton, 12.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.

1161, she wrote that “a group of prophetically gifted leaders would come whose task would be to collect divinely inspired writings and teaching and adorn them with their own interpretations in order to provide a mirror (*speculum*) in which the faithful could inspect themselves.”⁷⁴ Beyond the evidence from the title of his compilation, which includes the word *speculum*, and the structure of the work – Hildegard’s collected writings *adorned* with Gebeno’s interpretations – Gebeno’s own assessment of his location in history in some of his other writings indicates that while he believed the “prophetically gifted leaders” to still belong to some future time, he saw himself as doing work which would build up to that era and would be part of that lineage.⁷⁵ Although these were genuinely significant themes in Hildegard’s life and work and she did have the unusual distinction of being a woman who involved herself directly in ecclesial political battles, the emphasis on these passages in the *Pentachronon* had significant influence on later citations of Hildegard. It could be argued that the long-lived understanding in some scholarly circles of Hildegard as primarily a political prophet, as opposed to any other major theme one could emphasize in her prophetic work, such as gender relations or humankind’s relationship to the rest of creation, is still influenced by Gebeno’s selections.

In Gebeno’s own writing, however, there is significant respect for Hildegard and for her work. He refers to her as a saint, emphasizes the great esteem in which she was held during her life, and compares her to a number of other religious figures,⁷⁶ most insistently St. John.⁷⁷ Many elements of the *Pentachronon* also seem designed to increase Hildegard’s reputation as a prophet, especially as pertains to Hildegard’s letters. The compilation excludes names of minor

⁷⁴ Hayton, Magda, 128.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁶ Kerby-Fulton, 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

clerics and other recipients perceived as being less important, such as Hildegard's own nuns, but includes names of powerful places such as Trier and Cologne, and in the case of some particularly famous recipients of the letters, additional biographical information identifying them is included. Gebeno is also sure to emphasize the importance and significance of Hildegard's works being formally approved by the papacy.⁷⁸ Gebeno also presents Hildegard as the fulfillment of one of the prophecies from the Book of Revelations, identifying Hildegard with the eagle crying out woes in Revelation 8:13,⁷⁹ and equates her visionary experience with the Living Light to that of the apostles at Pentecost.⁸⁰ Moreover, although he is anthologizing and by necessity making alterations to the text by removing them from their original context, his justification of his act of compiling above shows a certain consideration and almost reluctance to change the text. Nevertheless, his particular biases and interests do show in the choice and arrangement of the text. Magda Hayton in an essay on the subject writes that the *Pentachronon* functioned "as an apocalyptic work of spiritual edification composed within a monastic milieu, that is, a work intended to shape the beliefs and actions of its readers by drawing them into the apocalyptic narrative and asking them to adopt an apocalyptic identity."⁸¹ Regardless of motive and regardless of the impact his choices would have on later readings and appropriations, Gebeno of Eberbach, in creating his anthology, had a great role in saving Hildegard's work from truly being forgotten. When attempting to understand how Hildegard was used in the centuries following her death, Gebeno of Eberbach's influence should not be underestimated.

⁷⁸ Hayton, Magda, 139.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

Finally, in discussing Hildegard's legacy in the pre-modern period, beyond considering her genuine surviving works, readers should also take into account the pseudepigraphal prophecies attributed to her after her death. Not all of the texts generally included in Hildegard's body of work are considered to be of certain authorship; two letters, one to a Master Odo of Soissons and another to a Master Odo of Paris, are of debated origin.⁸² 'Insurgent gentes' was an anti-mendicant text written in Latin, probably in the 1250s during a secular vs. mendicant controversy, which was closely modeled on a genuine prophecy by Hildegard addressed to the clergy of Cologne. The author of the pseudo-Hildegardian writing is unknown, but the writings of William of St. Amour, who was involved in the anti-mendicant controversies at the University of Paris at the time, indicate that he and his circle were familiar with the Cologne prophecy, leading Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Magda Hayton, and Kenna Olsen to suggest in their critical edition of the text that it may have originated from this group. They also point out that the main rhetorical strategy employed in 'Insurgent gentes,' starting as an exegesis and then describing the mendicant orders and predicting their fall without directly naming them, was also used by William of St. Amour in his own anti-mendicant work *De periculis novissimorum temporum*.⁸³ The genuine Cologne prophecy and 'Insurgent gentes' share a number of themes, including the seduction of women, a misled laity, financial trouble for the church, "the awakening of the people and the subsequent demise of the false prophets," but while the Cologne prophecy seeks

⁸² Justin A. Stover, "Hildegard, the Schools, and Their Critics" in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 115-116.

⁸³ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Magda Hayton, and Kenna Olsen, "Pseudo-Hildegardian Prophecy and Anti-Mendicant Propaganda in Late-Medieval England: An Edition of the Most Popular Insular Text of Insurgent Gentes," in *Prophecy, Apocalypse, and the Day of Doom: Proceedings of the 2000 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nigel Morgan (Lincolnshire, United Kingdom: Paul Watkins Publishing, 2004) 160-162.

reform, ‘Insurgent gentes’ is only concerned with the destruction of the mendicant party.⁸⁴

(Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly, the Cologne prophecy is one of those which Gebeno of Eberbach was most interested in; it featured prominently in many of his own writings.)⁸⁵ In later centuries, some of Hildegard’s reform-minded prophecies would be used by Protestant reformers such as Andreas Osiander to support the legitimacy of the Reformation,⁸⁶ and although the texts specifically cited by Osiander are genuine works from Gebeno’s anthology, it is possible that the wide circulation of the pseudepigraphal anti-mendicant texts, which could be read sympathetically by Protestants with similar critiques of monasticism, may have contributed to his selection of Hildegard as a model “proto-Protestant.”

The distribution of Hildegard’s works in abridged and sometimes pseudepigraphal versions has left a significant mark on how she was understood and cited. The sheer quantity of Hildegard’s writing, while one of the attractions in studying her for modern scholars, was a hindrance to the distribution of her works in the era of hand-copied manuscripts, leading the most-read editions of her work to be anthologies, specifically that of Gebeno of Eberbach. Hildegard, as a prophet, was subject to use and interpretation by other writers and scholars throughout the years and was cited as a way of proving other’s arguments; most frequently, due to the needs of institutional Christianity through different periods, the focuses of popular compilations of her work, and Hildegard’s own subject matter, these citations had to do with conflicts over clericalism and beliefs about the apocalypse. Her rhetorical value as an absent authoritative figure seems to only have increased with time, to the point that her name would be attached to pseudepigraphal works. The popularity of ‘Insurgent gentes’ also greatly influenced

⁸⁴ Ibid., 168-169.

⁸⁵ Hayton, 140.

⁸⁶ Bain, 23-24.

many interpretations of Hildegard; this, combined with the criticisms of clerical abuse of power to be found in her genuine work, would lead to her appropriation as a proto-Protestant during the Protestant Reformation. Although modern readers of Hildegard generally have access to a much more complete library of her works, the tendency seen in her much earlier readers to focus on a few aspects of a much larger corpus as the basis for their analysis is still present in many uses of Hildegard today.

Chapter Two

...And How She Wasn't: From Disinterest to the Modern Resurgence

Barbara Newman, a medievalist whose 1987 *Sister of Wisdom* continues to be one of the most often-cited English-language works on Hildegard, recalls in a 2013 piece on Hildegard and feminist theology:

Hildegard enthusiasts outside of Germany may not realize how recently the abbess acquired her contemporary fame. I still vividly remember one of the reasons I decided to write my dissertation on her back in 1978. ... Although I was doing a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies at Yale, never did any professor in any context mention Hildegard in class. That suited me fine because I wanted to write on a relatively obscure figure, and I craved a topic where the primary sources would outweigh the secondary. So Hildegard fit the bill. ... There were no critical editions of anything except the *Scivias* ... No English translations existed yet, but I found an ample array of German versions ... And I discovered a handful of dissertations by German women ...⁸⁷

Newman uses this passage to illustrate a point: Hildegard, although she enjoyed great renown in some places in some periods, was not well-known in English-speaking scholarly circles until relatively recent times. The preface to the much less academic *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen* by Gabriele Uhlein – a strange volume from 1983 which leaves the reader to guess whether its content is supposed to be a poor translation and abridgement of Hildegard's works, or if it merely inspired by her works, and if so, which ones – makes a point in a similar vein, when the author of the preface, Matthew Fox, recounts an incident in which, speaking to a group of

⁸⁷ Barbara Newman, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, 1(2013), 39.

Benedictine nuns on Hildegard, he discovered that very few of them had heard of this great member of their tradition.⁸⁸ These two accounts leave us with a question: given the circulation of Hildegard's works seen in the previous chapter and the continued existence of her cult, how did it come to be that the "Sibyl of the Rhine" was largely unknown in English-speaking religious and scholarly circles as late as the 1970s? As scholars concerned with manuscript history like Bain and Kerby-Fulton have pointed out, Hildegard was not truly the "forgotten female saint" that many overzealous authors in the 1980s believed her to be; nevertheless, a combination of changing historical circumstance and inconsistent distribution of Hildegard's work did mean that, until relatively recent times, there were many places where she was entirely unknown.

The lapse of interest in Hildegard on the level of the institutional Church can be largely attributed to the failure of the initial effort to have her canonized in the thirteenth century, which itself was tied to a changing definition of the category of "saint" in the Catholic Church. The original Catholic saints were the martyrs, or "witnesses," who were people who quite literally died for the faith, largely at the hands of the Roman government before Constantine's legalization of the new religion.⁸⁹ The martyr became the archetypal and ideal Christian: not only were they the perfect example of fidelity to God in their willingness to lay down their own lives, but they – and their physical remains, known as relics – were believed to have special powers of healing and intercession. After the legalization of Christianity, however, the persecutions largely ended, and the availability of martyrs and martyrs' relics decreased significantly. Given how central the cult of the martyrs had become – to the point that it was necessary for churches to

⁸⁸ Matthew Fox, "Preface," in *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen* by Gabriele Uhlein (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1983), 7.

