

Separated by twelve centuries, thousands of kilometers, and oceans of orthodoxy, Hildegard of Bingen and the Mary of the Gospel of Mary are two of the most intriguing women in the history of the western Christian tradition. Both searched for deep insight into the nature of life. Both described startling visions. Each established her authority to lead and actively taught the Christian message as she understood it. Despite these similarities, a multitude of contrasts characterize these women's lives and the writings associated with them. I will explore here both the circumstances which constrained these two singular voices, and the religious messages they expressed. Key to the different fates of these two mystics was their relationship to what was – or would become – the orthodox teaching of the church.

Mary, of the Gospel of Mary, is generally thought to be Mary Magdalene¹, frequent companion of Christ. Vilified as a prostitute by the winners of history,² Mary Magdalene is also rumored to be Jesus' lover or wife – an idea discredited by scholars but popularized in the box office hit *The Da Vinci Code*. Then and now, it is hard for this holy woman to be received on her own terms, rather than being defined on the basis of her sexual relationship to men. Most accounts of Mary fail to recognize her for the more astonishing role which describes her in the Gospel of Mary: more beloved by Jesus than all the (male) disciples (Mary 9:9), and receiver of advanced spiritual teachings (Mary 5:6). This knowledge nearly died out, or was suppressed, in centuries past, with the gospel apparently not recopied beyond the fifth century.³ Fragments were discovered in 1896. They were finally published in 1955, and again in 1986 with an additional fragment.⁴ Although her gospel has been available for almost sixty years, its readership is far more limited than the Christian Bible, and our knowledge of Mary herself remains modest.

Nearer to us in time and Christian culture, Hildegard of Bingen has the advantage of leaving behind an extensive body of her own works as well as other documentation of her life. We know much more about this noble-born woman of twelfth-century Germany⁵ than we do about the life of Mary, the closest Apostle of Christ himself. Major works from Hildegard's prolific writing career – including her *Scivias (Know the Ways)*, *Liber vitae meritorum (The Book of Life's Rewards)*, and *Liber divinatorum operum (Book of the Divine Works)* – were highly regarded during her lifetime.⁶ Tracts and letters from her literary activism have also been preserved.⁷⁸ The *Protocollum canonisationis*, an investigation of her

life and miracles, was undertaken in the thirteenth century in the Catholic Church's process of canonizing her as a saint.⁹ It provides biographical detail on this renowned prophet and polymath of the Middle Ages.

As women, both Mary and Hildegard had to bolster their authority to lead, but they were received somewhat differently by their contemporaries. After Mary conveyed the teachings she had received from the Savior in a vision, several of the (male) disciples questioned what she had said. Andrew regarded the teachings as "strange ideas" (Mary 9:2). Peter questioned whether Christ would "really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us" (Mary 9:4). In contrast, thanks to "official sanction of her prophetic abilities, along with her noble rank," Hildegard enjoyed "power and freedom far above those of most women of her time" and was able "to express her convictions with little hesitation."¹⁰ Still, she was not unconstrained by gender norms. Unlike me, Hildegard would not have been able to answer her sacred calling were she also a wife and mother. It was only by embracing the chaste ideal in a holy order that Hildegard could "rise above her native position and become like a man," able to pursue a religious and literary vocation.¹¹ Mary may have been evoking a similar idea when she implicitly included herself in the statement that "He has prepared us and made us into Men" (Mary 5:3).

Mary did use her sacred authority; having spoken to the disciples and "turned their hearts to the Good" (Mary 5:5), the Gospel of Mary ends with she and the others going forth to preach (Mary 9:10). Hildegard's career, including her preaching tours, as well as all her writing, the "visionary counsel and exhortation" given to leaders of church and state, and her "decisive ability to lead," all indicate that she made ample use of the authority permitted her as well.¹² And she did not completely accede to the gender norms of her time. While Hildegard restates "the prevalent view of men's superiority over women," she also "consistently counters the traditional theological and biological view that women are more lustful than men. Rather, she maintains that it is men who are lustful – women cohabit only in hope of children."¹³ In one way, Hildegard seems to have achieved a greater level of leadership than Mary. While Mary is depicted in her gospel as a messenger of the Savior, conveying what he has taught her, Hildegard retains a distinctive voice. She, too, attributes her visions to a higher power, presenting herself as "the trumpet of God"¹⁴ – "a vessel of divine inspiration, not... a creative genius," as was customary by that

time for any mystic considered valid by the Church.¹⁵ But her writing is “fresh and powerful,”¹⁶ her use of imagery “vivid and original”¹⁷, and the range of her talent so broad – mystic writer, influential abbess, herbalist, composer, alphabet-creator – that audiences seem nevertheless prone to perceive her as a “Poetic Genius” in her own right.¹⁸

