

Mystic, Medic, and Musician
*Hildegard of Bingen's
Embodied Spirituality*

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*For it is the soul's joy to become effective in the body.
She strives forever to perfect the work of the body that was created by God*
-- Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei* IV, 19

On a list of things the church has historically ignored or shunned women and bodies are right near the top. However, despite the repression women and bodies have undergone throughout church history there have always been moments of proclamation by those brave individuals who challenged Christians to remember that it was the *incarnate* Jesus that saved the world and that it is with our *bodies* that we worship, serve, and love God. Hildegard of Bingen was just such a prophetic voice to the church. As a Benedictine nun Hildegard was a remarkable woman who embodied a spirituality that deeply integrated the body and soul, particularly in her vivid visions, medical writings, and musical compositions.

I was first drawn to Hildegard of Bingen when I came across the Swedish folk-rock group, *Garmarna*, who had combined Hildegard's lyrics and melodies into their own unique sound. What could inspire a group of agnostic and atheist musicians to remake chants composed by a Benedictine nun nearly nine centuries ago? A little research showed that Hildegard's music and poetry, after having been nearly forgotten for almost 800 years, has been undergoing a recent resurgence in popularity, especially in the New Age movement. However, I had never heard of Hildegard in any of my Church History classes. What had the New Age movement discovered in this medieval mystic about whom the church had largely forgotten? As it turns out, quite a bit. The more I dug into the life and writings of Hildegard of Bingen the more I was impressed at the breadth of her studies, the depth of her visions, and the richness of her poetry. Moreover, in a church that has been largely dominated by cognitive reasoning and male authority I was

intrigued to see what this woman theologian, leader, and mystic had to say to us today.

Hildegard's Life and Works

Immediately upon investigating Hildegard one becomes aware of the many “firsts” that made her so exceptional: the only woman of her time to be accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine, the only medieval woman to preach openly, the only composer of her time with a large corpus of original music, and the first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and female gynecology from a woman's perspective.¹ While there are many “firsts” in Hildegard's life, she began her life as “one of many.” Born in 1098 in Bermersheim, Germany, Hildegard was the tenth child of a well-off family. It was a time of tremendous conflict as the first nation-states formed, the Crusades were beginning, and the investiture controversy, which pitted secular authority against papal authority, was to rage throughout Hildegard's life. Perhaps in part because of the upheaval in the land, and in following the custom of noble families of tithing their tenth child to God, Hildegard's parents gave her over to the care of Jutta, an anchoress attached to the monastery at Disibodenberg. As an anchoress Jutta lived in an enclosed cell and gave herself over to intense asceticism and observance of the monastic life. One window of her room opened into the adjoining church so that she and her pupils could participate in the Eucharist and listen to the monks as they chanted the Divine Office. Another window opened out to the wider world allowing local people to come and seek wisdom and advice.²

Hildegard and Jutta were soon joined by others and by 1113 the small anchorage

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- 1 Barbara Newman, “‘Sibyl of the Rhine’: Hildegard's Life and Times,” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), 1.
 - 2 Renate Craine, *Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ* (New York, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 22-23.

had become a Benedictine convent. Jutta introduced Hildegard and the others to the Benedictine rule of life, which included instruction in the Scriptures and praying the Psalms in Latin. At the age of fifteen Hildegard freely chose to take the habit of a Benedictine nun, and when Jutta died in 1136 Hildegard was elected abbess of the newly established convent. Even though Hildegard had lived these first thirty years of her life in near total seclusion, she nevertheless quickly became actively involved in the world around her. For instance, in her letters she called Pope Anastasius IV to “wake up from the slumber of of tolerance and fatigue in discernment” and she even confronted Emperor Frederick I of Germany when she felt he overstepped his bounds in appointing a counterpope.³