⁸⁹ Lawrence Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 11-13.

contain the relics of such a person to be judged legitimate – there had to be some new source of holy people within Christianity. Before long, the category of “saint” emerged.⁹⁰ Similar to the martyr in power and in the veneration given to them, saints encompassed a wider variety of possible individuals: ascetics, virgins, monastics, and so on. By the time of Hildegard’s death, the number of saints had grown significantly, and certain general assumptions could begin to be made about who they were as a category. They were mostly male, although female saints were far from uncommon; they were mostly from the upper classes of medieval European life, although there were outliers; and many of them were monastics. Saints were everywhere in medieval European life; it is perhaps not surprising that, given the influence that the cult of the saints had on almost every level of daily existence, that as the papacy struggled to consolidate its power following the Gregorian reforms that sainthood would be one of the things which it began to try to control. Lawrence Cunningham writes,

Scholars have long noted that once canonization became formalized there was a certain sociological profile of who got canonized. Men outpaced women by a margin of four to one. Women who were canonized were either high-born aristocrats or religious superiors (or both). Men, by and large, came from the ranks of either the established (Benedictine) or emerging religious orders. Few lay persons were canonized and those who were, typically, did not come from the lower classes of society. Enough careful research has been done to demonstrate empirically the generalizations just made. The point to remember is that every canonization is a sociological, theological, and political statement. The process says, in effect: here is one whom we admire and hold up as a model.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁹¹ Ibid., 63.

By the time Hildegard begun her journey to sainthood, there was already a well-established understanding of who did and did not become a saint.

As discussed in the previous chapter, an inquiry into Hildegard and her sanctity was launched by Pope Gregory IX in 1227. Although Gregory was likely familiar with her cult due to his previous position as papal legate in Germany, his instructions to the inquisitors assigned to Hildegard's case were very rigorous and were in line with the requirements for sainthood outlined by his predecessor, Alexander III.⁹² By this point in Christian history, the simple veneration of those with a reputation for holiness was waning and the rationalized and legalistic form that the process of canonization now holds was beginning to take shape. Unfortunately for those supporting the cause of Hildegard's sainthood, the clerics assigned to the task of preparing a report on her sanctity focused primarily on her theological writing and were less interested in the detailed accounts of her miracles which the pope needed, and by the time that the original report had been rejected and clarifications requested, many of the witnesses to the miracles for which more detail was necessary had died, leading the clerics involved to refrain from submitting to the papacy their complete but not substantially different revised report.⁹³

In the broader academic and theological world, Hildegard may have fallen out of favor due to changes in the status of both women and mysticism. Mysticism as a category can broadly be defined as “direct or immediate consciousness or awareness of the presence of God.”⁹⁴ That being said, there is significant disagreement regarding definitions of this phenomenon, and

⁹² George Ferzoco, “The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen” in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Beverly Mayne Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014) 305-306.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 306-307.

⁹⁴ Frank Tobin, “Introduction,” in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* by Mechthild of Magdeburg, ed. Frank Tobin (New York, Paulist Press: 1998), 12.

although Hildegard is sometimes referred to as the first of a line of female mystics, in most senses, she was very different from most of her contemporaries and successors and many people who study her work use the term “prophet” to describe her instead. Where the lives of female saints after the twelfth century were frequently characterized by embodied religious experience in the form of stigmata or extreme ascetism which allowed them to be identified with the suffering Christ, the lives of Hildegard and her contemporary Elizabeth of Schönau do not share this focus.⁹⁵ Rather, as discussed in the last chapter early hagiographies of Hildegard tended to focus on her theological and prophetic capacity, or on her virtues as a monastic. Regardless, Hildegard has in common with these other women writers from medieval Europe the presence of what Grace Jantzen calls “the modesty formula” in all their writings. Jantzen explains that, in order to survive in an explicitly anti-female institution like medieval European Christianity and to avoid the censure of deuterio-Pauline prohibitions on women’s preaching, the mystics portrayed themselves in their writings as vessels only for their various revelations, insisting that they were only relaying messages given to them directly by God with no input of their own in the matter.⁹⁶ Although, as Jantzen also notes, mysticism and women’s writings were still often seen as inferior to the intellectual products of their male counterparts, this formula, combined with clerical approval, protection, and collaboration – of the sort which can be seen in Hildegard’s relationship with Guibert of Gembloux and other men such as Bernard of Clairvaux – meant safety for medieval women of letters.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ John W. Coakley, “The Powers of Holy Women,” in *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* 7-24 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 10-11.

⁹⁶ Grace Jantzen, “Cry Out and Write: Mysticism and the Struggle for Authority,” in *Women, the Book, and the Godly*, ed. Lesley Smith & Jane H.M. Taylor (Cambridge, UK: DS Brewer, 1995), 68.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

Hildegard, living in the decades following the end of the Gregorian reforms, lived in a church whose hierarchy and rules were in some important fashions still in flux, at least as they applied to the lives of women. Institutions that may seem fundamental to a Catholic now, such as the infallibility of the pope or the celibacy of priests, were either nonexistent (in the case of infallibility) or relatively new (in the case of celibacy). Discussing one such institution, the understanding of preaching as the sole prerogative of ordained priests in Catholicism, Caroline Walker Bynum writes,

“We should not assume that people in the early twelfth century saw preaching as central to clerical status. In fact, any monk who was also a priest might request permission to preach. Even nuns like Hildegard of Bingen occasionally preached, although canonists in the twelfth century were already objecting that women, however learned and holy, were disqualified from instructing men.”⁹⁸

Hildegard had some level of freedom that later women, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and the other beguine mystics, whose writing features the modesty formula very prominently, would not have the same access to, which may explain in part why Hildegard is such an outlier among women in terms of the interest in questions of clerical authority for which she would be read in later centuries. Although there was strong anti-female sentiment, the idea of a woman preaching was not yet so impossible as it would seem in the centuries to come. In a similar vein to Bynum’s commentary, John Coakley notes that, in spite of scholar’s efforts to name the power of the holy woman as “informal” and the power of the priest as “formal,” many of the charismatic powers ascribed to holy women, such as prophecy, healing, and levitation, were also ascribed to the

⁹⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982), 31.

bishop-saints of the early Church.⁹⁹ Moreover, even Coakley's assessment of the three most prominent topics of the revelations given to holy women, which he identifies as the state of souls, political or historical matters, and issues of doctrine and Scripture,¹⁰⁰ were also – or even usually – the domain of male clerics and male writers. The fact that both clerics and holy women made claim to the same sorts of powers may have in some ways been the origin of tensions between them, and even the ambivalence towards female saints seen in the writings of their male collaborators, such as Guibert of Gembloux's changing views on Hildegard, discussed in the last chapter. Male authorities within the Church were put to pains to distinguish between men's and women's experiences; Jantzen again writes of Bernard of Clairvaux, saying,

Bernard [of Clairvaux] is quite clear that ... encounters with Christ through the mystical meaning of scripture, are to be sought and 'ardently desired.' By contrast, visionary experiences of the sort that Hildegard and other women mystics had were not to be sought. These could at best be 'corporeal images', and thus could never really represent God, whose reality must be spiritual. Although Bernard does not actually condemn visionary experiences, and, at least after Hildegard's visions were ratified by the Pope, he was willing to support her, it is clear that in his view experiences such as hers are very much second-rate. Intentionally or not, Bernard reinforces the gender division in the Western mystical tradition: the real mystical experience will be largely a male prerogative.¹⁰¹

In addition to being informative regarding gender and mysticism, this selection from Jantzen also suggests another important point: the issue of the gender division in the mystical experience

⁹⁹ Coakley, 23.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰¹ Jantzen, 71-72.

mattered to Hildegard's contemporaries. Bernard of Clairvaux and others were engaged in the project of delineating which types of religious experience were appropriate to men and which types were appropriate to women; in addition to merely reinforcing, as Jantzen notes, their actions as Church leaders were actually building the reality of the centuries to come. Hildegard in many ways had the good fortune to live at a time when these questions were still being probed, as opposed to living in the years to come when the answer would be more settled (as much as questions of gender and hierarchy are ever truly settled or static). Whether a female figure as towering as Hildegard could have existed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century remains to be debated, but it is doubtless that she lived at a time when many of the roles of the Church's drama in the coming centuries – priest and holy woman; witch and heretic – were not yet set in stone.

As time went on, however, women's roles in the Church would begin to calcify and the safety one could claim from association with a male cleric would begin to deteriorate. Marguerite Porete, another mystic who was likely a beguine and is often discussed in the same breath as the beguines, seems to have largely eschewed male protection and was executed in 1310 for heresy. More successful mystics, such as Mechthild and the others of her school, also largely – although certainly not entirely – avoid political and worldly topics and spend more time on affective, beautifully-written descriptions of their experience with the divine. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, female saints in general – or at least their hagiographers – would become much less likely to speak out on matters of doctrine than Hildegard, as the rise of formalized scholastic theology, which was firmly set against women preachers, made the understood theological capacity of women in the Church ever more narrow.¹⁰² Coakley again notes that the

¹⁰² Coakley, 16.

powers of the holy woman and the powers of the witch were “strikingly similar,”¹⁰³ and Jantzen in her discussion of the topic also draws a connection between earlier criticisms of female mysticism and the later burning of heretics and witches.¹⁰⁴ It is likely that miracles which in earlier centuries were the mark of divine favor would become signs of witchcraft or heresy as the Church tightened its grip on women’s activities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The lapse of interest in Hildegard in the centuries following her death – and part of the resurgence in interest in her from reformist and New Age spiritual groups in the last several decades may stem from the same source: the anti-scholastic message embedded in many of Hildegard’s writings. Scholasticism can be defined as theology being done within medieval academia; it grew along with the growth of the first schools and universities of Europe.¹⁰⁵ Scholasticism strove to reconcile contradictions in early Christian writings in order to present a unified Christian doctrine; to do this, it utilized techniques gleaned from the recently-reintroduced writings of ancient Greek philosophy; as a movement, it was specifically concerned with reason, order, and clarity.¹⁰⁶ The time during which scholasticism existed seems to be a matter of debate: the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* gives its range as the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries;¹⁰⁷ the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* claims that it was dominant from the eleventh century until the sixteenth century,¹⁰⁸ and the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Jantzen, 74-75.

