

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 8
Issue 2 *Darfur and Sudan: The People, Politics,
Conflict, and Recovery*

Article 18

2024

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Recommended Citation

Furchert, Almut (2024) "Cosmic Partnership: Hildegard of Bingen's vision of an integral ecology," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, 310-326.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1293>

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol8/iss2/18

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Cosmic Partnership: Hildegard of Bingen's vision of an integral ecology

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Though Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Benedictine Abbess and polymath, canonized and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 2012, has been named a patron of ecology, only fragments of her ecological philosophy exist. This article attempts to introduce Hildegard's polyphonic work by outlining her theology of viriditas as the green thread that connects her cosmological, anthropological, and ethical theory and to show how it constructs the relationship between humanity and creation as a cosmic partnership. Hildegard's striking visual style is not only inspired by her appreciation of the natural world, but deeply grounded in her theology. This theology entails an ethical obligation for humans to live in harmony with creation and to take on the task to become co-creators in God's garden, culminating in a symphonic life in harmony with all creation. Thus, Hildegard offers not only a theory but also a practice towards an integral ecology.

"In the beginning all created things were green..." (LDO III.5.8.)*

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Benedictine Abbess and polymath, canonized and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 2012, belongs in the line of church teachers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Teresa von Avila. Overlooked for centuries, scholars are now rediscovering her contributions to medieval mysticism, feminist theology, philosophical, theological and medical anthropology, as well as to environmental ethics, musicology, sacred arts and the healing sciences (Furchert, 2021). While Hildegard speaks of herself as a little uneducated woman, "a feather on God's breath," Hildegard's reception has depicted her in grander ways: renaissance woman, mystic, sister of wisdom, prophetess, healer, or even "eco warrior", as the popular Hildegard interpreter Matthew Fox has it. He claims that for Hildegard to "defend Mother Nature is to defend the Cosmic Christ." Thus, Hildegard is "as ecological as she is cosmological." (M. Fox, 2012, p. 33-34). Though Minore (2002)ⁱ argues that Fox appropriates Hildegard rather for his own version of creation-centered theology, there is no doubt among scholars that creation is indeed at the heart of Hildegard's theology (e.g., Furchert, 2021; Schipperges, 1998; Zátonyi, 2017).

In 2014 the German *Foundation for Ecology and Democracy* named Hildegard of Bingen their "patron of ecology," honoring her as one of the most important women in history, a pioneer of the ecological movement, and a scholar whose prophetic power has been "shining through" for 900 years. Hildegard of Bingen has not only inspired her own sisters, but also other religious and non religious to follow her example by living a life of greening.ⁱⁱ The Chair of the St. Hildegard Academy at Saint Hildegard monastery (a monastery descended from Hildegard), Sr Zátonyi claims that in the face of today's ecological crisis, Hildegard's writings feel more urgent than ever. Hildegard sees the crisis of the natural world as caused by a defect of moral responsibility and offers her life's work as response: from her theological writings, to her public and church political activism and her caritative work for the ill (Zátonyi, 2017, pp. 50-53).

In his epoch-making encyclical *Laudato Si* Pope Francis (2015) calls for an integral ecology, which encompasses all dimensions of life.ⁱⁱⁱ Because Hildegard "is the original green campaign," the Pope's encyclical "was a missed opportunity ... to incorporate the thought of Hildegard of

Bingen,” argues Dadosky (2018), as Hildegard could offer a proper foundation for such an integral “spirituality and theology of the environment.” Just as Pope Francis “bemoans” the destruction of our natural ecology, Hildegard bemoans the “barrenness and aridity” which reflects “the loss of the original *viriditas*.” (Dadosky, 2018; see sect. 2).

Indeed, the concept of *viriditas*, the greening life force, plays a crucial role in Hildegard’s work, it lies at the heart of her cosmology, theology, ecology, and philosophy of human nature (anthropology), infuses her medical, ethical and psychological writings, and is praised in her music. According to Hildegard we are tasked to protect and replenish *viriditas* and to bring its greening spirit to all domains of human life, including philosophy and the sciences (*viriditi scientia*). *Viriditas* “enters into the very fabric of the universe,” write the translators of Hildegard *Letters*, God breathes *viriditas* into every living thing, “even the smallest twig on the most insignificant tree is animated with *viriditas*” and “the garden where the virtues grow is imbued with *viriditas*.” (Baird & Ehrmann, 1994, p. 7).

According to Hildegard translator and scholar Nathaniel Campbell, Hildegard's view on creation could provide “a toolkit for solving theological problems, such as the relationship of humankind to the rest of creation entrusted to our care.” It could also help to overcome the “exploitative interpretation of the Genesis command,” so often read as a call to subdue and dominate creation. Hildegard instead offers a theology of stewardship, integral ecology and environmental responsibility (Campbell, 2022).^{iv}

The scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) helped to shape the modern use of the term “environment.” The German “*Umwelt*,” literally understood as the world which surrounds us, refers to the interdependence of plants, animals, and their natural environment as an interlinked and interwoven whole. “Everything is interaction and reciprocal,” Humboldt wrote during his expedition to South America (Nassar, 2023, p. 20; Wulf, 2015, p. 58)^v This stance could also express Hildegard’s understanding of creation as a “*single, interconnected eco-system*”. (M. Fox, 2012, p. 34)^{vi}

