

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: A FEMINIST ONTOLOGY

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Abstract. Two major lines of argument support the notion that Hildegard of Bingen's metaphysics is peculiarly gynocentric. Contra the standard commentary on her work, the focus is not on the notion of *viriditas*; rather, the first line of argument presents a specific delineation of her ontology, demonstrating that it is a graded hierarchy of beings, many of which present feminine aspects of the divine, and all of which establish the metaphysical notion of interpenetrability. The second line of argument specifically contrasts her thought to that of Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, noting areas of similarity and difference. It is concluded that the visionary origins of Hildegard's work may have to some extent precluded our understanding of it, and that her work merits consideration not only philosophically and theologically but from the standpoint of its early presentation of a gynocentric worldview.

Hildegard of Bingen possesses an odd place in the current project of resurrecting the work of women philosophers. Unlike other women thinkers who have traditionally been accorded at least some small place in the pantheon – Hypatia, Anne Conway, Damaris Cudworth Masham – Hildegard has historically been sufficiently well-known so that the contention that she was lost does not stand up. On the other hand, precisely because Hildegard already has a place, at least in theological thinking,¹ there is enough commentary on her work that the feminist scholar who chooses Hildegard as a subject may find herself in the somewhat unusual position, vis-a-vis a woman philosopher, of going against the grain.

Linda Lopez McAlister, in her introduction to a recent work on women in philosophy, remarked that Hildegard was the only woman

¹ The main work is *Hildegardis Scivias*, Adelgundis Fuhrkotter, ed., *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievals*, Vol. LXIII (Turnhout: Pontificat, 1978). Due to the renaissance of interest in mystical thinkers, Hildegard's work is now widely cited.

thinker categorizable as a philosopher of whose existence she had been aware as a student.² Matthew Fox has done extensive work on Hildegard, and she is widely perceived as standing in the same mystical tradition as Meister Eckhart.³ But Hildegard's visions are informative for us, I shall argue, in a number of ways. Fox, Newman and others have argued that Hildegard brings a peculiarly female dimension to her thinking.⁴ The concept of *viriditas*, for example, seems consonant with an ecologically-oriented wholeness, and strikes a chord with regard to current work by feminist theorists on deep ecology and ecofeminism.⁵ The challenge, I believe, is to provide an account of Hildegard's ontology which is specific enough to achieve philosophical adequacy and simultaneously sufficiently developed from a feminist point of view to be able to sustain the assertion that portions of Hildegard's work are gynocentric.

Both Conway and Masham have received critiques which focus on their construction of ontologies or metaphysical viewpoints that might be deemed to be feminist.⁶ Hildegard's work requires a similar explication. In this paper I shall be concerned to develop her ontology in such a way that delineation of its mystical origins helps us understand the nature of its gynocentrism. I shall first be concerned with some particulars of Hildegard's metaphysics.

I.

An area of difficulty with presentation of Hildegard's ontology is immediately apparent upon reading a work like the *Scivias*, for example,

² Linda Lopez McAlister, 'Some Remarks on Exploring the History of Women in Philosophy', in *Hypatia*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1989), 1.

³ See, for example, Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1985). Fox specifically makes the comparison with Eckhart on pp. 16-17; Fox and Bruce Hozeski (eds.) composed an English edition of *Scivias* through Bear & Co., 1986.

⁴ Helen John, 'Hildegard of Bingen', unpublished ms. (Trinity College, Washington, DC, 1990).

⁵ See *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1991): this special issue contains approximately a dozen articles on ecofeminism.

⁶ See the relevant articles from *Hypatia*, op. cit.; Jane Duran, 'Anne Viscountess Conway: A Seventeenth Century Rationalist', pp. 64-79, and Lois Frankel, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Rationalist Philosopher', pp. 80-90. With regard to Conway's work, a superbly edited version is available: Anne Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Peter Loptson, ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982).

even in its English excerpts and translations. The problem is that this work (and many others attributed to Hildegard) is the product of a series of visions, and the visionary influence presents us with assertions which, taken as a whole, are either inconsistent or incoherent.⁷ Even a commentator like Fox, who wishes to employ Hildegard's visions for his new theology, presents us with brief excerpts from *Scivias*, the letters and *De Operatione Dei* which give seemingly contradictory accounts of the structure of the universe.⁸ Nevertheless, some points of comparison seem clear, once the nature of the visions becomes apparent.