However, it was not until she was forty that Hildegard revealed to the world the visions she had been experiencing since she was three years old. As a child Hildegard had visions with her “inner eyes” and she soon learned that this was not the normal experience of others. Out of fear that the visions might give way to self-deception and that they might be judged by others as faulty she kept them hidden for many years. It was only when God commanded this “daughter of many troubles” to “commit to permanent record for the benefit of humanity what you see with your inner eyes” that she finally consented to write them down.⁴ For the next ten years she endeavored to put her visionary imagery into the written word in the first of her major works, *Scivias*. Still nervous about whether or not her visions were orthodox she sent off a copy to both Bernard of Clairvaux and the pope. Both the Pope and Bernard agreed that “such a brilliant light” must not be “covered by silence” but allowed to flourish in the name of

3 Ibid., 29.

4 Hildegard, *De Operatione Dei*, Foreword.

Christ.⁵

Shortly after finishing *Scivias* Hildegard had a vision telling her to establish a convent independent from the monastery to which she was currently attached. At first Hildegard's announcement was vigorously opposed by the monks who enjoyed having their famous protégé at their monastery. However, when Hildegard became temporarily paralyzed and could not be lifted up by the Abbot, Kuno, they relented. Hildegard and her twenty sisters make the trip down the river to Rupertsberg where she began work on building the convent. The little girl who had entered a secluded cell had emerged as a strong Abbess of an independent convent.⁶

It was during the next few decades that Hildegard turned out an impressive array of work, much of it arising from the spiritual leadership that she sought to give the sisters in her care. Three major visionary works sought to address the Christian mystery in its entirety and depth. *The Natural History* and *Causes and Cures* describe the healing powers of herbs, gemstones, metals, and animals as well as exploring the constitution of the human body, including its illnesses and cures. She was also the author and composer of seventy-seven songs. Additionally, she wrote an allegorical commentary on the book of John, a commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, and hundreds of letters to people in all walks of life⁷

After writing to so many people Hildegard felt compelled to speak to them, and so undertook four preaching tours, despite her age and ill health. Over the next twelve years Hildegard preached the Word of God to both laypeople and clergy alike. She preached against the threat of the Cathars, a dualist movement who she thought were undermining

5 Renate Craine, 26.

6 Ibid., 28.

7 Fiona Bowie & Oliver Davies, *Hildegard of Bingen: An Anthology* (Great Britain: SPCK, 1990), 15-17.

Christian doctrine, and scolded the clergy for not resisting them with the true Gospel. She died on September 17, 1179, at the age of eighty-one. While she was never formally declared a saint due to administrative difficulties, her cult continued unabated and German bishops have proposed she be named a “doctor of the Church” for her theological achievements, an honor given so far to only three other women.⁸

An Embodied Spirituality

Though her life is complex and broad one thread we find woven throughout her life is an awareness of the interdependence of body and spirit in the spiritual life. Mysticism is generally thought of as epitomizing an other-worldly, ecstatic experience of complete *spiritual* union with God. Even if one is not a mystic there is a sense in many segments of the church today that worship increases in holiness as it becomes more and more divorced from our physicality. What do sweat, bellyaches, neurons, and unpredictable emotions have to do with “being spiritual”? Isn't worship better if we all close our eyes and seek to forget our body and the bodies of those around us in all their distracting shapes, sizes, and colors? However, any spirituality which divorces the body from the soul capitulates to gnosticism, that ancient heresy which stubbornly keeps popping up in Christian history. Whether it is the Cathars of Hildegard's day or the popularity of the newfound Gospel of Judas in our day any movement which devalues the body forgets God's proclamation that all he had created, including humans and their bodies, was good, very good (Gen. 1:31). Hildegard understood that “the soul assists the flesh and the flesh, the soul”⁹ and her spirituality, even the interior aspects, undergirds the notion that bodies matter because all spiritual practices necessarily involve our bodies.¹⁰

⁸ Barbara Newman, 29.

⁹ Hildegard, *De Operatione Dei* IV, 24.

