

## ***Viriditas and Veritas: The Ecological Prophets Hildegard of Bingen and Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP***

“Every cosmology represents God in its own particular way, as well as offering a globalizing, integrative, and sacramental understanding of the world,” writes Boff.<sup>1</sup> For Hildegard of Bingen, twelfth century German Benedictine abbess, the universe is like an egg in the womb of God. Her view of the universe, conditioned as it is by her times and her education, represents her visionary understanding of God’s motherhood of this sphere that we call the universe. Hers is a view that is organic and holistic, coloured neither by Greek philosophy nor Enlightenment rationalism, refreshing and strikingly “true” in its perceptions around the source of created life.

In a similar way, the *new universe story* as told by geologists Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Miriam Therese MacGillis, O.P. is also organic and holistic. MacGillis, an American Dominican nun, is convinced, like her colleagues Berry and Swimme, that the current crises of the environment such as climate change and extinction of species are evidence of an altogether deficient cosmology. It is her passion to tell the universe story in order to create hope and offer truth to people, the truth about the earth and its place in the universe. It is her mission to attempt to reverse the destructive thinking and profit-motive activity that are undoing the creative life processes of billions of years of life on this planet earth. MacGillis is committed to re-fashioning a vision of human beings and their purpose within the “seamless fabric of Earth’s life”<sup>2</sup>.

Though separated in time by nearly one millennium, Hildegard of Bingen and Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP have striking similarities. Both are members of religious orders—one a Benedictine, the other a Dominican. Both women, who were drawn to the arts and to agriculture, speak the truth of nature and its beauty, of sin and its effect on the earth and its peoples. Both women share a cosmology that is organic and integrated. And finally, both women offer the church and the world a prophet’s warning, and a mystic’s vision.

There are two Latin words that I think capture something of each of these prophetic women—*viriditas* and *veritas*. Hildegard’s term *viriditas* means fecundity, greening power—the power of life pulsing in the whole universe. *Veritas* means *truth* and is the motto of the Dominican Order. It is a key feature in MacGillis’ description of the fate of the earth and in her telling of the new story of the universe. In this essay, I will give some background of Hildegard and Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP. Then, focusing on Hildegard’s concept of *viriditas*, I will show how *viriditas* speaks to *veritas* in the new universe story as presented in MacGillis’ lecture on the “Fate of the Earth” (1986).

### ***Hildegard of Bingen***

“In the beginning all creatures were green and vital. They flourished amidst flowers.” So writes Hildegard of Bingen in her praise of the greening power, the *viriditas* of God. Hildegard’s unique vision and cosmology celebrated the Living Light of God in

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<sup>1</sup> L Boff 1995. *Ecology and Liberation. A new paradigm*. NY: Orbis, 62.

<sup>2</sup> “Sustaining Earth. Sustaining Spirit” [www.grailville.org](http://www.grailville.org). Accessed 2 January 2009.

creation. She was a prolific writer and theologian with practical knowledge of the healing properties of plants. A talented musician, she was also gifted with discernment powers and was an able leader in her monastery. She was sought out for her wise counsel, a woman whose inner authority led her to speak out against abuses in the church and in monasteries of her time.

As the tenth child of a noble family, Hildegard was given as a tithe into the care of anchoress Jutta of Spanheim. The strength of her character was fundamentally shaped by her early childhood spent in the company of the holy woman. There in the anchoress' cell Hildegard absorbed the hermit's spirit of contemplation and mystical understanding of the ways and works of God, something she had tasted already in her early childhood. By the time Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was elected abbess or spiritual mother of the women who had been a part of the small Benedictine convent attached to the Disibodenberg monastery. Hildegard was especially dedicated to the singing of the psalms in the Divine Office and composed numerous hymns and mystical songs in praise of the Trinity, the Redeemer, and the Mother of God.

Hildegard's visions which began at the age of forty-two, caused her grievous suffering and, for a time, paralysis. In them she bore witness to the mysteries of creation, fall, redemption, the incarnation, and the power of sin to "dry up" what was full of life. Hildegard's most important work, *Scivias* (Knowing the Ways of Light) was completed in 1151. It was illustrated with coloured pictures, inspired by her visions and drawn by artists whom she supervised. In correspondence with Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard sought to have her visions authenticated and it was through him that the Council of Trier 1147-1148 was read the text her visions—something truly extraordinary. So moved was the group of assembled group of bishops and Pope Eugenius III, that her work was declared free of error and she was encouraged by the Pope to make known the content of her revelations as they were revealed to her by the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Never before had a woman been so powerful and influential, though her use of the rhetoric of weakness undoubtedly rendered her less threatening to her male audiences.

