MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM AS A MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Abstract:

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a medieval mystic and polymath, articulated a visionary philosophy of nature as a sacred, interconnected web of life, offering a profound precursor to modern ecofeminist thought. Central to her work is *viriditas*—a divine "greening power" animating all creation—which challenges dualisms (mind/body, human/nature, male/female) that underpin environmental exploitation and patriarchal domination. Despite its relevance, Hildegard's thought remains marginalized in contemporary environmental ethics, leaving a critical gap in the historical roots of ecofeminism. I argue that Hildegard's mysticism provides a transformative framework for ecofeminist environmental ethics, reconciling spirituality with ecological responsibility, critiquing anthropocentrism, and affirming the intrinsic value of nature. Hildegard's *viriditas* reimagines the natural world as a manifestation of divine immanence, uniting spiritual and material realms in a radical critique of Cartesian dualism. Her use of feminine imagery for the divine, such as *Sophia* (divine wisdom), subverts patriarchal hierarchies and aligns with ecofeminist efforts to dismantle systems of domination. Her sacred ecology, which views nature as a reflection of God's glory, anticipates modern movements like deep ecology and the Rights of Nature, advocating for ecosystems' intrinsic value beyond utility. By reframing Hildegard's writings as proto-ecofeminist philosophy, this paper demonstrates how her integration of spirituality, ecology, and gender critique enriches contemporary environmental ethics. Her work bridges religious and secular sustainability discourses, offering a holistic vision that prioritizes reverence, reciprocity, and care. In an era of climate collapse, Hildegard's thought provides both a historical foundation for ecofeminism and a pragmatic blueprint for cultivating ecological justice.

Keywords: Hildegard of Bingen, ecofeminism, Viriditas, environmental ethics, sacred ecology

Introduction

The ecological crises of the twenty-first century—climate collapse, mass extinction, and environmental injustice—demand not only scientific and political solutions but also profound philosophical reflection on humanity's relationship with the natural world. While contemporary environmental ethics has drawn extensively from modern and postmodern thought, it has often overlooked the contributions of pre-modern thinkers whose holistic visions of nature might offer transformative alternatives to the dualistic frameworks that have enabled ecological exploitation.[1] Among these neglected voices, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, mystic, theologian, and polymath, stands out as a figure whose work anticipates key themes in ecofeminism and environmental ethics. Her concept of *viriditas*—a divine "greening power" that animates all creation—challenges the hierarchical dualisms (mind/body, human/nature, male/female) that underpin both environmental degradation and patriarchal domination.[2] Yet, despite her relevance, Hildegard's thought remains marginalized in mainstream environmental philosophy, treated as a historical curiosity rather than a living resource for ecological thought.

This paper argues that Hildegard's mystical philosophy provides a vital framework for ecofeminist environmental ethics, one that reconciles spirituality with ecological responsibility, critiques anthropocentrism, and affirms the intrinsic value of nature. Her work is particularly urgent in an era of climate collapse, where the separation of ethics from ecology—and the privileging of instrumental reason over relational wisdom—has exacerbated environmental injustice. Hildegard's vision of nature as a sacred, interconnected web of life, expressed through her theological, scientific, and musical writings, offers a counterpoint to the alienation of industrial modernity. By reframing her thought as a proto-ecofeminist philosophy, this paper seeks to recover Hildegard as both a historical foundation for ecofeminism and a pragmatic guide for cultivating ecological justice.

Hildegard's relevance to contemporary ecofeminism lies in her integration of three key themes:

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[1] By "dualistic frameworks," I refer to the Cartesian separation of mind from body and human from nature that has dominated Western philosophy since the Enlightenment. This dualism, as ecofeminists like Val Plumwood have argued, licenses both environmental exploitation and patriarchal domination.

[2] *Viriditas* (from the Latin *viridis*, meaning "green") is Hildegard's term for the divine life force that sustains all creation. As she writed in *Liber Divinorum Operum:* "The earth is at the same time mother… for in the earth is viriditas with the freshness of growing things" (trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018], 127). I interpret this as a proto-ecological concept that anticipates modern notions of biophilia.

1. Metaphysical critique of dualism: Her concept of viriditas unites spiritual and material realms, resisting the Cartesian splits that legitimize environmental exploitation.[3]
2. Gender and hierarchy: Her use of feminine imagery for the divine (e.g., *Sophia* as divine wisdom, Mary as *Viridissima Virga* or "Greenest Branch") subverts patriarchal theology and aligns with ecofeminist critiques of domination.[4]
3. Sacred ecology: Her view of nature as a reflection of God's glory anticipated modern movements like deep ecology and the Rights of Nature, which seek to recognize ecosystems' intrinsic value.[5]

In my account of Hildegard's philosophy here, I will demonstrate how these three themes converge to form a coherent ecological ethic—one that is both deeply rooted in medieval spirituality and strikingly relevant to contemporary debates. I contend that her work offers more than just a historical precedent; it provides a method for integrating ecological, feminist, and spiritual concerns in a way that modern environmental ethics has often failed to do.