¹⁰ Meredith B. McGuire, “Why Bodies Matter: A Sociological Reflection on Spirituality and Materiality,”

Mystical visions seem quite removed from an embodied spirituality at first glance. However, the way in which Hildegard experienced her visions was rather unique. From her autobiography we know that Hildegard described her inner vision as seeing “so great a brightness that my soul trembled” and that her normal perceptions were unaffected by her visions.¹¹ This stands in contrast to many of the other medieval mystics who experienced their visions as a trance, ecstatic unconsciousness, or in a dream. Hildegard is insistent that her regular senses remain unaffected during her visions: “I hear them in my soul alone while my outward eyes are open.”¹² Thus, even while Hildegard retained the use of her body she saw things with her inner eyes in vivid color: “mountains, cosmic eggs, spheres of shimmering light, colossal figures, towering walls and pillars” (Newman, 9).

What are we to make of this “inner vision” which does not directly involve the body and yet is not separate from the body? First, we must recognize that these visions were experienced consistently and as she was going about the rest of her life. It also useful to note the toll they took on her body. Frequently they caused her to fall ill and become weak. It is as though Hildegard is living at the edge of physical reality where heaven and earth meet; as if she is encountering the light of God's love in a palpable way that almost cannot be contained by that cracked and earthen vessel, her body. We might understand them as “hearing with the soul,” a way of perceiving the world with the spiritual senses.¹³ Hildegard's visions remind us that we are not *just* floating clouds of atoms or animated hunks of meat. Humans are embodied souls or ensouled bodies who

Spiritus vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring, 2003), 2.

11 Quoted in Finoa Bowie and Oliver Davies, 20.

12 Quoted in Renate Craine, 36.

13 Renate Craine, 36.

can perceive, albeit most of us more dimly than Hildegard, the spiritual reality that undergirds the cosmos. Hildegard, in describing her visions, captures what many Christians have experienced when they have an intensely felt experience of God:

And in the same brightness I sometimes, not often, see another light, which I call “the Living Light”; when or how I see it, I cannot express; and for the time I do see it, all sadness and all anguish is taken from me, so that then I have the air of an innocent young girl and not of a little old woman.¹⁴

While her visions are an expression of Hildegard's interior spirituality her medical writings are a good example of an exterior spirituality. Many today would not associate investigating the body and healing people of their ills as a spiritual discipline, but healing of bodily ills in Christ's name is just as much a spiritual discipline as a pastor who heals spiritual ills. Hildegard studied and documented the created order, the body, and remedies for illnesses with an intensity and thoroughness to be admired by any medical student today. Particularly noteworthy in Hildegard's writings about medicine and creation is the broad and deeply theological lens with which she approaches the subject. She looks not only for cures for her sisters' illnesses or at the physiology of her own illnesses. Rather, she is interested in how humans fit into the divine ordering of creation, why they are prone to diseases, and how everything from an understanding of God's ordering of the cosmos to the properties of different herbs and gemstones can provide remedies for these diseases (Glaze, 1998:133).

It was Hildegard's understanding of the human as both integrally connected to the universe and yet also the apex of God's creation that allowed her to develop such a healthy appreciation for medicine and the body. In agreement with the other medical writers of her day Hildegard thought of the body as composed of four humors. However, she develops a completely original formulation of these humors by seeing health as a

¹⁴ Hildegard, *Letter to Wilbert of Gemblaux*, 168-169.

balance between the “celestial” humors and the “terrestrial” humors.¹⁵ While bodily humors are foreign to the modern reader, the idea that health is achieved by seeking the harmony and well-being of *both* the body and soul can be immediately recognized by medical doctors and spiritual directors.