Hildegard can be seen as an ecological prophet both in her cosmology and in her assertion that there is a profound and life giving power of lush greenness immanent in all creation, and that the destruction of that wet and wondrous life through sin leads to dryness and death at physical and moral levels. Hildegard's visions, her knowledge of the science of her day and her religious faith gave her the conviction of the inter-relatedness of all created things. Her contributions are significant as they present an understanding of the universe as an organic living entity. Her insights lead us to consider another prophet of ecology, Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis.

### ***Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP***

Since 1980, Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP from the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey has been actively involved in alternative farming at the Order's property called *Genesis Farm*, situated near Blairstown, New Jersey. Since its inception, Genesis Farm has offered courses in Earth Literacy, workshops and retreats on eco-spirituality, eco-theology, eco-justice and developing rituals that honour earth and

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<sup>3</sup> Renate Craine, 1998. *Hildegard. Prophet of the cosmic Christ*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 26-27.

connect human beings to it. It has also taken its “place within a community of people and organizations working to preserve the wildlife, farms and rural communities of this highly threatened region.”<sup>4</sup> Collaborating with her Dominican sisters Miriam MacGillis has played a key role in turning the farm into an education centre as well as a productive and ecologically sustainable farm. Today it is a place where one hundred and eighty families engage in biodynamic farming, a practice inspired by the writings of Rudolf Steiner.

Miriam Therese MacGillis describes herself as someone shaped by her proximity to rivers throughout her childhood and adult years. Rivers as sources of life were places where she and family members relaxed and played. They also provided the “greening power” to the farms and agricultural projects nearby as they were sources of fresh water where she and family members relaxed and played. They also provided the “greening power” to the farms and agricultural projects nearby, as they were sources of fresh water for gardens, wild life and eco-systems.

By profession Miriam Therese MacGillis is an art teacher who trained at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana and who taught in her Order’s secondary schools for a number of years. She became aware of the writings of Passionist priest Thomas Berry, Swimme, and Teilhard de Chardin. In the light of the rapid deterioration and degradation of the earth’s wild life, rivers, flora and fauna, Berry, Swimme and MacGillis as their spokesperson, posit that the ecological crisis is necessarily a crisis of cosmology. It is this crisis with its threats and challenges that has become the passion of Miriam Therese MacGillis. She writes: “Now, more than ever, as we move through the unprecedented dangers and opportunities unleashed in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we’re deeply in need of a transforming vision...A vision that opens the future up to hope.”<sup>5</sup> The *new universe story* provides that transforming vision.

As a so-called “green sister” MacGillis’ environmental concerns are those of many religious women, according to McFarland Taylor. Telling the story of a cosmology that will provide a meaningful sense of the nature of the universe, companion planting—an organic farming technique, making conscious decisions to “re-inhabit” landscapes that are damaged or no longer habitable, modelling sustainability, cultivating diversity and biodiversity, conserving “heirlooms” of the past, providing sanctuary for living creatures, celebrating cosmic liturgy, creating space for new growth, and living the vision of the power of prophetic imagination so that there is a movement toward an ecozoic era—all these are the initiatives<sup>6</sup> of religious women responding creatively and effectively to the cry of the earth.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Viriditas***

Matthew Fox’s book of Hildegard’s illuminations depicts the very beautiful Rhineland landscapes that were the source of much of Hildegard’s inspiration. There in the forests around the monasteries in which she resided, first at St Disibodenberg and later at St Rupert’s and across the river in Eibingen, Hildegard knew and

<sup>4</sup> [www.sustainablelawrence.org/macgillis.html](http://www.sustainablelawrence.org/macgillis.html). Accessed 1 Dec 2008.

<sup>5</sup> [www.mdc.ed/ethics/fateoftheearth.asp](http://www.mdc.ed/ethics/fateoftheearth.asp). 1986. Accessed 2 January 2009.

<sup>6</sup> T Hessel-Robinson. 2008. Review. The green sisters: A spiritual ecology, *Spiritus*. 8.1. 105-108.

<sup>7</sup> S McFarland Taylor. 2007. *Green sisters. A spiritual ecology*. London: Harvard University Press, 5-20.

experienced the “greening power” of the nature. Her theology and cosmology grew out of her visions and her appreciation of the living power of light inhabiting all created beings. This living power of life and light she called *viriditas*. It has no English equivalent that adequately expresses Hildegard’s understanding.

Hildegard created the term *viriditas*, or fecundity and it is an operating metaphor in her consciousness of God’s role in the universe. It is not a biblical term. It has no direct translation in English. No word adequately expresses all the nuances associated with it. *Viriditas* operates in the human body in its metabolism in particular with its sensitivity to the influences of constellations during particular times of the month and of the year.<sup>8</sup> Hildegard calls it “greening love” that “hastens to the aid of all. With the passion of heavenly yearning, people who breathe this dew produce rich fruit.”<sup>9</sup> *Viriditas* has a moral aspect reflected in the relationships of men and women:

The earth grants sprouting fecundity according to the nature of human beings, depending on the quality and direction of their lives and actions. Men and women are the light-green heart of the living fullness of nature. A direct connection exists between the heart of a person and all the elements of the cosmos. They effect together that which has been decided in human hearts (1998:72).

