

## **Breaking the Gender Barrier**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of my paper is to show that gender is a belief system which is taught, and that individuals can choose to believe that gender is a barrier or obstacle to their own career goals, successes, or to their value as an individual, and whether or not gender impacts their individual contributions to society as a whole. In other words, the real issue of *inequality* or gender, or men versus women, lies in the perception individuals hold of themselves, and their understanding of the world around them.

### **Introduction**

I used to believe that gender was the issue that held me back from moving forward in my career, Conducting. Conducting has been largely a man's arena. But the old gender conflict represented in the tennis match between Bobbi Riggs vs. Billy Jean King is no longer relevant, either in sports or music. What is relevant is that the individual (in my case, a woman) perceives that what she is capable of is of equal benefit to herself and her career, and that she is responsible for what she produces. It is my argument, that what would be a very convenient excuse for women, gender inequality in higher education and elsewhere, is really not the *pink elephant* in the room.

Let me use an example to explain. My conducting professor at the University of Washington, after a conducting class, met with me to review my video-tape of the conducting that I had just finished. While watching the video tape I became crest-fallen, feeling that my conducting was, for lack of a better word, "wimpy" or not strong enough. I immediately thought in my mind, "If only I were a man!" I voiced this last statement to Abraham Kaplan, and further cemented my *victimhood* status by whining, and finished my statement with, "I should conduct like a man!" Kaplan, asked, "Why do you think this way about your conducting?" I answered, "Because I am not being effective." He said, "Being effective has nothing to do with whether or not you are a man or a woman. The measure of a fine conductor has nothing to do with male or female." His words hit me like a hammer, for I had always believed my premise to be true. I had known many women colleagues in the conducting world that had changed their conducting to reflect a greater masculinity and less femininity. If his statement was true, then everything that I had based my assumptions upon was no longer relevant.

In my career years, nine since that moment in time, I have revisited this conversation many times in my mind. I have realized my professor's statement to be true. It is much easier to blame your inadequacies upon something or someone else. It is easier to accept your weaknesses as being produced by another or caused by another. What I have learned, and have continued to learn, is that I create my own beliefs about myself and the world around me. What I believe about myself and what my belief systems hold about the world around me are both how I am perceived and how others perceive me.

Joan of Arc, Hildegard Von Bingen, Mother Teresa, and Teresa of Avila are all examples of women who were not held back by their belief systems, or by so-called gender issues. Compared to us today, they had many more *gender* issues to deal with. Yet, it did not hold them back. I use these women as examples because while they also were in religious communities often viewed or thought of as greater gender discriminators, these women had an incredible influence. Why and how did this happen? My response to this question is that so-called gender issues may never really have existed in their reality. A belief system is only true if an individual or society holds it to be true. What happens when an individual no longer accepts a commonly held belief system? What happens when an individual is able to make a significant impact upon a commonly held belief system? Does the belief system control the individual, or does the individual control the belief system? What power does the individual have in determining the outcome of a particular event, or belief? Given a specific event, is it the event itself that determines the outcome, or is it the individual's response to the event?

This paper will examine the lives of four women, what they were able to accomplish, why they were successful, and how we can apply their collective wisdom to break the gender barrier.

### **Mother Teresa**

In *The Missionary Position*, a book by Christopher Hitchens, Mother Teresa and her missionary focus is the brunt of Hitchens' criticisms. He grimly points out her unwavering sufferings, aids, abortion, and living the Christian life, which for Mother Teresa meant due pietism in living sacrificially. Unfortunately, this often meant for her and others around her, extreme poverty, simplicity, and fervent dedication and discipline to a strict religious routine. In defense of such a position, I would state that most successful people, whether male or female, are imbued with an extreme focus towards a specific goal. This focus leads individuals to live a life completely dedicated to the goal, whatever it may be. While these individuals are successful, there is often the shadow side of the goal which creates a type of joyless mechanical discipline in which the individual surrenders to a greater good, and totally leaves the individual bereft of personal enjoyment or individual satisfaction. All of the women examined in this paper, Hildegard of Bingen, Joan of Arc, Mother Teresa, and Saint Teresa of Avila, struggled with personal relationships, the fine line between personal success and individual piety. They sought to lift up the church, the cause, and the goal above and beyond their own personal gain. Mother Teresa, while not wishing to be political, found herself involved with political issues and personalities. She struggled with receiving billions in donations, yet maintaining her religious piety. Again, it may be established that she had a focus which was undying and relentless in its pursuit of religious piety, to the fault of allowing individuals to suffer for *the cause of Christ*, to identify with his sufferings to endure life, and to experience pain and suffering for the benefit of self-discipline in order to *gain Christ*. This type of personal piety led many to question the church and its actions with regard to monies received on behalf of Mother Teresa, and the many ways in which the monies were put to use.