Hildegard presents us with a dualistic metaphysics, but with a metaphysical apparatus that allows for complex ontological relationships between various gradations of being. Just as Anne Conway posited a being midway between God and humankind (Conway refers to this being as 'Adam Kadmon,' following cabbalistic tradition),⁹ Hildegard seems to hold an ontological view which allows for the triune deity, the standard sorts of Christian spiritual entities such as angels, and then intermediate entities, such as the Virtues, which are above human and animalkind in the ontological hierarchy but which are still essentially spiritual entities. In various of Hildegard's visions these beings are personified as animals or entities with more human features but still metaphysically separate from the lower realm of existence. This same ontological separation seems also to come out of some of Hildegard's visions with regard to manifestations of the Trinity. Uhlein's translation of parts of *De Operatione* describes one vision as

... Love appearing in a human form, the Love of our Heavenly Father ...
Love – in the power of the everlasting Godhead, full of exquisite beauty,
marvellous in its mysterious gifts.¹⁰

In other words, Hildegard's visions allowed her to create epicycles on her ontology, as it were, which show a degree of union and interpenetration between the spiritual and material worlds which would be rare even for a visionary Christian. It is this aspect of Hildegard's

⁷ An interesting contrast is that between the cosmic structure given in *Scivias* (Latin ed., op. cit.), p. 42 and *Welt und Mensch* (German translation of Hildegard's *De Operatione Dei*) (Salzburg, 1965), p. 35.

⁸ Fox makes this comparison, which is taken from the primary sources referred to in the previous fn., on pp. 35 and 39 of *Illuminations*.

⁹ Duran, 'Conway', p. 66.

¹⁰ Gabriele Uhein, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1982), pp. 40, 37.

work which has usually been labelled 'feminist' by the commentators, and it ties into the other aspect of her work that has received extensive attention, the notion of *viriditas*. This notion of a life-force – this time a manifestation of the spirit through that which is material – is, according to Fox, '... God's freshness that humans receive in their spiritual and physical [capacities]'.¹¹ Thus Hildegard sees creation as having the capacity to manifest physically that which is spiritual. Although this does not give her any unusual sort of monistic view (which we find, for example, in some of the philosophers of the early modern period), it apparently yields for her a view which allows the spiritual and material to intermingle, even if the nature of the intermingling is not clear.¹² The notion of a dualism which allows for penetration or admixture is a metaphysically sophisticated concept, preceding occasionalist and other Cartesian notions, and allowing for the gradations of spirituality that I have mentioned above. Uhlein, working from *De Operatione*, translates Hildegard as writing:

O Holy Spirit, you are the mighty way in which everything that is in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness.¹³

The contention that *viriditas* or a similar manifestation of this commingling is peculiarly gynocentric is drawn out further by Newman, who in her commentary focuses on the extent to which some of the personifications of the Virtues mentioned earlier are also highly feminized figures. As Newman notes, this was characteristic of certain strands of medieval thought, but Hildegard perhaps utilized these personified entities in new ways. *Illumination Six* in Fox's collection of excerpts, largely from the *Scivias*, focuses on the vision that sees the universe as an organic part of the deity; the Virtues, Newman notes, are personae such that '... wherever [they] appear, we will find the Platonizing cosmology that captivates 12th century thinkers: the divine ideas, eternal in the mind of God and bodied forth in creatures; ...'¹⁴

Thus a cursory impression of Hildegard of Bingen's ontology is that it is a graded dualism which allows for some interaction between spirit and

¹¹ Fox, *Illuminations*, p. 32.

¹² Again, Conway seems to hold such a monism.

¹³ Uhlein, *Meditations*, p. 4l.

¹⁴ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 44.

matter. The notions of connectedness and relatedness, which we would clearly deem gynocentric and which fly in the face of the more atomistic thinking of others from the same period,¹⁵ seem even more powerful when we remember that Hildegard wrote a number of empirically-based pieces, and that at least one, her medical work, does not lay claim to being of visionary origin. In the next section a development of Hildegard's more overtly poetic and musical work will follow, coupled with an analysis of what can be gleaned from her metaphysics once these more literary pieces are examined.