“*Viriditas* expresses growth in fertility in all its forms, which is always experienced as opposed by or in tension with *ariditas*, a shriveling into barrenness” (1998:76). In Hildegard’s view, the imagery of fruitfulness and barrenness applies not only to natural processes but also to the spiritual life: “If we surrender the green vitality of virtues and give ourselves over to the drought of our indolence so that we lack the sap of life and the greening power of good deeds, then the powers of our very soul will begin to fade away and dry up” (1985:64). Hildegard makes a surprisingly contemporary connection.<sup>10</sup> “Injustice is the cause of sin because injustice is the ultimate dryness. A person who lacks the verdancy [sic] of justice is dry, totally without tender goodness, totally without illumination” (1985:64). As Craine writes “*viriditas* has a social component” (1998:71), and as we note in the world today, ecological disasters, disrespect for the earth, fall under the newly pronounced category of ecological sins promulgated by Benedict XVI.

Ultimately, *viriditas* also has a redemptive quality. “The greening life-force (*viriditas*) has weakened because of the ungodly erring of human souls” (1998:67). Yet, says Hildegard, the nature of God, through whom “the fountain-fullness of the Word came the embrace of God’s maternal love, which nourishes us into life, is our help in perils, and—as a most profound and gentle love—opens us for repentance” (*Scrivias*, II, 2, 4). Hildegard “believes Christ brings lush greenness to shriveled and wilted people” (1985:30). And this is the main activity of the Word—*viriditas*.

In sum, *viriditas* is not some form of supernatural chlorophyll. It is a life force emanating from the creative womb of God. Its absence signals sin, creates suffering, breeds destruction, drought, chaos. Its presence is the presence of God whom Hildegard heard speaking in these words:

<sup>8</sup> R Craine. 1998. *Hildegard. Prophet of the cosmic Christ*. NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 75.

<sup>9</sup> M Fox. 1985. *Illuminations of Hildegard of Binge*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co., 30.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is the result of Matthew Fox’s rendering of the text (1985).

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.  
 I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits,  
 I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh  
 with the joy of life (1985:33).

### *Veritas*

The word *veritas* means *truth* and is the motto of the Dominican Order. For Miriam Therese MacGillis, *truth* is an essential element in her prophetic message. According to MacGillis the assumptions of the old cosmologies are no longer truthful. In the cosmology of antiquity, the divine was perceived as outside of the universe, apart from it. God was transcendent, powerful, had dominion over the earth. In the cosmology that followed in the Enlightenment period, the world was understood only in material and mechanistic terms. The science of Newton, Copernicus, and Galileo deepened knowledge, but placed Westerners outside the universe. They became observers, stewards, whose detached outlook produced domination.<sup>11</sup>

In “Fate of the Earth” MacGillis has outlined the fifteen billion year process of development of the universe as it started with hydrogen atoms and progressed to more complexity. Not only does the universe develop exteriorly, but it also unfolds interiorly, “evolving to a high psychic complexity in order to realize its inner potential.” MacGillis presents a kind of cosmic calendar<sup>12</sup> that compresses time so that five billion years is equal to one twelve month period. In this timeframe the human has been in existence for **one** day. “The human is the being in whom the earth has become spiritually aware, has awakened into consciousness, has become self-aware and self-reflecting. In the human, the earth begins to reflect on itself.”

The truth as Miriam MacGillis sees it is that human beings have not understood the extent to which their presence is contingent, recent and significantly less independent than they think:

...we’ve had to move from this ready-made, totally furnished, spatial universe, which we simply inherited to exist upon, to an understanding of the universe that is itself in process, which from the very beginning has had a deep spiritual interior...Our planet and our solar system are recent manifestations, recent developments within a sequence of events that began fifteen billion years ago.<sup>13</sup>

The old assumptions are no longer truthful, declares MacGillis. This is precisely why a new cosmology is so needed: people are living as if they are observers when in fact, they should be participants. Their awareness of the true nature of the universe and of the earth within it is limited, and their judgements are impaired. The truth of the new cosmology is that it proposes a more unified and authentic vision of the world as we live in it—organic, holistic, masculine, feminine, spiritual, material. A new cosmology is respectful of the mystery that “everything is proudly interrelated.

<sup>11</sup> For a very helpful explanation of the various cosmologies that have been operative in western civilization, see J Cannato. 2006. *Radical amazement*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Sorin Books.

