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# Two medieval views on woman's identity: Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas

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The Christian philosophical tradition produced two great theorists of sex identity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) both developed fairly elaborate theories about the concept of woman in relation to man. A comparative study of these two great thinkers yields some interesting discoveries about the history of the philosophy and theology of sex identity. Both Hildegard and Thomas were empiricists by methodology. They began with the data that presented itself and then developed a theoretical framework of interpretation. As will be seen they reached similar conclusions about woman's identity in some areas and radically different conclusions in others. One of the questions we will ask in this paper is: What were the differences in data and context of empirical observation that would lead these two empiricists to such different conclusions?

If we were to characterize the theories of sex identity proposed by these two philosophers and theologians we could say that Hildegard of Bingen argued for a theory of sex complementarity while Thomas Aquinas argued for a double theory: sex polarity on the level of nature and sex complementarity on the level of grace. By *sex complementarity* I mean a theory which argues for the fundamental equality of worth and dignity of women and men while at the same time arguing for a philosophically significant difference between the two sexes. *Sex polarity* on the other hand accepts the philosophically significant differences between women and men, but this theory argues that men in general are superior to women. In the history of philosophy there is a third general theory of sex identity, or *sex unity*, which argues that there are no philosophically significant differences between the sexes, and as a consequence that men

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and women are fundamentally equal. This theory which springs from the Platonic tradition was not supported by either Hildegard or Aquinas. The probable reason for this lack of interest in sex unity was the insistence on the integration of soul and body found in both of their philosophies. Sex unity, on the other hand, usually is accompanied by a devaluation of the body.<sup>1</sup>

For purposes of comparison I have selected some of the key concepts considered by both authors. Their respective arguments about each of these concepts will be compared or contrasted. Then we will return to the previously proposed question concerning that factors might have led to such a combination of theories. The concepts to be considered are the following: creation, generation, resurrection and wisdom.

### Creation

What does creation in the image of God mean for men and women? Hildegard answers this question in the *Scivias* by presenting a Godhead which is both masculine and feminine. Accepting the tradition of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, she describes a feminine Divine which she identifies as *Scientia Dei*: "She is awesome in terror as the Thunderer's lightning, and gentle in goodness as the sunshine. In her terror and her gentleness she is incomprehensible to men, because of the dread radiance of divinity in her face."<sup>2</sup> The Divine which was masculine and feminine then communicated this nature to both women and men. Barbara Newman describes this duality as follows: "For when God created male and female in His image, Hildegard remarks, he extended this dual likeness to the soul as well as the body."<sup>3</sup>

Hildegard then developed a theory of the relation of the four elements—fire, air, water and earth—to male and female identity. Man had a predominance of fire and earth, while woman had a predominance of air and water. In the continuation of her theory of creation she describes the nature of Adam and Eve in *Heilkunde*:

Adam, who was created out of the earth, was awakened with the elements and thereby transformed. Eve, however, having emerged from Adam's rib was not transformed. So through the vital powers of earth, Adam was manly and through the elements he was potent. Eve, however, remained soft in her marrow and she had more of an airy character, a very artistic talent and a precious vitality for the burden of the earth did not press upon her.<sup>4</sup>

1 For a thorough discussion of these theories and their development in the history of philosophy, see Sister Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution (750 BC-1250 AD)* (Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1985).

2 Barbara Newman, "Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness: St. Hildegard on the Frail Sex," in *Medieval Religious Women* (Cistercian Publications, 1965), p. 18, n. 54.

3 Ibid., p. 21, n. 60.

4 Hildegard of Bingen, *Heilkunde: Das Buch von dem Grund und Wesen und der Heilung der*

The above passage is a good example of the attempt by Hildegard to keep a balance of valuation between the two sexes. Although man is more potent from the greater presence of earth, woman is more artistic because of the greater presence of air. In this way Hildegard supports the basic claims of sex complementarity, i.e., the significant difference and equality of woman and man.

