The Use of Neoplatonism within Christianity: Augustine and Hildegard’s Adoption of the Philosophy in Their Works

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Introduction:

Christianity has been around the world for more than two thousand years. It started in Palestine and then spread across the Mediterranean throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity stretched out as far east as Persia, and as far west as Britain. Everywhere Christianity spread it sought to defend itself, as well as convert people through theological reasoning. On one end, this could have looked like strict Christianity, with no exceptions to the rule. On the other end, it could have been entirely syncretic, blending aspects of different religions within it. One philosophical school that Christians interacted with to help explain and defend their beliefs was Neoplatonism.¹

Neoplatonism and Its Role in Late Antiquity and The Middle Ages

Neoplatonism was mainly derived from the works of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato. It emerged in Late Antiquity with the works of Greco-Roman Pagans such as Porphyry who used it, among other things, to debate the Christian religion. Christians also used Neoplatonism in response to Pagan debates. It was also possible to use Neoplatonism to explain Christian beliefs, such as in Augustine’s City of God when he uses the Greek word “sophrosyne” to explain the virtue of temperance. The use of Neoplatonism by Christian theologians in Late Antiquity was effective in explaining Christianity to educated non-Christian populations who needed a familiar philosophy to get a good impression of Christianity.

That was how Neoplatonism was used in Late Antiquity, but the use of Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages had its differences. One difference was the idea of creation with Genesis and Revelations being viewed as “procession and return”. Neoplatonism was used in the Middle Ages as Christian thinkers searched for personal faith and meaning with God. Developing a personal mysticism is reflected in Hildegard of Bingen’s Ordo Virtutum, a morality play about the opposite camps of Virtue and Vice battling over a soul. Besides personal faith in God, theological thought at the time was also used to self-reflect as a form of worship instead of liturgical worship or through participation with the community. This shift to self-reflect came from a desire to be in religious places isolated from the world, far from external duties so one could be free to worship God instead of having to deal with local governments.

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2 Kukkonen and Remes, “Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion”, 140
3 Augustine. “City of God.” Marcus Dodds. Project Gutenberg. April 8 2014. 303
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm
7 Ibid, 210
It was an inevitability that one had to deal with the external world, even as an abbot or a nun. One person who understood this was Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess and a mystic who claimed to receive visions from God. Hildegard is also considered a Neoplatonist with her *Scivias* being a collection of visions that detail things like how the world is depicted as God at the top and how the universe is explained with cosmology. Hildegard and Augustine claimed to have visions, but one big difference was that Hildegard claimed to be lucid while having them, separating her from other theologians who also claimed to have visions. The importance of this was that it put her on a different level of visionary experience than the rest, giving her more credit as an “oracle” of Christ.

Hildegard of Bingen and Augustine both used Neoplatonism to explain God and the world around them. They both had similarities and differences in how they tried to do this. The main similarities were the conception of the soul, the universe, and the idea of a trinity. The differences in their approaches involved their uses of cosmology and how they viewed the end of the world. Understanding how Neoplatonist ideas were transmitted from Augustine to Hildegard is also important for understanding how messages are interpreted and taught over time as contexts change.

**Hildegard and Christianity in the 12th Century**

It is important to know who Hildegard was, and how her life and context impacted the way she saw things. Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098CE to a noble family. She was born

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8 Hildegard, “Scivias”, From *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. Paulist Press. 1990. 64
into a position where she was not treated as an equal to a man, but as a woman who could be married to a suitor at any time. Around the turn of the twelfth century, asceticism had begun to take hold in Christianity again, and an ascetic who took a young Hildegard under her wing was Jutta.\textsuperscript{11} Jutta was an abbess who had good relations with monks around the area and taught Hildegard a variety of things. She taught Hildegard how to read Latin, an important language to learn if you were to read any text from the church at the time.\textsuperscript{12} Jutta was also a very intense ascetic, which contrasted with Hildegard when she eventually became the leader of her own nunnery. Hildegard emphasized the moderation of ascetic practices, claiming that too much of it could be a problem with someone worshipping God.\textsuperscript{13} Hildegard in her teens got to go back to her family’s lands and court where she experienced what the temporal life was like for a time.\textsuperscript{14} Having the experience of living in a temporal place instead of a religious one impacted her in the way that she knew how the world and its politics worked, giving her a more grounded approach to her leadership. This is evident when she advocated for women to choose the spiritual life instead of being forced into it, as being forced led to “fleeing in body or mind”.\textsuperscript{15}