Hildegard's combination of theology and medicine not only allowed her to formulate an original description of health, but also allowed her to develop a spirituality of healing and medicine that is both materialistic and spiritual. While Hildegard recognizes that illness occurs because of the Fall this does not lead her to believe that we must rely solely on faith and prayer in order to be healed. While she does realize the efficacy of these things she also knows that the created world, with its “good and useful herbs,” can be used to mitigate the consequences of the fall. Moreover, to engage in determining cures for bodily illnesses is a spiritual discipline because it requires the God-given virtue of discernment to separate the “good herbs” from the “bad herbs,” as it were. Hildegard's work to dignify the tools of medicine and articulate a very bodily spiritual discipline of healing stands unprecedented in the middle ages and is a reminder to Christian doctors today of the spiritual nature of their work.¹⁶

A final aspect of Hildegard's spirituality that highlights its embodied nature is her music. Towards the end of her life Hildegard became embroiled in a dispute with the Church over a formerly excommunicated man who was buried on the grounds of her convent. This resulted in an interdict being placed on her and her sisters that prevented them from singing the Divine Office. In an impassioned defense of musical chant Hildegard wrote that “[t]he body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice,

15 Florence Eliza Glaze, “Medical Writer: 'Behold the Human Creature',” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), 135.

16 *Ibid.*, 137.

and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God.”¹⁷ For Hildegard singing is one of the primary ways in which body and soul are bound inextricably to one another.

On the one hand, music affects the body by softening “hard hearts [by] inducing in them the moisture of contrition and summoning the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ Music also fits well with one of the main Benedictine spiritual practices, *lectio divina*. In *lectio divina* one reads a text over and over, out loud, looking for the word that *shimmers* or stands out. Hildegard's songs take that idea and enhance it. As one sings the text it plants itself into the full person or, to put it in psychological terms, it weaves itself into the neurons and synapses of both sides of our brain, the creative and the analytical. Central to nearly all of Hildegard's songs is that they are a vehicle for the text, be it a Psalm, some other reading from Scripture, or a piece from the church fathers and mothers. Ornate, long, slow, and difficult Hildegard's songs allow for *ruminatio*, the “chewing on the cud” of the text.¹⁹ In fact, the structure of the songs is such that each word becomes an individual unit, forcing us to slow down and savor the text.²⁰ It only takes a little imagination to picture the interplay of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and spirit as Hildegard and her sisters sang her songs at matins in the stone abbey where the chill of the morning was offset by the smell of the beeswax candles that lit the church. Certainly this would have been a deeply *felt* experience that integrated mind, body, and spirit.²¹

While Hildegard's visions, medical writings, and music give us a picture of a

17 Quoted in Margot Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist: 'Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse,’” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), 149.

18 Hildegard, *Scivias* III, 13 as translated in Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, 83.

19 Margot Fassler, 162.

20 *Ibid.*, 164.

21 Meredith R. McGuire, 8.

thoroughly embodied spirituality, there are some places in her writing where we get the sense that the body is a hindrance to the soul. Specifically, she follows the general teachings of the Church at that time in viewing sex as impure and a result of humanity's fall from perfection. From this theology of sex sprang her inspiration, at least in part, for the idea that in renouncing sexual relations the consecrated virgin can “recapture the delights of paradise, and enjoy the heavenly music which Adam lost through his fall into concupiscence.”²² Additionally, in Hildegard's work there surfaces a subtle theme that while the body is needed by the spirit it always plays second fiddle to the spirit. For example, she writes that when divine grace is at work it fills with light those things “that had been concealed by the carnal senses in the weakness of the flesh.”²³ It would seem that, for Hildegard, while both the spirit and body are needed to advance in the spiritual life the body is more of a hindrance and source of weakness than the spirit.

Despite the above shortcomings Hildegard remains at the vanguard of her time in teaching and practicing an embodied spirituality. We especially see this when she is set in contrast to the Cathars of her time, who practiced extreme asceticism and saw all bodily functions as a hindrance to the spiritual life. In contrast, Hildegard saw the necessary unity of body and soul and advocated a life of moderation. What Hildegard's spirituality teaches us is that *bodies matter* for the spiritual life. Embodied practices like singing involve the full participation of the body, memories, emotions, and spirit. It is only through such embodied practices that the soul can be “the greening life-force of the flesh.”²⁴

22 Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, 47.

23 Hildegard, *Scivias* III, 13.

24 Hildegard, *De Operatione Dei* IV, 21.

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Texts

Unless otherwise noted, translations of Hildegard's writings are from Renate Craine, *Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ*. New York, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997.