When we turn to Thomas Aquinas a rather different theory of the relation of creation to sex identity emerges. In the *Summa Theologiae* he develops an analogy between God as Father of the world and Adam as father of the human race: "When all things were first formed, it was more suitable for the woman to be made from the man. . . . First, in order thus to give the first man a certain dignity consisting in this, that as God is the principle of the whole universe, so the first man, in likeness of God, was the principle of the whole human race."<sup>5</sup> Aquinas claims that God's image is found alike in woman and man, but that it is more perfectly reflected in man. In the following excerpt from the *Summa Theologiae* the theory is explicitly stated:

Hence: God's image is found equally in both man and woman as regards that point in which the idea of "image" is principally realized, namely an intelligent nature. . . . But as regards a secondary point, God's image is found in man in a way in which it is not found in woman: for man is the beginning and the end of woman, just as God is the beginning and end of all creation.<sup>6</sup>

The analogy with God as Father and man as father gave Thomas a basis for a superiority in "dignity" and "principle" in man. This is a support for the sex polarity theory in that it argues for a significant differentiation between the sexes with an attribution of superiority in worth and dignity of man over woman.

Even at this early point in our comparison it is possible to ask how to such different interpretations of the Adam and Eve creation story could be given. The question of interpretation of theories of creation is a question of faith and interpretation of scriptures. Both Hildegard and Thomas used the same scriptural source, Genesis. How did they reach such different conclusions?

It would appear that Thomas depended upon traditional sources of interpretation in developing his theory, Paul and Augustine. The latter had argued that woman was not in the image of God as regards her individual existence as a physical being.<sup>7</sup> Thomas qualified this extreme

*Rankheiten* (Salzburg: O. Müller Verlag, 1972), p. 103. Translated by Jasmin El Kordi Schmidt as are all subsequent passages from this text.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 1a, 92, 1 and 2.

6 Ibid., 1a, 93, 4.

7 Augustine, *The Trinity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1963), Book 12, chap. 7, p. 351.

statement in his view that woman was in the image of God, but that she less perfectly reflected that image. Man was a more perfect creation of the prime principle.

Hildegard would have also been familiar with the views of Paul and Augustine. She had had, however, a series of creative mystical visions and these experiences gave her some new data for reflection. The *Scivias* recorded her experience of the feminine nature of the Divine. In this work she describes her new source of insight when she relates being told by God: "Therefore write it from a fountain of abundance, and so overflow in mystical erudition, so that they may tremble at the profusion of your irrigation, who wished you to be considered contemptible on account of Eve's transgression. But thou does not get this knowledge from men, for thou receivest it from above."<sup>8</sup> Hildegard described a series of mystical experiences which began in 1141 when she was forty-two years old. She said: "The heavens opened and a fiery light of great brilliance came and suffused my whole brain. . . . And suddenly I came to understand the meaning of the Book of Psalms, the Gospel and the other canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments."<sup>9</sup> Hildegard allowed her inner experience of the dual nature of the Divine to penetrate into her theory of the creation of man and woman in the image of God. Her "knowledge from above" led her to a theory of sex complementarity in the context of a tradition that had used scriptural texts as a basis for sex polarity.

### Generation

The next question for comparison concerns the respective identities of woman and man during the process of generation. During the medieval centuries the commonly held opinion was that woman did not provide a fertile seed in reproduction. This view had its source in Aristotle who had argued that woman had no seed at all, and it was qualified by Galen who argued that woman had a seed but that it was infertile. Thomas accepted Aristotle's arguments and Hildegard accepted Galen's.<sup>10</sup> On the question of generation both thinkers depended upon the opinions of others who, they believed, had a more solid empirical basis for their views. Galen was a physician and Aristotle had studied generation in animals in great detail. It is ironic that Aristotle had rejected on "empirical" grounds the more accurate double-seed theory proposed by Empedocles, and even by Parmenides and Democritus. In any event, by the time Hildegard and

8 Francesca Maria Steele, *The Life and Visions of St. Hildegard* (London: Heath, Cranton and Cusely, 1914), p. 132.

9 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (cccm 43-43A), translated by Barbara Newman in "Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation," forthcoming in *Church History*.