Historical context strongly shaped both how these two exceptional women were able to teach and lead, and the way that generations have remembered them. The Gospel of Mary emerged out of the earliest period of Christianity, when the new religion was developing independently in different locations; “such basic issues as the content and meaning of Jesus’ teachings, the nature of salvation, the value of prophetic authority, and the roles of women and slaves came under intense debate” and “early Christians proposed and experimented with competing visions of ideal community.”¹⁹ There were not yet any canons, creeds, cardinals or cathedrals. While Mary’s authority did not go unchallenged, she could step forward and be heard – and she could say some things which might sound strange not only to her co-religionists, but to later, orthodox Christian ears. Mary had great latitude to interpret Jesus’ teachings and answer the call to “go forth to proclaim and to preach” as she saw fit (Mary 9:10). Indeed, her gospel asserts that no new rules or laws should be laid down besides those Christ taught (Mary 4:38, Mary 9:9).

Hildegard, in contrast, came along after centuries of religious strife, and theological and institutional development that reflected who won the various debates. Plenty of new rules *had* been laid down. Hildegard was able to claim and use authority by operating carefully within the established system; it was only as “an exponent of Christian philosophy and staunch orthodoxy”²⁰ that she could play a role in monastic reform. Against the corruption of nobles and bishops who turned the great abbeys into “means of personal aggrandizement,” her “mystical writings became popular among those who sought a more profound spiritual life.”²¹ These visions would not have been taken seriously if they did not pass the orthodox smell test and if Hildegard’s life did not display conformity to church authority (for example, by her taking of monastic vows).²² In this respect it was easier for Hildegard to “prove” the genuineness of her mystical experience than it was for Mary, in whose time orthodoxy and visionary authenticity had not yet been made synonymous by church authorities. Hildegard went so far as not only to conform to

orthodox views and church hierarchy, but to publicly decry heretical ideas. She stood “among the early apologists of unflinching orthodoxy ... unswerving and passionate, she denounced Cathar heresy as the work of the devil.”²³ Whether Hildegard would have evinced so orthodox a brand of Christianity in a less constrained context, we can never know. But it strikes me as possible that her position with regard to orthodoxy might be similar to the closeted, inwardly-conflicted gay person who publicly condemns those who are “out,” in a conscious or unconscious attempt to protect oneself from scrutiny. In any case, it was not only Hildegard’s “gift of prophecy and clairvoyance,” nor merely her “visionary counsel and exhortation... courage and resourcefulness,” but also her pronounced orthodoxy that quickly garnered “official sanction for her prophetic ability.”²⁴

Beyond the visionary experiences and mystical yearning that Mary and Hildegard shared lay two very different theological viewpoints. As one of the foremost scholars of the Gospel of Mary summarizes it, “this astonishingly brief narrative presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life;.. it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection;.. and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority.”²⁵ The Gospel of Mary repeats phrases familiar from the New Testament books, as well as excluded gospels like Thomas, such as “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mary 4:24) and “Those who seek Him will find Him” (Mary 4:36) and “He who has a mind to understand, let him understand” (Mary 4:29) – phrases that encourage one to open oneself to spiritual insight. This gospel approaches spiritual practice not in terms of laws to be followed or creeds to be espoused, but a state of mind or heart to be cultivated.

The Gospel of Mary also shares with the Gospel of Thomas the radical idea that holiness lies within: “the Son of Man is within you” (Mary 4:34); “the Kingdom is inside you” (Thomas 2). This is, to my understanding, the heart of mysticism – the idea that “Thou art That” (*tat tvam asi* in Sanskrit) – you are divine, of God, an intimate part of an underlying reality which can be discovered through direct experience. The theological emphasis in the Gospel of Mary is on discovering one’s true spiritual nature,

and the unity at the heart of life: “The Savior said, All nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their roots” (Mary 4:22). When asked by Peter about “the sin of the world,” the Savior explains: “There is no sin, but it is you who make sin... That is why the Good came into your midst, to the essence of every nature in order to restore it to its root... That is why you become sick and die, for you are deprived of the one who can heal you” (Mary 4:26-28). In other words, our deepest nature is not sinfulness, but goodness. Goodness is original; sin is alienation from it. Salvation is returning to that root, one’s true spiritual origin. Jesus was an agent of this Goodness – by his presence reminding us of our own native state, drawing us toward wholeness. As Mary describes it in her vision, the way to attain this restoration is to recognize the transient nature of this reality (“All is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly” [Mary 8:17]) – and to overcome one’s attachment to and identification with that which is impermanent: “what binds me has been slain,.. my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died... I was released ... from the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of time ... of the aeon, in silence” (Mary 8:21-24).