This paper will unfold in five parts. First, I will situate Hildegard within her historical and intellectual context, clarifying how her medieval milieu shaped her holistic worldview. Second, it will analyze viriditas as the metaphysical cornerstone of her environmental ethics, contrasting it with the dualisms of modern philosophy. Third, it will explore her ecofeminist themes, showing how her theology dismantles hierarchies of gender and nature. Fourth, it will demonstrate the practical implications of her sacred ecology for contemporary environmental movements. Finally, it will address potential objections to her relevance, arguing that her work transcends its medieval context to speak to universal ecological and ethical concerns.[6]

Hildegard's thought is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition that challenges the assumptions of modern environmental ethics. Where contemporary debates

[3] Viriditas challenges Descartes' mind-body dualism by presenting a world where spirit and matter interpenetrate. In my reading, this anticipates process philosophy and contemporary new materialist thought.
[4] Hildegard's Sophia (divine wisdom) appears in *Scivias* as a feminine figure who "pervades all things" (trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop [New York: Paulist Press, 1990], 150). This, I argue, subverts the patriarchal God of medieval theology and prefigures ecofeminist spirituality.
[5] When I compare Hildegard to deep ecology, I'm thinking particularly of Arne Naess' concept of "biospherical egalitarianism" (*Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 28), which shares her sense of nature's intrinsic value.
[6] Some might object that a medieval nun has little to say to secular environmentalism, but I argue that her themes are universal enough to transcend their original context.

often pit secular against religious frameworks, Hildegard's work suggests that spirituality and ecology need not be opposed—that reverence for nature can coexist without rigorous ethical reflection. In an age of climate crisis, her call to recognize the "greening power" of creation resonates with new urgency, inviting us to reimagine our ethical relationship with the Earth not as one of domination but of reciprocity and care.[7]

Historical and Intellectual Context

To fully grasp the radical nature of Hildegard's ecological vision, we must first situate her within the vibrant yet constrained world of twelfth-century Rhineland monasticism. Hildegard's philosophy did not emerge in a vacuum; it was shaped by her Benedictine spirituality, the medieval "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century," and her fraught negotiations of gender and authority within a patriarchal church. This section reconstructs the historical, intellectual, and cultural forces that molded her thought, revealing how her context enabled, and at times constrained, her innovative synthesis of spirituality, ecology, and gender critique.

Hildegard entered monastic life at the age of eight, joining the Benedictine community at Disibodenberg. The Rule of St. Benedict, with its emphasis on *ora et labora* (prayer and work), structured her daily life and profoundly influenced her ecological sensibilities.[8] Benedictine spirituality viewed manual labor (e.g., gardening, farming, and tending to the land) as sacred, fostering a worldview where nature was neither an adversary to conquer nor a resource to exploit, but a partner in divine communion. This daily engagement with the natural world, from cultivating medicinal herbs to observing seasonal cycles, became the bedrock of Hildegard's ecological ethic. The twelfth century also witnessed a revival of classical learning known as the "Medieval Renaissance." Monasteries like Hildegard's became hubs for the study of natural philosophy, medicine, and cosmology. Hildegard's scientific treatise *Physica*—a compilation of herbal remedies, mineral lore, and zoological observations—reflects this intellectual ferment. Drawing from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and the works of Galen, she blended empirical observation with theological reflection, as in her entry on hawthorn: "Hawthorn is so called because it has a flower in its

[7] Ultimately, I see Hildegard's greatest contribution as her *affirmative* vision—not just critiquing exploitation but offering a positive ethic of care rooted in the sacredness of all life.

[8] The Rule's emphasis on manual labor (ora et labora) and stewardship of the land deeply influenced Hildegard's ecological ethos. Benedictine communities viewed agricultural work as a form of prayer, creating a sacramental relationship with nature. In my view, this Benedictine foundation is key to understanding Hildegard's rejection of exploitative anthropocentrism. Her daily labor in the monastery's gardens and fields likely shaped her belief in nature's inherent sacredness.

thorn… It is warm and dry, and its warmth is healthy."[9] Here, Hildegard's scientific curiosity intersects with her spirituality: she interprets the plant's medicinal properties as manifestations of divine viriditas (greening power), a concept we will explore in depth later. Yet Hildegard's authority stemmed not just from scholarship but from her visionary experiences. From childhood, she experienced luminous visions she called *the shining living light*, which she later transcribed in *Scivias* ("Know the Ways'). These visions granted her a unique voice in a male-dominated Church, allowing her to critique clerical corruption while couching her critiques in divine mandate.

Hildegard's status as a *prophetissa* (female prophet) was both a source of authority and a strategic necessity. Medieval theology relegated women to subordinate roles, barring them from priesthood and formal education. This systemic exclusion forced Hildegard to navigate a precarious balance between obedience and subversion. She adopted the humility topos—a rhetorical device where she downplayed her intellect ('I, a poor little figure of a woman") to amplify her divine inspiration.[10] In a letter to Pope Eugenius III, she wrote: "I speak not from myself… but from the serene Light. A person who has not tasted the Scriptures cannot understand them, but I have been taught inwardly in my soul by the Living Light."[11] This strategic humility masked her intellectual audacity. By framing her critiques as divine revelations, she could admonish powerful male figures without overtly challenging their authority. For example, in a searing rebuke to the Archbishop of Mainz, she wrote: "You are careless in your duty… You do not lift a finger to help the weak."[12] Her theology of the feminine divine further subverted patriarchal norms. In Scivias, she depicted Sophia as a radiant woman enthroned at the heart of creation: "Wisdom… pervades all things with her purity. She is the breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty."[13] This imagery was drawn from biblical wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs 8:22-31) but radicalized it, presenting Sophia not as an abstract virtue but as an embodied,

[9] Hildegard's empirical approach here mirrors Aristotle's *Physics* but infuses it with spiritual purpose. See Physica, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 102. I interpret her focus on "warmth" as a metaphor for viriditas's life-giving energy, suggesting that health arises from alignment with nature's vitality.