10 See Allen, *Concept of Woman*, p. 83-126 for a thorough discussion of Aristotle, and p. 187-89 for a thorough discussion of Galen.

Thomas thought about the issue the authority of Aristotle and Galen was well established.

In *Heilkunde* Hildegard describes the process of generation in continuity with her previous description of the role of the elements in creation: "The blood of woman, who is weak and fragile, has no such seed; rather she emits a thin and scanty foam, for she unlike man is not composed of two different types, namely earth and flesh, but is only of man's flesh."<sup>11</sup> The potency of man is attributed to the greater presence of the element earth. Hildegard does not conclude, however, that woman's role is inferior in generation. She argues that man deposits a cold seed which woman then heats up and allows to develop: "[The man's] blood pours into the woman a cold foam which then congeals in the warmth of the motherly tissue taking on that blood-mixed state. In the beginning this foam remains in the warmth and later is maintained by the dry humors of the motherly nourishment growing into a dry, miniature like form of the human being."<sup>12</sup> The contributions of woman and man are balanced, which once again indicates a theory of sex complementarity. Each one does his or her own part, neither is superior to the other.

Thomas reached very different conclusions. Following Aristotle, and more directly his teacher Albert the Great who completely accepted the Greek philosopher's arguments about generation, Aquinas argued that the mother played no active role in this process: "The active power which is in the semen cannot be caused by the mother (although some indeed maintain this), because the woman is not an active principle but a passive one."<sup>13</sup> The mother does not provide seed, but material to the generative process. Thomas continues by arguing in the *Summa Theologiae* that a perfect conception will produce a male child:

For the active power in the seed of the male tends to produce something like itself, perfect in masculinity; but the procreation of a female is the result either of the debility of the active power, or some unsuitability of the material, or of some change affected by external circumstances, like the south wind, for example, which is damp, as we are told by Aristotle.<sup>14</sup>

The fundamental premises of sex polarity are evident here in that woman is identified as being an imperfect conception. In his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard his indebtedness to Aristotle is made explicit: "The generation of woman occurs, as is said in *De Animalibus* 18 or *De Generatione Animalum* 4, from that which the seed cannot overpower in the nature of woman to guide it in the final arrangement of the perfect sex."<sup>15</sup>

11 Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, p. 125.

12 Ibid.

13 Thomas Aquinas, *The Soul* (St. Louis: Herder, 1949), Article ix, reply to objection 2, p. 146. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 118, 1.

14 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 75, 4.

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Petri Lombardi Sententiarum Libri Quattuor* (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1953),

The claim that man is a perfect sex, and woman a less perfect one is consistent with Thomas's view that man is a more perfect reflection of the image of God. Aquinas, however, did not want to argue that woman was not intended by God. Borrowing a distinction from his teacher Albert he argued that woman in general is intended by God, but that each woman in particular is a defective conception: "Only as regards nature in the individual is female something defective and *manqué*. . . . But with reference to nature in the species as a whole, the female is not something *manqué*, but is according to the tendency of nature, and is directed to the work of creation."<sup>16</sup>

The view that woman was a defective generation and that the female contributed no active seed to generation had far-reaching consequences for the concept of woman. In the area of theology, Thomas argued that Mary did not contribute anything active to the conception of Christ: "Since it was not given to the Blessed Virgin to be the father of Christ but mother, the consequence is that she did not receive an active power for the conception of Christ. . . . The Blessed Virgin did not actively effect anything in the conceiving, but ministered the matter only."<sup>17</sup> This rather negative conclusion about woman's identity is offset by a reflection on the role of Eve in the transmission of original sin. In an historical context in which woman was frequently blamed for the downfall of humanity, Thomas argues that her role was minimal:

Now it is the teaching of philosophers that the active causality in generation is from the father, the mother merely providing the material. Therefore, original sin is not contracted from the mother but from the father. Accordingly if Eve and not Adam had sinned, their children would not have contracted original sin. And conversely, they would have contracted it if Adam alone and not Eve had sinned.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, it could be argued that this conclusion is not a favourable one to women because it ignores the role of the first female parent, or Eve, in subsequent generations. However, in this historical context of the devaluation of woman as "the gateway of the devil" Thomas's claim was an improvement.

