

The women of the medieval Church who were given voice and chose to use it were invaluable to the development of Medieval Christian thought. Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila stand out as three women, in particular, who made distinct and important contributions. It might be argued that these women, at times, were too willing to participate in the patriarchal framework of the time, thereby discounting their own contribution. However, consideration of their legacies reveals the fact that these women were quite courageous in their writing and their very presence in the spiritual leadership of the Church was effective in undercutting the male-dominance of their day.

Hildegard of Bingen wrote about a variety of topics, but her most important contribution to Medieval Christian thought might be her balanced view of the roles of men and women in relationship. Hildegard says, "just as the blood cannot be separated from the flesh as long as the spirit remains in the flesh, so the husband and wife cannot be divided from each other but must walk together in one will."ⁱ The idea that men are dependent on and incomplete without women would have been revolutionary in Hildegard's society. Women were solely meant to bring men pleasure and to make them appear powerful. Furthermore, Hildegard had a radically frank and positive view of human sexuality, especially considering the views of Augustine, which were pervasive in the Church of her day. Hildegard says, "When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight... And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it."ⁱⁱ Indeed, it is clear that Hildegard's writings began to lay the groundwork for relationships of mutuality between men and women that only began to emerge long after her lifetime.

Catherine of Siena is another important female figure in Medieval Christian thought. Catherine's most prominent contribution is her position that love of God must be the love out of which one loves Creation. While this is not a new idea, Catherine's writings are presented as visions from God, which make them unusual and caused people of her society to take notice of her insights. Catherine says, "love of me (God) and love of neighbor are one and the same thing: Since love of neighbor has its source in me, the more the soul loves me, the more she loves her neighbors."ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, we see that Catherine subtly proposes the idea that soul is feminine. Of course, the soul is thought to be the part of the person to which God communicates, so Catherine bucks the status quo by assuming her role of spiritual leadership and by assuming the very essence of the person to be feminine.

The words of Teresa of Avila came several centuries after those of Hildegard and Catherine and their influence is apparent. Teresa says, "You need not be desiring to benefit the whole world but must concentrate on those who are in your company... Do you think such deep humility... service of all and great charity toward them, and love of the Lord is of little benefit?"^{iv} These statements resonate with Catherine's emphasis on love of neighbor and charity as the primary virtue.

There are those who wish to say that these women could have done more to undermine the suppression of women and patriarchy of their day. Indeed, in light of a strong dualistic sense, Hildegard is known to have said, "man signifies the divinity of the Son of God; woman his humanity."^v Sabena Flanagan says of Hildegard, "Indeed, there was some suggestion that God might specifically choose the weak and despised to confound the strong. Thus to be a female prophet was to confirm women's inferiority, rather than to deny it."^{vi} Still, one has to ask, whether Christian thought and practice would be better off if these women had offered silent protest to the systems and structures that bound them, as it seems most women did? Most certainly not!

Indeed, the very presence of these feminine voices was counter-cultural. Inherent to the timbre of the prophetic voice is the sound of the oppressed and the repressed taking their place at the table. One cannot read the words of Hildegard, Catherine, Teresa, or any other woman writing before the 21st century without realizing the great lengths to which she has gone to make her voice heard. Whether or not these particular women posed a tremendous threat to the systems of injustice facing them personally, they sparked a revolution that is leading to the downfall of the systemic undermining of the feminine voice in Christian thought.

ⁱ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Visions*, 11.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/hildegarde.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 7.

^{iv} Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, Ch. 7 ¶14.

^v Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of the Divine Works*, ch. 100.

^{vi} Sabena Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 15.