II.

Hozeski's analysis of Hildegard's morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*, is of great help in a further refinement of her notions of commitment in terms of entities. The strong counter that could be made to any attempt to come to grips with her hierarchy is that the results of such an account, as mentioned above, are metaphorical at best and unstable – or unintended – at worst, but a look at *Virtutum* seems to bear out some of the niceties of her ontology.

Throughout *Scivias*, certain entities recur: the *Virtutum* repeats this theme. Although Hozeski's main concern is to establish Hildegard as chronologically prior to the canonically-verified liturgical play tradition, his analysis of the structure of the *personae* is revealing.

The 'Ordo' of the Virtues begins with a list of 'Personae'. The first of the 'Personae' are the Patriarchs and Prophets, followed by the Souls and by Humility, a Queen. There are three Choruses. The first consists of six members: Knowledge of God, Charity, Hope, Chastity, Heavenly Love and Discretion. The second Chorus has five members: Faith, Contempt of the World, Discipline, Patience and Modesty. The third also has five: Fear of God, Obedience, Innocence, Mercy and Victory. The Devil is listed separately and finally in the 'Personae'.¹⁶

This listing of the Virtues would not be so striking were it not consonant with a good deal of the *Scivias*, and were the Virtues not placed on a par, metaphysically, with several other entities. Hozeski

¹⁵ Fox, for one, specifically compares her to Aquinas in this regard.

¹⁶ Bruce W. Hozeski, 'Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*: the Earliest Discovered Liturgical Morality Play', in *American Benedictine Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (September 1975), 251-259. (This citation p. 252)

notes, for example, that ‘... a ... Soul ... passes through ... the conquest of the Devil by the coming of Christ with His virtues ...’;¹⁷ several of the scenes have the Soul in conversation with the individual Virtues, the Devil and so forth. Although Hozeski mentions Hildegard’s fondness for certain kinds of visual images, which are also found throughout the *Scivias*, her poetry and some musical works, the visual images are only very generally related to each other, and vary in metaphorical intensity. He notes, for example, that the finale of *Virtutum* has ‘... images of love, of darkness and brightness, death and growth ... with those of dryness and water, and fruitful flowers, plants and trees.’¹⁸ These images are consistent with many of the vaguer results of the *Scivias*, as found in the illustrations (and as treated by Fox) – more direct constructions seem to figure in any activity involving notions of individual salvation or the activity of the soul.¹⁹

Barbara Grant, writing in *Signs*, seems to come to a similar conclusion about the importance of a sort of ontological intermediary (or set of intermediaries) for Hildegard. Noting the Gnostic origins of some of what Hildegard appeared to use as subject matter, both for the *Virtutum* and her *Symphonia*, Grant writes:

Wisdom makes regular appearances in Hildegard’s visions and speaks as the Wisdom of God. We have recently learned a great deal about the Sophia-Sapientia figure from the recovery in this century of Gnostic documents ... The consensus is that the female counter-part of the godhead in Gnosticism is the Wisdom of Judaism ... she both precedes and is instrumental in the creation of the world [S]he has existed from eternity, and ... she assisted and harmonized the creation of the various parts of the physical universe.²⁰

Song 59, as translated by Grant, is specifically addressed to Wisdom and provides us with a precise visual interpretation of her – although this is far from unusual for a vision-driven work, the consistency of Hildegard’s assertions on this score merits some degree of confidence.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁹ Hozeski (p. 256) also cites Hardison as noting that the liturgical plays of the type created by Hildegard were constrained by a ‘sacramental psychology’. (Hozeski citing O.B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: n.p., 1965), p. 289).

²⁰ Barbara L. Grant, ‘Five Liturgical Songs by Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)’, in *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1980), 557-567. (This citation pp. 561-562.)