¹⁰⁵ *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1 (2011), s.v. “scholasticism,” accessed January 13, 2019, https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/content/title/cupdct?tab=entry_view&heading=scholasticism&sequence=0

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3 (2016), s.v. “scholasticism,” accessed January 13, 2019, <https://www-oxfordreference->

Terms suggests that it was an effort of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries.¹⁰⁹ By all these estimations, however, Hildegard's life intersected the rise of scholasticism in Europe, and she, as part of the monastic tradition, was a part of the broader debate on the validity of its methods. Justin Stover in his essay "Hildegard, the Schools, and Their Critics" provides an analysis of how Hildegard fit into the broader monastic critique of scholasticism. He writes of the monastic position,

Reason is the issue at stake: these heretics, scholastics included, refuse to realize that it is only through God that they are rational. Hildegard was not alone in connecting scholars with Cathars and other heretics. William of St. Thierry ... accused the famous French scholar William of Conches of Manichaeism around 1140, and Alan of Lille, writing before 1160, linked the doctrines of Plato, still very popular in the schools, with a Manichaeism that 'flourishes still among very many people.'¹¹⁰

Although Hildegard herself was adept at using the scholastic mode of pedagogy, evidenced by the fact that several of her works are written in that style,¹¹¹ she also believed that rationality was inadequate to fully understand God and cautioned against the methodology of some of the scholastic "teachers and masters" of her day and an overall anti-scholastic thread runs through many of her works.¹¹² Hildegard's writings on reason are part of the broader stream of twelfth-

com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198735304.001.0001/acref-9780198735304-e-2781?rskey=cVETyM&result=1

¹⁰⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4 (2015), s.v. "scholasticism," accessed January 13, 2019, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1023?rskey=LmNufs&result=1>

¹¹⁰ Justin A. Stover, "Hildegard, the Schools, and Their Critics" in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 114.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122-124.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 112-113.

century monastic anti-scholasticism, which Stover, summarizing Leclercq, says centers on scholasticism's "prioritizing activity over contemplation, the obsession with education at the cost of prayer, the dominance accorded to dialectic, the violation of traditional boundaries, and its pride and love of novelty."¹¹³ In spite of the criticisms of Hildegard and her contemporaries, however, scholasticism would continue to be the dominant methodology of Christian theology – both Catholic and, eventually, Protestant – for centuries to come.¹¹⁴ As such, it is not surprising that, while Hildegard and pseudo-Hildegard continued to be cited throughout the Middle Ages on questions of clerical authority that many of her other writings with a distinctively anti-scholastic, anti-rational bent to them fell into disuse.

The story of how Hildegard was forgotten is a complicated one. Although to the modern reader it seems surprising that an author who produced such a wide and varied body of work should, far from being counted among the great minds of her century, rather be largely forgotten; this is in many ways, however, because Hildegard happens to align so perfectly with many modern interests, as will be discussed in the coming chapters. In part the failure to preserve Hildegard's legacy comes down to circumstance. Had the initial report back to the papacy on her candidacy for sainthood been more thorough, or had the papacy's request for clarification come earlier, before the case's original witnesses had mostly died, she may have been canonized at that time. This would have established her memory within the institutional Church and ensured that her cult could become more widespread than the relatively local reach it would enjoy until relatively recent times. In another sense, however, Hildegard was forgotten simply because, by the time she died, she had become in many ways a creature of a past era. Her style of prophecy,

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁴ *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1 (2011), s.v. "scholasticism."

although similar in some senses to that of later mystics (especially as regards the modesty formula which underlies much of her prophetic call), differed in many important ways: it lacked the affective language, the detailed imagery, and the bridal metaphors that later figures such as Mechthild of Magdeburg would feature so prominently in their own work. As the Church's understandings of the role of women and the nature of heresy became ever more restrictive, later holy women and their male collaborators stopped taking the same risks that Hildegard and her colleagues were willing to. Hildegard's criticism of scholasticism, while not at all uncommon among other monastic writers of her time, did not fit the rationality-oriented tendency of the dominant theology of the coming centuries, and even her location within monasticism as a relatively conservative Benedictine would be largely left behind with the rise of new mendicant orders, beguines, and a more urban spirituality. These same characteristics of her writing, however – her gender, the deep ties to nature and the land in her theology, her ideas on the divine feminine, and her occasional rejection of rationality – would make her ripe for rediscovery in the twentieth century. In the coming chapters, we will discuss how different groups in the twentieth and twenty-first century have re-discovered and re-appropriated Hildegard's work, and the peculiarities of each interest's understanding of Hildegard as a figure. In particular, we will focus on interest in Hildegard from feminists, from environmentalists, and from both left- and right-wing Catholics.

Chapter Three

Spiritual Feminism and the Revival of Hildegard Scholarship

Although debates on the historical legitimacy and contemporary utility of such studies have proliferated in the intervening decades, it is undeniable that the growth of Hildegard scholarship in the mid-twentieth century and the particular interests and needs of feminist spirituality and feminist scholarship are intimately intertwined. However, the beginnings of Hildegard's reintroduction to the popular consciousness are significantly humbler than the grand swell of later feminist interest may suggest. By the estimate of Barbara Newman, herself one of the most influential figures in modern work on Hildegard of Bingen, the contemporary period of scholarship on the topic began in 1956. Marianna Schrader and Adelgundis Führkötter, two nuns from the monastery which was effectively the heir to Hildegard's own monastery, began analyzing the original Hildegardian manuscripts available there rather than the anthologized versions which had circulated more widely.¹¹⁵ This work, however, was taking place within the structure of the Catholic Church prior to the liberalizing event that was Vatican II; the Catholic women's movement, if it could be said to exist at all in 1956, was but one very weak voice in a seemingly monolithic conservative establishment. In the aptly-named piece "Please Don't Talk about Hildegard and Feminism in the Same Breath!" Lorna Collingridge notes that, in spite of debates about Hildegard's feminist consciousness or lack thereof, interest in her works coincided with increased interest in feminism.¹¹⁶ Barbara Newman's own *Sister of Wisdom*, one of the most influential English-language works on Hildegard, would directly engage with both mainstream

¹¹⁵ Barbara Newman, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, 1(2013), 40.

¹¹⁶ Lorna Collingridge, "Please Don't Talk about Hildegard and Feminism in the Same Breath!" *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 34, 1 (2002): 35-43. 38.

and spiritual feminist ideas. It would not be too much to say that a large part of the attention given to Hildegard in the latter half of the twentieth century was generated by feminism's quest through history for female role-models.

Much of what has attracted feminists to Hildegard over the years is her treatment of the feminine. However, Hildegard's "theology of the feminine" poses an issue for many feminists in that her writings all rely on the idea that some traits are essentially masculine while others are essentially feminine. In Newman's words, this is very much in line with "difference feminism" but would later fall out of favor. Writing on the difference feminism of theologians in the earlier part of the twentieth century, she says,

Unlike today's theologians ... they felt quite confident in asserting which character traits were masculine, which feminine, though in practice they might recognize or even advocate a balance of the two within individuals. It was of utmost importance to them to reclaim the value of all things feminine, to end the asymmetry that privileged the male, and to uphold such cultural values as maternity, nurture, compassion, empathy, receptiveness, self-sacrifice, spiritual attunement, and – dare we say it – love. By and large, theologians of the feminine believed that greater equality and esteem for *women* would come about through the achievement of greater equality and esteem for the *feminine*.¹¹⁷

According to Newman, this version of feminism eventually gave way to a combination of changing ideology which rejected belief in a universally feminine or female experience which transcended race and class, as well as changing cultural and economic conditions which

¹¹⁷ Newman, 42.

encouraged American women to place higher value on competition and individualism than traditionally “feminine” virtues.¹¹⁸

Although Hildegard’s life and work were and are not necessarily in-sync with the goals of academic second-wave feminism, her theology of the divine feminine was very much in line with the goals of another prominent group in the late twentieth century: the feminist spirituality movement. Barbara Newman, in her preface to the 1997 reprint of *Sister of Wisdom*, makes note that since the book was originally published, there had been a significant growth in interest in Hildegard outside of the “historically and ecclesiastically based medievalism in which [she] was trained.”¹¹⁹ In this preface, Newman seems sometimes somewhat amused by the “creative, freewheeling realm of feminist spirituality,” she expresses significant pleasure that her book serves as a “bridge” between the two worlds and is hopeful that the energy of the feminist spirituality movement will continue to vitalize interest in Hildegard and Hildegard scholarship. Although in many ways this hope would come to be, the feminist spirituality movement was itself a very complex social phenomenon with its own internal issues, debates, and blind spots, and although it cannot be denied that much of the fascination that many still have with Hildegard today can be traced back to the feminist spirituality movement’s interest in her, many of the problems and popular misconceptions about her also have their origins with this group’s handling of her.

Cynthia Eller, in her 1993 book *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, makes an effort at summarizing the goals and composition of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁹ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine, With a New Preface, Bibliography, and Discography* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), xvii.

the then-vibrant feminist spirituality movement, which she argues was distinct enough to constitute its own religion. She writes,

The most important agreement is that virtually all practitioners of feminist spirituality view the religion as being uniquely empowering for women: empowerment (sometimes more conservatively termed healing) is both the goal and the reward of feminist spiritual practice. Whatever works to make a woman strong is valid feminist spirituality. There is also a consistent interest in ritual as a tool of empowerment and a means of communication with the sacred, and in some form of magic, divination, or the cultivation of psychic skills. Nature is almost universally revered ... Women, like nature, are revered, usually for their female biological functions (particularly menstruation and childbirth). ... Finally, much of the feminist spiritual imagination is given over to speculation about how gender relations have been structured over the history of the human race.¹²⁰

This version of feminism, like earlier feminist admirers of Hildegard, very much holds as a tenet essential differences between genders. (That being said, the book repeatedly notes that the movement was far from monolithic, and not all spiritual feminists might agree with or be sympathetic to that construction of gender.)