Before passing on to other areas of comparison between our two theorists of sex identity, it is useful to reflect on the methodology of Hildegard and Thomas. It appears that both chose to accept what they believed was the most current scientific opinion on generation. Hildegard wrote just prior to the availability of Latin translations of Aristotelian texts. Thomas used these texts in his research. It is likely that if they had access to the same texts they would have reached the same conclusion about the process of generation. It is difficult to assess whether or not they

Book 2, Dist. 18, Quest. 1. Translated by Sister Therese Marie Dougherty.

16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 75, 4.

17 Ibid., 3a, 32, 4.

18 Ibid., 1a, 2ae, 81, 5.

would have reached the same general theory of sex identity, i.e., polarity or complementarity. Hildegard appears consistent in her evaluation of woman and man as inherently equal in dignity and worth while Thomas consistently values man as being more perfect. It is likely that they would both have changed their theory if they had had access to the contemporary double-seed analysis of generation in which both parents contribute the same number of chromosomes to the fetus. Given their empirical approach to human nature they would have wanted to use the most up-to-date conclusions about generation.

### Resurrection

One of the most intriguing consequences of the devaluation of woman's identity in early medieval thought was the question of what happens to woman in the resurrection of the body. If man was more perfect, and in the resurrection all would be made perfect, the question logically follows whether women will be perfected by being made into men?

Augustine is the first philosopher and theologian to consider this issue. He claimed in the *City of God*:

There are some who think that in the resurrection all will be men, and that women will lose their sex. . . . For myself, I think that those others are more sensible who have no doubt that both sexes will remain in the resurrection. . . . In the resurrection the blemishes of the body will be gone, but the nature of the body will remain. And certainly, a woman's sex is her nature and no blemish.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian belief in the resurrection of the body brought a new concept into the question of sex identity. In heaven both man and woman will have achieved full perfection, and since the reunion with a specific glorified body demanded a reference to a woman's or a man's body, faith in the resurrection of the body demanded a philosophy of the equal worth and dignity of woman and of man. This means that the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body offered a theological foundation for the philosophy of sex complementarity.

Hildegard of Bingen explicitly stated this view: "Thus all men in the twinkling of an eye shall rise again in body and in soul without any contradiction of cutting off their members, but in the integrity of their bodies and their sex."<sup>20</sup> The full union of body and soul in the resurrection will lead to the presence in heaven of women and of men. Significantly, Thomas reaches the same conclusion in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

One ought, nevertheless, not hold that among the bodies of the risen the feminine sex will be absent, as some have thought. For, since the resurrection is to restore the deficiencies of nature, nothing that belongs to perfection of nature will be

19 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), xxii, 17.

20 Steele, *St. Hildegard*, p. 176.

denied to the bodies of the risen. . . . The frailty of the feminine sex is not in opposition to the perfection of the risen, for this frailty is not due to a shortcoming of nature, but to an intention of nature.<sup>21</sup>

The intention of nature, or the intention of God, was to generate both women and men according to Thomas's previously mentioned distinction between universal and particular intention. God's plan, therefore, held women and men in a relationship of sex complementarity in heaven after the resurrection of the body. This claim then leads Thomas to a theory of sex complementarity on the level of grace, while he supports a theory of sex polarity on the level of nature. On the question of resurrection Hildegard and Thomas are in complete agreement: both support sex complementarity.