Another thing that Jutta had taught Hildegard was how effective an energetic nun could be. Having a lot of that energy could be used to convert and “form disciples”.\textsuperscript{16} Hildegard was also taught religious practice by Jutta, as she was not allowed to go to a cathedral school because she was a woman.\textsuperscript{17} She instead used the visions to make her opinion known to higher-ups in the church to get her recognized. If she couldn’t go to a seminary school to be taught theology and

\textsuperscript{11} Newman, “Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World”, 5
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 6
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 7
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 33
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 33
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 7
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid
beat others in debates, she would instead focus on visions explaining their personal significance to mystic bonds with God.

Another important consideration is understanding the time Hildegard was in. Considering she was born in 1098CE, she was alive during the time of “The Reformation of the Twelfth Century”. This was a time of reform in the church world, where the politics and ideas of the church would shift. The ideas of Neoplatonism would be popular as many Christians adapted ideas from Augustine, such as his canon interpretation of Genesis. The monasteries also had reform movements take place. A movement that supported Hildegard was the Cistercians who were led by Bernard of Clairvaux. The fact that the Cistercians supported her provides evidence of a correlation in beliefs such as the Neoplatonic idea of a “higher, unified form of reality…which the gifted mind could contemplate only in a transcendental, mystical state.”

On the political plane there were also certain key players in Europe during the twelfth century. In Germany there was Frederick Barbarossa who was increasingly dissenting from the church, possibly inspiring what Hildegard thought the apocalypse would be like with “anticlerical riots and secular confiscation of the church’s wealth”. One factor that represents these tensions between church and state was the idea of church property with monasteries being granted the right to control their own property. With the right to control her own property, Hildegard’s position became important to the spiritual and temporal world, as the church had

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18 Constable, “The Reformation of the Twelfth Century”, 3
19 Otten, “Christianity’s Content: (Neo) Platonism in the Middle Ages, Its Theoretical and Theological Appeal”, 254
21 Witts, “How to Make a Saint: On Interpreting Hildegard of Bingen”, 482
23 Constable, “The Reformation of the Twelfth Century”, 240
increasingly influenced politics because of the given freedom of property. This meant the church had to have some form of interaction with the outside world.

One last important aspect of Hildegard was how she viewed herself as a person. Hildegard did not see herself as just an abbess, or a great theologian; she saw herself as a mother and “The voice of living light”.24 Using this motherly label to see herself as a caregiver of religious women instead of a basic leader. She described how learning scripture and theology was like “divine font as breasts offered to be sucked”, creating a nurturing image of the Christian religion.25 The other label of “The voice of the living light” refers to her visions from God and liturgical music. Being referred to this way could not only give her more validity in her visions but also made it easier to publish her visions. This would not have been too difficult because even though she did align with the reform movement, she still supported many orthodox values such as the concept of marriage and the dignity of priests.26

**Augustine and Hildegard: Similar Uses of Neoplatonism**

To know why Hildegard had her differences in visions with Augustine is to know the context of the medieval world she was in. With Christianity being the dominant religion trying to hold on to its power instead of Augustine’s world where it was newly on the rise. There are still some similar views of Augustine and Hildegard though, with the most notable views being how they conceived the soul, how the universe worked, and the idea of the trinity.

**The Conception of the Soul**

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24 Newman, “Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World”, 42
25 Ibid, 50
26 Ibid, 19
The Neoplatonic conception of the soul is that it is separate from the human body. The concept also includes the notion that the soul is the source of the divine, but some souls incline downward to a more materialistic life. This is present in Christianity with the idea of virtue and vice. Vice being actions one can take that will fulfill the idea of a materialistic existence, and actions of virtue that will fulfill the idea of a divine existence.