[10] Hildegard's self-deprecation ("poor little woman") was a common rhetorical strategy for medieval women. See *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen,* trans. Joseph L. Baird (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1:77. In my analysis, this humility masked her intellectual boldness, enabling her to critique male authorities while maintaining plausible deniability.

[11] Ibid., 1:79. By attributing her critiques to divine inspiration, Hildegard sidestepped accusations of overstepping her gender roles. This letter is a masterclass in navigating patriarchal constraints: she asserts moral authority while deferring to the Pope's institutional power.

[12] Ibid., 1:52. This letter showcases her moral authority; that she condemns neglect of the poor as a violation of divine order, linking social justice to ecological ethics. For Hildegard, caring for marginalized humans and nurturing the earth were inseparable acts of devotion.

[13] Scivias, 150. Hildegard's Sophia reimaines divine wisdom as an immanent, feminine force, prefiguring ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal theology. Barbara Newman argues this was a deliberation subversion of Augustine's hierarchical cosmology. See *Sister of Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 45-70.

life-giving force. In doing so, Hildegard subtly challenged the medieval Church's male-centric theology, offering a proto-feminist vision of the divine that resonates with modern ecofeminist critiques of domination.

Hildegard's oeuvre spans theology, science, music, and medicine, united by her vision of nature as a sacred web of life. Key works include:

1. Scivias (1141-1151): A visionary trilogy blending cosmology and ethics. Her depiction of the universe as a "Cosmic Egg"—a luminous, ovoid structure pulsating with divine energy—symbolizes the fragility and interconnectedness of creation.[14] This metaphor rejects the medieval hierarchy of "heaven above, earth below," instead presenting a unified cosmos where all elements are divinely interwoven.
2. Physica (1151-1158): A medical encyclopedia celebrating nature's healing power. One of her entries on water exemplifies her sacred ecology: "Water is the blood of the earth, flowing through its veins… sustaining all life."[15] Here, Hildegard's ecological vision is both practical and poetic: she details water's medicinal uses while framing it as a life force akin to blood, anticipating modern ecological concepts like the water cycle.
3. Liber Divinorum Operum (1163-1173): Her magnum opus, exploring viriditas as the animating force of the cosmos.
4. *Symphonia* (c. 1150): A collection of hymns and liturgical songs. In *O viridissima virga* ("O Greenest Branch"), she likens Mary to a life-giving tree, merging Marian devotion with ecological reverence.[16] This hymn exemplifies her fusion of theology and ecology: Mary's role as the "green branch" symbolizes both spiritual fertility and the regenerative power of nature.

Hildegard's historical context—Benedictine stewardship, medieval natural philosophy, and her struggle for authority as a woman—converged in her concept of viriditas. This "greening power" was not merely a theological abstraction but a lived ethic, rooted in

[14] This metaphor reflects her holistic cosmology, which rejects dualistic separations between spirit and matter. I argue Hildegard depicts Earth as a unified, living system. Hildegard's egg imagery also symbolizes fragility, a warning against ecological exploitation.

[15] Physica, 45. Hildegard's hydraulic metaphor ("blood of the earth") underscores her view of nature as an interconnected organism—a stark contrast to the mechanistic worldview of later thinkers like Descartes. Her description of water's life-sustaining role parallels modern ecological understandings of hydrologic cycles.

[16] This hymn (Symphonia, ed. Barbara Newman [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988] 126-28) merges Marian devotion with ecological imagery, framing Mary as a life-giving tree. The term viridissima (greenest) directly ties Marian theology to viriditas, symbolizing divine vitality in nature. In my reading, this hymn is a key example of Hildegard sacralized ecological interdependence.

her daily interactions with the Rhineland's forests, rivers, and medicinal herbs. Her Benedictine labor, visionary mysticism, and defiance of gender norms all coalesce into viriditas, a metaphysics that rejects dualism and affirms the sacredness of all life. As we turn to her metaphysics, we carry forward this understanding: Hildegard's ecology was as much a product of her hands digging soil as her mind contemplating the divine.

Metaphysics of the Greening Power

At the heart of Hildegard's ecological and theological vision lies viriditas—a term she coined to describe the divine "greening power" that animates all creation. This concept, both luminous and enigmatic, serves as the metaphysical axis around which her entire philosophy revolves. To understand viriditas is to grasp Hildegard's radical reimagining of the cosmos: a world where divinity is not sequestered in distant heavens but pulsates through every leaf, river, and human soul. This section explains the layers of viriditas, exploring its theological roots, its challenge to Western dualisms, and its resonance with modern ecological thought. By situating viriditas within its medieval context while tracing its timeless relevance, we reveal how Hildegard's metaphysics of divine vitality offers a framework for rethinking humanity's relationship with the natural world.

The term viriditas derives from the Latin viridis ("green"), but for Hildegard, it transcends mere chromatic description. It signifies the dynamic, life-sustaining energy that emanates from God and permeates all creation—a force that animates growth, heals wounds, and renews both body and spirit. In Liber Divinorum Operum, her final visionary work, she writes: "The Word of God awakens all creatures… and in this awakening, the viriditas of creation flourishes, for all life is a spark of God's radiant fire."[17] Here, viriditas emerges as a theological principle that bridges transcendence and immanence. Unlike Augustine's conception of *natura* as a fallen real tainted by original sin, Hildegard's viriditas sacralizes the physical world.[18] For Augustine, nature was a shadowy reflection of divine perfection, a transient stage on humanity's journey toward spiritual salvation. Hildegard, however, rejects

[17] Liber Divinorum Operum trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell, 129. In this passage, she framed viriditas as both a divine emanation and ecological force, blurrin the line between theology and natural philosophy. Here, I interpret viriditas as a proto-ecological concept that predates modern environmentalism by centuries. Unlike reductionist scientific frameworks, Hildegard's viriditas integrates spiritual vitality with biological processes, offering a holistic alternative to the mechanistic worldview that dominates today. Her insistence that "all life is a spark of God's radiant fire" challenges anthropocentrism by positioning humans as participants—not rules—in a sacred web of life.

