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Brides of Christ

Barbara Kraft · Thursday, March 30th, 2017

BRIDES OF CHRIST: HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, SAINT TERESA OF AVILA, SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ (NEW SPAIN)

The Hildegard craze was jump started in 1982 by medievalist Christopher Page's album *A Feather on the Breath of God* (Since then over a million recordings of the music of Hildegard have been sold). Subsequently the 12th century abbess was taken up by New Age enthusiasts who have catapulted her into a 90s cult figure. This year the 900th anniversary of the visionary prophetess, abbess, composer, correspondent of popes, kings, and emperors, writer of books on medicine, natural history, the lives of the saints, and her own visions is being observed worldwide with concerts, articles, lectures, and symposia.

This phenomenon is not such an anomaly as it might seem, occurring as it does in a secular age rife with superstition, pseudo-science, and pseudo-religious cults in which the beleaguered genuinely seek for a union with God and spiritual renewal through self-realization, meditation, and various other imported spiritual practices cut to fit modern proclivities. These pseudo-systems are easy to accommodate because they do not involve confrontations with reality and thus reality is more easily avoided and, in many instances, transcended. While the craving for spiritual role models is undoubtedly genuine, we tend to approach the examples presented by our chosen heroes and heroines as if we were eating a piece of cake – licking the halo of icing and leaving the substance of the matter, the reality, untouched. The 'substance,' as demonstrated in the lives of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) of New Spain (Mexico), has to do with the ways in which they negotiated (from within the confines of 12th, 16th, and 17th century enclosed convents) with their respective worlds, and so realized the fruition of their talents in remarkable : achievements remarkable in any age.

The context of the lives of these women was Christianity, Catholicism, of course, which was all powerful: equal in power to the monarchies and kingdoms of the times. In terms of religious history two phenomena in the name of Christ characterized the 11th through the early 19th centuries. During the Middle Ages, throughout the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, the Christian military marched across Europe on a campaign to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims. And from 1480-1834, the Spanish Inquisition, organized by the Spanish government, spread terror throughout Spain and its colonies with the barbarism of its search to ferret out nonbelievers,

infidels, demons and witches.

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Catholicism is an autocratic, hierarchical, paternalistic, authoritative, judgmental, worldly religion which, in its adamant recognition of good and evil as symbolized in the images of God and Satan, provides a black and white path of navigation through the world and its many temptations for the practitioner or believer (who are not necessarily the same). The goal of life's journey is not happiness, self-fulfillment, peace on earth, or transcendence; the goal is the salvation of the immortal soul upon its liberation from the earthly body at death.

The lives of Hildegard, Teresa, and Juana span six centuries, but the alternatives for women who remained in the world during that vast span of years remained remarkably constant: marriage, concubinage, or prostitution. To live under some form of male protection was essential for survival. The convent, austere as it could be (although some bordered on social clubs), had much to offer, particularly to intellectually gifted, spirited, bold women. The Church provided an opportunity for an education; while there was no formal prohibition of learning by women there were no educational facilities for them other than the convent. During medieval times noble and upper class young men generally had tutors, particularly if they were destined for a clerical career; thereafter, they could go from tutors or from a monastic education to schools. Women could only attend schools if they disguised themselves as men. (Remember Streisand's film *Yentl*?) As a young woman Sor Juana toyed with the idea of disguising herself as a man in order to attend the university.

Convents were frequently adjacent to monasteries whose monks served as spiritual advisors and confessors to the nuns. For women of an intellectual bent this provided an opportunity for theological discourse. (In medieval times and in late 17th century Spain and its domains an intellectual vocation was restricted to theology and sacred studies.)

Within the convent there was the possibility of rising to a position of authority and power, of having what today would amount to a career, as demonstrated by the chains of convents established by Hildegard and Teresa. These convents added to the wealth and property of the Church because brides of Christ commonly brought with them dowries of property or money or both. As bookkeeper for her wealthy community, the Convent of Santa Paula of the Order of San Jerónimo, Sor Juana managed substantial sums in carrying out the financial transactions her post required, including the lending of money at interest.