Although Eller takes a neutral to positive tone towards the movement throughout most of the book, avoiding most overt criticisms, she openly acknowledges the problems of positionality of the American feminist spirituality movement: while its claims were often universal, most women involved when Eller was conducting research in the 1990s were white, of “middle-class

¹²⁰ Eller, Cynthia, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 3.

origins,” had at least a high school education, were “disproportionately lesbian,” and were part of the baby boom generation.¹²¹ Although Eller argues that the movement was specifically non-Christian and non-Jewish,¹²² many of the women involved in it came from one of those two religious backgrounds and usually had a relatively high degree of religious training within those traditions.¹²³ When Eller was writing, there was a significant amount of tension over the incorporation of elements of those traditions into feminist spirituality and, more generally, over the relationship of feminists to religions which were understood as being inherently patriarchal. This tension would be exacerbated by feminist spirituality’s quest for models and symbols in the creation of a new tradition.

Although Eller argues that feminist spirituality was creating a new religion, to do so, she writes, it of necessity borrowed elements from other, pre-existing faiths.¹²⁴ Although she does not state it explicitly, one may easily imagine that a large part of the reason for doing so is creating warrants to authority – an entirely new faith, while it can certainly generate its own symbols, may do well to borrow established symbols and concepts that are already understood as credible. However, as stated above, although many spiritual feminists were Christian or Jewish, there was also a broad-base perception that Christianity and Judaism were inherently set against women’s interests and thus could not be suitable sources of material or inspiration for the creation of a truly feminist spiritual tradition. As a result, a large number of spiritual feminists sought to appropriate images, themes, and concepts from Eastern religions and the religions of nonwhite and indigenous people in general, which they saw as less punitive and less inherently

¹²¹ Ibid., 18.

¹²² Ibid., 7.

¹²³ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 20.

patriarchal than Christianity or Judaism.¹²⁵ This was met with pushback, however, both from women of color who objected to white spiritual feminists' frequent and seemingly indiscriminate appropriation of symbols from various nonwhite cultures (many of whose faiths had been specifically suppressed by white Christian colonists), as well as from within the ranks of white spiritual feminists themselves.

A few spiritual feminists at the time that Eller was writing were trying to incorporate elements of Jewish tradition into their practice as a solution to this dilemma.¹²⁶ Many other women within the movement, according to Eller, tried to use symbols and images only from what they identified as their own culture;¹²⁷ for many white women, however, this mostly looked like a return to neopaganism or witchcraft that claimed European or Anglo-Saxon roots.¹²⁸ Many, if not most, of the women featured in Eller's book identify as witches. As compared with the incorporation of Jewish imagery and symbolism, "The use of Christian images in feminist spirituality has been slower in coming, and is still practically invisible. A few women interviewed mentioned that they include female Christian figures in their spiritual practice, but they justify this inclusion by stressing these figures' pagan roots."¹²⁹ Because in the feminist circles Eller was investigating Christianity and Christian symbols had ceased to be authoritative due to Christianity's perceived hostility towards women, people using those symbols felt the need to connect them to non-Christian religions and religious practices.

The complete exclusion of Christianity and Christian symbols from feminist religious circles was not to last. One wouldn't guess it from reading Eller's book, but many women within

¹²⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 78-79.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 74.

the “patriarchal” religions Christianity and Judaism were also doing serious work in the realm of feminist spirituality. A good example from the Catholic tradition might be Susan A. Ross’s 1998 work *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, which constitutes a very serious effort to unite the goals and methods of feminism and, to an extent, spiritual feminism with the established traditions and theology of the Roman Catholic Church. Although likely not what Eller would consider spiritual feminism, this text and many others like it from various Christian and Jewish circles were doubtless spiritual and doubtless feminist. When Eller was writing, the distance between feminist efforts at creating their own faith and the faiths that they had grown up with seemed unbridgeable. Now, as I am writing, the “outsiders” in Eller’s book would no longer seem so distant to Christian “insiders” like myself; in an article from a 2019 edition of *U.S. Catholic* (entitled, in a coy imitation of a tone of moral panic, “Toil and trouble: Are women turning to witchcraft in the era of #MeToo?”) Jessica Mesman would write on the women who self-identify as both Catholics and as witches.

Among Catholic women, in particular, I see, at best, ambivalence to the male church hierarchy in the wake of so many disturbing revelations of abuse. We feel betrayed by those we trusted to lead us when we were not permitted to lead. With the wisdom of these men now called into question, we look to the wise women of history – so often dismissively, dangerously labeled ‘witches.’¹³⁰

The reason these modern Catholic women identify as witches today is much the same as the reason that spiritual feminists identified as women in the 1990s: they hope to, by reclaiming the

¹³⁰ Jessica Mesman, “Toil and trouble: Are women turning to witchcraft in the era of #MeToo?” (*US Catholic*, 2019) https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A567633745/AONE?u=mlln_m_tufts&sid=AONE&xid=2bbb9ba6.

term, connect to a longer tradition of women's power and spirituality, even if their methodology is not approved by the official hierarchy of male-dominated religions. Mesman goes on to note that Joan of Arc was burned as a witch long before she was ever declared a saint. She ends her article on a point that is quite significant in understanding the relationship between Hildegard and New Age spiritualists and feminists: it's "a short jump ... from St. Hildegard of Bingen, the doctor of the church and expert in folk remedies and animal omens, whose *Physika* looks strikingly like a witch's grimoire, to the modern day Christian insta 'witches' who are lifting these women up as their heroes." Hildegard, a powerful historical woman with a pedigree of orthodoxy and sainthood, might be powerfully attractive to Catholic feminists whose goal, unlike that of the spiritual feminists of Eller's book, is not to create their own new religion but rather to carve out a space for themselves within the existing Catholic tradition. Both groups attempt to associate historical women with their movement as a way to access the authority of the past, but where the generic witch is more a symbol than an individual, Hildegard, with her detailed biography and impressive corpus of surviving works, has all the power of the potential foundress of a movement, her mere existence proof that Catholic women can be leaders while still being orthodox. The records of Hildegard's leadership, along with examples of women leaders from early Christianity, in some ways hold the door open for Catholic women to use Oakley's politics of oblivion to say that there's always been a place for women in the Church. To grant women more agency in today's Catholicism, then, rather than being a radical move towards feminism, is simply returning things to their original and natural order.

When one examines the motives and priorities of the feminist spirituality movement as it is described by Eller, one can understand the appeal Hildegard might have for many spiritual feminists and how she ended up with the reputation of being a New Age saint. As people

gradually became more wary of the appropriation of non-Western religions by white women, and as the gap between Christianity and New Age feminist groups began to steadily decrease, Hildegard became a much more available – and appealing – figure for use by white feminists. A white woman from what is now Germany who lived before the colonial encounter in the Americas, Hildegard does not carry with her the complexity and weight of the colonial experience. Although whiteness as a category did not exist then as it does now, by most modern definitions, Hildegard can be understood as white; as a result, white women today may feel more free to claim her as one of their own than they would similar nonwhite figures. Although Hildegard is by no means an unproblematic figure – her work very much contains an anti-Semitism typical of medieval writers which goes largely unaddressed in most literature on her – for those who haven't delved very deeply into her work (and even sometimes for those who have) interest in Hildegard can serve as a sort of escapism: she existed *before* any of the racial complexities that mar white feminists attempts at constructing a “universal” feminine by haphazardly taking from the traditions of nonwhite people. She also, conveniently, existed before the widespread burning of witches in Europe, which many spiritual feminists saw as a time of great patriarchal persecution which led to the loss of women's culture and spirituality in Europe. Her theology of the divine feminine is in line with many – although certainly not all – spiritual feminists ideas on women as being fundamentally different from men.

Also salient to spiritual feminist and New Age interest in her, Hildegard was a healer. Mesman, above, references her scientific works as resembling a “witch's grimoire.” Eller writes:

In spiritual feminist thought, it is a given that all women need healing: if not from specific illnesses or infirmities, then from the pains suffered as a result of growing up female in a patriarchal world. Spiritual feminists aspire to healing themselves and their

sisters through a variety of less than medically and psychotherapeutically orthodox techniques, including homeopathy, chakra balancing, massage, Bach flower remedies, acupressure, and so on.¹³¹

The place of Hildegard's herbal remedies on this list can be guessed at easily. Eller goes on:

Some spiritual feminists argue that women are natural healers who, before their historical oppression at the hands of men, were able to control menstruation, abort fetuses, and shrink tumors in a nonintrusive, low-technology manner (principally with herbs).¹³²

The twelfth century is certainly not the primordial era before the creation of patriarchy that many spiritual feminists harken to in their theology, but it is nevertheless distant enough from many of the perceived evils of the modern world that calling on Hildegard, a figure from that time, as a representative of a more ancient tradition of female healing seems almost natural.

Opposition to specifically Catholic feminism – or at least questions regarding the proper role of women in the Church – might also play a part in Hildegard's recent resurgence in popularity, at least in terms of her formal canonization and reception in the Church. As has been mentioned, Hildegard's work is multivalent and contains passages that can be used both for and against contemporary Catholic feminist arguments. Just as some Catholic feminists use Hildegard as a warrant to the authority of the past, it is possible that the institutional Church is in some ways doing the same, but by pointing to Hildegard's particular understanding of the role of women rather than her leadership in general they hope to use this authority to silence certain women's interests within the Church. Hildegard's canonization process, as noted in Chapter One, began in 1227 but was never formally completed; until her cause was revived in the 2000s, it was

¹³¹ Eller, 108-109.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 110.

widely assumed that she simply *was* a saint and the lack of formal Church recognition was not widely discussed. When she did finally formally take on the mantle of sainthood, it was through a process known as “equivalent canonization,” in which the fact of the existence of her cult largely stood in for the legalistic verification of miracles in her name.¹³³ The 785-year timespan between the beginning of the inquiry into Hildegard’s sanctity in 1227 and its end in 2012 makes hers the longest canonization process in the history of the Church.¹³⁴