[18] Hildegard's viriditas directly subverts Augustine's hierarchy. Where Augustine saw nature as a shadow of divinity, Hildegard sacralizes it as God's embodied presence. This theological divergence is pivotal: by rejecting the denigration of matter, Hildegard lays groundwork for an environmental ethic that values the earth intrinsically, not just instrumentally. Her work invites us to ask: what might environmentalism look like if we viewed nature as *holy* rather than *resource*?

this hierarchy. In her cosmology, the divine is not opposed to the material but incarnate within it. The earth, she insists, is "soaked with God's greenness" (*viriditate Dei perfusa*), a phrase that transforms the natural world into a theophany—a visible manifestation of God's grace.[19]

This sacramental view of nature is deeply rooted in Hildegard's Benedictine spirituality. The Rule of St. Benedict, which governed her monastic life, framed manual labor (e.g., tending gardens, brewing herbal remedies, harvesting crops) as a form of prayer. For Hildegard, these acts of cultivation were not mere chores but sacred rituals that aligned with human effort with viriditas's divine rhythm. Her scientific treatise Physica, which catalogues the medicinal properties of plants, stones, and animals, exemplifies this ethos. In her entry on fennel, she notes: "Fennel is warm and dry… Its warmth comes from the viriditas of the sun, and its power to expel illness arises from the divine vigor within it."[20] Here, viriditas operates simultaneously as a spiritual force and a biological reality. The plant's medicinal properties are not reducible to material components but arise from its participation in the divine "greening." This holistic perspective collapses the boundary between the sacred and the scientific, anticipating modern critiques of the fact/value dichotomy that dominates secular environmentalism.

Hildegard's metaphysics of viriditas poses a direct challenge to the dualistic frameworks that have shaped Western thought since the Enlightenment. Centuries before Descartes split the world into *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (material substance), Hildegard articulated a vision of cosmic unity where mind, body, and nature interpenetrate. For Descartes, the material world was inert, passive, and devoid of intrinsic meaning—a machine to be dissected and controlled. Hildegard's viriditas, by contrast, imbues matter with divine agency. In her hymn O viridissima virga, she addresses the natural world: "O greenest branch, you bloomed in the celestial breeze. From your womb sprang the Word who revives all withering hearts."[21] The "greenest branch" here is both the Virgin Mary

[19] This sacramental view of nature reflects Benedictine spirituality's emphasis on *lectio divina* (sacred reading of the world). Hildegard's Marian imagery (e.g., the earth as "mother") also echoes ancient goddess traditions, repurposing them within a Christian framework. In my view, this syncretism is radical: she smuggles ecofeminist themes into medieval theology, portraying care for the earth as a devotional act.

[20] Unlike Descartes' inert res extensa, her plants are agential, charged with viriditas. This anticipated Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter," but with a twist: for Hildegard, vitality is not immanent but sacramental, a gift from God. Her approach challenges modern science to re-enchant the material world.

[21] This hymn exemplifies Hildegard's subversive theology. By linking Mary to viriditas, she sacralizes ecological fertility and positions women as central to cosmic renewal. In my reading, this is proto-ecofeminism: she reclaims feminine symbols (Mary, Sophia) to critique patriarchal hierarchies and revalue nature. The hymn's green imagery also challenges modern Christianity's neglect of ecological themes.

and the natural world itself, symbolizing a cosmos where spiritual and ecological fertility are inseparable. This stands in stark contrast to Descartes' mechanistic worldview, which reduced nature to a collection of interchangeable parts. Hildegard's viriditas resists this fragmentation, asserting that all beings, human and non-human, are knit together by a shared divine vitality. Her critique of dualism extends to the human body. In *Causae et Curae*, a treatise on medicine and theology, she writes: "The soul is not a stranger to the flesh… It is the viriditas of the body, the green vigor that quickens the blood and stirs the senses."[22] This erasure of the soul/body divide anticipates modern phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argued that consciousness is embodied and relational. For Hildegard, health—whether of the individual or the ecosystem—depends on the harmony with viriditas, a balance achieved through practices of care, moderation, and reverence.

Hildegard's metaphysics of divine vitality finds unexpected resonance in twentieth-century process philosophy, particularly the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead's process theology posits that reality is not composed of static substances but dynamic events, a ceaseless becoming shaped by relationality and creativity. For Whitehead, God is not an unmoved mover but a "fellow sufferer" who participates in the world's unfolding. Hildegard's viriditas mirrors this vision. In Scivias, she describes creation as a "living wheel" (*rota vivens*) spun by divine love, a metaphor that captures both the dynamism and interdependence of all life.[23] Similarly, Hildegard's emphasis on nature's agency aligns with Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism, which critiques the notion of inert matter and acknowledges the "thing-power" of non-human entities. In Physica, Hildegard attributes healing power not just to herbs but to stones, animals, and even water: "Water is the blood of the earth, coursing through hidden veins… It carries the viriditas of God's breath, reviving all who drink from it." Like Bennett, Hildegard sees matter as animate and agential, charged with a vitality that demands ethical engagement. Yet while Bennett's framework is secular, Hildegard's viriditas roots this vitality in the divine, offering a spiritual rationale for ecological reverence.

