

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: CELEBRANT OF GREAT MYSTERIES

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HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (1098-1179) WAS:

- an acknowledged authority of her time;
- founded and headed monasteries and was an eminently successful administrator;
- wrote a mystical trilogy: *Scivias*, *The Book of Life's Merits*, and *The Book of Divine Works*;
- composed medical and scientific treatises, poetry, and the first known full-length morality play;
- advocated the reform of the higher and lower clergy, undertook arduous preaching tours at an advanced age, and made public appearances in marketplaces;
- wrote hymns and a cycle of liturgical songs together with their music; and
- carried on an extensive correspondence with secular and ecclesiastical leaders and a vast range of people of lesser rank.

THE 12TH CENTURY: RENAISSANCE OR "WOMANISH AGE"

- Historians refer to the 12th century as a period of renaissance: of spiritual and literary flowering, renewed optimism and confidence in the individual. It was an age of expansion geographically, demographically, architecturally.
- Hildegard viewed her age as one of decline and decay, calling it "womanish."
What was it that so disturbed Hildegard about her times?
 1. The political situation in Germany was unstable. Furthermore, the 12th century was marked by constant squabbles between local rulers and the German crown and the papacy and between European royal families.
 2. Conflicting notions of religious and secular power had begun to develop during the 11th century, and by the 12th century, the papacy was locked in conflict with the German kings and emperors over their respective powers. Prelates' political allegiance to the empire remained in conflict with their ecclesiastical obedience. During her lifetime Hildegard saw the election of some dozen popes and ten antipopes.
 3. Reformers were attempting to address practices that intruded worldliness into the Church. The main abuses were clerical marriage, a perennial issue, and simony, which meant the sale and purchase of bishoprics, abbacies, and other ecclesiastical offices. Hildegard was squarely in the reform camp, savagely criticizing clerical avarice, moral laxity, corruption, and abuses of authority.

4. The Church was also beset by heresies. Catharism in particular was spreading rapidly in the Rhineland. The Cathars rejected the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. They held that Jesus was merely an angel; his human sufferings and death were an illusion. Hildegard was later to preach forcefully against Catharism, blaming its rapid spread on negligent prelates.
 5. Peter Abélard pioneered a dialectical method in theology that contributed to the later Scholastic method. Other monks were suspicious of the use of secular learning and philosophy in matters of faith. Hildegard, in admonished against probing into divine matters and asking too many questions in theology, placed herself firmly in opposition to Abélard.
- The times, she was later to say, called for a woman—Hildegard’s influence as visionary and prophet came from the accepted Medieval belief that in times of crisis, when male leadership failed, God could inspire women to take up his work.

HILDEGARD’S VITA

- Hildegard was born in the Rhineland area of Germany at the close of the eleventh century in 1098.
- She had her first visionary experience before she was five.
- In 1106, at the age of 8, Hildegard was placed in the care of an anchoress, Jutta von Sponheim, a noblewoman, in an enclosure attached to the new Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg.
- At some point during the period 1112-1115, she took the veil from Bishop Otto of Bamberg and professed virginity.
- Jutta died in 1136, and Hildegard became abbess of what was by then a small cloistered convent at the age of 38.
- Jutta taught Hildegard to read, using the Psalter. She picked up at least a reading knowledge of Latin, though her grammar sometimes was shaky, and she could write. Her education was rudimentary.
- The monk Volmar, who later would become her friend, adviser and secretary, encouraged her to write down her visions. In 1141, Hildegard began to compose what became the first volume of her mystical trilogy —called *Scivias*.
- In 1146 or 1147, she received cautious encouragement from Bernard of Clairvaux. Shortly after, Pope Eugenius III gave her work official approval and her apostolic license to continue to write.
- In 1150, compelled by a vision, Hildegard and her nuns moved from Disibodenberg and found a new monastery at Rupertsberg. She supervised construction of new buildings, secured gifts and bequests that would make the monastery financially secure, and fought to obtain a charter of independence from St. Disibod.
- She conducted an active correspondence with fellow abbesses, priors, and priests, secular rulers, prelates, and ordinary laymen and women and visited the

emperor at his palace in Ingelheim in the mid-1150s; in 1155, Barbarossa granted her the Rupertsberg lands unconditionally.

- In 1158, Hildegard, then 60, embarked on a preaching tour, furthering the cause of monastic and clerical reform. Her second and third preaching tours occurred in the period 1160 through 1163, and her fourth was in 1170. Sometimes she preached in public, addressing both clergy and laity—this at a time when public preaching, or indeed preaching at all, was a rare privilege to be accorded to a woman.
- During the same period, Hildegard completed the second volume in her visionary trilogy, *The Book of Life's Merits*, and began work on the third volume, titled *The Book of Divine Works*.
- Hildegard also founded a second monastery, at Eibingen, across the Rhine from Bingen.
- In 1159, an eighteen year schism began with the election of the first of three antipopes.
- In 1163, Frederick granted perpetual imperial protection to the foundation at Rupertsberg. Such a charter was virtually unheard of in those unsettled times. to Hildegard. Hildegard sharply criticized Frederick after the elections of the second and third antipopes. Nonetheless, while Barbarossa destroyed some other monasteries for their allegiance to the Pope, he never harmed Rupertsberg.
- The final two years of Hildegard's life were marred by a serious dispute with the prelates of Mainz occasioned by Hildegard's allowing to be buried on the monastery grounds a nobleman who had been reconciled with the church after a period of excommunication. The community was placed under interdict. The interdict was finally lifted in 1179, and Hildegard died a few months later.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