Still, only fragmented views on her ecology exist to this day. This paper attempts five things: First to introduce Hildegard’s life and work with a concern towards her regard for creation and environmental issues (sect. 1). Second, to deepen Hildegard’s theology of *viriditas* (sect. 2), and third, to explore its divine origin as it is depicted in one of Hildegard’s illuminations, bringing together the universe and humanity as works of God, calling the human into co-creation rather than dominion (sect. 3). Fourth, we will ask how Hildegard’s understanding of the natural world and its crisis can help construct implications for an “ecological conversion” (sect. 4). Fifth we will conclude with one of Hildegard’s favorites images, the human being as gardener, which brings together her ecological thinking and her ecological practice, cosmology and human nature in a grand “symphony of creation” (sect. 5).

1. Moved by the “living light”: Hildegard’s life and work^{vii}

Born into an agricultural society in the high Middle Ages as the 10th child to a noble family, 14-year-old Hildegard entered the small women’s convent at the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, which became her cultural, intellectual and spiritual nursery. Thus “her experience of contemplative life and Benedictine prayer is pivotal for understanding the woman, the theologian, the musician, the healer.” (King-Lenzmeier, 2001, p. XV). Having been gifted with

visions from early on, Hildegard was reluctant to share them with the public. At 43 years of age, she gained support from the influential Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, who read to Pope Eugen III selections from her early visionary writings. After securing papal protection, Hildegard grew quickly into the most prolific woman writer, composer, and sought-after counselor of the 12th century, founding mother of two Benedictine convents, teacher, healer, preacher, and social critic. She worked relentlessly as an author, letter writer, and prophetic voice until her death at 81 on Sept 17, 1179 (Furchert, 2021).

Hildegard ascribes her authorship to her “*visio mystica*” (a term borrowed from Augustine), visions she perceives with the “eyes and ears of the inner person.” Thus she understood herself as a vessel for the “living light” to “reveal things of importance to her contemporaries.” (King-Lenzmeier, 2001, p. 52). Her visionary experiences led her to compose her theological Summas as a succession of grand visions and artistic illuminations unique in history. Educated within the Benedictine culture, Hildegard was well acquainted with early Christian texts, church fathers like Augustine and Jerome, biblical exegesis, and commentaries (Zátonyi, 2017, pp. 21-23, 30–32, 128ff). Her visual style corresponds with her theological understanding that one can speak about God only in visual and metaphorical language,^{viii} and with the biblical and Benedictine hermeneutics of image and word. Using vivid imagery throughout, to mirror the beauty of creation, the depth of the cosmos, and the mystery of the Divine, Hildegard guides our attention in a “hermeneutic spiral of acquaintance and inquiry” (Schipperges, 1998, p. 52). Creating a visual rather than a verbal expression of Christian tradition distinguishes her theological writings from other medieval summas. By enfolding a complex interplay of the visible and invisible world, micro- and macrocosmos, body and soul, Hildegard points to the interconnectedness of creation, history and human responsibility (Furchert, 2021).

Hildegard’s philosophy is steeped in medieval symbolism, her monastic upbringing, and her appreciation of the sacredness of nature. At its heart stands the human as the image of God (*imago Dei*), embedded in the cosmic order and embraced by Divine motherly love (see sect. 3). Hildegard translator and scholar Barbara Newman (1987) describes Hildegard’s work as the culmination of sapiential thought traditions, which balances traditional masculine creator images with *sapientia* (wisdom), the Feminine Divine, mother of all living, who suffuses the cosmos with life giving wisdom and healing powers.

Hildegard leaves behind a complex “polyphony” of writings (King-Lenzmeier, 2001) including her visionary trilogy written in the style of medieval summas. Her works also include texts on medicine and natural science; musical compositions (e.g., 77 liturgical songs, and her opera *Ordo virtutum*); various homilies and commentaries and more than 300 pastoral letters to popes, emperors, and lay people. Her first theological summa *Scivias* (“*Know Thy Ways*”) walks us through 26 stunning visuals telling the story of creation and redemption. The 4th vision famously portrays the universe as an egg, alluding to the anatomy of human birth. The fifth vision illuminates a child in her mother’s womb, receiving the Divine spark like a fireball from heaven. This incarnation narrative continues in a series of panels about the journey of the soul and its many trials on its way towards original wisdom. In her second summa *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (“*Book of Life’s Merits*”) Hildegard unfolds her distinct virtue ethics as dialogue between 35 personified vices and virtues. The dialogue later finds its unique expression in *Ordo Virtutum*, probably the first liturgical morality play of her time. Hildegard’s final cosmological summa, *Liber Divinorum*

Operum ("Book of Divine Works"), brings together key terms like *viriditas*, *caritas*, and *rationalitas* into a "final, great synthesis" (Furchert, 2021; King-Lenzmeier, 2001, p. 62; see sect. 3).

