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Over and Over: Cycles and Concentricity in Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*

In many religions, and especially within various Christian traditions, repetition is used as penance: a priest might tell a Catholic parishioner to repeat five Hail Mary prayers and five Our Father's as punishment for some sin. In a more drastic example, a monk from the Middle Ages might take to flagellating himself repeatedly for something as small as an impure thought, or just simply to connect with the pain Christ felt at the Crucifixion. However, repetition can also represent moments of praise or exaltation: one need only think of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*. In traditions outside Christianity as well repetitive acts of devotion are used to celebrate God and achieve closeness with the divine force. In the Turkish sect of Sufism, a mystical strain of Islam, people known as whirling dervishes twirl in a circle over and over until they essentially lose all sense of where they are, and are said to access a high plane, closer to God's divinity. One of the key figures of Christian mysticism, St. Hildegard of Bingen who lived in Germany during the 12th century, is especially exemplary of the power of repetitive, devotional motions of prayer.

Hildegard is most well-known for her extensive visions of God, the Trinity, the Universe, and Heaven: she recorded these visions in a book called *Scivias*, which is a truncated form of the theological phrase *Sci Vias Domini*, or "know the ways of the Lord." The book is divided into three "books," a numerological allusion to the Trinity, with each book being a collection of individual visions. The manuscript is also illuminated, with an illustration accompanying each of the visions—while scholars disagree over whether Hildegard herself created these illustrations or whether she simply commissioned them, it

is clear that she was involved in the creation of the visual representations of her visions. One of the most striking elements in these illustrations is their incorporation of striking concentric circles and other repeating patterns. In this paper, I will connect the various iconographies of repetition in Hildegard's writing and illuminations in *Scivias* to repetitive motions of devotional prayer, and by doing so, will illustrate the power that physical motion has to bring a devotee into a mystical, altered state of connection with a higher power—whatever that higher power may be. I will also highlight the larger relationship between cycles in time and cycles in space, with the physical motions of prayer exemplifying cycles in time, and the concentric illustrations cycles in space.

Hildegard begins her recollections of her visions by describing what she was doing when her first main vision arrived: she states, "And behold! In the forty-third year of my earthly course, as I was gazing with great fear and trembling attention at a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven." At first, this statement seems rather odd—Hildegard tells us that she was already looking at a "heavenly vision" when her first vision of "great splendor" seized her. It is also here important to note the frontispiece to *Scivias*, which depicts Hildegard sitting in a church nave, seized in the head by flames of fire meant to represent the Holy Spirit, as she writes on a table and dictates to her scribe Volmar (see Appendix A). Given that, because of this frontispiece, Hildegard was most likely in the sanctuary itself or another holy place within her convent, it is presumable that she was engaged in an act of prayer at the time of her first vision. It becomes clear then that Hildegard receives these "heavenly vision[s]" regularly, in that they appear whenever she is engaged in prayer within a divine space in the convent. The first clause of that sentence further supports the regularity with which she receives these visions: Hildegard

takes special care to note the cycles of the earth: she states that it is “in the forty-third year of [her] earthly course” when she received these visions. By invoking the cycles of the earth here, Hildegard connects herself to these larger, more celestial patterns and rhythms of repetition, and thus endows her written work with a similar kind of cyclicity. Hildegard further links her own writing to the patterns of the earth through her use of the word “course” to describe the motions of the earth. “Course” in Latin would translate to “via,” which is the very same word that appears in the work’s title, *Scivias*.

After her depiction of her reception of these visions, Hildegard recounts how “a voice from Heaven” addressed her with the words “O fragile human, ashes of ashes and filth of filth!” In these small ascetic phrases, “ashes of ashes” and “filth of filth,” which allude to the famous Genesis 3:19 verse “from dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return” (King James version), Hildegard connects not only herself, but also the human race writ large, to the idea of the unending cycles of resurrection and death that she has depicted in the motions of the earth. However, as the work continues on, Hildegard makes it clear that these patterns of repetition and cyclicity are not only earthly, but heavenly as well.