The news of the new saint – and, shortly after, new doctor of the church, a title which only very few people and fewer women have ever held – has been received mostly positively within different branches of the Church, but the question may arise: why now? Barbara Newman attributes it to multiple causes: primarily, the work of many generations of nuns devoted to maintaining her memory, but also the fortuitous circumstance of Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, or Pope Benedict XVI, who happened to be a German medievalist who was likely familiar with Hildegard’s work, becoming pope.¹³⁵ In the conclusion to her piece on Hildegard’s canonization, however, Newman becomes more explicit in hypothesizing what the goals of the Church in naming Hildegard both saint and doctor might be. Noting that, in spite of Benedict XVI’s call for more “holy and spirited women” in the Church, Hildegard’s canonization came at the same time as the disciplining of numerous North American nuns and that “[p]rophetic women are so much easier to deal with in the remote past,” Newman seems to coyly suggest that the Church’s canonization of Hildegard may be a sort of gentle appeasement of Catholic feminists, now that the voices of feminist spirituality and women’s ordination have largely quieted. Newman also

¹³³ George Ferzoco, “The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen,” in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Beverly Maine Keinzle, Debra L. Stoudt, and George Ferzoco (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014) 305.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹³⁵ Newman, 40.

notes that Hildegard's theology of gender is quite conservative and upholds both clerical celibacy and the ban on women's ordination.¹³⁶ In spite of all this, Hildegard is also still the chosen saint of a number of feminists, environmentalists, and other progressives within the Church; Newman notes quite correctly, "As always, what any doctor of the Church has to teach depends on who is listening."¹³⁷

Reception of Hildegard as a saint can also be seen in less academic works: in an article that can be found in the online archives of *The Catholic World Report*, one can glimpse the reaction of the broader Catholic world, and is especially interesting in the way that it attempts to set up a relatively unknown saint as authoritative to the general Catholic public. The article, written by Sandra Miesel, offers a biography of Hildegard, seemingly working to familiarize readers new to Hildegard with her life and works. This could in part be due to the need, in a Church already full of beloved and well-known saints, to demonstrate any new saint's bonafides. Emphasis on Hildegard's obedience to the Church (via certifying herself by Church authorities), her "steady humility," and the orthodoxy of her theology all seem to be efforts to establish that this new saint is, indeed, orthodox and worthy of Catholic's trust. Her discussions of Mary is also put in the spotlight; by connecting Hildegard to a figure that is already almost universally beloved by Roman Catholics – and a female figure at that – it seems that the article hopes to establish her as a legitimate part of the tradition. Miesel also seems to be trying to quietly distance Hildegard from the less-than-conventional groups that also make claim to the saint's legacy. She writes:

¹³⁶ Ibid., 49-50.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 50.

As academic interest in saints—especially female ones—grew in the later twentieth century, Hildegard was rediscovered. New Agers publicized her—inaccurately—but solid research also multiplied. Her unique music was performed again to great acclaim. Even her herbal remedies found users. The nine-hundredth anniversary of Hildegard’s birth was celebrated with a comprehensive exhibition, “Hildegard von Bingen 1098-1179,” at the Cathedral and Diocesan Museum of Mainz. German director Margarethe von Trotta’s well-received film *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard of Bingen* was released in 2010.¹³⁸

The association of Hildegard with New Age spirituality is acknowledged, but minimized, and the immediate follow-up is a focus on more respectable commemorations and celebrations of Hildegard’s life. The Hildegard in *The Catholic World Report* is no pre-patriarchal holy woman or witch, but rather a devout Catholic, musician, and inspiration to modern artists. The article ends with a suggested reading list, which includes well-known and well-respected works, such as Barbara Newman’s *Sister of Wisdom* and the Mother Columba Hart’s translation of *Scivias*.

The tension between Catholic (feminist or otherwise) claims to Hildegard and New Age and spiritual feminist claims to Hildegard predates Hildegard’s canonization significantly: in a 1998 article from the *Independent* entitled “Saint Hildegard: from medieval cult to New Age cool,” the author describes the disappointment of the “young people with perforated nostrils” visiting Hildegard’s shrine experienced upon discovering the apparently relatively uninteresting and non-Hildegard-focused town of Bingen. The article’s biases are pretty evident – none of the much-feared “New Age” people are interviewed, but their views are associated with

¹³⁸ Sandra Miesel, “Hildegard of Bingen: Voice of the Living Light,” *The Catholic World Report*, January 25, 2012, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2012/01/25/hildegard-of-bingen-voice-of-the-living-light/>.

commercialism and a cheapening of Hildegard's theology. Hildegard's opinions are described as "reactionary" and the author implies that the connection of Hildegard with feminism is nothing more than a ploy by "marketing men."¹³⁹

Although claims to Hildegard as a truly feminist figure are continually debated, that feminism and its quest for female historical figures had a strong role in the resurgence in Hildegard's popularity in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century can't be ignored. However, the deep contradictions inherent in much of Hildegard's work have made it difficult for some feminists to accept her uncritically and has provided a way in which more conservative Christians can also attempt to use her as a source of authority to back their claims. The fact that Hildegard is claimed by groups as diverse as mainstream feminism, conservative Catholicism, and the feminist spirituality movement and New Age religions perhaps speaks to why the debates over the "true" Hildegard – and which, if any of these groups, can truly claim her as a foundress or precursor – tend to be so intense.

¹³⁹ Imre Karacs, "Saint Hildegard: from medieval cult to New Age cool," *Independent*, March 8, 1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/saint-hildegard-from-medieval-cult-to-new-age-cool-1149055.html>.

Chapter Four

Auctoritas and *Viriditas*: Hildegard as Environmental Patron

In his 2018 essay “The Original Green Campaign: Dr. Hildegard of Bingen’s *Viriditas* as Complement to *Laudato Si*,” John Dadosky writes of Hildegard of Bingen, “She *is* the original green campaign” (emphasis his).¹⁴⁰ The piece, which draws connections between Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si* which made environmental stewardship a part of Catholic social teaching, and Hildegard’s own theology of *viriditas* or “greening,” has, in spite of the overall solid theological work, a number of small peculiarities in how it chooses to depict Hildegard. From the title alone, which emphasizes the title *doctor* – referring to Hildegard’s status as a doctor of the church – to the claim that her theology constitutes any green campaign, much less the *original* green campaign, it seems from the first that Dadosky is making some sort of effort to bolster Hildegard’s credentials. Just as centuries before Gebeno of Eberbach would arrange and introduce Hildegard’s writings in a way that he hoped would increase Hildegard’s renown as a prophet, Dadosky here introduces Hildegard’s theology to modern readers in a way that attempts to paint her as a hard-core environmentalist long before environmentalism as it exists in the West today had become a question. Dadosky’s piece is just one of many which connect Hildegard to modern ecological movements, and it is far from the first. As with feminist claims to Hildegard’s work, ecological claims to Hildegard are rooted in both the peculiarities of the Catholic environmental movement and in the broader problem of modern Catholic authority, and both should be understood to discuss Hildegard’s relevance here.

¹⁴⁰ John Dadosky, “The Original Green Campaign: Dr. Hildegard of Bingen’s *Viriditas* as Complement to *Laudato Si*,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 34, 1 (2018): 79-95. 81.

An important moment in the development of a coherent Christian environmentalism was the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" in the magazine *Science* in 1967, which served as a clarion call to many civic-minded Christians on the matter of the religion's role in how the West views and relates to the natural world. White argues that technology as we understand it today - which he distinguishes from science as being more "lower-class, empirical, [and] action-oriented" - emerged from a distinctly Western and distinctly medieval historical and cultural moment.¹⁴¹ Christianity, especially in its Western European form, conceptualizes man and nature as two entirely separate things, with man being designed to control, use, and exploit the natural world; in medieval Europe, he does this through the development and use of technology. Meanwhile, "natural theology," the study of nature, emerges out of the idea that all of nature is a revelation to humankind. White argues that in the Latin West, by the 13th century, interest of self-described theologians became less focused on symbolism (what does this mean as a sign from God?) than mechanics (how does God's creation work?). Out of this endeavor grew modern Western empirical science, the upper-crust counterpart to pure technology.¹⁴² The crux of his argument is summarized in the following passage:

I personally doubt that disastrous ecologic backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology. Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians. Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around

¹⁴¹ White, Lynn Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207. 1204.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 1205.

our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim. The newly-elected Governor of California, like myself a churchman but less troubled than I, spoke for the Christian tradition when he said (as is alleged), ‘when you’ve seen one redwood tree, you’ve seen them all.’ To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.¹⁴³

For White, the fact that modern science has “disproved” some of what he sees as the most environmentally negative parts of Christian philosophy, especially the idea that humankind is somehow set apart from the rest of the natural world, is ultimately not a solution to environmental degradation. Science and technology cannot solve environmental crises because they grew out of the same philosophical system that justified the creation of these crises to begin with. Perhaps most damningly, White suggests the possibility that care for the environment may not be able to be fit into the Christian worldview, in which not only is the natural world not sacred, but which also sees viewing the natural world as sacred as a sin in and of itself.

White, as a Christian himself, had a vested interest in the rehabilitation of his tradition, but his best suggestion is that St. Francis, whose theology contains a certain respect for the value of animal life, may be a possible model within the Christian tradition for ecological stewardship and that Francis could be used as a “patron saint for ecologists.”¹⁴⁴ This call hasn’t been entirely fruitless - in 1979, much as White suggested, Pope John Paul II made Saint Francis the patron

¹⁴³ Ibid., 1206.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 1207.

saint of ecologists and “those who promote ecology.” The current pope, upon ascending to the throne of Peter himself, took Francis as his papal name and has made environmental protection a priority of his papacy.¹⁴⁵ *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis’s encyclical which is the focus of the Dadosky essay mentioned above, makes environmental stewardship an explicit part of Catholic social teaching.