Her *Testamentum propheticum*, a letter Hildegard left for her nuns at Rupertsberg, was reconstructed in 2014 from the original Latin manuscript, giving an intimate summary of her life's work.^{ix} Here, Hildegard reminds her sisters that the whole creation has been created with humanity in mind. Contrary to the Platonic understanding, Hildegard sees the human being as the perfect work of God not despite but because we have our life in unity of body and soul (Zátonyi, 2016, pp. 68–69; see sect. 3). Lastly, Hildegard's art of healing as expressed in her writings on nature and medicine (*Causae et Curae; Physica*) can be read as "a successful synthesis" of medical and herbalist knowledge of her time and antiquity, the Christian spirit of *humanitas*, and the Benedictine understanding of *miser cordia*. Her work provides witness to the Benedictine healing practices and care for the sick as established in the medieval European monasteries (Schipperges, 1998, pp. 110, 105). We will see in the following section that Hildegard's philosophy of health and healing, as well as her understanding of Divine creation and human nature, is deeply infused with her understanding of "viriditas."

2. Divine Greening: Hildegard's theological philosophy of *viriditas*

Hildegard's thinking is as theological as it is philosophical.^x It is grounded in her appreciation of the sacredness of nature, proposing the contemplation of creation as a way to know God (*vestigia Dei*). Her key term *viriditas*, which she derived from the Latin *viridis* (green), and which refers to the greening life force which animates all living things, has been described as one of Hildegard's "theological hallmarks." Hildegard was most likely introduced to the concept through the writings of Gregory the Great (540-604). Gregory refers to *viriditas* as the "newness and fecundity of creation." While *viriditas* in Gregory appears in only one biblical commentary, it becomes the 'green thread' in Hildegard's polyphonic work. She even uses *viriditas* as "the central defining feature of God," e.g. focusing on *fruitfulness* and *vitality* as Divine attributes (Dadosky, 2018, pp. 83–84; Mews, 1998, pp. 57–58). Here is how the translators of Hildegard's *Letters* summarize her use of *viriditas*:

"In Hildegard's usage it is a profound, immense, dynamically energized term. The world in the height of spring season is filled with *viriditas*, God breathed the breath of *viriditas* into the inhabitants of the Garden Eden, ... the sun brings the life of *viriditas* into the world; ... the garden where the virtues grow is imbued with *viriditas*, the neophyte must strive for *viriditas*, and the holy Virgin is the *viridissima virga*." (Baird & Ehrmann, 1994, p. 7)

We can see that this flourishing force animated by the Divine breath not only brings greening to the natural world which surrounds us, but also to our inner world by growing virtues and the good life (Zátonyi, 2016, pp. 235–236). Just as she describes Divine incarnation in green allegories, (e.g., the greening word, the greening virgin etc.), Hildegard depicts the human being as the bright green heart of nature. (Schipperges, 1998, p. 95)

1. Greening natural life: According to Hildegard the natural world offers us first-hand experiences of the indwelling divine life force in its sprouting, blossoming, and flourishing. *Viriditas* shines through the structures of the world and composes the biological and cosmological forces giving vitality and life to all (Schipperges, 1998, p. 111, see sect. 3). In the words of Hildegard:

“Greenness brings forth the blossom, and the blossom the fruit. Clouds travel across the heavens. The moon and the stars burn in all their brilliance and fiery energy. The life-force urges new flowers from dry and withered wood.” (PL 171 A*)

Dadosky summarizes Hildegard’s theology of *viriditas* as “God’s creative action:” God’s greenness suffuses and permeates the entire created order with its breath of life. “Not only is it generative, but it is also regenerative with the promise of restoration.” (Dadosky, 2018, p. 88). Thus, for Hildegard *viriditas* goes beyond the mere greenness of the natural world but points to its indwelling divinity. It “represents the principle of all life, growth, and fertility flowing from the life-creating power of God.” (Newman, 1987, p. 102).

2. *Greening inner life:* As we can witness *viriditas* in the natural world around us, it also gives greening to our spiritual life. Hildegard’s affinity for green metaphors comes to life when she compares the soul in the body to the sap in a tree (Sc I.5). Just as the sap gives life to the tree and enables its growth, greening and blossoming, the soul does so to the human body. Our intelligence (*intellectus*) corresponds with the green of branches and leaves, our will (*voluntas*) with its blossoming, our spirit (*animus*) with the trees’ ripening fruits and our reasoning (*ratio*) with the ripe and mature fruit. Hence body and soul are no opponents, instead the Divine life force makes them one (“unum opus”). And the soul loves her body like a beautiful cloth (Schipperges, 1998, p. 111; Furchert, 2021):

For just as the Word of God has penetrated everything in creation, the soul penetrates the whole body in order to have an effect on it. The soul is the *viriditas* of the flesh. For indeed, the body grows and progresses through the soul just as the Earth becomes fruitful through moisture (LDO I 4.22).

3. *Health and sickness* are both understood from within this concept of the greening life force, which encompasses all dimensions of life: the physiological, psychological, spiritual, ethical and ecological. A healthy life relies on a continuous flow of *viriditas* and the lack of health is also a lack of greening (*ariditas*), which is indicated by “a shriveling into barrenness” (Craine, 1997, p. 76). In describing this process Hildegard borrows organic allegories throughout:

If we surrender the green vitality of virtues and give ourselves over to the drought of our indolence so that we lack the sap of life and the greening power of good deeds, then the powers of our soul will begin to fade and dry up... (LDO 1.4.57).