<sup>12</sup> See also C Wessels. 2006. *Jesus in the new universe story*. NY: Orbis, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Rather than body-soul, spirit, we speak of Energy and Life. Human beings are not dominating, but participating” as Boff writes (1995:63).

### ***Limits of consciousness***

For Miriam Therese MacGillis, *truth* is an essential element in her prophetic message: firstly, that our own truth is a perceived reality from a limited consciousness and for that reason, “cannot totally reflect what is infinite.” What MacGillis makes clear is that human beings who have only been around one day in the year, so to speak, have a consciousness that is not fully matured. While scientific knowledge has made it possible for human beings to make great advances in agricultural and genetic research for example, that same knowledge and unrestricted scientific activity interferes with processes that have gone on naturally for billions of years. MacGillis poses the question: “Have we arrived at anywhere near the level of integrity, wisdom or maturity to do what we can do with the truthfulness that life had when it was on “remote control” that is, under the earth’s internal guidance system?”

MacGillis’ telling of the new universe story reveals another kind of earth— not a thing, not just one of many planets, but a living, vital system, a complete self-healing system. Earth is a living entity that has been self-directive, self-healing for billions of years and now under the influence of errant human consciousness is losing its capacity to renew. Berry, echoed by MacGillis, says that human beings are “genetically coded to exist in a world of beauty.” However, it is clear that their consciousness does not allow them to enter fully into the world of mystery, of the sacred, of the cosmic liturgy. This is the crisis—*unenlightened consciousness*—and this is why a new cosmology is so necessary. Climate changes, extinction of species, the movement of peoples in search of water and land are evidence of the greed, mismanagement and *hubris* of human beings. It is time for people to open the eyes of their hearts, lest their souls lose the vision of stars (Berry).

### ***Points of Intersection: Viriditas and Veritas***

Hildegard’s understanding of *viriditas* is multi-dimensional. It straddles the boundaries of the physical, the moral and the spiritual. *Viriditas* is fecundity. It is fruitfulness. It is greening power. A key facet of *viriditas* is its absence, *ariditas*. Dryness. The current state of the earth is an example of *ariditas* while the preferred situation of the earth within the universe is seen in *viriditas*. Obviously, at a purely physical level, this is the case. The earth is drying up and the seas are warming up. MacGillis’ discussion of the oceans, their composition, and the effects of lethal waste upon marine and human life leave no one in doubt. At a deeper level the crisis of unenlightened consciousness exemplifies another form of *ariditas*. It is a type of sinful mindset caused by deluded thinking based on rationalist and materialist philosophies. It is a type of sinful mindset that sees mankind [sic] at the top of the ladder of creation devouring natural resources and exploiting peoples. It is the type of sinful mindset that has created the current credit crunch—irresponsible, self-aggrandizing behaviour indicative of profound *ariditas*, of profound need for conversion. Where there is no ethical understanding, scientific knowledge leads to a diseased consciousness, to ultimate dryness and death. Says MacGillis:

If the planet dies the only cause of it will have been consciousness, because without consciousness, the whole thing [earth’s cycles] was coded toward life...there are dynamics happening at the most profound level

which are altering the capacity of the earth to do what the universe has mandated it to do. This is to continue to live and to continue to heal and nourish and regenerate itself. Consciousness is violating this mandate. And that's us.

Hildegard's recognition of the interconnection between *ariditas* and sin is significant as is her conviction that *viriditas* is the way of justice and "fountain-fullness." Is not *viriditas* also a heightened consciousness of connection, of consequences, of inter-relatedness, Is it not an embracing of creaturehood accompanied by a large dose of humility?

The Earth, indeed the universe, is not a collection of objects, as Berry states, but a *communion of subjects*. Human beings are only one, lately emerged development in this communion. Understanding the principles of the new cosmology means imagining another kind of earth, perhaps like Hildegard's, with *viriditas* at its core, an earth in full fruit. And in another kind of consciousness, *veritas* and reverence will enable people to see that the Earth is our body and God's—something that Hildegard herself saw in her vision of the earth, embraced by the Cosmic Christ and resting in the womb of God (1998:41).

### ***Conclusion***

The message of Hildegard of Bingen and Miriam Therese MacGillis, while certainly more expansive than presented here, is that *viriditas—greening power* is absolutely essential to the future of the planet. When *viriditas* inhabits the consciousness of a human being, of a group, of a nation, of the human family, there is the possibility of life and fecundity. The work of creating awareness of this new interiority is not only prophetic and visionary, but it is an authentic ministry within the church and society. Calling people to a new vision of the earth is in fact, calling them to wake up to life. And perhaps because of two ecological prophets, Hildegard of Bingen and Miriam Therese MacGillis, we will hear again the words spoken to Hildegard:

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.  
 I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits,  
 I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh  
 with the joy of life.

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