White’s article was by no means perfect, as a 2016 retrospective in the journal *Conservation Biology* is careful to point out: his argument ignores the fact that Christians tend to ascribe to God’s favor or disfavor environmental changes, to the point that some Christians consider it impossible for human behavior to significantly impact the environment because that is God’s sole province, which would constitute a significant barrier to participation in environmental protection movements beyond the reasons listed by White.¹⁴⁶ Some Christians are also reluctant to be associated with environmentalists because those environmentalists are seen as “spiritually dangerous pagans or deviants promoting abortion and homosexuality”¹⁴⁷ (possibly as a result of the interest that neopaganism and the feminist spirituality movement often have in environmental protection), and the even the views of different Christian groups vary widely on the matter of mastery over nature.¹⁴⁸ White’s article has also been criticized for its assertion that non-Western religions have less environmentally harmful beliefs than Christianity and for its focus on religion over other social and cultural factors.¹⁴⁹ Finally, according to the article, there is not significant statistical evidence that Christian views on the environment are actually

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, Bron, Van Wieren, Gretel, and Daley Zaleha, Bernard, “Lynn White Jr. and the greening-of-religion hypothesis,” *Conservation Biology* 30, 5 (2016): 1000-1009. 1000.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1002-1003.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1003.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1003.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1006.

improving, despite the influence of figures like Pope Francis¹⁵⁰; this calls into question the actual effectiveness of White's few recommendations on how the Christian tradition may be changed to be more environmentally conscious. Nevertheless, White's article has undoubtedly had significant influence in the creation of the Christian environmental movement, and the stamp of his criticisms can be seen on many of the works that have followed.

Within Catholicism, one of the loudest voices to answer the calls and criticisms in White's article has been that of the monastic community. An early example from American monasticism comes in the form of Terrance Kardong's essay "Monks and the Land," published in 1983 in the journal *Cistercian Studies*. Kardong, noting that most monastic work was then taking place in the cities in the form of aid given to the urban poor, and that rural monasticism, separated from population centers, was thus beginning to be viewed as obsolete, suggests ecological stewardship as both a means for rural monasteries to retain relevance and as a responsibility of the land-holding Church.¹⁵¹ Unlike White and Dadosky, Kardong does not attempt to claim that there is a longer history of ecological stewardship in Christianity, even if it is a submerged one; rather, he writes,

If modern monks have not reflected much about their land, they are carrying on an ancient tradition. The topic has rarely emerged in monastic literature. The hermits of Egypt fled the fertile river valley for the barren desert that is almost the antithesis of 'land'. Although the Pachomian cenobites of south Egypt were great farmers, they never talk about the ideological link between their land and their monasticism.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 1007.

¹⁵¹ Kardong, Terrance, "Monks and the Land," *Cistercian Studies* 18, 2 (1983): 135-138. 135-136.

¹⁵² Ibid., 136.

Here, a quiet echo of White's criticism can be heard: monks, rather than seeking to be in nature when they fled to the desert or to the countryside, were simply seeking escape from the worldly. The natural world is seen as a negative space into which spirituality can be carved out. Even if there is not as explicit a belief in mastery over nature, this is because nature is reduced down to nothing more than the not-city. The human-nature divide remains intact. Kardong then goes on to discuss the specific history and context of Benedictine ties to the land. Neither of the two monastic rules popular in medieval Benedictine monasteries which Kardong cites – *The Rule of the Master* and *The Rule of Benedict* – regard farming all that positively, but the economic and historical realities of Europe after the decline of the Roman empire meant that Benedict's vision of the monastery as a "self-sufficient rural complex" would become widespread and highly successful. However, labor was divided, with serfs and a second class of monks known as *conversi* responsible for farm work; most Benedictines, as well as the later Cistercians, did not write theology of the land because they did not work the land. American monasticism would follow the European model, with many 19th-century monastic farms becoming quite successful as more lay brothers familiar with farming joined the orders. By the time Kardong was writing in 1983, however, American monastic farming was in serious decline, with few monasteries farming at all.¹⁵³ He then gives an overview of modern industrial farming and outlines the problem of food exploitation and the general crisis of agriculture in the late twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ He writes:

Few of us would want to go back to the life-style of the sixth century or even a century ago. Yet we should be aware of the price of this massive change in our consumptive

¹⁵³ Ibid., 136-138.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 138-143.

patterns. The cornucopia on our supermarket shelves and the advertising that urges us to treat ourselves to luxury regularly, are had at the price of freedom. Many of those who produce our luxuries are not free to raise their own staples. And we have been trained to consider luxuries as needs.¹⁵⁵

For Kardong, then, the problem is multi-faceted. There is a loss of freedom both for the American consumer, who Kardong indicates suffers a sort of spiritual decline in the face of industrialized life, and for the workers in exploited countries, who are forced to give up traditional agriculture (which Kardong places a very high value on) in favor of the growth of crops which can be sold profitably in the United States and elsewhere in the global north. The problem is also one of will and education: what was formerly luxury has become commonplace and expected. People in the United States rely on it and are so blind to its presence that they do not stop to consider the labor which produced it. Out of this complex web of issues, he identifies fragmentation – an alienation of people from the nature, products, and consequences of their work – as the root of all the ecological and agricultural crises and suggests a sort of localization as a solution. Monks, he says, can by attending to the needs of their local community and being aware of local problems begin to attend to this.¹⁵⁶ He writes:

Real farming is an art that can only be learned in community. It takes generations to accumulate wisdom about the proper way to farm a given district, and even a given farmstead. This is a different sort of knowledge from that learned at the agricultural college. The communal question is not just how I can turn the biggest profit, but how I can leave the land better than I found it for my successors. This is information that I can

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 144.

only get from ancestors. Where there is no communal continuity, there is no culture and therefore no agriculture.¹⁵⁷

The continuity of the monastic community in one particular location (although, as he acknowledges, this is not assured everywhere due to decreasing vocations) provides an opportunity to cultivate the sort of highly-local understanding and appreciation of the land and the natural world that Kardong considers necessary for true ecological stewardship. The community also provides the opportunity for the creation and transmission of knowledge, as well as the growth of a tradition of respect and care for the land. Kardong differs from many other and later Catholic environmentalists in his focus on agriculture as a way of interacting with the environment, but his interest in justice for the poor and the global focus of his work cleverly combines Catholic social teaching and environmentalism long before the writing of *Laudato Si*. Although the extent to which any of his suggestions have been carried out in fact is dubious, Kardong's is nevertheless an important early effort to propose a Catholic way of looking at environmental stewardship.

Another effort to connect environmental stewardship and Catholic monasticism comes in the much more recent "The Greening of Christian Monasticism and the Future of Monastic Landscapes in North America" by Jason M. Brown, published in *Religions* in 2019. The piece in many ways attempts to write a history of Catholic environmental stewardship in the United States, at least insofar as it interacts with monasticism. Brown cites Kardong in this work, and while he does not directly point out any disagreement with Kardong's work, he nevertheless attempts to trace a history of Christian monasticism and the environment that directly contradicts Kardong's estimate of the history (or lack thereof) of ecological stewardship within the Church.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 145.

While Kardong seems to accept the criticism in White's argument that Christianity attempts to separate the human and the natural, Brown pushes back on it by constructing a historical narrative which would show that Catholicism from its earliest roots has had concern for the natural world. Brown first compares the monastic flight into the natural world – be it the deserts of Syria and Egypt or the rural countryside of Europe or America – to the experience of Jesus contemplating in the desert, and thus suggests that nature had a much greater spiritual significance to early monastics than what Kardong would argue, as monasteries continued to be located at a distance from population centers in an effort to discourage worldly attachments and encourage contemplation.¹⁵⁸ Brown also cites the structure of the monastery itself, referring to the cloister garden as an example of how nature was central to both the physical life of the monastery and to its spiritual and symbolic life. The cloister garden in monasteries both provided food and other goods to the monks and also served as a symbol – the monastery as a whole and the garden in particular were thought of a space between Earth and Heaven, with the garden representing the Garden of Eden.¹⁵⁹ He then goes on to argue that current monastic efforts to use monasteries' lands as ecological preserves in both Europe and the United States and the inclusion of environmental stewardship in the missions of many monasteries is part of this longer tradition.¹⁶⁰ Although both Kardong and Brown acknowledge that declining numbers of monks in the United States makes the future of monasticism's ecological work somewhat unsure, neither of them point to solutions which would involve more Catholics not living and working in religious life. This is one of the limits of this monastic model of Catholic environmentalism: it

¹⁵⁸ Brown, Jason M. "The Greening of Christian Monasticism and the Future of Monastic Landscapes in North America." *Religions* 10, 7(2019):432. 2.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

addresses and utilizes only a small and shrinking portion of Catholics without any obvious interest in reaching a broader audience or creating more widespread change. For an approach that attempts to involve all Catholics, one must look to an entirely different argument and claim to lineage within Catholic environmentalism.

Dadosky's piece on *viriditas*, mentioned above, traces an entirely different legacy of environmentalism within Catholicism. Like Brown, he attempts to grant his position legitimacy and authority by tracing a lineage of concern for the environment through to early Christianity, and in fact argues that Pope Francis, while he successfully draws on Franciscan and Ignatian spirituality in *Laudato Si*, missed an opportunity to use the writings of Hildegard ("the towering medieval figure") which have a more obvious environmental message than those of either St. Francis or St. Ignatius, and also fails to draw on the existing tradition of Catholic environmental theology as it comes down through the writings of Thomas Berry.¹⁶¹ Although Dadosky has a clear appreciation of and understanding of Hildegard's theology, he is also using her – and her proximity to an earlier and seemingly more authoritative stage of Catholic history – in order to add legitimacy to the cause of Catholic environmentalism. Dadosky, however, not content with the authority of Hildegard alone, distinguishes himself from most others writing on Hildegard's *viriditas* by claiming that the concept is not idiosyncratically hers. Rather, he suggests that Hildegard is part of a longer lineage of Church fathers writing on the subject. Hildegard, he claims, was introduced to the idea through the writings of Gregory the Great (540-604 CE), who himself was reflecting on a passage in the Book of Job.¹⁶² In this way, the writings of Hildegard which Dadosky focuses on in the rest of his piece are made out to be not just interesting for their

¹⁶¹ Dadosky, "The Original Green Campaign," 80-81.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 81-82.

own merits or for the fact that they are attached to a figure that Dadosky sets up as authoritative, but also as part of an interpretive tradition reaching back to the seventh century and a tradition of writing that began long before the Christian tradition was even thought of. In the arena of establishing the legitimacy of movements within Catholicism, to do this convincingly would be an impressive feat. Hildegard's theological pedigree established, he goes on to use her in a way not much different from how his medieval forebears approached her: as a prophet. He writes,