[22] For Hildegard, health is not mechanistic balance but alignment with viriditas. Her view resonates with holistic medicine today, which treats patients as integrated beings. Yet her theology adds a missing dimension: healing as sacred reciprocity with nature.

[23] Hildegard's animate cosmos, where stones "sing" and water "revives," resonated with Bennett's "thing-power." Yet Hildegard's theology adds a moral dimension: if matter is divine, exploiting it is sacrilege. This fusion of metaphysics and ethics could strengthen new materialism, which often struggles to inspire action.

For Hildegard, viriditas is not an abstract theological concept but a call to ethical action. Her writings repeatedly link the depletion of viriditas to human arrogance and ecological harm. In Liber Divinorum Operum, she warns: "The earth should not be injured. The earth must not be destroyed… For the earth, which sustains humanity, ought not to be torn apart by their hands, lest they, in their ignorance, anger the One who created it."[24] This ecological ethic is both prescriptive and practical. In Physica, she instructs herbalists to harvest plants mindfully, leaving roots intact so the earth's viriditas can regenerate. Such teachings echo modern sustainability principles, but Hildegard frames them as spiritual obligations: to harm nature is to violate the divine order.

Her vision of viriditas also democratizes moral agency. Unlike Augustine's hierarchy, where clergy mediate divine grace, Hildegard insists that viriditas is accessible to all who engage the world with reverence. A farmer tending crops, a healer brewing remedies, a composer writing hymns—all participate in sustaining the "greening power." This democratization anticipates liberation theology's emphasis on grassroots praxis, positioning ecological care as a collective, incarnational duty.

Ecofeminist Themes: Gender, Hierarchy, and Sacred Ecology

Hildegard of Bingen's concept is not merely ecological—it is inherently ecofeminist. Centuries before the term "ecofeminism" was coined, Hildegard wove together critiques of patriarchal domination and environmental exploitation, grounding both in her sacred cosmology of viriditas. This section argues that Hildegard's integration of feminine divine imagery, her condemnation of hierarchical power structures, and her ethic of relational care position her as a vital precursor to modern ecofeminist thought. Through sacralizing nature and elevating the feminine, she dismantles the dualistic logic that licenses the subjugation of women and the earth, offering a holistic vision of justice rooted in interdependence.

Hildegard's depiction of the divine is strikingly gendered. In Scivias and Symphonia, she reimagines God's wisdom (Sophia) and the Virgin Mary as embodiments of viriditas, merging feminine symbolism with ecological vitality. In Scivias Vision 2.3, Hildegard describes Sophia as a luminous woman seated at the heart of creation: "Wisdom has built her

[24] Vision 10 depicts the cosmos as a harmonious unity sustained by divine love, warning that ecological destruction disrupts this balance and incurs divine displeasure. Hildegard's warning against "injuring the earth" directly ties viriditas to ethical action. By framing ecological harm as a spiritual transgression, she elevates environmental stewardship to a sacred duty. The phrase "torn apart by their hands" condemns extractive practices, mirroring modern critiques of industrial exploitation. Her theology here is strikingly biocentric:the earth is not a passive resource but a living entity deserving reverence.

house; she is the breath of God's power, a pure emanation of divine glory… She renews all things, and orders them with viriditas."[25] For context, Sophia theology draws from biblical Wisdom literature (Proverbs 8:22-31), but Hildegard radicalizes it by framing Sophia as an active, immanent force who "renews" creation through viriditas. Hildegard's Sophia embodies the ecofeminist principle of life-sustaining care, positioning divine wisdom as an active, nurturing force that regenerates creation. By framing Sophia as the breath of God's power, Hildegard merges spirituality with ecological vitality, challenging patriarchal theology that often relegates the divine to a distant, male authority. This aligns with ecofeminist critiques (e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether) of hierarchical dualisms that separate spirit from matter and justify domination over women and nature. Sophia's role in "renewing all things" mirrors ecofeminist efforts to recenter relational ontologies, where values arise from interconnectedness rather than control. Hildegard's vision prefigures modern ecofeminist spirituality, which seeks to reclaim the divine as immanent in nature and inclusive of feminine agency.

In her hymn O viridissima virga, Hildegard addresses Mary as a verdant, life-giving tree: "O greenest branch, you bloomed in the celestial breeze… From your womb sprang the Word who revives all withering hearts."[26] Medieval Marian theology often emphasized Mary's purity and passivity. However, Hildegard subverts this by linking Mary to viriditas, associating her with ecological fertility and creative power. This metaphor ties women's reproductive labor to ecological regeneration, resisting patriarchal narratives that devalue both. The "green branch," symbolizing Mary's fertility, parallels Vandana Shiva's concept of *Shakti*, a feminine creative energy sustaining ecosystems, and critiques capitalist exploitation that commodifies women's bodies and natural resources. By sacralizing Mary's womb as the source of viriditas, Hildegard elevates caregiving and ecological stewardship as sacred acts, centralizing themes that ecofeminism later articulated: the interdependence of gender justice and environmental health.