Given the nature of Hildegard's mysticism and the concomitant philosophical ramifications, the feminist theorist who wishes to pursue the importance of notions such as connectedness and penetration for Hildegard's work must make some comparisons with other metaphysical commitments of the time. Fox wants to make an easy comparison with Aquinas; although this can be done, it is not always to the point since it is clear that the origins of Aquinas's conceptualizations are vastly more empirical. The more obvious point of comparison is Meister Eckhart. Fox does himself make this comparison, and this contrast – along with some of the more standard Aristotelian material from Aquinas and others – provides a base from which we may expand on the significance of Hildegard's gynocentrism.

III.

The commentators on Hildegard seem to differ in precisely what it is that makes her work of philosophical importance. That is, if we accept the fact that Hildegard, as a visionary, is working from a different conceptual standpoint than many even of the lesser-known medieval thinkers, it must be inquired precisely what it is about Hildegard's work that makes it philosophical and comparable to other philosophical – rather than, say, poetic – work of the period.

Brunn and Epiney-Burgard answer this question implicitly by arguing that Hildegard's work is 'didactic'. They note that:

In general, Hildegard's visions have been considered didactic rather than ecstatic; that is to say, through them, she transmitted her knowledge in allegorical form. Her visions are not hallucinations, even when received in wakefulness, but they allow her to penetrate 'with the eyes and ears of the inner man' into the realm of the 'spiritual senses', where what one sees and hears is received in a supranatural light, 'shadow of the Living Light', and sometimes, very exceptionally, she penetrates that light itself.²¹

In other words, one might want to make the case for the elucidation of Hildegard's metaphysics and even a nascent epistemology – largely on the basis of what the goal of the visionary presentation is. We may think of Hildegard herself as not only motivated toward but actually

²¹ Emily Zun Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 8-9.

enthusiastic about the presentation of her metaphysics; this is presumably what Brunn and Epiney-Burgard mean when they say that here visions are ‘... not hallucinations’.

Given the foregoing (a view which is, of course, consonant with Fox’s, as well as Hozeski’s), one might be surprised to find that the intersections between Hildegard’s work and those of other medieval philosophers are rather more obvious than might initially be thought. Aquinas’s pedantic and semi-Aristotelian style is in direct contrast, of course, but not all of the philosophical points fail to be congruent. Consider the following passage from Aquinas’ ‘On the Composition of Essence and Existence in Created Substances’, from *De ente et essentia*:

Hence there is no composition of matter and form of any kind in the soul or an intelligence. On this score, then, essence cannot be said to be in them as it is in corporeal substances. But composition of form and existence is there ... Now whatever pertains to anything is either caused by the principles of its nature, as man’s ability to laugh, or it stems from some extrinsic principle, as the sun’s luminosity in the atmosphere ... Therefore everything whose existence is something other than its nature must derive its existence from another.²²

The preceding passage is exemplary because it contains less of the type of distinction frequently occurring in Aquinas and seldom occurring in Hildegard – that between primary and secondary substances, accidents and so forth. Rather, the language lends itself to the characterization of the deity which occurs throughout Hildegard’s works, and which is cited here in the excision from Uhlein’s translation of *De Operatione* and Newman’s commentary on Hildegard’s cosmology: the deity as the source of all things, and form as influencing both the individual soul and (on Hildegard’s view), the ‘divine ideas’, or Virtues.

Hildegard’s notion that an examination of creation paves the way for further knowledge of the deity is also found in, for example, the work of Peter Lombard: as Wippel and Wolter have it, an intriguing passage in Lombard’s *Libri Sententiarum* reads:

... it has been shown here just how some likeness at least of the Trinity is found in creatures. Without interior revelation or a revelation of this

²² Thomas Aquinas, originally from *De ente et essentia*, Roland-Gosselin, ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948); translated by A.B. Wolter and excerpted in *Medieval Philosophy: From St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa*, John F. Wippel and Allan B. Wolter, eds. (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 330-332.

doctrine, however, adequate knowledge of the Trinity neither was nor can be obtained from a contemplation of creatures. That is why ancient philosophers could only see the Trinitarian truth in a haze, as it were, and from afar Nevertheless, our belief in what we cannot see is helped by means of the things that were made.²³

That there should be at least some strong connection between the metaphysics which can be gleaned from Hildegard's visions and other medieval ontologies should not be so surprising when one remembers that, historically, the eleventh century is regarded as a watershed in the rise of Western culture. Palmer, whose European history is more or less a benchmark for generations of students, remarks that '... such a time [a time of dynamic change] has been the last century ... Such a time, also, began in Europe in the eleventh century.'²⁴ He also reminds us of the facts of the early years of Hildegard's life: she was born around the time of the election of Gregory VII (Hildebrand), a 'dynamic and strong-willed' reformer. Brunn and Epiney-Burgard are at pains to emphasize Hildegard's interest in the autonomy of her order; surely some of the impetus for her zeal in trying to spread her cosmology and its corollaries came from the historical events which provided the context and backdrop for Churchly innovation.²⁵

IV.