Another advantage of a religious vocation was that as brides of Christ rather than of men, women avoided the burden of child-bearing, no small consideration in a period during which women regularly bore ten or more children. (Romantic love as we understand it did not flourish until the 19th century and is associated with notions of free-will and choice.) Hildegard was the tenth child of a noble family and, as such, was tithed to the church at birth as was the custom. St. Teresa's mother bore nine children before dying at the age of 33. Of her mother, Teresa writes that she was a woman of great intelligence and very virtuous, who "endured a life of great infirmity…..and though she died at thirty-three, her dress was already that of a person advanced in years."

The fear of committing mortal sin and thereby jeopardizing the salvation of her immortal soul is what motivated St. Teresa to take the veil. She did so with determination, if not enthusiasm. (No

one not brought up in strict Catholicism can begin to imagine the guilt and horror that committing a mortal sin inflicts on young and impressionable minds, even in this century. The pain such a sin causes God is equivalent to hammering a nail into Christ's shattered, crucified, bloodied body. If one should be unfortunate enough to die before confessing a mortal sin, his or her soul goes directly to hell where it will forever be deprived of the sight of God. A mortal sin can range from something as innocuous as eating meat on Friday – the issue being obedience – to a grievous affair such as murder.)

In the opening pages of her *Autobiography*, Teresa reveals that she was inspired "by servile fear more than by love," and castigates herself for her youthful vanity, her love of companionship, and of books. Upon the death of her mother, Teresa was put into a convent by her father, for educational instruction and because it was inappropriate for her to remain at home alone with him. In the convent, the impressionable and charismatic fourteen-year-old came under the influence of a nun who spoke to her of the wonders of God. Of this experience Teresa writes that she had the "greatest possible aversion for becoming a nun," although "all the nuns were pleased with me, for the Lord had given me grace, wherever I was, to please people, and so I became a great favorite…" In poor health and prone to fainting spells, both of which plagued her throughout her life, Teresa was forced to leave the convent a year and a half later. Against her father's wishes she took the habit of the Convent of the Incarnation at the age of twenty. In the *Autobiography* she states "It seemed to me that every bone in my body were being wrenched asunder, for as I had no love of God to subdue my love for my father and kinfolk, everything was such a strain to me that, if the Lord had not helped me, no reflections of my own would have sufficed to keep me true to my purpose. But the Lord gave me courage to fight against myself and so I carried out my intention." Unfortunately, the Lord did not give her health. "The change in my life and in my diet, affected my health; and though my happiness was great, it was not sufficient to cure me…."

Choice was not a prerogative for Hildegard, who also suffered from migraine headaches and illnesses throughout her life. (It has been suggested that her visions resulted from the migraines.) At the age of eight, she was 'enclosed' in a cell-like room at Disibodenberg with the anchoress Jutta. The room contained a small window through which the woman and child spoke to visitors, through which the necessities of life were passed and refuse taken out. In this setting, Jutta, the daughter of a local count, educated Hildegard in the recitation of the Psalter. Having rejected all marriage proposals, Jutta dedicated herself to God, choosing the life of a recluse or anchoress, rather than that of a nun in a convent. Because they were literally dead to the world, before their confinement, anchors received the last rites from the Bishop and then underwent a macabre burial ceremony which included the anchor being laid out on a bier.

Historically Catholicism was, and it still remains, a religion hard on women. Yet it was through the offices of the Church that these three women found expression and recognition during their lifetimes. For centuries, St. Teresa has occupied an esteemed place in the public imagination, and Hildegard is gaining ground. Such is not the case with Sor Juana who, of the three, challenged and upset the perceived natural order of the superiority of the male. Were it not for Octavio Paz's extraordinary book on her, she would remain the purview solely of scholars and poets.

A lover of knowledge, an intellectual, and a poet, Sor Juana's decision to enter the Convent was a prudent, not a vocational, one consistent with the morality of the age and the habits and convictions of her class. She was of bastard birth, she was poor, and she lived without male protection. (When Sor Juana entered the convent a dowry was negotiated for her by Nuñez de Miranda, her confessor and a censor for the Inquisition.) For Sor Juana the convent was not a ladder toward God, but a

refuge for a woman alone in the world who wanted to devote herself to a life of letters and knowledge. Highly educated, she read Latin and perhaps Portuguese as well. The library she kept in her cell contained Spanish poetry, treatises on mythology, Latin literature and the obligatory, for a poet of her times, works of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan.