Thus, the task of the human journey is to achieve and maintain wholeness by overcoming dryness (*ariditas*) and cultivating greenness. Hildegard’s second theological Summa, *The Book on Life’s Merits*, focuses on its ethical implications by exploring the relationship between vices and virtues (King-Lenzmeier, 2001, p. 51). For instance she describes a vice which consists in a blindness to creation, and thus lacks *viriditas*:

Worldly sorrow does not have the joy of heavenly things. It is like a wind that does not have the usefulness of greenness or dryness, but simply scatters everything it touches. (...)

As a result of not having spiritual breath, worldly sorrow dries up all living things (LVM 5. 62-63).

Such Worldly Sorrow suggests certain forms of depression we know today, especially those which are characterized by an alienation from the natural world. Paralyzed in body and spirit, and isolated from creation, Worldly Sorrow wails in her unhappiness in a long monologue: "I was born into unhappiness, and I live without any consolation."

Hildegard does not shy away from giving practical advice on how to restore *viriditas*, borrowing from the Benedictine way of life: e.g. by (re)connecting to the earth and the creator, by fostering a healthy life-style and diet, and healthy relations in body-soul-spirit (Furchert, 2018, 2021). So, following Hildegard's dialogues of vices and virtues, we find Heavenly Joy answering Wordly Sadness (King-Lenzmeier, 2001, pp. 58–59). While collecting "roses and lilies and all greenness (*omnem viriditatem*)" in her lap she speaks:

Look at the sun, moon and stars, at all the embellishments of the earth's greenness and consider how much prosperity God gives man with all these things (...). Who gives you these bright and good things unless it is God? (LVM 5. 9-11).

In the following, we want to look at the Divine origin of *viriditas* and how it suffuses the world of nature and humanity.

3. Cosmic partnership: Hildegard's Cosmological Anthropology of *viriditas*



Figure 1 image: *Liber Divinorum Operum* I.2: The Cosmic Spheres and Human Being. [Biblioteca Statale di Lucca, MS 1942, fol. 9r](http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html) (early 13th-cen.) By permission of the [Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism](http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html). source: <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html>

Hildegard's final cosmological summa, *Liber Divinorum Operum* (Book of Divine Works), brings together her key terms *viriditas*, *caritas*, and *rationalitas*. It introduces *viriditas* as the "greenness of God's finger" (*viriditas digiti Dei*) that propels all creation into being through eternal love. Thus love (*caritas*) is the guiding creation principle – the first cause of the world. It is expressed in a relational act of creation set into motion by the resounding word (*rationalitas*) of the beginning (Zátonyi, 2016, p. 53ff; Furchert, 2021). Hildegard enfolded this grand vision in a succession of stunning illuminations, illustrating her view on the cosmos, human nature and their interrelation (LDO, I 1 1 ff).^{xi}

I. Cosmology: In the first illumination the divine life force appears as a shimmering image of a beautiful figure too radiant to look at, clad in a tunic, brighter than the sun, speaking:

I am the supreme and fiery force who kindled every living spark.... As I circled the whirling sphere with my upper wings [that is, with wisdom], I ordered it rightly. (...) I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. With every airy breath I awaken all things as with invisible life to sustain all things. (...)

I shine in the water, I burn in the sun, and the moon, and the stars. Mine is that mysterious force of the invisible wind.... I am the breath of all the living. (...)
I am Life, whole and undivided (*vita integra*) —not hewn from any stone, nor budded from branches, nor rooted in virile strength; but all that lives has its root in Me (LDO I 1-2).^{xii}

This whole and undivided life force described here so vividly that permeates every living being resonates with concepts like the Greek *pneuma* or the Asian *Chi* or Mother Earth philosophies from indigenous traditions. It is said to touch on the interface between the Western mystical ideal of "supreme union" and Eastern perspectives on "webs of interconnection" and "interbeingness." (Taylor, 2009, p. 130f). In Hildegard's vision, the fiery life (*igneus vita*) is visualized by the shimmering two-headed figure symbolizing the love (*caritas*) of the heavenly father (the older head appearing above the head of the younger figure) taking on human form (the incarnate word), creating and holding the whole universe in motherly embrace. Hildegard is less interested in a doctrine of the trinity here than how those different aspects of divinity help us understand the principle of incarnation, e.g. metaphorically expressed in the relationship between Eternity (father), Word (son) and Breath (Holy Spirit). (Mews, 1998, pp. 58, 60).

In the introductory monologue of the vision the great "I am" introduces itself also as the Word of the beginning, through which all creation comes into being:

I am also reason (*rationalitas*), carrying with me the breath of the resounding word through which all creation came to be. ...I breathed life into all, ... because I am life (LDO I 1 2).

Hildegard's use of *rationalitas* here refers to the Greek *logos* in the creation narrative in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word...". It is a text that deeply moved Hildegard and to which she refers often. But her understanding of *rationalitas* is different from the "rationality" of post-enlightenment generations. It neither means a form of heady thinking nor mere philosophical reasoning, instead her concept of *rationalitas* encompasses the triunity of "Divine greening power,

ordering wisdom and self-giving love” (Zátonyi, 2017, p. 53). It is personified in the feminine figures of *viriditas*, *sapientia* (wisdom) and *caritas* (love). In the opening vision the eternal Word appears like a flame within the divine fire continuously incarnating “through the viridity of the Holy Spirit” (Mews, 1998, p. 58). This divine life force of *rationalitas* is also the root, from which the resounding word blossoms (LDO I 1 2).