Perhaps the thinker with whom Hildegard bears the strongest comparison is Meister Eckhart. Fox makes this comparison explicitly;²⁶ for our purposes the more important point is that the Meister is regarded as standing squarely within the mystical tradition, and yet a number of philosophical positions are freely attributed to him and recur in extended commentary. The desire to characterize Meister Eckhart as a philosopher does not appear to stem solely from his use of the more Aristotelian and Thomistic terminology which, of course, was subsequent (in its extensive usage) to Hildegard's time – rather, Meister Eckhart is,

²³ Peter Lombard, *Libri IV Sententiarum* (Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1916), tom. I, 30-33, excerpted in

Wippel and Wolter, *op. cit.*, and translated by Wolter, p. 208.

²⁴ R. R. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 22.

²⁵ Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

²⁶ Cf. fn. 3.

according to McGinn, a mystic without specifically being a visionary.²⁷ In other words, it appears that the virtue that Meister Eckhart possesses is that he engages in speculative ratiocination about some of the same problems that Hildegard pursued through ecstatic and visionary means. What is remarkable, however, is that again we find areas of consonance between the two thinkers. Meister Eckhart writes that the ‘... soul ... has a drop of understanding, a little spark, a little sprout ...’, and that it ‘... has powers which work in the body.’²⁸ In a more extended commentary in Sermon 9 (one of his works in German, more accessible than several other of his commentaries), he explains:

... God is something that of necessity must be above being. Whatever has being, time or place does not touch God. He is above it. God is in all creatures, insofar as they have being, and yet he is above them. That same thing that he is in all creatures is exactly what he is above them. Whatever is one in many things must of necessity be above them. Some masters maintain that the soul is only in the heart. This is not so, and learned masters have gone astray here. The soul is complete and undivided at the same time in the foot and in the eye and in every part of the body.²⁹

In his gloss on this part of the Sermon, Bernard McGinn notes the extent to which Eckhart seems to rely on what Aquinas would refer to as the *via negationis*, that is positing what God is not;³⁰ he also notes that Eckhart makes use of the fact that ‘... the conceptual distinction between substance and relation is legitimate in thinking about God as three-who-are-one, but is not in any way applicable to the hidden Godhead.’³¹ In any case, for our purposes the noteworthy point is the obvious comparison between Hildegard and Meister Eckhart: Hildegard cites the ‘mysterious gifts’ of the Godhead (in Uhlein’s translation of *De Operatione*, previously excised), and notes the Godhead’s ‘connectedness’ to all living beings. Meister Eckhart notes that God is ‘... in all creatures, insofar as they have being ...’ and goes on to make an analogy between the way in which God is ‘in’ things of the material world, and the way in which the soul is in the body. The soul, he asserts, is even in the foot.

²⁷ Bernard McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 14.

²⁸ Sermon 9 (‘Quasi stella ...’), in McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Thus Hildegard seems to receive, visionarily, the same sort of knowledge – knowledge which, as Newman emphasizes, she wants to impart to others – that Eckhart receives largely through contemplation. It seems appropriate to assert that we would want to label both of these theorists philosophers.

V.

If we can find intersections between the interests and assertions of Hildegard and those of other, male, philosophers of the medieval period – as we have done above – it might be pertinent to ask in what her gynocentrism consists. Fox, Newman and Hozeski all seem to agree that there is a particularly strong gyncentred style to Hildegard's work, even if there is some slight disagreement about the manner in which it presents itself.³² The concept of *viriditas* alone is not enough to enable us to make this assertion: it is structurally similar to many of the statements Meister Eckhart makes about the immanence of the divine nature. Nor can we posit the mystical or even visionary modes of Hildegard's epistemology as the primary factors here; clearly, these are elements of knowledge reception which are quite common among the medieval thinkers of a number of strands of the Christian tradition.

