

Faith: Hildegard von Bingen and Some of the Modern Theologians

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Source: *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 20-26

Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717031>

Accessed: 26-11-2015 12:00 UTC

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## *Faith: Hildegard von Bingen and Some of the Modern Theologians*

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Saint Paul tells us that “There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love,” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Maybe Saint Paul thought—and rightly so—that love is the greatest of these, but for the purpose of this presentation, faith will be the center of our attention. Further, we have all heard various definitions of faith, but many of us recall in particular the one from *The New Baltimore Catechism*:

291. What is faith?

Faith is the virtue by which we firmly believe all the truths God revealed, on the word of God revealing them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.<sup>1</sup>

Many of us now think of that definition as too restricted, too limited; and Hildegard would have, too, if she had been alive.

James Fowler has given us a more complete and more modern definition of faith.<sup>2</sup> During the past ten years he has emerged as an international leader in Faith Development, with his pioneering research in the field, including his development of a stage theory of Faith Development.<sup>3</sup> As he approaches the topic of faith from a theological perspective, his findings are grounded in extensive interviews with hundreds of people. He writes:

The term ‘faith’ denotes a rich, multilayered phenomenon. My own effort conceptually to grasp and unify these many dimensions owes a great deal to theologians Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Fr. William Lynch, and to historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. From these various sources and others and from personal observation and reflection, I have come to see faith as a complex phenomenon integrating at least the following characteristics:

1. A dynamic disposition of the total self giving character to a person’s way of moving in life . . .
2. Arising from and correlated with a comprehensive image of the conditions of existence taken as a whole . . .
3. With both (1) and (2) being shaped by the person’s commitments of trust in and loyalty to a center or centers of value, an image or images of power, and a master narrative or narratives, which orient her/him to patterns of order, coherence, and meaning characterizing the ultimate conditions of existence.

4. Like selfhood, faith takes form and is sustained in community; it is inherently relational. Our relations in faith are triadic and covenantal in form. Our investments of trust in and loyalty to other persons, and of theirs with us, are deepened and ratified by our shared commitments to centers of value, images of power, and master stories that transcend and include us and them, conferring value, significance, and truth in our lives.

5. Faith shapes its initiatives and responses in our lives on the bases of modes of knowing which combine imagination, valuing, or affections and reasoning in a complex logic of conviction. The symbols, rituals, stories, and teachings of religious traditions as well as other ideological systems can become the mundane causes of faith's awakening and growth.

6. Faith, with the characteristics represented in (1) through (5), undergoes formation and transformation in the interaction of persons with the changing events and circumstances that constitute the force-field of their lives. As an ongoing process faith includes times of doubt, darkness, loss of orientation and meaninglessness, as well as times of disclosure, ecstasy, and profound intuitional participation in the character of ultimate reality. A person's self-awareness, intentionality, and conscious grasp of the elements of dynamics of his/her faith vary in accordance with the person's developmental level.

When viewed in these ways faith is not to be equated with religion or belief. Faith, so described, is a generic or universal feature of human struggle for identity, community, and meaning. Religious traditions are the living, cumulative representations of the faiths of persons or groups in the past and present.<sup>4</sup>

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a historian of religion, gives a more religious definition of faith, but does not in any way contradict Fowler's more generic definition:

Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition, in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines; but it is a quality of the person, not of the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbors, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees, and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously both Fowler and Smith have given us more complex definitions than *The New Baltimore Catechism*, and, moreover, see faith as part of the universal human struggle for identity in relation to self, neighbor and the universe—and even to a transcendent dimension beyond the universe. Turning to Hildegard's ideas on faith, we find that, as is so typical of Hildegard, she was far ahead of her time, and had an understanding of faith very much in line with these and other modern scholars.

But before turning to Hildegard's writing, we need to consider the Christocentric dimension of faith, as articulated by John Hick, The Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell University, in his *Faith and Knowledge: A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge*:

As we study the Christian claim concerning Christ, it will make for clarity if we distinguish within it two movements or phases, which we may call (for want of a more elegant terminology) faith 'in' Christ and faith 'from' Christ. There is, first, faith directed upon the person of Christ himself in an act of interpretation which sees him as the unique Son of God; this is faith 'in' Christ. And there is, second, faith surveying the world from this new-found standpoint, and interpreting life and all that it brings in the light of the revelation of Christ; this is faith 'from' Christ. In this second movement of faith Christ acts as the spiritual catalyst for a reinterpretation of the believer's experience as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Hick sees the faith "in" Christ as centering around the doctrine of the Incarnation, whereby Jesus Christ is mediating the divine presence; and faith "from" Christ as the resulting reinterpretation of all life in the light of Christ, together with his various teachings.