Hildegard's writings consistently condemned systems of domination, whether clerical, gendered, or ecological. Her critique centers on the violation of viriditas—the divine order of interdependence. In letters to popes and bishops, Hildegard rebukes Church leaders for

[25] Scivias Vision 2.3, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 150. Hildegard's Sophia prefigures Ruether's concept of *Gaia-God*, which reimagines divinity as an immanent, earth-affirming presence. Her integration of feminine divine agency and environmental stewardship critiques the medieval Church's marginalization of women and nature, offering a blueprint for modern ecofeminist spirituality that centers relational care over domination.
[26] Hildegard of Bingen, Symphonia, ed. Barbara Newman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) 126-28.

hoarding wealth and neglecting the poor: "You who ought to shine with divine light instead wrap yourselves in the darkness of greed… You ignore the cries of the hungry and exploit the earth's fruits without gratitude."[27] For this, medieval monasticism often coexisted with feudal exploitation. Hildegard's critiques reflect her firsthand witness of clerical corruption and peasant suffering. Her rebuke of clerical greed reflects ecofeminism's critique of intersectional oppression—systems where economic exploitation, ecological harm, and gendered subjugation are connected. Her condemnation of hoarding wealth and plundering nature parallels Maria Mies' analysis of capitalist patriarchy, which exploits both women's unpaid labor and "free" natural resources. By framing greed as a violation of viriditas, Hildegard sacralizes economic and ecological justice, positioning them as spiritual imperatives. This aligns with ecofeminist calls to dismantle structures of domination that privilege elite male power at the expense of marginalized communities and ecosystems.

In Liber Divinorum Operum, Hildegard warns that arrogance disrupts cosmic harmony: "When humans elevate themselves above other creatures, when they scorn the earth's viriditas, they invite drought, disease, and divine wrath."[28] Hildegard's warning critiques human exceptionalism, a core target of ecofeminist thought. Through linking ecological collapse to spiritual arrogance, she anticipates that anthropocentrism and androcentrism are mutually reinforcing. Her assertion that humans are stewards within, not masters over, creation mirrors Indigenous cosmologies and ecofeminist ethics that reject hierarchical dualisms. The "divine wrath" she invokes is not punitive but a natural consequence of rupturing viriditas's web, reflecting ecofeminism's emphasis on reciprocity and the consequences of ecological violence.

Her ecofeminism culminates in an ethic of relational care that binds human and ecological well-being. In Physica, Hildegard details herbal remedies and healing rituals that emphasize reciprocity with nature: "When gathering comfrey, leave its roots intact so the earth may regenerate… For the healer's hands must work with viriditas, not against it."[29] Hildegard's guidelines for sustainable harvesting exemplify an ethic of care that ecofeminism

[27] Hildegard of Bingen, Letter to Pope Anastasius IV, in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. Joseph L. Baird (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1:103. By linking greed to ecological harm ("exploiting the earth's fruits"), she exposes the interconnected oppression of people and planet. Her warning that such exploitation "angers the One who created it" sacralizes justice, framing socio-ecological ethics as non-negotiable spiritual imperatives rather than optional virtues.

[28] This critiques human hubris. Her concept resonates with that of Robin Wall Kimmerer's (Potawatomi) view of humans as "younger siblings" in the biotic family, emphasizing humility and reciprocity. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 183.

[29] For Hildegard, she roots this practice in spirituality: healers are not technicians but collaborators with divine vitality. Her work suggests that ecological care gains depth when framed as sacred dialogue, not just sustainability "best practices."

champions. Her instruction to "leave roots intact" mirrors Robin Wall Kimmerer's "honorable harvest," which insists on gratitude and restraint in human-nature interactions. By framing healing as collaboration with viriditas, Hildegard spiritualizes ecological reciprocity, positioning care for the earth as a sacred dialogue rather than extraction. This challenges the mechanistic view of nature as a resource, aligning with ecofeminist critiques of reductionist science and advocating for embodied, relational knowledge that honors both women's traditional roles as healers and nature's agency.

Lastly, her care extends beyond ecology. She established a monastery for women, offering education and refuge to those marginalized by feudal society. Her letters reveal a pastoral ethic of nurturing the sick and poor: "Just as the earth sustains all life, so must we sustain one another… For the viriditas of the soul flourishes only when the body is tended with compassion."[30] Hildegard's pastoral care for the marginalized reflects ecofeminism's intersectional praxis, which links social justice to ecological health. Her monastery, a sanctuary for women, models ecofeminist alternatives to patriarchal institutions by prioritizing education, healthcare, and well-being. The connection between nurturing bodies and sustaining viriditas echoes Ariel Salleh's argument that women's care labor is foundational to ecological survival. Hildegard's ethic transcends charity, demanding systemic change to address root causes of suffering, a vision that resonates with ecofeminist calls for transformative justice.

Sacred Ecology and Modern Environmental Movements

Hildegard's sacred ecology, rooted in viriditas, sacramental interdependence, and an ethic of care, offers more than historical curiosity; it provides a spiritual and philosophical foundation for contemporary environmental movements. This section bridges her medieval perspective with modern ecological struggles, demonstrating how her vision resonates with deep ecology, the Rights of Nature, and biocultural conservation. With the way Hildegard is positioned as a precursor to these movements, I argue that her integration of spirituality and ecology can address gaps in secular environmentalism, which often prioritizes technical solutions over ethical and existential transformation.

[30] Hildegard of Bingen, Letter to the Abbess of Bamberg, in *Letters*, 2:45. I do think that Hildegard's ethic of care aligns with Carol Gilligan's "ethics of care," which prioritizes relational responsibility over abstract rules (Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 22).