In considering the context for this similarity of views of the two theorists, it is likely that both follow the teachings of Augustine as well as the logical consequences of the dogma of the resurrection of the body. In this choice they would be arguing as Christian philosophers against the pagan philosophers within the Platonic tradition, who believed in the reincarnation of a sexless soul. This attitude towards the body relegated to insignificance the question of whether it was male or female. In addition, as was made explicit in Thomas, they also argued against the extreme form of sex polarity which claimed that to be a woman was an imperfection and that women after the resurrection would be turned into men. For both, resurrection of the body led to a sex complementarity in heaven.

### Wisdom

When considering the views of Hildegard and Thomas on woman's relation to wisdom, there are two different issues to raise. Do they believe that women and men have the same reasoning capacities, and what do they claim that women and men ought to know to be wise? A corollary issue concerns the relation of the sexes to the virtues associated with speaking in public and remaining silent.

For Hildegard wisdom demands an enlightened self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the fundamental nature of the complement sex. In *Heilkunde* she develops an elaborate typology of four types of women and four types of men. Her analysis demands a sophisticated understanding, within the limited framework of the medieval categories of elements and humours, of the interaction of body, mind and spirit. It is clear from the tone of her writings that she attributes a similar capacity for understanding to men and women in general. Individuals may vary, so that the third type of woman is more intellectual, for example. However, there is no indication that women are less able to use their reason than men.

21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (New York: Beninzer Brothers, 1923-29), iv, 83, 5 and iv, 88, 3. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Quest. 81, art. 3.



In the following chart<sup>22</sup> the types of women and types of men are summarized:

#### Hildegard's Four Types of Women

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
muscular structure	very heavy	moderately heavy	delicate	meagre
blood	clean, red	whiter	drier	slimy
colour of skin	clear and white	sullen	pale	dark
fertility	moderate	very	partial	rare
menstruation	light	moderate	heavy	very heavy
character	artistic, content	efficient, manly, strict	intellectual, benevolent, loyal, chaste	unstable, ill-humoured
possible diseases after early menopause	depression, melancholy, pains in side, unhealthy glandular secretions	insanity, problems with spleen, dropsy, tumors	paralysis, imbalanced, liver problems, cancer	abdominal pains, spinal pains, early death

#### Hildegard's Four Types of Men

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
blood	fiery	fiery and windy	windy and black bile	weak in all respects
colour of skin	red hue	mixed red and white hue	sombre	unclean and pale
fertility	very	moderate	partial	infertile
character	heartly and hale	balanced	very dangerous, no moderation	weak, effeminate
children	tend to be unrestrained, coarse-mannered children	balanced, happy, well-mannered children	mean or evil children	

In addition to the classification of types within each sexual grouping, Hildegard also studied the basic principles of the interaction of women and men. In the following chart her claims are summarized:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, p. 93-128.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

**Hildegard's Theory of the Interaction of the Sexes**

Four Types of Men: Generally More Earth and Fire			
Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
too much fire	balanced air and fire	too much water in form of bile	weak in all elements
passionately interested in sexual relations with women	honourable and fruitful relationship with women (sexual and celibate)	hates women, masochistic	indifferent to women, effeminate
Four Types of Women: Generally More Air and Water			
Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
more earth through heavy muscular structure, more fire through red blood	balanced earth through moderate muscular structure, more air through white blood	less earth through delicate muscular structure, less water with drier blood	weak in all elements through meagre muscular structure, slimy blood
needs to be with men	likes to be with men, but does not need to	remains loyal to men, but suffers because cannot keep their interest	not interested in men
Generative Relationship			
moderately fertile	very fertile	partially fertile	rarely fertile

There are many important aspects of Hildegard's analysis which relate to the question of wisdom for women. Not only has she as a woman developed one of the first theories of various kinds of women and men with a careful examination of the relation of the soul and body, but she has also given us one of the earliest phenomenological analyses of the contents of consciousness with reference to sexual interaction. In the following example she considers the difference between the way in which the first and second kind of man looks at a woman:

[The first type of men] love coition with women and are anxious to get out of other men's way and to avoid them, for they are more inclined to women than to men. . . . As soon as they get sight of a woman, hear of one or simply fancy one in

thought, their blood is burning with a blaze. Their eyes are kept fixed on the object of their love like arrows as soon as they catch sight of it.<sup>24</sup>

This first type of man reduces the woman to a "sexual object" to possess. The second type, or Hildegard's ideal type of man, on the other hand, looks at a woman in a very different way:

The addition of wind in their genitals moderates and tames the fiery power within themselves. . . . That is why one refers to them as a golden edifice of sexual embrace. . . . With women they can have an honorable and fruitful relationship. The eyes of such men can meet squarely with those of the women, much in contrast to those other men's eyes that were fixed on them like arrows.<sup>25</sup>

There are chapters of analysis in *Heilkunde* with a great deal of explicit detail. It is clear that Hildegard associates wisdom with an enlightened use of reason to understand one's own nature. This demands a knowledge of basic physiology, character, medieval elemental science, and individual insight. In addition, wisdom demands an equally in-depth knowledge of the complement sex. Her analysis considers relations which include genital sexual activity as well as those which are celibate within the context of the double monastery.

When we turn to Thomas, a very different kind of concept of the relation of woman to wisdom emerges. On the level of nature or, in the present case, the level of natural reason, he argues that woman does not have the same capacity as man. While the medieval philosopher does not say a great deal about women and wisdom, what he does say follows the Aristotelian tradition. In his commentary on the Greek philosopher's *Politics* he repeats Aristotle's claim that woman's natural reasoning power is weak: "But since a woman is free, she has the capacity for understanding but her capacity is weak. The reason for this is on account of the changeableness of nature, her reason weakly adheres to plans, but quickly is removed from them because of emotions, for example, of desire, or anger, or fear, or something else of the kind."<sup>26</sup>

The weakness of woman's reason appears to follow from her defective generation. In the *Summa Theologiae* we find Thomas considering the weakness of woman's natural reason, directly following a passage in which her defective generation has been considered: "For the human group would have lacked the benefit of order had some of its members not been governed by others who were wiser. Such is the subjection in which woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational

24 Ibid., p. 138.

25 Ibid., p. 140.

26 Thomas Aquinas, *In Octo Libros Policorum Aristotelis* (Quebec: Tremblay and Dion, 1940), Book I, p. 52. Translated by Diane Gordon, as are all subsequent passages from this text.

discernment is by nature stronger in man."<sup>27</sup> For Thomas the virtue of wisdom is defined in the *Summa Theologiae*: "A correct judgment made through rational investigation belongs to the wisdom which is an intellectual virtue."<sup>28</sup> Since woman's capacity for rational investigation is weak because of her defective generation, it follows that her capacity for wisdom is different from man.

It is interesting to consider how Thomas and Hildegard could have come to such different conclusions about this issue. I would like to suggest two possible factors. The first, and more obvious, concerns the influence of Aristotle on their respective philosophies of sex identity. Hildegard remained relatively free of this influence while Thomas was grounded in Aristotle through his teacher Albert. The elaborate description of woman's inferior nature due to her defective generation was easily applicable to the question of wisdom. Aquinas, therefore, had a rationale available for arguing that women had a different capacity for wisdom than did men.

A second factor, less easy to prove, but nonetheless important I would contend, is the different learning contexts of the two philosophers. Thomas studied only with men at the University of Paris and in the context of the Dominican order. Hildegard, on the other hand, studied with men and women in the context of the double monasteries of the Benedictine order. She had extensive personal experience of women and men searching for wisdom. This experience may have taught her that both had a similar capacity for wisdom. Thomas had no comparable experience with which to counter the Aristotelian claims.