Compare this with how Augustine thought of the soul with him explaining why the Romans were “destroyed by their own gods”. The way he explains it is that at first, God granted the Romans a temporal reward for their virtues, giving them the Empire that they possessed. Augustine condemned the Romans for not turning to God. Augustine explains that the gods that they worship grant no wisdom, arguing that there is a shrine for emperors but virtually none for wise philosophers like Plato. Augustine is arguing that it makes no sense that an emperor with temporal power could be granted such holiness, while a man who has provided wisdom and philosophy has not been seen the same way. In essence, is Augustine argues that Plato has done more than worldly rulers for the advancement of the human soul. Augustine prioritizes the soul when he writes, “For it is not earthly riches which make us or our sons happy…But it is God who makes us happy, who is the true riches of minds”.

Hildegard’s conception of the soul was on display in Ordo Virtutum. Within the play, as previously established, there is a battle over a soul between virtue and vice. Supporting the virtues is a happy soul, who is revered as wise and loving. This contrasts with the troubled soul.

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27 Kukkonen & Remes, “Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion”, 142
28 Augustine, “City of God”, 51
29 Ibid, 207
30 Ibid, 66
31 Ibid, 210
32 Hildegard, “Ordo Virtutum”, 2
who laments about its “fight against the flesh”.\textsuperscript{33} The Virtues tell the troubled soul that it is the soul’s “duty to overcome the devil through us”.\textsuperscript{34} This represents how Hildegard thought one could be happy with the happy soul gladly basking in the virtues, while the troubled one views fighting against temptations as a struggle. The virtues that Hildegard writes about are ones such as humility, love, fear of God, obedience, faith, hope, and contempt for the world, among others. Contempt for the World is interesting as the character has a line where it says, “O unhappy pilgrimage on earth, fraught with many labors, I renounce you. O virtues, come to me, and let us ascend to the spring of life”.\textsuperscript{35} Referring to visiting Earth as an “unhappy pilgrimage” can only mean being in the material world can make one sad, and so one must “ascend” to be happy. Viewing the soul in this way is an introspective and conscience way that speaks to the growing need for personal faith in the 12th century. A liturgical morality play could teach people about how to keep their own trust and faith in God. This idea is like Augustine’s, for both Christian thinkers view happiness as being one with God. While Hildegard sees this in the way of practice and virtue, Augustine views it in the sense of gaining rich knowledge from God.

**The Universe and its Physics**

Another Christian theme of that took inspiration from Neoplatonism was ideas surrounding Cosmology and Creation.\textsuperscript{36} This was touched on by Origen, a Christian philosopher in late antiquity who used the Neoplatonic conception of the *logos* or “divine word” to represent Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{37} This relates to the universe in that the divine word was a connection between the

\textsuperscript{33} Hildegard, “Ordo Virtutum”, 3
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 6
\textsuperscript{36} Otten, “Christianity’s Content: (Neo) Platonism in the Middle Ages, Its Theoretical and Theological Appeal”, 252
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 253
material world and the spiritual with Jesus Christ being the ultimate philosopher to touch on both worlds.

Both Hildegard and Augustine touch on cosmology, or how the universe is, in their works. In Augustine’s book City of God in the section Origins of the City of God, Augustine explains how the world works through an explanation of creation. Augustine explains that the world is separated into two planes, the visible and the invisible.\textsuperscript{38} The visible world being ours with Earth, and the invisible being the one where God resides. It is explained by Augustine what is made by God. Things made by God include only the good and light in the world.\textsuperscript{39} Augustine explains this is so because God created light and separated it from the darkness, but he did not create the darkness. Evil is only present when good is not present.

Hildegard wrote a very detailed description and illustration of what she imagined the universe was like. One feature of her vision was her use of winds. There were three different winds. The winds were outside of the earth and layered as such: the first wind one “spread the words of justice”, the second wind was a “tempest” brought forth by the devil, and the third wind represented a unified faith.\textsuperscript{40} The use of wind imagery by Hildegard represents the different phases that the world goes through. The winds could be described as “winds of

\textsuperscript{38} Augustine, “City of God”, 439
\textsuperscript{39} Augustine, “City of God”, 459
\textsuperscript{40} Hildegard, “Scivias”, 95
change” because it is right after the tempest that the third wind is present to help humanity.\textsuperscript{41} This represents the fact that humans must fight with the devil to reach serenity and unity in faith. This explanation is interesting as it lines up with how Augustine depicts his universe. The tempests of evil and a unified faith are separate entities that did not mix. Both universes seem to reflect this nature of the duality of night and day, as well as the distance from Earth to God. God was not visible in Augustine’s idea of the universe, and God was far away in Hildegard’s.