While she was a sincere believer and her orthodoxy beyond question, the knowledge to which Sor Juana aspired was not the learning religion offers. Her intellectual and moral concerns differed from St. Teresa's longing to be pierced by divine light; from those of that other Spanish mystic and ascetic, St. John of the Cross, who sought to obliterate reason in the ecstasy of love of God. Juana's desire was the light of reason. She wanted to penetrate the opaque mysteries of things.

A worldly nun who, before entering the convent, was a companion to the Vicereine Doña Leonor Carreto, Marquise de Mancera at the viceregal palace in Mexico, Sor Juana's poetry proclaims that reason has no gender and that intelligence is not the privilege of men, nor is stupidity limited to women. Paz places Sor Juana, a prolific poet, firmly in the great tradition of Western civilization.

And then, at the age of forty-six, this woman, who was devoted to theology and mythology, a lover of music, inquisitive of the sciences (she kept scientific and musical instruments in her cell), and gatherer of unusual and esoteric information, was forced by ecclesiastical authorities to renounce her life of learning and erudition, and ordered to devote herself to a life of prayer and penitence by scourges. Shortly thereafter, an epidemic swept the convent of San Jerónimo. Nursing the stricken sisters, Sor Juana contracted the disease and died. She was 46 years and five months old.

Paz writes that "knowledge is transgression" and that "transgression is a movement towards maleness." (Similarly, Rosa Luxemburg's biographer, Paul Frölich, wrote that "There was much that was manly about Rosa Luxemburg in her keen intellect, in her boundless energy, in her dauntlessness, in her confidence and assertiveness.") Paz notes that while the Church often harbored writers and poets such Gongora and Lope de Vega, they were poets and dramatists, not intellectuals, whereas Juana was both poet and intellectual. While her conduct as a nun was above reproach, her attitude was not. She had the temerity to disprove the inferiority of women in intellectual and literary matters with her attainments which were a source of admiration and public applause in Spain, Portugal, and Mexico. Like Eve, Juana dared to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge.

Hildegard and St. Teresa fell well within the boundary of acceptable Church orthodoxy with their prophetic and mystical writings. In the Middle Ages, superstition was rampant and prophetic visions were not an uncommon occurrence. It was generally believed that God chose the weak to confound the strong and fools to correct the wise. As a member of the weaker sex, a prophetess was readily accepted as a spokesperson for God. In her biography of Hildegard, Sabina Flanagan notes that to be a female prophet was "to confirm women's inferiority rather than to deny it." Hildegard and Teresa insured themselves against ecclesiastical censure by proclaiming that the written revelation of their visions and mystical experiences were ordered by their superiors. (Male writers were also diffident about writing books and did so, for the most part, only at the request of their superiors.) Hildegard's order to write came from God; St. Teresa's from various confessors and spiritual advisors.

In the preface to the apocalyptic *Scivias*, her first book, Hildegard writes: "But when I had passed my first youth and attained the age of perfect strength, I heard a voice from heaven saying….write what you see and hear." In *Scivias* Hildegard records her visions and lists thirty virtues; in her

second book, *Liber Virtue Meritorium*, thirty-five vices that beset mankind are described, together with the appropriate punishment and penance for each. These include fasting, flagellation, and prayer; and for particularly heinous crimes, hair shirts and isolation. In laying claim to her role as prophetess, Hildegard was able to engage in theological writing without suggesting any equality with men to whom the field belonged. Her mandate and her knowledge (she was uneducated in the formal sense) came from God. With this ground under her feet, she assumed a public role in the church as an agent of God, corresponding with and dispensing advice to kings, emperors, and popes, traveling to monasteries and convents as a touring preacher, and consulting as an exorcist when the occasion arose; she wrote music and books including three theological volumes as well as works on the natural sciences, on the body and its ailments, the lives of the saints, poems, and her own visions. She wrote these works herself, rather than dictating them, and she wrote them in Latin, the language of high culture which implies they were not intended for the general public but for the elite. As Flanagan points out, writing in Latin on theological subjects, Hildegard identified herself with the male literary and theological intelligentsia of the age.

St. Teresa, fearful that she might be suffering from demonical delusions, confided her mystical visions to her confessors. They, so as to form some kind of judgment on the situation, ordered her to write an account of the graces (particularly in prayer) she was receiving from God. This was the origin of her remarkable *Autobiography* or *Confession*, which is filled with references to her wickedness, to her great sins, and to the weakness of women and their susceptibility to being deluded by the devil. (Extreme self-judgment and self-vilification, a common formula of the times not unlike present-day 'political correctness', also permeate Hildegard's theological works.)