In her *Testamentum Propheticum* Hildegard depicts the sounding Word of the beginning as the sound of life, which fills the whole world with Divine melody. By answering the sounding word, we become part of this cosmic symphony. Hildegard’s musical image also marks the dimension of time coming into being. It is the condition to create living beings marked by beginning and end on a path of change and transformation. With the sounding word, history begins just like the history of salvation does (Zátonyi, 2017).

2. *Anthropology*: In the second illumination (LDO I 2ff), a circling wheel (*rota*) appears at the heart of the same radiant figure which grows into a fiery circle of the elements, holding the whole cosmos, world and humanity, which in turn is lovingly embraced by the arms of the divine figure. In the third illumination a human appears at the wheel’s center, naked, spanning the directions of the world, grounded on the earth and embedded in the cosmological order (Furchert, 2021). Here we find the world inscribed on the human body itself as all elements were created for humanity. Or as Hildegard writes elsewhere: “God has adorned the universe with brilliance and beauty. He has filled it with the riches of creation, for the service of humankind” (LVM III, 26*). Hence, every created thing has its proper place as it exemplifies the work of God (*operatio Dei*): “The stars sparkle with the moon’s light and the moon is illuminated by the sun’s fire. Each thing serves something higher and nothing exceeds its due measure” (LVM II, 22*) Humans are made in the image and likeness of God. In Hildegard’s view this image is the garment of the Incarnate word; the divine Word resonating through creation: “The reality of the word becomes fruitful in greenness,” she writes in her *Causes and Cures* (22, 15*). Everything in creation is created for the purpose of God entering in. In her *Book on Live’s Merits*, Hildegard speaks about the “great architect of the world” who created human beings to “perform their actions so that, by means of earth, water, air, and fire (of which, after all, they themselves are composed), they might bring all God’s and their own works to fruition” (LVM VI, 59*) Here, both the cosmic cycle as well as the course of history provide humans with life giving *viriditas*.

Campbell shows that the way Hildegard explores the relationship between cosmos and humanity is with the analogy of macrocosm and microcosm, referring back to the ancient idea that all of creation (macrocosm) is contained and reflected in every person (microcosm), “or as Hildegard puts it, the human version *is* all of creation or every creature (*omnis creatura*)” (Campbell, 2022). Thus, the human condition holds all of creation (Zátonyi, 2022, p. 92). “Consequently,” Hildegard writes, “humanity is entirely the full work of God (*plenum opus Dei*). Only humans know, survey and control the requirements of the earth and discern heavenly things in the mirror of faith.” (LDO IV, 92*). As we are part of God’s work, Hildegard reminds us, we are also called to be “the workman of God,” shadowing the mysteries of God. (King-Lenzmeier, 2001, p. 63).

3. *Cosmic partnership*: The above vision of the cosmic wheel is a powerful example of how Hildegard sees the human being “physically and morally enmeshed within the whole universe.” (Campbell, 2022) As there is a network of lines crisscrossing the cosmic spheres, they also connect

the human figure like beams of energy that connect each part of creation with another, so all become parts of a complicated net of *viriditas* which balances and restrains its part as needed. Hildegard even “meticulously mapped each aspect of the world around us onto corresponding parts of the human body.” Those parts again equal a spiritual meaning so that the whole picture tells us the story of “the complete work of God (...), divine by soul and earthly by earth” (Campbell, 2022; BDW 1.4.92).

Hildegard draws the world as an orderly network in which all things must interact with each other properly. Thus, the whole world exists in a “cosmic partnership” (Schipperges, 1998, 95). This gives humanity the responsibility to cultivate the world (*opus cum creatura*) not by dominion but in mutual care. As creation exerts her pull on us, we affect creation in turn (Campbell, 2022). Hence, according to Hildegard we are called into cooperation and co-creation in the divine work of creation:

God, for the glory of his name, gathered together the world out of the elements, strengthened it with the winds, stitched it together and gave it light with the stars, and filled it up with all the other creatures. With all these things in the world he surrounded and fortified humankind and everywhere imbued them with the greatest strength, so that creation might assist them in all things and partake in all human works, so that they might do their work with creation—for humankind can neither live nor even exist without creation... (BDW 1.2.2).

Though Hildegard centers the human being in the cosmos, her anthropocentric cosmology should not be mistaken as anthropocentrism. Instead, brought to life by the divine breath and strengthened with the greening power of the earth and the elements, the responsibility for the created world is given to us due to our creatural condition, “as it would be inscribed into our DNA.” (Zátonyi, 2022, p. 233) As a mirror of the Divine life force the human person is called to work *with* creation, not against it, which entails “to rule” the world with “knowledge” and “wisdom” and all our “senses...,” all the while discerning our doing in the “mirror of faith” (LDO II.1.43 and IV. 29). Any understanding of the Genesis call for dominion or ruling is to be understood in the context of such knowledge, wisdom and discernment which serves the flourishing of all creation. Hence, our unique ontological relatedness to the divine creator entails our human responsibility in the Divine order: to live in active harmony with all creation (Furchert, 2021).