We can now examine Hildegard's *Scivias* for her statement on the virtue of faith. The *Scivias*, written by the saint to teach the clergy of her time, develops her views on the universe, the theory of microcosm and macrocosm, the structure of man; and birth, death, and the nature of the soul.<sup>7</sup> The *Scivias* also refers throughout to the various virtues and ultimately ends with the *Ordo Virtutum* (Bk. III, V. 13), which is a dramatization of the fall and rebirth of a particular soul, and, in a sense, of all souls. The virtues are the main personages of the *Ordo*.

Hildegard discusses faith generally and in detail primarily in Books I and III of the *Scivias*, where the following pattern emerges: she presents some visual imagery regarding faith, then relates it to the individual – particularly in relation to baptism; to the community – Christ and the church; then to salvation – again Christ and this time the other virtues; then to the Antichrist, and finally to the Last Judgment. It will be noted this is the same pattern established by Fowler and by Smith in particular, who speaks of faith as "an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbors, to the universe; a total response."<sup>8</sup>

In Bk.I, V.3, Hildegard tells us:

After this I saw a very large, round and shady object. It was like an egg, with the top part narrower, the middle part fuller, and the lower part compressed. On the outer edge of this circular object, there was a bright flame which had a darker layer under it.

She continues:

Under the darker layer, there was the purest of air. This signifies that under the snares of the ancient destroyer, there shines forth the serenest of faith. This faith has none of the uncertainty of unfaithfulness concealed in it because this faith did not found itself but rather comes from a dependency on Christ. In this purest of air, I saw that very large globe of reddish fire. This truthfully shows the unconquered church which is shining white in the innocent brightness of faith. And the church

holds out honor to you. That very large globe of reddish fire has above itself those torches. The outer layer and the air restrained that globe so that it could not go beyond them. This signifies that the church is guided in heavenly matters to the divine precepts by the two published testaments, clearly the old and the new. The testaments guide the church so that it does not overextend itself in a variety of diverse ways, for the old and new testaments show the church the blessedness of its heavenly heredity. (Bk.I, V.3-11)

She then states that this very pure air has many spheres everywhere which signify the “very many and splendid works of piety . . . everywhere in the purity of faith” (Bk.I, V.3-12). And finally, she tells us a wind blows this very pure air about, which she interprets:

This means that through the unity of faith, very strong words—spreading with the aid of people through their true and perfect commands—spread throughout the whole world very swiftly (Bk.I, V.3-13).

Do we not find here the imagery that Fowler refers to when he says that faith is “arising from and correlated with a comprehensive image (or images) of the conditions of existence taken as a whole . . .”<sup>9</sup> Hildegard’s imagery primarily equates the purity of the air with the purity of faith. And the egg-shaped object and the many spheres are the environment of faith, the acts of piety of the people of faith in the church. Fowler tells us that “Like selfhood, faith takes form and is sustained in community. . . .”<sup>10</sup> And Hildegard uses the wind to move the pure air, which denotes the spreading of faith throughout the world. Again the movement is from the individual to the community.

In Bk.III, V.2, Hildegard describes a four-cornered building that is built in the likeness of a city, stands upon a mountain, and is like a fortress. Commenting on the building, she again refers to faith:

The fortresses are higher than the walls of the building. Why? Because when a person looks at the summit of a good mind, then that person builds high walls of faith with the virtues and the work of God. That person can ascend above understanding through faith, clearly knowing God to exist by the power of God’s divinity. So with faith, that person builds a higher and more distinguished fortress. How can this be? For the person builds higher and stronger virtues and therefore is not just dependent upon himself or herself. The person does not only hold onto his or her faith in God, but climbs up a green palm, which is *from virtues into virtue*. With the virtues, the most righteous faith is exalted and embellished, just as a city is with fortresses. (Bk.III, V2-26) [italics mine]

Hildegard is not only bringing out the relationship of faith and the other virtues and the work of God, but, more importantly, tells us that a person can ascend above understanding through faith, thus adumbrating Fowler: “Faith shapes its initiatives and responses in our lives on the bases of modes

of knowing which combine imagination, valuing, or affections and reasoning in a complex 'logic of conviction.'<sup>11</sup>

Hildegard then describes a house inside the four-cornered building, and a figure sitting at the end of the house's wall:

This image was sitting upon a stone which had been placed upon the pavement like a seat. This means that the replacement of the old law of the ancient people with the beginning of the new law of faith was begun by the true Trinity. For when God prepared all the virtues, faith appeared through God's work. And faith in God will be within the people right up to the end of the world. (Bk.III, V.6-26)

A paragraph later, she adds:

And she was looking toward the column of the true Trinity. This means that she stretches her thoughts out to the Trinity since the fact that the Trinity is three persons ought to be thought about continuously. Everyone thinking about God should think about the Trinity most carefully, and they should not forsake their thinking about the Trinity. (Bk.III, V.6-26)

Hildegard's connecting of faith to the Trinity is very much in line with Smith, who says that faith is "a way of seeing whatever one sees, and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension."<sup>12</sup>

In Bk.III, V.8, 9, 10, Hildegard presents a thorough discussion of the relationship of faith to good works, which, however, is so detailed that it is beyond the purview of this essay.

In Bk.III, V.11, Hildegard foretells the persecution of the faithful who will suffer at the hands of the Antichrist, and predicts that the faith of the institution of the church will be held in doubt:

The faithful will suffer persecution from the Antichrist right up to the time of the teaching of the two witnesses, Enoch and Eli, who despise earthly things and put their own work aside for the sake of heavenly desires. And because of the persecution, the faithful will doubt the institution of the church, and full of grief will say: 'Are the things spoken about Christ true or not?' (Bk.III, V.11)

She describes the Antichrist attacking the faithful as follows:

The raging son of destruction will come with the same deceitfulness as at the first seduction of Adam and Eve. He will come with monstrous ugliness and with the blackest of evil. He will have fiery eyes, the ears of an ass, and the nostrils and mouth of a lion. He will send people into rages and fill them with contradictions, pouring out the worst stink upon their senses and tearing the institution of the church to pieces with the crudest of greediness, crushing it with his great jaw and biting it with his horrible teeth. (Bk.III, V.11-14)

This, of course, will be followed by the Last Judgment where some will have been signed in faith and some not. Those signed in faith will have the

works of faith filled with the brightness of wisdom and will be brought to eternal happiness:

Certain ones of them will have been signed with faith; certain others, however, will not have been. The consciences of the ones showing the works of faith will shine with the brightness of wisdom; the consciences of the others will appear in the darkness of the neglect which has been openly discerned in them. This is because some filled up their works with faith whereas the others extinguished the faith in themselves. The ones without the sign of faith did not want to have any knowledge of the living and true God in the old law nor in the new grace. (Bk.III, V.12-14)

Hildegard concludes the *Scivias* with the *Ordo Virtutum*, wherein she places the character of Faith in the second of three choruses, grouped with Contempt of the World, Discipline, Patience and Modesty. Faith speaks when the chorus speaks, but she also speaks individually: "I am faith, the mirror of life (1 Cor. 13:12): venerable daughter, come to me, and I will show the flowing fountain to you" (Bk. III, V. 13). Hildegard's correlation of faith to life and salvation parallels Fowler's "Faith is a generic or universal feature of human struggle for identity, community, and meaning" and Smith's "Faith is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbors, to the universe; a total response."<sup>14</sup>

That Hildegard had a strong faith is not surprising. What is remarkable is that her understanding of faith anticipated the findings of modern scholars working to understand and define this important theological virtue.

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#### Notes

1. Rev. Francis J. Connell, *The New Baltimore Catechism: No. 3* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1943), 72.
2. James Fowler is Professor of Theology and Human Development, and Director of the Center for Faith Development at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta.
3. Fowler defines his concept of "Stage" as "a 'Time,' 'Phase,' 'Season,' or 'Passage' of one's life characterized by an age-related set of existential issues or challenges, and by the inner growth and outer changes required to meet them. Closely tied to biological aging and to bioculturally established 'life-tasks,' psychosocial stages come more or less on schedule and cannot be avoided," in *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle*, ed. Kenneth Stokes (New York: W. H. Sadlier, 1982), 186.
4. Fowler, 179-80.

5. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), 12.
6. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1957), 197–98.
7. Hildegard von Bingen, *Hildegard Scivias*, 2 vol., ed. Adelgundis Fuhrkotter, (Turnholt, Brepols, 1978). All translations are my own.
8. Smith, 12.
9. Fowler, 180.
10. Fowler, 180.
11. Fowler, 180.
12. Smith, 12.
13. Fowler, 180.
14. Smith, 12.