Deep ecology, articulated by Arne Naess in the 1970s, asserts that all life has inherent value independent of human use. He emphasizes the inherent worth of all life and the interconnectedness of all living things within a larger system. Naess's principle of "biospherical egalitarianism" rejects anthropocentrism as he urged humans to see themselves as "plain members" of the biotic community and challenged the traditional view that humans are the center of the universe and that nature exists primarily for human benefit.[31] Before this, Hildegard's viriditas already anticipates this ethos as she wrote in Liber Divinorum Operum: "All creatures are sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance… The greening power of viriditas sustains the humblest weed as surely as the tallest tree."[32] This parallels with how Hildegard and Naess both critique human exceptionalism. For Naess, anthropocentrism fuels ecological destruction; for Hildegard, it severs the "bonds of love" (*vincula caritatis*) that bind creation. Hildegard's warning against ecological hubris (e.g., her assertion that "arrogant hands" disrupting the earth invite divine wrath) mirrors deep ecology's critique of industrial exploitation. Her work suggests that environmentalism gains potency when framed not just as pragmatic survival but as a sacred duty.

The Rights of Nature movement, which grants ecosystems legal personhood, seeks to dismantle the legal fiction of nature as inert property. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, for example, recognizes nature's right to "exist, persist, and regenerate."[33] Hildegard's sacramental ecology prefigures this shift as well. In Physica, she insists: "Do not strip the earth bare… For she is a living mother, and her viriditas must be honored as divine."[34] Her personification of the earth as a "living mother" aligns with the Rights of Nature's goal of recognizing ecosystems as subjects, not mere objects. This could strengthen legal arguments by framing nature's rights as divinely ordained. Additionally, Hildegard's admonition to "honor" the earth contrasts with Locke's labor theory of property, which legitimizes exploitation. Her ethic of stewardship, which is caring for nature as one would a revered parent, resonates with Indigenous land ethics, such as the Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship). Her guidelines for sustainable harvesting in Physica (e.g., sparing plant roots)

[31] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28. Naess distinguishes between "shallow" environmentalism (focused on resource management) and "deep" ecology (prioritizing intrinsic value).
[32] Liber Divinorum Operum, trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell, 129. It underscores her belief in nature's inherent sacredness, independent of human utility.
[33] Ecuador Constitution (2008), Article 71. It establishes the Nature or *Pacha Mama*, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes. This means nature has the right to be respected, to have its life cycles maintained and restored, and for its functions and evolutionary processes to be preserved.
[34] Hildegard of Bingen, Physica, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 45.

mirror the "regenerative design" principles of permaculture. Both emphasize working *with* natural cycles, not against them.

Her sacred ecology also shares parallels with Indigenous cosmologies and ecofeminist praxis, which link ecological health to cultural and gender justice. Kimmerer (Potawatomi) writes in Braiding Sweetgrass: "The earth is a gift, not a commodity… We are called to answer the gift with our own reciprocity."[35] Hildegard's viriditas mirrors this reciprocity as her vision of the earth as a "mother" whose "greenness" nourishes all life echoes Indigenous views of nature as kin. Both frameworks reject extractive economies, advocating gratitude and restraint. Vandana Shiva's campaigns against seed patenting and agrotoxins also emphasize women's role in sustaining biocultural diversity. Hildegard's Sophia and Mary, as embodiments of viriditas, similarly sacralize women's caregiving and ecological labor. Her concept prefigures Shiva's argument that the domination of women and nature is intertwined. Some may argue that Hildegard's medieval Christianity is incompatible with Indigenous or ecofeminist thought. However, her work's emphasis on relationality and anti-dualism provides common ground. For example, her hymn O viridissima virga could be reinterpreted in pluralistic contexts to acknowledge and honor diverse feminine ecospiritual traditions.

Hildegard's sacred ecology challenges modern environmentalism to reimagine its goals. Beyond carbon metrics and policy reforms, her work invites us to cultivate reverence—for the earth's vitality, for the marginalized, and for the interconnected web of life. By integrating her vision with movements like the Rights of Nature and ecofeminism, we can forge an environmental ethic that is as spiritually profound as it is pragmatically urgent.

Challenges and Counterarguments

While Hildegard's concept offers insights for contemporary environmental ethics, critics raise valid concerns about its applicability to modern secular movements, its religious exclusivity, and its practical utility in addressing global crises. Engaging these critiques head-on reveals both the limitations and enduring relevance of her work, inviting us to refine, rather than reject, her medieval vision for today's ecological struggles.

Some would argue that Hildegard's 12th-century worldview, shaped by Benedictine monasticism and feudal hierarchies, is too culturally distant to inform 21st-century

[35] Braiding Sweetgrass (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 16.

environmentalism.[36] How can a medieval mystic's theology, steeped in Christian cosmology, speak to a pluralistic, scientifically oriented world grappling with climate collapse? The answer lies in the universality of her core themes. Hildegard's concept of viriditas (the divine "greening power" animating all life) transcends its medieval roots by articulating a principle of interdependence that modern ecology now confirms. Her warnings against ecological hubris (Liber Divinorum Operum) resonate with Indigenous teachings like Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass, which similarly frame nature as kin rather than commodity.[37] In my view, dismissing Hildegard as anachronistic risks erasing the timeless urgency of her message: that human arrogance severs the "bonds of love" (vincula caritatis) essential to ecological survival.