**The Trinity**

One thing that Augustine and Hildegard shared, along the Catholic Church in general, is how they view the trinity of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. The prevailing current understanding of the Trinity, thought up by Augustine was derived from Neoplatonic thought.\textsuperscript{42} It took inspiration from ideas of how the mind worked. In classic Augustinian fashion, was presented in an interpretive way with the The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

Augustine views the Trinity in the same way that Hildegard does, with him claiming that Jesus is the “Mediator between god and men”.\textsuperscript{43} This represents an interpretation of finding Jesus as the one who came down to Earth and taught the true way of God, representing God’s word. Augustine also views the Trinity as all equal, writing that, “For we do not say that the nature of the good is simple, because the Father alone possesses it, or the Son alone, or the Holy Ghost alone”.\textsuperscript{44} This view sees all Persons of the Trinity as equal in goodness and power.

\textsuperscript{41} Hildegard, “Scivias”, 95
\textsuperscript{43} Augustine, “City of God”, 438
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 448
Hildegard represents the trinity in *The Universe and Its Symbolism* through the use of stars. In particular, she uses star imagery to represent the trinity, with one star being pulled closer to Earth. This star is supposed to represent Jesus Christ and his humanity causing him to be pulled closer to earth. This claim is similar to Augustine’s with Jesus being the mediator between God and Men. An interesting part about this image is that the stars are so high, being the furthest from the earth in the illustration. This signals that the stars are on a higher spiritual plane than the physical one of Earth, presenting them as the highest in the universe’s hierarchy. The stars are also separated from the Earth with the biggest star in the illustration, the sun, blocking them from Earth’s “view”. Hildegard refers to the Sun as “The Sun of Justice with the brilliance of burning charity, of such great glory that every creature is illumined by the brightness of His light”. This alludes to the fact that the Sun is God’s greatest gift to humanity while at the same time blocking any view that man could have of the Trinity. The stars all being the same size means that no part of the Trinity is greater or lesser than the other, which makes sense as a Catholic concept. Hildegard and Augustine had very equal views of the Trinity as it had been a Neoplatonic development that had existed as official church doctrine since the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea.

**Augustine and Hildegard: Differences in Interpretation**

Hildegard and Augustine also differed in how they interpreted the world that matched the times in which they lived and wrote. Augustine lived in a time when Christianity was still trying to figure out itself and its basics, with only one state entity that mattered in terms of its acceptance, The Roman Empire. In the time of Hildegard, there was feudalism and different

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45 Hildegard, “Scivias”, 95
46 Ibid
states across Europe. Instead of there only being one political entity that the Catholic Church had to settle with, there were many. The differences between their worlds came out more in how they viewed the hierarchy of the world and how they viewed the Apocalypse.

**The Hierarchy of the World**

The notion of a hierarchy as sorted into “levels of being” is a Neoplatonic idea present in both Augustine and Hildegard.\(^{47}\) The levels of being are high to low. If somebody was on the low end of the hierarchy, it typically meant that one did not possess divine power and vice versa.\(^{48}\)

Augustine views the world through a hierarchical lens writing that “All natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good.”.\(^{49}\) This excerpt and view on nature certainly did influence Hildegard as hierarchy was a Neoplatonic influence on Christian thought in the Middle Ages.\(^{50}\) Augustine sorted this hierarchy not through a class context, writing that “It is not earthly riches which make us or our sons happy”.\(^{51}\)

Hildegard in her *Scivias* depicts this hierarchy of the world through a mountain made of iron representing the “strength and stability of the eternal Kingdom of God”.\(^{52}\) On the top of this mountain sits God with eyes looking out from all directions. The purpose of these eyes is to