This same situation may also have led Thomas to repeat Aristotle's dictum that silence is a virtue for woman while speech is a virtue for man. "For what is appropriate for the ornament of a woman or her integrity, that she is silent, proceeds from the modesty which is owed to women, but this does not relate to the ornament of a man, instead, it is fitting that he speaks."<sup>29</sup> The capacity to participate in public debate was an important characteristic of the wise man. So Thomas clearly differentiated the nature virtue of wisdom for women and men. It is interesting to note that Hildegard did not appear to agree that silence was a virtue for women. We know that she was engaged in extensive public teaching. As Barbara Newman states:

Between 1158 and 1159 Hildegard travelled along the Main, preaching at monastic communities in Mainz, Wertheim, Wurzburg, Kitzingen, Ebrach, and Bamberg. Her second trip in 1160 took her to Metz, Krauftal, Trier, where she preached publicly. Within the next three years she visited Boppard, Andernach, Siegburg, and Werden, addressing clergy and people together at Cologne. After

27 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 92, 1.

28 Ibid., 2a, 2ae, 45, 2.

29 Thomas Aquinas, *Policorum Aristotelis*, Book 1, p. 51.

1170 she undertook her fourth and final journey in Swabia, preaching at Rodenkirchan, Maulbronn, Hirsau, Kirchheim, and Zweifalten.<sup>30</sup>

For Hildegard it would appear that speech in public was as virtuous for women as for men.

It is important to mention that even though Thomas argued that woman was limited in the natural virtue of wisdom, he believed that she had equal access to the supernatural virtue of wisdom. In the *Summa Theologiae* he describes the differences between the two: "The gift of wisdom differs from the acquired virtue of wisdom. The latter comes through human effort, the former comes down from above."<sup>31</sup> He argues that Mary received the gift of wisdom, but he concludes that her use of this gift is different from Christ's because of her nature as woman: "The Blessed Virgin unquestionably received, to an intense degree, the gift of wisdom, . . . just as Christ. . . . She used wisdom in contemplation. . . . But she did not use wisdom by teaching since this was not thought becoming to women; I am not giving permission for a woman to teach."<sup>32</sup> In this conclusion, the assertion that speech is man's virtue while silence is woman's virtue is repeated. The difference of opinion of Thomas and Hildegard is clearly evident here. Again it would appear that the two key factors in this difference are the relation of their thought to Aristotelian theory and their personal experience of women studying and teaching philosophy and theology.

If we consider now which theory of sex identity is supported by Thomas's and Hildegard's views on wisdom, it would appear that on the level of nature a sex complementarity is supported by Hildegard while a sex polarity is supported by Aquinas. The Benedictine abbess, arguing in a context in which women and men studied together, proposed that a wise woman and a wise man should understand their respective identities with equally intelligent study and that they should apply their powers of reason to the understanding of their interaction with the complement sex. On the other hand, the Dominican friar, arguing in the context of a university education available only to men and filled with a recent influx of Aristotelian translations, proposed that women had an inferior reasoning capacity and that she was less able to achieve wisdom through her own efforts.

Thomas did suggest, however, that on the level of grace, through the gift of God, woman could participate equally with man in the infused gift of wisdom. In this way, on the theological level he supported a theory of sex complementarity in wisdom. He argued, however, that woman would use this gift of wisdom in silent contemplation while man would use it in public teaching. Since he would not have valued teaching as higher than

30 Newman, "Divine Power," p. 28, n. 4.

31 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a, 2ae, 45, 2.

32 Ibid., 3a, 27, 6.

contemplation it is safe to conclude that even though he differentiated the use of infused wisdom for women and for men, he supported a sex complementarity on the level of grace.