The relevance of Hildegard is clearly discernible in her ominous warning: *'If we abuse our position to commit evil deeds, God's judgment will permit other creatures to punish us.'* In the face of recent unpredictable weather patterns alone, this warning should give even the most ardent climate change deniers pause – not that we are being punished by God, of course, but rather that we are beginning to experience the consequences of our short-sightedness concerning the environment.¹⁶³

Although Dadosky seems reluctant to go all-out and directly compare the climate crisis to any or all of the punishments and apocalypses prophesied in Hildegard's various writings, he is nevertheless doing something that may seem somewhat curious in modern scholarship by calling on her prophecies in this fashion. Within a Catholic setting, however, and especially given the continued or renewed preoccupation of some lay Catholics with prophecy and apocalypse, drawing on an authoritative prophet like Hildegard – whose writing is centuries old, who was approved by popes, who has been declared both a saint and a doctor of the church – can be a powerful argumentative tool, as discussed in the Introduction. Although it should not be forgotten that Hildegard herself was a Benedictine and a monastic, her ministry – unlike the ministry of Benedict or Pachomius – was not only to monastics, but also to lay people. While

¹⁶³ Ibid., 81.

both Brown's and Kardong's versions of Catholic environmentalism are written about and in many senses written for the monastic community (which, as numbers of United States monastics decline, may seem like an increasingly distant and insular group to many American Catholics), Dadosky puts forward a vision which is more appealing across the board. Additionally, while both Kardong and Brown locate Catholic environmentalism within a tradition which, while long and rich, is somewhat impersonal, Dadosky leans in more to White's suggestion of finding a "patron saint" for the environmental movement. Although Dadosky mentions Francis, Hildegard also has her own unique benefits – a more conservative and obedient saint, she has orthodox appeal, while her status as (quoting Barbara Newman) "the first medieval media superstar of the digital age"¹⁶⁴ gives her a wider reach among a younger and more online audience – people already largely predisposed to have environmental concerns. Dadosky also connects Hildegard's work to the work of environmental activist Sister Dorothy Stang who was killed for her advocacy around the Amazon rainforest in 2005, suggesting that this type of "witness" – possibly an intentional choice on Dadosky's part, calling back to the etymology of the word "martyr" which was and is still so central to Christian understandings of lived faith – is in line with the *viriditas* which Hildegard equated with divinity.¹⁶⁵ Although here as earlier in the piece Dadosky tries to avoid directly claiming that Hildegard has directly prophesied a recent event, his methodology nevertheless departs from Kardong and Brown significantly. Although all three pieces are intended as both analysis and call to action to varying degrees, Dadosky is perhaps the most effective due to his willingness to invoke prophecy in this way. By both bolstering and invoking Hildegard's authority, his argument is effective enough that, by the end of the piece, a

¹⁶⁴ Newman, Barbara, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, 1 (2013): 36-55. 47.

¹⁶⁵ Dadosky, John, "The Original Green Campaign," 87-88.

reader may be wondering why Pope Francis chose *not* to invoke such an impressive and seemingly obvious figure in *Laudato Si*.

Dadosky's article is not the only one to combine analysis of Hildegard's prophetic writings with an environmental call to action; this in fact constitutes something of a genre within sources on Hildegard that can be found online. In Jean Evans's "*Viriditas* and *Veritas*: The Ecological Prophets Hildegard of Bingen and Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP," found on the Sisters of Mercy website, the author works to connect Hildegard and a more recent Catholic environmental activist. The article is a good example of an article attempting to popularize Hildegard's theology and draw connections between a specific element (*viriditas*) and contemporary issues. The facts presented in the article are mostly correct (except for a misspelling of *Scivias* as *Scrivias*) but the analysis is fairly surface-level and deals exclusively with a particular element of Hildegard, not even attempting to work with her holistically (although her other various works are mentioned). However, in this piece, the failure to treat Hildegard holistically may not necessarily be problematic; unlike feminist interpretations and uses of Hildegard, which have to contend with the contradictions inherent in much of Hildegard's work, the pieces of Hildegard's theology which can be claimed as environmentalist are relatively straightforward. Although *viriditas* is a theme throughout much of her work, it doesn't necessarily come out of the same kind of societal oppression that Hildegard's theology of the feminine did. *Viriditas* can also be understood as a natural variation on the Benedictine concern for the land discussed above. While feminist claims to Hildegard as authoritative have to address the fact that she was, as a woman leader, something of an outlier, environmentalist claims have the benefit of being able to almost seamlessly integrate her into a longer tradition.

Much of the Catholic environmentalist movement comes out of a desire to address the claim that Christianity is an inherently environmentally destructive ideology that is itself behind much of the ecological destruction we're seeing now. Attempts like those of Terrance Kardong and Jason M. Brown attempt to find in the monastic tradition a cure to this particular ill, and others, like John Dadosky and Jean Evans look to Hildegard in particular as an example of a saint and doctor of the church who may serve as a prophetic call to care for the natural world. Like feminist claims, these authors use Hildegard and her assumed authority as a twelfth-century saint, a prophet, and a doctor of the church to bolster their arguments, but unlike feminism, environmentalism does not need to contend with the same deeply complicated questions of gender which are embedded in Hildegard's work. To fail to treat Hildegard holistically consists of much less of a problem for environmentalist works than feminist ones.

Conclusion

The Problem of Change

I've been fairly well steeped in Catholicism for most of my life. I went to a Catholic school from the age of five until the age of thirteen, and, after a hiatus in high school, resumed being a practicing, churchgoing Catholic as an eighteen-year-old freshman in college. During that time I also chose religion as one of my majors. I've taken numerous classes on Christianity; I've gone to various talks, events, and functions; I've lived most of my life as a Christian. None of those things, however, are how I was introduced to St. Hildegard of Bingen. My first encounter with Hildegard was through a meme page.

A friend of mine during sophomore year of college showed me the Facebook page "Daily Update On Hildegard Von Bingen's Health Condition" while studying together one night. The page, whose icon is a close-up of the face of a hagiographic representation of Hildegard, posts once a day to reassure its audience that Hildegard is, indeed, still dead. When I first began following the page, the daily post was always simply "She's dead," to which the page's followers would dutifully reply using Facebook's sad reaction function. Today, the page's posts are more varied in how they convey that message, often incorporating different popular joke formats. At the time I thought the concept was absolutely hilarious and became a dedicated follower of the page's activity, but I was never motivated to explore Hildegard further – I had no idea of what she had actually done in life, of her vast surviving body of work, of the history of her cult or how she'd entered the American popular consciousness in the last few decades. In my original introduction to a figure who'd come to take up so much of my time and mental energy, she was simply (1) the understanding that she was a saint, (2) a strange-sounding name, (3) an old-fashioned picture of a woman in monastic garb, and (4) the fact that she was dead and had

clearly been dead for some time, and that it was funny to remind people of this every day as if it were a rapidly-evolving news situation.

More than a year later, while writing a paper on medieval women's mysticism, I'd encounter Hildegard again, this time somewhat more fully – although I wasn't reading specifically about her, she would be referenced again and again in various papers and books on the status of medieval women. She'd often be a footnote, or an off-hand reference to someone that the author clearly thought was so well-known as to make further explanation unnecessary. I added her to the list of female mystics I planned to discuss in that paper, then removed her when it became clear to me that her work was substantially different than that of the other writers I was reading. Part of this decision was fueled by frustration; the more I read her work and the more I read *about* her work, the more it became clear to me that I couldn't form a complete picture of her writings and her legacy in one paper. Unlike the others I was researching, like Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Pourete, both of whom left behind only one surviving work, Hildegard's works had survived almost in their entirety, and been added onto by pseudepigraphal writers. She'd been interpreted and re-interpreted again and again, and the threads of understanding seemed too complicated to try and untangle for one end-of-term paper. Even now, after working on this topic for over a year, when I'm being completely honest I cannot say I'm sure that I have a totally correct understanding of what Hildegard means, either in her own time or to her modern readers.

Earlier in the process of writing this thesis, I contacted the page administrator of "Daily Updates On Hildegard Von Bingen's Health Condition" to ask them about how they themselves had come up with the idea of starting the page. When I'd encountered it, the joke – and Hildegard herself – seemed completely disconnected from the rest of reality. The joke was a

completely novel format to me, and Hildegard was more or less like those strange footnotes you find in medievalist papers, referencing some obscure text that you'll never be able to access and likely have no reason to need. As I became involved in trying to trace Hildegard's influence from the time of her death to the present day, I became more curious about the origins of the medium through which I'd been introduced to her. The page's creator explained to me:

The page started from two ideas. The first context was within a Facebook music shitposting group, and whilst I don't recall the post that inspired the page, I remember commenting as if a tag group, "Daily Update On HVB's Health Condition."

The name itself comes from another page at the time that started off the trend: Daily Update On Michael Jackson's Health Condition. The equivalent to the meme's relevancy then is to pages we have now today like "Every SpongeBob Frame In Order," which has inspired its own splinters too.

From there, I committed to actually making a page out of that comment, and then the page was born.

They'd selected Hildegard because of her status as relatively niche but not so anonymous as to ruin the joke. They also explained that they'd been introduced to Hildegard in the context of music history and that they had been really interested in her as a composer. This was surprising to me; while the focus of my study has been on Hildegard as a visionary, for other people, that's far from the primary context in which they're interested in her. Earlier in this thesis, I've suggested that many people using Hildegard as a warrant for their own authoritative claims focus solely on one aspect of her life and work to do so; even though I had hoped going into this project to try and form a more holistic view, I've very likely done the exact same thing.

This paper has attempted to chronicle and explore the recent history of popular interest in Hildegard and to analyze possible motivations behind different currents in writing about her. The Introduction discussed the problem of authority in contemporary American Catholicism and how the saint and the doctor of the church as absent authoritative figures can play into different conversations and struggles over both power and moral rightness in religion. Chapter One traced some strains of the distribution of Hildegard's during her life and shortly after her death to both complicate the popular belief that Hildegard was "forgotten" and to set up the discussion in Chapter Two, which attempted to explain how, although Hildegard was a prominent regional figure in her life who left behind an impressive body of work, changing currents in terms of mysticism, monasticism, scholasticism, and the role of women did effectively bury her legacy for all but a few circles of scholars and monks for several centuries. Chapter Three explored the revival in interest in Hildegard in English-speaking circles in the latter half of the twentieth century, and analyzed possible resonance of Hildegard's message and identity with the feminist spirituality movement to explain how Hildegard, a fairly conservative twelfth-century monastic, has come to be associated with New Age and neopagan spirituality. Chapter Four delved into Hildegard's use as an environmentalist figure as an example of how she is used not only as a form of representation or as a token female figure but is also still to this day understood as a prophet with a valuable message for our times.