It is through the manuscripts’ illuminations largely that Hildegard depicts the concentricity of Heaven: one especially powerful example is the illumination of the sixth vision of Book I, the Choirs of Angels (see Appendix B). The image depicts 12 concentric rings of varying color and width. Within each ring are many angels, side by side, repeating around the length of the ring. At first glance, the work appears almost like an abstraction: the individual angels are hardly visible, and all that one notices is the near-hypnotizing concentric circles. Hildegard employs these types of concentric circles elsewhere in her work as well: she depicts “The Trinity in Unity” by showing Christ as a human figure

surround by two circles, meant to represent God and the Holy Spirit (see Appendix C). In her illustration of “The One [Christ] Sitting Upon the Throne,” Hildegard paints the throne as a set of seven concentric circles upon which Christ sits, foregrounded in front of his own set of three concentric ovals (see Appendix D). According to Jeremiah 3:17, “they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord” (King James version,” meaning that the “throne” upon which Christ’s sits represents the foundations of the Church itself: therefore, in her illumination and vision, Hildegard sees the Church as being itself a set of concentric circles. This idea has several ramifications. First, it suggests Hildegard’s pious view that the Church will be never ending: just as the circles seem to go on forever both in that they are repeating and in that their circumference has no beginning or end, so Hildegard believes that the Kingdom of God as symbolized by His throne, the Church, will be eternal.

However, the church as concentric circles also alludes to the architecture of 12th century Byzantine churches. Such churches were often constructed with circular dome over the nave and a semicircular dome over the apse and altar (see Appendix E). These domes were often painted or mosaicked with concentric illustrations building up to their apex: to a nun such as Hildegard who spent the majority of their time in the church, these concentric circles would have been deeply familiar as the point at which the physical church came into closest with the sky, a synecdoche for Heaven itself. Therefore, by using concentric circles in her illumination to depict the Heavenly spheres and the body of Christ himself, Hildegard alludes to how the place in which she and her congregation carry out the same, repetitive devotional prayers day in and day out, is the very place in which they can achieve greatest proximity to God. Through her mystical visions, she connects the daily

rhythms of herself and her fellow nuns to the grand, celestial rhythms of the Trinity and the Church writ large.

Hildegard also invokes her own specific cycles as a woman multiple times throughout the work. Wombs and yonic illustrations appear repeatedly, with perhaps the most potent examples being the very first illumination in the work, that of “The Universe” (see Appendix F), and her illustration of “The Synagogue” (see Appendix G). “The Universe,” with its yonic imagery suggests the reproductive organ of a woman, while “the Synagogue,” a depiction of the Church/Synagogue personified as a woman, gives special attention to the womb of the woman, in which the entire congregation resides. In alluding to the female reproductive organs so specifically in the illuminations, Hildegard merges not only earthly and celestial cycles in her writings, but also the most human cycle of all, that of menstruation.

Through this act of merging, Hildegard then makes the broader, powerful suggestion that the human, the earthly, and the celestial spheres are in fact not as separate as they might appear. Rather, she suggests, they are linked because of the presence and importance of repetitive cycles throughout all of them. Furthermore, Hildegard suggests, the *vias* between these different states is precisely through repetitive acts and repetitive motion. The Eastern Orthodox path, therefore, to an altered state of communication with the divine is not dissimilar to that of the whirling dervishes or repenting Catholics: it is through familiar, recurring gestures and words that one can reach the extraordinary.

Appendix A: Frontispiece



Appendix B: The Choirs of Angels



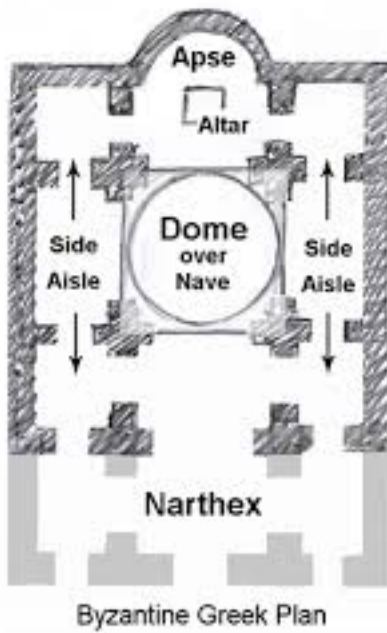
Appendix C: The Trinity in Unity



Appendix D: The One Sitting Upon the Throne



Appendix E: Diagram of the Byzantine Church



Appendix F: The Universe



Appendix G: The Synagogue

I. De synagoga matre incarnacionis
natiuonũ domini. filii dei.
ii. Verba salemonis.
iii. Verba ysaię pphete.
iiii. De diuerso colore synagoge.
v. De cecitate eius ⁊ quod in
corde abraham. in pectore
moyses. in uentre eius reli
qui pphete. qđ significet.
vi. Quod magna ut turris ba
bens circulum in capite si
mitem aurore.
vii. Verba ezechielis. **Item**
viii. Comparatio de samstone. ⁊ de
saul ⁊ de dauud ad eandẽ