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47 Kukkonen & Remes, “Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion”, 143
48 Ibid
49 Augustine, “City of God”, 486
50 Otten, “Christianity’s Content: (Neo) Platonism in the Middle Ages, Its Theoretical and Theological Appeal”, 249
51 Augustine, “City of God”, 210
52 Hildegard, “Scivias”, 67
represent the virtue of the “Fear of the lord” and to remind people of God’s good will.\textsuperscript{53} There are also people at every step of this hierarchy. This depiction of the hierarchy in relation to God represents how one would have to improve one’s spirit to be closer to God. One way that one could improve their spirit is by “Strong works of salvation, running in the way of truth…by which he prepares himself most precious riches on earth and in Heaven”.\textsuperscript{54} This outlook affirms that if one performs righteous acts, he or she will both be rich in the material and spiritual world. This reflects the feudal beliefs of the time. Considering that Hildegard was born in the upper classes and only allowed upper-class women in her nunnery, it would make sense for her to have this classist belief of being rich and righteous. This difference between the two with the focus on class being a different factor brings up an interesting revelation in Christianity as it developed. Christianity over time was used more to maintain a current hierarchy rather than upsetting the one already in place. This makes sense as the Catholic Church did need to maintain control over temporal entities to keep its influence and message.

\textbf{Apocalyptic Thought}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Hildegard, “Scivias”, 68
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid
\end{itemize}
Neoplatonism and Christianity intersect on ideas of the Apocalypse in Early Christianity. This idea of Apocalypse was brought up by Christian students in Neoplatonic schools fighting in the culture war between Pagans and Christianity.  

Augustine viewed the apocalypse as something that wasn’t imminent. This contrasted with the millenarians of his time who were trying to set dates such as phases until the apocalypse. Augustine differed from them by arguing that in Revelations the Kingdom of the Saints was represented as lasting a thousand years because “he used the thousand years as an equivalent for the whole duration of this world, employing the number of perfection to mark the fulness of time”. Augustine wrote that there was no definite way to mark when the apocalypse would start, as it was a mysterious interpretation that was not supposed to be taken literally. One key difference in Augustine’s vision of the apocalypse that sets himself apart from Hildegard is the understanding of what “the beast” or antichrist is. While Hildegard views the Anti-Christ as a single entity, Augustine claims it is “the ungodly city itself”. Instead of pinpointing the apocalypse to one person, he connects it with a group of people. The assigning of “the beast” to a group instead of a person removes a figure to attach apocalyptic omens to, eliminating guesses as to leaders who could be designated as the antichrist at least in a one-person way. 

Hildegard had a view of the apocalypse that emphasized the distance from God that focused on temporal rule by writing, “Five ferocious epochs of temporal rule” causing the apocalypse. Another passage in which the upper-class side of Hildegard comes out is when she  

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57 Augustine, “City of God”, 357
58 Ibid, 367
59 Hildegard, “Scivias”, 494
wrote that the “powerful and the fortunate” will be robbed. This shows that Hildegard prioritized the ideal of maintaining the hierarchy at play, believing that if it was upset, it was a sign of the apocalypse. It’s also interesting that her portrayal of the antichrist was not one of malice, but one of temptation who wanted to convince people that it was okay to sin, as they would still go to heaven if they did. Concerning the context and life of Hildegard, it’s not too surprising she would write this, with Frederick Barbarossa in her time having clashes with the Pope over power in HRE counties. Possibly she thought of this temporal rise in power as a warning that people would switch their loyalties.

**Conclusion**

The similarities and differences between Augustine’s and Hildegard’s interpretations reflect the separate contexts they were in and how religion was used. The added analysis of the texts of Augustine and Hildegard show how the baseline ideals of Christianity are upheld in their analyses, albeit in different ways. The conception of the soul as a fight between pureness and base desires. The Universe being separated between two planes, and the idea of a trinity connect to form the base ideals of the church. Hildegard did not separate from the basic ideals of the church as she was an ally of the church during the reform movement and not an enemy. The differences between the hierarchical and apocalyptic interpretations in their texts represent the different uses and views at the time they were alive. Augustine was setting down the ideals and getting rid of the division that would make the church into what it was. Hildegard presented the mysticism and personal union with God that many people desired in the Middle Ages.

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60 Hildegard, “Scivias”, 495
61 Ibid, 503
Augustine and Hildegard were philosophers of their time and context. Their historical contexts both influenced both in why they wrote what they wrote. Augustine and Hildegard interacted with the philosophy of Neoplatonism and its ideas to bring its wisdom to Christians of their periods. Neoplatonism with its ideas of the soul and the material being separate takes shape in both their philosophies.

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