4. Crisis and Redemption: Hildegard’s call for an “ecological conversion”

“Hildegard can be seen as an ecological prophet both in her cosmology and in her assertion that there is a profound and life giving power of lush greenness immanent in all creation, and that the destruction of that wet and wondrous life through sin leads to dryness and death at physical and moral levels” (Evans, 2019, p. 2).

In the previous section we have seen how Hildegard places the human being at the heart of the cosmological order: “In consideration of this reciprocal agreement, the earth offered people its vitality (*viriditas*)...” (PL 1125). As the cosmic order relies on the order of the elements, so does every human being: “Fire gives them heat, air allows them breath, water offers them blood, and earth endows them with firm tissue.” And further:

Throughout the world everything thrives in succulence and abundance when the elements perform their task properly, so that heat, dew, and rain descend exactly as they should..., so that the earth and its fruits are nurtured carefully, and effective fruitfulness and health are the assured results (CaCu, 49/50*).

Hildegard even correlates the elements with human virtues in lucid imagery which shows the significance of her cosmology for our spiritual life. All creation is created to disclose its maker, “so that people can use and cooperate with its elementary forces” (Schipperges, 1998, 98).

But when part of that relationship is broken, the other part is affected, too, warns Hildegard, e.g. when humans lack spiritual virtues it will also impact the balance in the physical world. Hildegard herself characterized her time as a period of dryness, because as humans lack virtues also the elements “have been stripped of all their proper function” (BDW, 3.5.20).

In her *Book of Life's Merits*, Hildegard portrays the elements themselves as crying out in agony:

We can no longer keep going as before and complete our natural course as intended. For humans twist, crunch and grind us as in a mill, from top to bottom. We, the elements — the winds and the waters — stink to high heaven, like the plague itself. We are almost starving from hunger for true equilibrium (LVM III,2*).

Hildegard's sensual description of the “lamentations of the elements” (*querula elementorum*) is probably what speaks most into our time and ecological concern, as it foreshadows the current climate crisis where people “hardly dare open their mouths lest they breathe in all this pollution.” (LVM III, 43*). Thus, Hildegard sees the human being not only in a central position in the cosmological order but also in its disorder: “Accordingly the elements shout their complaints at human behavior and raise their voices in fear and outrage” (Sc III, 5*).

According to Hildegard, the moral state of humanity is reflected in the physical state of the world (Campbell, 2022). That means, Hildegard links human behavior directly to the distortion of the fine-tuned cosmological order: “If people only behaved as they were originally intended to behave and thus in accordance with their *constitutio prima*,” she writes in her medical work *Causes and Cures*, then all the seasons of the year would be the same. “But because people in their disobedience neglected the respect and love they owed to God the elements and the seasons alike now overstep their natural bounds” (CaCu 17, 21-27*). This apocalyptic destruction is caused by the destruction of the greening power, making it “wither away.”

How can things be turned around? For Hildegard, the restoration of creation calls for a restoration of justice first. From a Hildegardian perspective, our current climate crisis cannot be cured by caring for the physical damage alone, but instead by restoring justice to all aspects of life. “Hildegard thus prophesied that the renewal of creation will come when corruption in the Church and in society is cleansed and holy living is renewed, and when the princes, together with the rest of the people, will rightly ordain God's justice and forbid all weapons that had been prepared to harm human beings,” concludes Campbell (2022). As Pope Francis calls for an “ecological conversion,” a spiritual shift which is needed in order to care for all creation, we find this concern for conversion already in Hildegard:

Now, in your spirit, consider how long you have wandered astray in the winter of the spiritual life. And so run quickly to the viridity of the Holy Spirit, which is summer, changing your morals. In this way, bring flowers of virtue, and gather your sheaves as fast as you can (in *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, Baird & Ehrmann, 1994).

It becomes evident here that for Hildegard the ecological conversion starts with an ethical shift. People need to change their morals, by reconnecting with the greening spirit which in turn will help them to flourish in virtues. The rejuvenation of *viriditas* here comes as a remedy and redemption to the dried-out world just as it comes to the dried-out soul (Dadosky, 2018, p. 87). Hildegard writes:

Indeed, in [those days], sweetest clouds will touch the earth with sweetest air and cause it to exude the viridity of fruitfulness, for people at that time will hasten toward all justice And as at that time the clouds will release rains gentle and right for the fruit of the just sprout, so too the Holy Spirit will pour forth the dew of its grace among the people, together with prophecy, wisdom, and holiness, so that they will then seem to be changed into a different way—a better way—of life (BDW, 244).

5. Gardening and Co-Creating. Towards an integral ecological practice

“Calling people to a new vision of the earth is, in fact, calling them to wake up to life” (Evans, 2019, p. 7).

Hildegard’s view on human nature is embedded in her “organic and integrated” cosmology (Evans, 2019, p. 1). This structure reminds us of our deep connection with the greening life force which sustains the cosmos and also every living being. In our age and time we have lost the powerful images our ancestors wielded to grasp the mystery of our souls, the breath that sustains us, our soul which animates us. One of the greatest achievements of Hildegard’s ecological perspective is that it is as scholarly as it is practical. Thus, Hildegard offers us a truly integral ecology, integrated not only across cosmology, theology, anthropology, and ethics, but also integrating ecological theory with ecological practice. Her powerful illuminations offer themselves to be read both with a scholarly view and with the inner eye, as the Benedictines have it. They invite us into contemplating the Divine greening power around us and within us and to renew our cosmic vocation.