While course materials about Hildegard do not quote her writings extensively, it is clear from her vehement orthodoxy that she espoused quite different ideas. Hildegard’s views not only tracked to the theological victors of early Christianity – contrasting with the Gospel of Mary on such matters as literal resurrection, original sin, and the nature of Jesus – they were also influenced by much later developments in mainstream Christianity. These differences include but go beyond doctrine. Based on a “profound change in the imagination,” in the seventh century Christianity developed “a new view of sin, of atonement, and of the other world, which, in turn, laid the basis for a distinctive notion of the individual person and of his or her fate after death.”²⁶ Hence, while Hildegard, like Mary, experienced visions and expressed teachings through them – and while she, like Mary, sought esoteric knowledge (a “quest for reasons behind appearances”) and was influenced by a “Platonic ferment,” which probably had much in common with the perennial philosophy that Mary seems to channel²⁷ – still, Hildegard did everything necessary to stay in the good graces of the official church. She interpreted her visions through biblical exegesis, wrote seventy-seven sacred songs (remarked for innovation in their poetry and composition if

not their theology), and wrote “the earliest extant liturgical morality play.”²⁸ The topic of this play was so conventional a Christian theme as “a contest between the devil and the virtues for possession of the soul,” and in the process of developing this theme, she exalted chastity in particular (good girl, Hildegard), as well as invoking “the mystery of the Crucifixion” as the redemptive climax of the plot.²⁹ As bold and brilliant as she was, Hildegard always colored inside the theological lines. She would have risked her continued creative freedom – perhaps even her life – had she done otherwise.

Although it may have been less clear to Mary how to obtain legitimacy as a spiritual leader, she ultimately was freer to speak the truth as she understood it, as plainly or as poetically as she felt drawn to do. There was no guarantee that her message would be understood or heeded by those who received it, of course. Indeed, as scholar Karen King interprets the Gospel of Mary, “Andrew and Peter at least, and likely the other fearful disciples as well, have not understood the Savior's teaching and are offended by Jesus' apparent preference of a woman over them. Their limited understanding and false pride make it impossible for them to comprehend the truth of the Savior's teaching. The reader must both wonder and worry what kind of gospel such proud and ignorant disciples will preach.”³⁰ Hildegard, alas, was limited by the understanding of Mary's male contemporaries and all of their ecclesiastical successors, who shaped the institutional church she inherited. This reader wonders how she might have responded to the Gospel of Mary, in the private sanctuary of her heart. Whether Mary Magdalene and Hildegard of Bingen might ever have seen eye to eye theologically, Unitarian Universalists today would be enriched by encounters with both of these remarkable women and their searching religious works.

¹ Gospel of Mary, introduction – as posted to LiveText

² In *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, from excerpts of p. 3-12 accessed online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm> in April 2013

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Kraft p. 109

⁶ Wilson p. viii

⁷ Kraft, p. 112-113

⁸ Wilson, p. viii

⁹ Kraft, p. 109

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110

¹¹ Wilson, p. x

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- ¹² Kraft, p. 110
- ¹³ Wilson, p. xxii
- ¹⁴ Kraft, p. 117
- ¹⁵ Wilson, p. xvii
- ¹⁶ Kraft, p. 109
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109
- ¹⁹ *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, from excerpts of p. 3-12 accessed online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm> in April 2013
- ²⁰ Wilson, p. xiii
- ²¹ Gonzales, p.327
- ²² Wilson, p. xvi-xvii
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. xiv
- ²⁴ Kraft, p. 109-110
- ²⁵ *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, from excerpts of p. 3-12 accessed online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm> in April 2013
- ²⁶ Brown, p. 220
- ²⁷ Kraft, p. 112
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116-117
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117
- ³⁰ *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, from excerpts of p. 3-12 accessed online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm> in April 2013