Distraught, Teresa made arrangements with her confessor Gaspar Daza to counsel her. Even though Daza expressed concern that an evil spirit might be working in her and advised prayer, St. Teresa, whose physical condition had deteriorated to where she "hardly ever seemed to be fully conscious," writes that she improved with his visits. "Gradually and discreetly he [Daza] showed me ways of vanquishing the devil. So great was the love which I began to bear him that I found nothing more restful than seeing him…..whenever a long time passed without a visit from him I would at once become very much worried, thinking that he was not coming to see me because I was so wicked." The longing expressed in this statement borders on that of romantic, human love. (And there were those who lamented that St. Teresa often appropriated expressions that appeared in the love songs of 15th century palace troubadours. There is a relationship between the language of mystic poetry, particularly Spanish mystic poetry, e.g. St. John of the Cross, and secular erotic poetry. Often they are indistinguishable from one another.)

Catholicism, which recognizes sin as integral to the human condition, created the sacrament of confession to give the troubled soul a means of regular absolution. A 'confession' such as St. Teresa's is consistent with and reinforces Church orthodoxy about sinfulness – which is not to detract from Saint Teresa's work. It is a remarkable document of a thwarted intelligence and sublimated love struggling toward the perfection of spiritual light and divine grace from within the vale of human doubt. Without this creative outlet for the intensity of her devotional fervor, Teresa might well have ended up an hysteric. (Hysteria is broadly defined as a psychoneurotic disorder, characterized by violent emotional outbreaks, disturbed sensory and motor functions, and various other abnormal effects due to autosuggestion.) The great English poet, engraver and painter William Blake, who read St. Teresa's work with interest, was also subject to visions and was thought quite mad by the majority of his contemporaries.

Hildegard and Teresa, both of whom committed their visions to writing when in their early 40s,

share something that has been called “the grace of complete surrender.” Subsequent to this surrender to their fates (neither expressed a desire to leave the convent which would have been virtually impossible in any event – where would they have gone?), both women rallied in the life of the mind, found their voices, and produced an astonishing body of written work in a genre which in no way compromised their religious lives. St. Teresa, who founded the first convent of the strict Discalced Carmelites, wrote twelve books in all. (Discalced Carmelites are unshod as opposed to shod Calced Carmelites.)

The Church canonized Teresa as a saint; Hildegard has been venerated but not sainted. (The reason most likely being that she allowed an excommunicant to be buried in a cemetery adjoining her abbey, thereby violating Church law. Her defense, that he had received the last rites which include confession, was not accepted and the convent was censured.)

It is interesting that Hildegard and St. Teresa both found their true vocations (that of writers) when they were in their early forties: a fact that leads to the speculation that they were post-menopausal, the hormonal caprices that, in women, pit human, emotional needs against purpose behind them. The great Danish writer Isak Dinesen stated that “Only when women are old enough to have done with the business of being women can they let loose their strength.”

We should celebrate Hildegard, St. Teresa, and Sor Juana as much for their intelligence, pride, ambition and ego as for their achievements, which could not have been realized without those four traits. In her writings, Hildegard claims that it is in the mind that we know God and choose his will for us. When we make the right choice, we “feel it.” She writes that our choice is an act “productive and perfect and prosperous; and the fiery grace of Christ Jesus calls this to the person’s mind anew.”

There is ego, and no small amount of canniness, in Hildegard, who having “attained the age of perfect strength” appropriates God’s permission so that she can get on with the expression of her intelligence. It was ego that made her write in Latin, the language of high culture. There is pride at work when St. Teresa writes “the Lord had given me grace, wherever I was, to please people and so I became a great favorite.” There is ego involved when Teresa, the most conventionally ‘feminine’ of the three, refers to *Interior Castles* as her “libro grande.”

Sor Juana was brought down, punished, humbled and humiliated, by ecclesiastical authorities for her appropriation of the traits of intelligence, pride, ego, and ambition, traits traditionally associated with men and eschewed in women, which, judiciously exercised, are God-given gifts and should be valued and celebrated as such. What better way to salvation, what better way to honor God, then to use well the gifts he has seen fit to bestow upon us.

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