While that is not the subject of this paper, what is important here is that Mother Teresa was relentless in pursuing what she felt was her place in the world: to attend to the poor and their needs. She forgot all else in her world except for that one goal. She remained faithful until her death in attending to those in need. This was not without personal unhappiness and great emotional pain on her part. She experienced a tremendous faith crisis, which is common for those who pursue such a single minded goal with such dedication. Despite her own convictions to not be a political figure or to be put on a pedestal, she became a symbol of religious piety, humility, and God's grace to the poverty stricken world. She met many people of status and privilege. They sought her out. She was good publicity for them. Did she know this? I believe that Mother Teresa was far smarter than she appeared, or was given credit for. To a certain extent she had to be aware and consciously making decisions that would enable her cause. Sometimes this meant accepting gifts of money, from sources that would be questionable.<sup>i</sup> As was previously mentioned in Hitchens' book, *The Missionary Position, Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, there is amongst the obvious criticism of the author, picture after picture of Mother Teresa with everyone from Charles Keating, to Queen Elizabeth II. There is also a picture of Mother Teresa accepting the Nobel Peace Prize.

Now, while Mother Teresa was not a perfect individual, as I am sure she would readily acknowledge, let's examine what made her tick so to speak. She lived simply, with a simple focus, determination, passion, and zeal. She had a strong belief system that fueled her ministry and served as the foundation for all that she did. While she deeply questioned her faith, and went through many dark nights of the soul, she continued to persevere towards achieving her goal, which was giving to the poor and the dying in society. While her seeming ignorance of money was glaringly apparent to Hitchens, she nevertheless associated with some of the most important figures of her time. She was able to harness a great deal of attention, money, and effort towards focus upon those who were less fortunate in our society. That really was her intent. This effort was undergirded by her obvious faith, which she tried to live out for the duration of her life. Even when her doubts surfaced, she continued to pursue what she believed to be the right direction. This unwavering devotion to a faith position is what allowed her to be so successful. In this case, there are several points to be drawn. First, gender had nothing to do with what she was able to accomplish. In fact, gender should have kept her from any notoriety at all. Second, gender had nothing to do with her perseverance, devotion, faith beliefs, and tenacity to care for the sick and dying. Third, her life was very simple, devoted to one cause, thus extreme focus and energy was directed to a specific outcome. This also had nothing to do with gender. Fourth, she was able to impact society as a whole, from the bottom up, or from the less fortunate to the extremely rich. Gender was not a factor in succeeding to cross boundaries of wealth, status, and position in society. Fifth, even though she was in a religious institution with definite gender bias, it did not seem to affect her with regard to her goals or her impact upon society. I think sometimes we use gender as an excuse. It might be easier for us as women to blame our lack of energy, focus, and the like, on gender, rather than focus on the hard work, perseverance, and dedication it takes to be successful at anything we choose to do. What Mother Teresa does prove

is that we as women can be in a position to affect change, no matter what the culture, no matter how strong the bias, and no matter how much we have monetarily. My point here is that gender really does not restrict or defeat such passion and intended focus. On the contrary, gender as a barrier is based upon a belief system. But if a person does not choose to live by that belief system, then gender does not have a place in that person's life. We have, as women, the power to choose what we wish to believe. We have the power to believe in our own selves, in our abilities, talents, and skills. We can choose to put our passions to work, and to put our endurance, strength, and energy behind what we believe in. We can do this individually and collectively.