- The Middle Ages were notoriously misogynistic. A woman could not publicly teach theologically or exercise authority in her own name. How did Hildegard gain a respected public voice in medieval Christianity?
- Christian tradition by Hildegard's time provided clear definitions of visionary and other types of experiences that were understood as genuine instances of supernatural communications and gifts.
- Christians at the time believed that God is likely to raise up the lowly to teach or oppose the strong. This belief worked in favor of seeing women as given special callings from God; in times of crisis, when male leadership failed.
- These beliefs worked together to create an environment in which a woman such as Hildegard could emerge as an influential charismatic figure.
- Hildegard simply accepted and conformed to the view of the church, which negated her as a woman only to allow her to speak with the highest possible authority as the voice of God.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICATION

- Women's visionary experiences were not self-validating. They had to be validated by male ecclesiastical authority—the higher the rank the better.
- Hildegard gained her own sense of charismatic authorization through years of interactions with male clerics who helped her to come to an understanding of herself as a legitimate "instrument of God."
- Volmar, Abbott Kuno, Bishop Heinrich of Mainz, Bernard of Clairvaux, and finally, Pope Eugenius III, all endorsed her, conferring incontrovertible legitimacy on her visions and writings.

HILDEGARD AS VISIONARY

- Hildegard insisted that her visions have nothing to do with dream states and that they do not take place in rapture (though she admits to having been bereft of her senses on at least one occasion). She also discriminated between two forms of seeing based upon two kinds of light.
- Hildegard perceives the *umbra viventis lucis* as a quasi-physical, though internal and constant experience of light within which or upon which appear the complex allegorical figures, often female, and the texts that serve as the basis for her major visionary works.
- The *lux vivens*, however, suggests the presence of another and more properly mystical dimension. The inexpressibility and the infrequency of the sight of this form of light, and the effect it has upon Hildegard, clearly suggest that she is talking about an immediate contact with the divine source of the *umbra viventis lucis*.

HILDEGARD AS PROPHET AND REFORMER

- Some have seen Hildegard primarily as a prophet and apocalyptic reformer and not, technically speaking, a mystic at all.
- Hildegard's prophetic call came to her in 1141 in the form of a fiery light that permeated her whole heart and brain and gave her an infused knowledge of all the books of Scripture.
- The illumination, with the subsequent command to "cry out and write," had come to her, she said, because the times were desperate, the Scriptures were neglected, the clergy "lukewarm and sluggish" and the Christian people ill-informed.
- Her mission was to teach, preach, interpret the Scriptures and proclaim the justice of God through her prophetic charism.
- Hildegard did not call for radical change of social or ecclesiastical structures. It was the abuse of authority, not the nature of it, that she opposed. She placed her zeal for reform at the service of an essentially clerical vision of the church and a hierarchical vision of society.

- Hildegard's preaching was apocalyptic but just as she was not a radical reformer or a millenarian. Her apocalyptic message is closely akin to that of the Old Testament prophets: divine judgment inevitably follows on human sin.

HILDEGARD AS MYSTIC

- Describing Hildegard as a reformer and a prophet does not mean that she was not also a mystic.
- Bernard McGinn, who has written a history of Western mysticism that so far runs to four volumes, notes that some, though not all, of Hildegard's showings fit the category of mystical visions. He observes that while the teaching found in her trilogy is primarily theological, cosmological, and eschatological, the visionary persona and the authority she claims for her teaching are in large part mystical. McGinn concludes that she is a prototype of the mystical women of the later Middle Ages.
- To what degree was Hildegard's theology contemplative and mystical? Like all monastic authors, Hildegard often spoke of contemplation; but she did not lay out programs of mystical practice and contemplation designed to lead to deeper personal experience.
- When she speaks of "mystical mysteries" and "mystical words," she is referring to the hidden meanings of the scriptural text. From this perspective, Hildegard is not a mystic in the sense of other twelfth century authors.
- But there are important mystical aspects in Hildegard and she is significant in the history of mysticism for the ways in which she used an appeal to visionary authority to ground her message.

CONCLUSION

- Hildegard is a unique figures in history who was both talented and prolific.
- To her contemporaries Hildegard was "the Sibyl of the Rhine," an oracle they sought out for advice.
- In our own day the voice that Hildegard had called "a small sound of the trumpet from the living Light" is again being widely heard.
- To students of mysticism, Hildegard remains of compelling interest, not only as a rare feminine voice, but also as "a perfect embodiment of the integrated, holistic approach to God and humanity for which our fragmented era longs."