What strikes one preliminarily about Hildegard's thought is the nature of her ontology and the gradedness of its construction. Recent work on feminist epistemology in the analytic tradition has posited the 'dialectical' and 'connected' nature of female styles of coming-to-believe as paramount; androcentric styles have frequently been characterized as normative, and detached and distanced from the purported objects of knowledge. In the paradigmatic case, we can agree with Bordo, for example, that Descartes' style is peculiarly androcentric because the desire to pull oneself away from the objects of the senses and to categorize over them in such a way as to achieve freedom from error seems to recapitulate, according to psychoanalytic theory, certain elements of male personality formation.³³

Hildegard's hierarchy of being, like Anne Conway's several hundred years later (although Conway, of course, employs much more standard

³² Cf. the title of Newman's work on Hildegard, fn. 14.

³³ Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987). There is an extended discussion in this work of object relations theory and its relationship to an analysis of Descartes' work.

philosophical terminology, including the standard rationalist constructs of her time), demonstrates an intermingling of gradations throughout its structure. Although we are tempted to label Hildegard a standard dualist, insofar as Christian thought requires this, Hildegard, like Eckhart, precedes to some extent the Spinozan 'all things that are are in God' by establishing her ontology as permeated by the divine. In addition, the strong place of the Virtues – Knowledge of God, or the traditional Sophia figure of the Gnostic tradition being chief among them – ensures a sort of concern for interaction of the principles of masculine and feminine which is almost more characteristic of thinkers outside the Christian heritage.

Several of the commentators report Hildegard's own awareness of her status as a female, and this fact seems in itself significant, for example, to Newman who notes:

[Her] texts ... interwoven as they are with references to her own simplicity, frailty, and femininity, insist on her authority with a defiance proportional to her fear that her books would indeed be concealed, altered, abridged, ridiculed, or ignored. In her *Vita* she tells how, when she was founding her new monastery at the Rupertsberg, many people asked 'why so many mysteries should be revealed to a foolish and uneducated woman, when there are many powerful and learned men,' and some wondered whether she had been seduced by evil spirits.³⁴

Somewhat heterodoxically, I would like to reiterate that the salient points here are neither Hildegard's status as female, nor her awareness of it. Rather, Hildegard's metaphysics is peculiarly gynocentric, even given the mystical epistemic base upon which it relies. Although she does not and cannot fashion the sorts of questions that would later be puzzling for dualists with regard to the interaction of two substances, she, like Conway at a later point, avoids these questions by positing interpenetration as primitive and by propounding a sort of metaphysical view of the union of the material and the divine which is, in its own way, a kind of precursor of interactive monism. Rupert of Deutz, a male mystic writer of the same period, shares with Hildegard the notion of visionary experience as a form of knowledge acquisition, but as Newman notes, 'His visions adorn and authenticate his writings, but they do not

³⁴ Barbara Newman, 'Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation', in *Church History*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (June 1985), 163-175. This citation is from p. 171.

determine the whole, and the inspiration he avows is of a far more general and less challenging sort than hers.³⁵ Augustine, like Hildegard, compares the corporeal light and the spiritual light, but for Augustine, ‘... such light-speculation ... is envisaged [as] a mystical ascent involving brief moments of ecstasy rather than a continuous illumination such as Hildegard’s.’³⁶

Hildegard, like the later Conway and Masham, has developed a gynocentric philosophy based on a metaphysics and epistemology that reject the divorce and detachment so common to male theorists. Although the commentary on her work, much of it done within the framework of Church scholarship, has tended to emphasize her status as a visionary and a woman, my claim has been that neither of these facts fully explains the strength of Hildegard’s work. Her ontological constructs, with the linkages between levels of being and the divine intercession of female or feminine figures, are themselves the most striking points of her theology. Hildegard, like Meister Eckhart, is a medieval mystic whose work speaks to us today. Unlike Meister Eckhart, she presents us with a gynocentric worldview that may serve as an antidote to our contemporary ills.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.