### Conclusion

We are now at the point where we can conclude this comparison between two medieval writers who gave considerable thought to the question of woman's identity. By focussing on some of the key areas of comparison it has been shown that Thomas argued for a two-level theory of sex identity which can be summarized as sex polarity on the level of nature and sex complementarity on the level of grace. Hildegard, on the other hand, argued fairly consistently for a theory of sex complementarity throughout. The main lines of their respective arguments look like this:

	Hildegard of Bingen	Thomas Aquinas
<i>creation</i>	man and woman created in the image of a masculine/feminine Divine man has more of "masculine elements," fire and earth; woman has more of "feminine elements," air and water	man created in the image of God the Father as first principle woman created as derived principle
<i>generation</i>	man deposits cold seed which woman heats up male and female both active principles	man as active sex deposits fertile seed woman as passive sex provides matter the perfect generation is a male fetus the individual female fetus is a defective generation
<i>resurrection</i>	both woman and man resurrected as perfect	both woman and man resurrected as perfect
<i>wisdom</i>	man and woman are equal in capacity for wisdom man and woman have different sex-related content in their respective wisdom	man has strong natural reason, is wise in speech woman has weak natural reason, is wise in silence  both man and woman equally capable of infused wisdom

This paper has also raised the question how these two thinkers could have reached such different conclusions. It has been suggested that there were two factors which influenced this divergence of opinion. The first

was the role that Aristotle played in their respective theories. Hildegard remained relatively free from the direct influx of Aristotelian arguments for the natural inferiority of woman, because she wrote just prior to the massive introduction of Latin translations of Aristotelian texts. Thomas, on the other hand, wrote just after this period. In addition, his teacher Albert the Great was very receptive to the Greek philosopher's theories, and particularly his theories of generation. In this way Thomas was predisposed to accept the Aristotelian rationale for sex polarity as a foundation for his own thinking on the subject. Where Thomas went beyond Aristotelian sex polarity was in his acceptance of the Christian orientation towards a sex complementarity on the level of grace, that is in the belief in resurrection, and in the equal access of women and men to infused wisdom and theological virtue.

The second factor which may have contributed to the difference between Hildegard and Thomas was the radically divergent contexts in which the two lived and wrote. Hildegard of Bingen, in the double monastery at Mount Disibode, was continually in contact with men. Indeed, her secretary Volmar came from the companion male monastery. In addition, she had extensive personal experience with a variety of women through her work as nurse-physician in the hospice associated with the monastery. Much of her insight into woman's and man's identity came from her personal experience. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, as part of the newly formed mendicant order of Dominicans, lived and studied only with men. The University of Paris, where he taught for years, was only open to men. In addition, he had no personal experience in the area of medicine. Thomas had no way to counter, therefore, the influence of Aristotelian theory through his own experience.

In conclusion, then, this comparative study of Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas has revealed a radically different concept of woman within approximately one hundred years. Given the obscurity of Hildegard's texts, hidden in the recesses of Benedictine libraries until after the French Revolution, the easy availability of the works of Thomas after his canonization in 1323, and the affirmation by Pope Leo XIII in 1879 that Thomas's writings be taken as the basis for all theology, it is not surprising that sex polarity became the dominant theory of sex identity within the Church for centuries. Today, however, the Church is rethinking much in relation to sex identity. In the striking series of writings given by Pope John Paul II in *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, we find Hildegard's kind of approach being initiated once again. In considering the creation story John Paul states: "The circle of the solitude of the man-person is broken, because the first 'man' awakens from his sleep as 'male and female.'"<sup>33</sup> In an attempt to bring about a

33 John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), p. 65.

reorientation in theology he emphasizes the equality and differentiation of man and woman which is so central to sex complementarity:

The theology of the body, which right from the beginning is bound up with the creation of man in the image of God, becomes in a way, also the theology of sex, or rather, the theology of masculinity and femininity. . . .

We understand that knowledge of man passes through masculinity and femininity, which are . . . two ways, as it were, of being a body and at the same time . . . two complementary dimensions, as it were, of self-consciousness and self-determination and, at the same time, two complementary ways of being conscious of the meaning of the body.<sup>34</sup>

The challenge for contemporary philosophy and theology within the Christian context is to work out the dynamic ways in which sex complementarity can flourish.

34 Ibid., p. 78.