1. The green thread. We have seen that Hildegard’s life, work and visions have been rooted in her appreciation of creation, the natural ecology around her, and the “living light” which sustained her. *Viriditas*, the greening life force, is woven into her life and works like a green thread. It lies at the heart of her view on Divine and human nature (see sect. 2), environmental crisis and redemption (see sect. 4) and holds together the cosmological (macrocosm) and the anthropological (microcosm). The whole universe, creation and humanity is infused by the Divine greening power of *viriditas* (see sect. 3). It is also the natural driving force toward healing and wholeness, the vital power that sustains all life's greenness. “It is greenness shining in the motion of the cosmos and in the wheel of history...” (Schipperges, 1998, p. 112).

Hildegard’s originality, writes Mews (1998, p. 58) is to “find metaphors from the natural world to interpret Christian teaching.” She adds greenness (*viriditi*) as a qualifier to all that is (or should be)

suffused with Divine greening power: e.g., our greening soul animates the body and moves us toward green virtues; the greening Word springs from the greening branch (*virgo viridissima*) of Mary. Even our scholarly endeavors and our science should be greening (*viriditi sciencia*), because without life giving viridity our knowledge becomes like dry sand, disconnected from the living whole.

Also sickness and health, both in humanity and ecology, are understood from within the *viriditas* concept. The lack of *viriditas* leads to *ariditas*, a dryness we see in the natural world as dried out landscapes, toxic rivers, or polluted air. In the inner world the lack of *viriditas* dries up the soul, and leads to a lack of physiological, psychological, ethical and spiritual health (see sect. 2). Dadosky sees the significance of Hildegard's theology of *viriditas* precisely in its depiction of "the intimate relationship between God and the created order, and the restoration of that order through the 'greening' action of God in cooperation with human beings" (Dadosky, 2018, p. 89). We depend on the eternal Word breathing life into us as we do on our motherly earth (*materna terra*) to feed us "just as a mother gives milk to her children" (Sc II.1.7.). Thus, the relationship between nature and humanity is deeply reciprocal: the natural world supports us and we are to work *with* creation to fulfill our vocation as bearers of God's image and likeness. Thus one could say that Hildegard does not place the human being at the center of creation but at its heart - just as creation in turn is at the heart of the Divine creator (see sect. 3). This position calls us into a cosmic partnership rather than dominion. It comes with a moral responsibility which is "embedded within the very structure of the universe: God created the world with a moral meaning baked into every element" (Campbell, 2022).



Figure 2 image: *Liber Divinorum Operum* I.4: Cosmos, Body, and Soul. [Biblioteca Statale di Lucca, MS 1942, fol. 38r](http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html) (early 13th-cen. By permission of the [Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism](http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html) source: <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html>)

2. *Gardening and co-creating*: In the sixth illumination, following the vision of the cosmic wheel which holds the whole universe in a motherly embrace (see sect. 3), now the earth herself takes center stage in the swirling wheel, surrounded by layers of air and water and the fire of the firmament (LDO I. 6 ff). This mandala-like visual invites us to contemplate the cycle of life, the seasons of flowering and dormancy, and our vocation to cultivate this earth, integrating the two previous visions. Macrocosmos and microcosmos are celebrated together in a cycle of flourishing and co-creation. It is the great vision of humanity and creation in cooperation: “body and soul, water and earth come together to bear fruit” (Mi. Fox, 2002, pp. 68–69). Hildegard depicts our world as God’s garden that offers us all we need, if we tend to it properly.

Not only are we called to be like flowering gardens, bringing forth rich fruit in harmony with the seasons and all cosmic powers, but also to be gardeners by partaking in God’s creation. Since the beginning of monastic life, gardens have been crucial parts of its architecture, daily living and spirituality. Hildegard praises gardens as places of nature and nurture, from the kitchen garden to the medicinal garden over the flowering orchard to the healing garden. Gardens as places of daily work and contemplation connect us with their indwelling power of *viriditas* and help us to discern the Divine presence in all of creation (Schipperges, 1998, p. 98).

According to Hildegard humans are called to become like “flowering orchards”, from which green virtues spring. We are also called to be gardeners in God’s garden, doing our “green work.” In her study of the Green Mountain Sisters, Taylor describes how they have put into practice a number of “green habits” or eco disciplines. They consume few resources, wear simple denim dresses, observe the traditional monastic prayer times of dawn and dusk, and engage in contemplative labor such as gardening, cooking, bread-making, and religious-icon painting (Taylor, 2009, pp. 130–131).

“Green work” thus goes beyond gardening in the literal sense but describes all creative work which fosters the cosmic partnership with creation. Thus, the vision depicting the cycle of life invites us to read it also in its allegorical meaning. As we engage in cultivating, tending, and harvesting of our green works we are guided by the seasons of the year, and the seasons of life. Participating in the seasons helps us understand the rhythm of creation and our own life. As the summer invites us into flowering and maturing wakefulness, winter offers us restful sleep and restoration. Humans and nature together live the seasons of dormancy and flowering (Schipperges, 1998, p. 98). In doing so we participate in the “cosmic symphony.” (see sect. 3) To be like a gardener, contemplating God’s garden while cultivating the garden around us and within us is what Hildegard calls the “symphonic life.” (Zátonyi, 2022, p. 218) Thus, reestablishing our place not at the center, but at the heart, of creation is the ecological conversion needed.