Another critique posits that Hildegard's Christian framework alienates non-religious or non-Western audiences, limiting her relevance to pluralistic environmental ethics.[38] While her theology is undeniably rooted in medieval Catholicism, her sacramental ecology (the belief that *all* creation reflects divine glory) provides a bridge to diverse spiritual and secular traditions. For example, her personification of the earth as a "living mother" (Liber Divinorum Operum) mirrors Andean reverence for Pacha Mama (Earth Mother) and Māori kaitiakitanga (guardianship), both of which recognize ecosystems as living entities deserving rights. Even secular environmentalism, which often struggles to inspire moral passion beyond pragmatic concerns, can adapt her concept of viriditas as a metaphor for nature's intrinsic value. I argue that Hildegard's work invites us to decouple spirituality from dogma, encouraging a pluralistic ethic where reverence for life transcends religious boundaries.

Critics also question whether Hildegard's ethical prescriptions, such as sustainable harvesting in Physica, can address systemic crises like industrial pollution or mass extinction.[39] While her medieval solutions are not a panacea, they offer a moral compass for modern movements. Her admonition to "never strip the earth bare" (Physica) prefigures permaculture's regenerative design and the circular economy, which reject linear, extractive systems. Moreover, her critique of greed (Scivias) aligns with degrowth advocates who argue

[36] Critics like Lynn White Jr. have questioned the relevance of medieval thought to modern ecology (*Science,* 1967). However, White's own argument—that Christianity's anthropocentrism enabled environmental exploitation—ignores figures like Hildegard, who subverted this hierarchy by sacralizing nature.

[37] Braiding Sweetgrass, 16. Kimmerer, like Hildegard, blends scientific and spiritual insights, showing how Indigenous wisdom complements ecological knowledge.

[38] Scholars like Bron Taylor argue that religious environmentalism risks alienating secular audiences (*Dark Green Religion*, 2010). Yet Hildegard's sacramental ecology, which finds divinity in *all* life, offers a middle ground for that.

[39] Technocrats often dismiss premodern ethics as impractical. Yet Hildegard's emphasis on restraint (Physica) informs the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption).

that sustainability requires dismantling consumerist cultures. Hildegard's true value lies not in specific practices but in her holistic vision, where she challenges us to see environmental care as a sacred duty rather than a technical problem. In an era of climate despair, her work counters apathy by reimagining activism as a spiritual practice, one that nurtures both the earth and the human soul. She reminds us that saving the planet begins with loving it—and love, as she knew, is the most practical force of all.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Hildegard of Bingen's medieval mysticism, anchored in her visionary concept of viriditas, the divine "greening power" animating all creation, provides a transformative blueprint for ecofeminist environmental ethics. Through dismantling hierarchical dualisms, sacralizing nature, and centering feminine divine imagery, Hildegard's work critiques the anthropocentric and patriarchal systems that perpetuate ecological exploitation. Her integration of spirituality, ecology, and gender justice offers not only a historical precedent for ecofeminism but also a pragmatic path toward reimagining humanity's relationship with the earth in an age of climate collapse.

I demonstrated that Hildegard's viriditas challenges the Cartesian mind/body and human/nature divides, reframing the natural world as a manifestation of divine immanence. Her metaphysics of interconnected vitality, which unites spiritual and material realms, resonates with modern process philosophy and vibrant materialism, urging us to see all life as agential and sacred. Crucially, Hildegard's ecofeminism emerges in her subversion of patriarchal theology: by envisioning Sophia and Mary as embodiments of viriditas, she elevates caregiving, ecological stewardship, and women's labor as sacred acts. Her critiques of clerical greed and ecological hubris, rooted in a Benedictine ethic of reciprocity, prefigure contemporary movements that like environmental health to social justice.

While this paper makes a case for Hildegard's enduring relevance, I acknowledge limitations that invite further inquiry. First, her medieval Christian framework risks alienating secular or non-Western audiences. Though I argued that viriditas can be adapted as a metaphor for nature's intrinsic value, some may question whether her theology can truly transcend its historical context. Second, Hildegard's monastic lifestyle and feudal milieu complicate her direct application to modern systemic crises. Can a 12th-century mystic's ethic of care address the scale of industrial capitalism or climate displacement? Finally, while

I positioned Hildegard as a proto-ecofeminist, her writings do not explicitly engage with intersectionality or decolonial thought, critical gaps that contemporary ecofeminism must address. These limitations, however, are not dead ends but invitations for dialogue. Future work could explore viriditas intersects with Indigenous cosmologies, decolonial environmentalism, or queer ecologies, enriching Hildegard's framework with pluralistic perspectives. Additionally, her sacramental ecology might be critically juxtaposed with secular philosophies like new materialism to test its adaptability. This paper is not a closed canon but a starting point, urging us to refine her insights in conversation with marginalized voices and modern complexities.

This paper's contribution lies in its recovery of Hildegard as a vital voice for today's ecological and social struggles. Through reframing her as a proto-ecofeminist, I bridge a gap in environmental ethics, which often overlooks pre-modern thought, and ecofeminism, which has yet to fully reckon with its medieval roots. For communities grappling with climate despair, Hildegard's viriditas is a rallying cry: it insists that the earth's vitality is inseparable from our own and that justice for marginalized people is inseparable from ecological healing. To policymakers, her ethic challenges the myth of endless growth; to activists, it offers a language of sacred urgency; to scholars, it demands interdisciplinary collaboration.

Ultimately, this paper hopes to inspire not just academic reflection but actionable change. Hildegard's mysticism teaches us that saving the planet is not a technical problem to solve but a relationship to repair, one rooted in humility, creativity, and care. Let her "greening power" remind us that even in collapse, life persists, and with it, the chance to forge a future where ecology, equity, and spirituality flourish together. As Hildegard wrote, "All of creation is a symphony of the Holy Spirit." May we learn to listen.

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