What, then, do we do with this knowledge in the context of Hildegard and authority? Just as Hildegard's name is being used in the halls of religious and academic power in efforts to prove points about the value of women, science, faith, and the environment, she's also become part of the popular consciousness in a very different way – in a way that, at least on the surface of things, has almost nothing to do with any claims to authority. Most of the sources analyzed in

this thesis are scholarly, but most people who encounter Hildegard won't be encountering her through academic analyses of her work. Hildegard is in many ways an import to our time; unlike some other (but by no means all) recent canonizations, such as St. John Paul the Great or St. Óscar Romero, she has no direct political relevance and no absolutely certain message for our time. Her life and her writings are separated from us by almost one thousand years. In some ways, the interpretive powers of the academic text feel necessary to try and form a deep understanding of her life and her work.

Another part of the great difficulty of interpreting and handling Hildegard today, beyond the vast differences between her twelfth century world and our twenty-first century one, are the deep contradictions inherent in much of her work. This is perhaps unsurprising from a woman writing at that time; in many ways, the survival of Hildegard and her thought is itself a paradox. One of the best summaries of these difficulties comes from one of the earliest and most influential popularizers of Hildegard herself, Barbara Newman, in the preface to the 1987 printing of *Sister of Wisdom*, as she discusses some of the deep difficulties and tensions in the work: "...[Hildegard] combined a holistic cosmology with a dualistic system of ethics, a strong scientific interest in sexuality with an aesthetic and moral disdain for it, and an exalted view of woman's cosmic significance with a practical view of femininity as a form of weakness. All these dichotomies elude easy schematization, however, for they are deeply rooted both in Hildegard's own culture and in the older traditions on which she drew."¹⁶⁶

Popular appropriations of Hildegard – as an example of the potential contributions of Catholic women to the Church, as a call for increased female authority, as a symbol of powerful woman's spirituality, or as model of more balanced relations between humans and the natural

¹⁶⁶ Newman, xxii.

world – almost all share the same problem: they all attempt to lay claim to a universality which they don't truly have. Claims about the divine feminine, about the spiritual history of women, and about gender relations all tend to operate under the conceit that they apply to all of humanity. The word "catholic" itself means universal, and it relies on the idea of a universal message of salvation. Scholars trying to apply Hildegard's thought to the present day often ignore or forget that she came from a very particular time and place: she was a woman, but also a twelfth-century European aristocrat, a Benedictine abbess, thoroughly part of the world she lived in. Similarly, scholars when discussing universals also tend to ignore their own positionality, but the vast majority of the texts cited in this thesis, as well as me, the writer of this thesis myself, are white. Many of the authors are also white *women*, writing from a particular feminist lens which, while concerned with the rights of women, are frequently less attuned to the needs of nonwhite, non-Christian women. Does Hildegard have utility as a figure for nonwhite feminists? Are there womanist theologians writing about Hildegard? Are there *mujerista* theologians writing about Hildegard? In my research (in the admittedly limited context of an undergraduate thesis being edited and defended during a global pandemic) I never encountered any. Does this silence or lack of interest problematize the often implicit belief in feminist writings on Hildegard that she, as a medieval woman of letters, can be held up as a symbol of success and leadership for all women, not just white women? I also did not encounter any analysis of the problems attached to Hildegard's association with New Age, neopagan, and feminist spirituality movements, which themselves are often predominantly white, frequently appropriate the religious and cultural practices of nonwhite people for their own purpose, and have complicated histories with race and racism. Finally, I was also totally unable to find any analysis of the anti-Semitism present in Hildegard's work. Although I don't believe that the anti-Semitic content in her prophecies is

necessarily unusual for a medieval Christian writer, it's certainly troubling by modern standards. If we are to import Hildegard into the present as an authoritative figure whose prophecies can still be understood as meaningful for contemporary people, how do we address this? Especially in a time of rising anti-Semitic violence and a time where the question of Christian complicity in and responsibility for anti-Semitic violence is increasingly asked, this concern with Hildegard – and with many, many other medieval Christian figures – cannot stay ignored forever.

A further problem in dealing with Hildegard is whether or not she's a particularly *successful* transplant from medieval sainthood to modern sainthood. Although the saint as a definitive category in the Roman Catholic Church is far more clearly defined today than it was in Hildegard's time, the saint as a popular category is much more in flux. What is modern sainthood? Who are the modern saints? And is the saint still authoritative? Edith Wyschogrod in her book *Saints and Postmodernism* argues that the figure of the saint, and especially the figure of the saint as it relates to the genre hagiography, is still a moral necessity in the modern era – perhaps even more so than in the past due to the horrors of the 20th century.¹⁶⁷ Wyschogrod also defines the saint as the person that puts their “body and material goods at the disposal of the Other,”¹⁶⁸ or “one whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow (the psychological suffering) and pain (the physical suffering) that afflicts other persons without distinction of rank or group or, alternatively, that afflicts sentient beings, whatever the cost to the saint in pain or sorrow.”¹⁶⁹ She pays special attention to the potential of the hagiography – the story of the saint's life – as a moral blueprint amid the confusions of modern life,¹⁷⁰ and claims

¹⁶⁷ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xiv.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

that it's far better than moral theory as a tool for actually shaping moral action.¹⁷¹ The modern saint need not be connected to a specific religious tradition¹⁷² and can often be a political figure.¹⁷³ In many cases, the saint today is divorced from historical or moral meaning and is reduced to its trappings: "its gilt, its flowers, its stylized drops of blood, its severed heads."¹⁷⁴ Relevant to our discussion of Hildegard, she is also concerned with the relationship between time and hagiography. She writes:

Hagiographic narrative exhibits a tripartite chronological ordering: the time of the matter narrated, the life of the saint from birth to death with both its quotidian and exceptional episodes; 'authorial' time, or the time of recounting; and the order of time into which the story falls, that of the listener or reader.¹⁷⁵

Can Hildegard be said to fit into this estimation of the contemporary saint? Although Wyschogrod doesn't explicitly discuss authority, she does construct the saint, especially through hagiography, as having the authority to, through example, dictate moral action. The saint and their life is the material which can be woven into the garment of moral authority. As shown in the previous chapters, different groups have certainly been trying to do this with Hildegard. But how effective are those efforts? Hildegard today is not usually understood through her hagiography. The focus has been and continues to be on her work: her music, her medical texts, her letters, her visionary writings. There are moral lessons to be gleaned from this legacy, certainly, but it is by no means the moving, embodied moral lesson that Wyschogrod seems to envision. Moreover, unlike Wyschogrod's modern political saint, Hildegard has almost no

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

conceivable connection to the modern political world. To “prove” that Hildegard would take one stance or another on any contemporary issue is as difficult as to try to “prove” that the historical Jesus would be a gun owner or a union member – the separation in cultural and political time is too great for meaningful parallels to be drawn. Hildegard has no sweeping hagiography, no unique iconography, and her legacy, as has been discussed, is hopelessly entangled with the various uses of her work over time.

Authority in the present day is usually understood as confused and embattled: it’s no longer something unquestioned, but rather something that must be argued for, justified, and fought for, in spite of the fact that, according to Furedi, these very qualities inherently undermine any claim to authority. Furedi also writes that narratives about lost authority are almost always accompanied by fear of disorder, and that people continue to express nostalgia for the seemingly monolithic authority of the past and, in spite of repeated failures, continue to attempt to return to these older models.¹⁷⁶ This can be seen in the fascist movements of the early twentieth century; this can be seen in the fascist resurgence of our own day.

As I write this, the United States is in a state of crisis over the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid worsening economic, environmental, and health conditions, the voice of that nostalgia – the voice of the old desire for absolute faith in absolute authority – rings as loud as ever. And that is the catch with authority – as much as it has been abused, as much as it has been made absurd, as much as it has proven time and time again to be corrupting and dangerous, the appeal of following a rule that you understand to be completely and infallibly correct will likely never die out within humanity. As much as authority has been weakened and questioned, the desire to not have to make your own choices, to not have to work out for oneself what is right and what is

¹⁷⁶ Furedi, 395.

wrong, and to instead follow a leader or rule backed by some superhuman force (whether that be the divine, or nature, or science, or history, or popular consent) will likely always be with us. The desire for safety is likely as fundamental as the desire for freedom.

Neither Hildegard nor any figure like Hildegard was ever going to be a panacea for the problems of authority in the modern era. Just as authority as a concept can't simply be uprooted from the human soul, the various battles over authority – its meaning, its value, its nature – have also left their own indelible marks. Unearthing female figures, unearthing a history of environmental concern, and similar projects will never seamlessly incorporate the subaltern into the existing hierarchy simply by showing that, to some extent, the voices of contestation were present in the distant past as they are today. If anything, the lesson to be learned from Hildegard, and from the other women of her time whose words and legacies have survived to the present day, is not that the Church has always accepted women, or that in some idealized past women were benign spiritually powerful leaders, or that the authority of women would be a kinder, gentler one than the authority of men, but rather that authority has never been uncontested and that it has never been uncomplicated. The dualities and contradictions in Hildegard's prophecies are the dualities and contradictions of today; these are perhaps the most enduring and universal part of her legacy. Our struggles are not totally novel; the rarities, the oddities, and the resisters have always been there. Reading Hildegard and understanding the debates and challenges in which she embroiled herself teaches us that the idea of the static past – the era of absolute and perfect authority which is the subject of nostalgia – is a fiction. The message of Hildegard is perhaps not a call to any sort of moral action, based in the idea that she speaks to us from an easier, clearer time, but perhaps rather a reminder: change, not authority, is the constant force of history.

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