According to Hildegard, also the philosopher, like any good teacher, should be like a gardener, playing her part in the cosmic symphony by drawing wisdom from the well to nourish interior knowledge (*interior scientia*) in the rational soul (*anima rationalis*) (Ranff, 2015, pp. 127–128; Furchert, 2021). The teacher should tend knowledge like he would a garden, with wisdom and humility, helping it grow and flourish, and offering flowers, fruits, and beauty to the community.

Thus a good philosopher both embodies and teaches virtues, the green garment of wisdom. Her work, together with the multiplicity of work of others, should support our joint inheritance, God's green creation. As humans we are called to cultivate the earth (*terram colit*) with the abundance of our greening works based in peace, justice and humility (Zátonyi, 2022, p. 218).

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All Hildegard references with an * refer to Hildegard's Latin texts translated by Schipperges (1998).

Hildegard von Bingen

Latin:

CaCu: *Hildegardis Causae et Curae* (Hildegard's Causes and Cures), P. Kaiser, ed. (Leipzig, 1903).

LDO: *Liber Divinorum Operum* (Book of Divine Works), Lucca, Biblioteca Statale.

LVM: *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. (The Book of Life's Merits), in *Analecta Scara*, pp 1-244.

PL: *S. Hildegard Abbatis Opera* (Collected Works) J. P. Migne, Ed., in *Patrologia Latina*, vol 197, Paris, 1882.

Sc: *Scivias*. (from Latin *Sci vias Domini*, Know the Ways of the Lord) In *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 197, cc. 383-738

English:

BDW: *Book of Divine Works* (Liber Divinorum Operum). Tr. Nathaniel M. Campbell. Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 2018.

Hildegard's Causes and Cures: The complete English Translation. Tr. Priscilla Throop. MedievalMS, Charlotte, VT, 2008.

Liber Vitae Meritorum: English. Tr. Bruce W. Hozeski Garland, New York, 1994.

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Endnotes

ⁱ In her dissertation, Anna M. Minore (2002) discusses if Hildegard can be claimed a “patron saint of the environment” or a “creation-centered theologian” offering a critical assessment of Matthew Fox’s reception of Hildegard. Though Hildegard has much to offer for an environmental ethic, Minore argues, she is not a creation-centered theologian, at least not in the sense of the movement initiated and described by Fox (2012).

ⁱⁱ See <https://www.stiftung-oekologie-u-demokratie.de/T/hildegard-von-bingen-patronin-der-oekologie/> for her patron status. In her book *Green Sisters*, Taylor (Taylor, 2009, p. 1) writes: “At the very grassroots of the Church, Catholic religious sisters have ... taken up the mission to heal and restore the life systems of the planet. Popularly referred to as “green nuns,” “green sisters,” or even “eco-nuns,” they have “committed themselves to addressing the most pressing environmental concerns confronting both human and nonhuman life communities... attending to issues of ecojustice and ecosystem repair all over the world.” See, for example, the “Green Sisters” of the Divine Revelation: <https://www.mdrevelation.org/the-community/the-green-sisters-missionaries-in-rome/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pope Francis does not define integral ecology in his encyclical letter (Pope Francis, 2015) but he refers to the interconnection of many systems, including natural ecology, human society, ethical demands for justice and compassion for the poor, and spiritual and conservation practices (Barrett & Duns, 2023). For a survey of the many different kinds of secular integral ecology approaches, see Mickey et al. (2013). For a Jesuit understanding, see Imanaka (2017).

^{iv} American students of late have grown skeptical of an anthropocentric worldview, as it usually goes contrary to their environmental concern. In Hildegard they encounter a teacher who centers the human being at the heart of creation, but rooted in an encompassing theology which makes environmental concern a central duty.

^v Humboldt has been described as “the most famous man after Napoleon,” renowned for his expeditions to Central and South America and the Caribbean, and across the vast expanse of Russia. It was on his expedition to Lake Valencia, in what is now Venezuela, that he measured and cataloged the decimation of the surrounding forest by colonial farmers, and the resulting reverberations throughout the local ecosystem. As a result, he began to develop his ideas of human induced climate change (Nassar, 2023; Wulf, 2015)

^{vi} See also Huff and Furchert (2023) for a current discussion of what one might mean by moral ecology.

^{vii} This section adopts and expands parts of Furchert (2021).

^{viii} One can assume Hildegard had access to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, presumably via Eriugenas’ translation, as evidenced by her emphasis on the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God. Similar themes can be found in the symbolic theology of Hugo von Saint-Victor (Zátonyi, 2017, pp. 30–32; Furchert, 2021).

^{ix} Edited by St. Hildegard Abbey, Eibingen, Hildegard von Bingen: Werke: Komplette Werkausgabe in 10 Bänden, 2009-2019.

^x For a fuller overview of her philosophy see also Furchert, 2021; Ranff, 2015; Zátonyi, 2017.

^{xi} See King-Lenzmeier, 2001 for an in-depth introduction into LDO..

^{xii} Slightly adapted English translation from the Book of Divine Works (BDW).