Hitchens states in his book, "The naïve and simple are seldom as naïve and simple as they seem, and this suspicion is reinforced by those who proclaim their own naivety and simplicity. There is no conceit equal to false modesty, and there is no politics like anti-politics, just as there is no worldliness to compare with ostentatious anti-materialism."<sup>1</sup> He continues, "Mother Teresa is fond of claiming to be not so much above politics as actually beyond them, operating in a manner that is transcendental."<sup>2</sup> I believe that Mother Teresa was following Jesus' example, to have a child-like faith, to "be in the world, but not of it,"<sup>3</sup> and to lead a Godly life, which means to respect authority, but to live with a simple, clear focus. This was her faith, or her understanding of reality, which was centered in God. It is extremely difficult for those people outside of the world of religion to understand that women of faith, past and present, are not necessarily complicated souls. The power of their presence on earth is to live very simple and uncomplicated lives. These women do exist. The four women represented in this paper, are examples of women who lived their lives simply, meaningfully, abundantly, and respectfully. They did not concern themselves with matters that were too great for them, nor were they interested in vesting their lives for purposes of becoming famous. If that occurred, it was not part of their original goal. If you judge these women by whether or not they accomplished what they set out to do, then overwhelmingly you have to concede that indeed they did accomplish what they set out to do. How successful they were depends upon your definition of success. From their vantage point, I believe that they would be profoundly shocked to realize the extent to which their words, practices, and actions created an impact that continues even today. Thus, what people choose or hold to be truth is what they live out in their lives. Mother Teresa displayed a courageous spirit and fortitude to continue her journey with regard to the poor and their needs. She had a central focus and a personal piety that did not take into account or even pause to consider gender issues. The questions that plagued Mother Teresa were issues or matters of personal faith, of endurance toward a goal that she felt obliged to follow. Gender, while being considered to be an issue in the Catholic Church with regard to hierarchical leadership, never entered her mind. She accepted her position, her personal choice of goals, and proceeded with due clarity as to what she was here on earth to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchens, Christopher, *The Missionary Position*, p.86, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Hitchens, p.86.

<sup>3</sup> The Bible, John 17:14.

## Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen also followed this same path, as she moved with clarity, focus, purpose, and vision to pursue what she felt was an important goal. Hildegard was not only a mystic, but also a prophet, and a politician. She was a member of the German Benedictine aristocracy, belonging to the spiritual and social elite. Yet she was extremely humble about her abilities, gifts and talents. Hildegard, in the course of her lifetime, wrote a trilogy that combines Christian doctrine, ethics, and cosmology, an encyclopedia of medicine and natural science, several hundred letters of advice and wisdom. She also wrote about two saints' lives, seventy liturgical songs, and a morality play. She was apparently unaware of other women, such as Heloise, a great French contemporary, or of other women who had preceded her. This means that she displayed great courage to write, compose, and even preach. She often preached about clerical and monastic reform. Hildegard also founded two nunneries, of which one is still thriving today!

Gender was not in her mind an issue to contend with. Hildegard stood against the Pope, and was able to do so because of her fervor and zeal for God and her passion for what she believed in. Hildegard knew that her mission was to fill the role of the clergy who she felt were not fulfilling their duties. She began to teach, preach, and interpret the Scriptures and proclaim the justice of God. The Pope officially endorsed Hildegard's writings publically and sent her a letter to encourage her continued work in writing *Scivias*. This was an important validation for Hildegard, and allowed her to pursue her work with renewed confidence and fervor. The Pope, in doing this, had protected her against public censure, which most certainly would have occurred. "Not only did it increase Hildegard's confidence and security in the face of continuing self-doubt, but it also authenticated her publicly and protected her from the censure she was bound to attract for violating the deuteron-Pauline strictures on female silence and submission."<sup>4</sup> In fact, Hildegard's troubles did not come from a gender standpoint at all. One of her greatest issues was her desire to establish a new convent, which met with severe objections. She finally got her way, but had a very difficult battle to fight. It is interesting that it would be over establishing a new convent and not writing a book! It was not her personal views, her preaching, teaching, visions, or writings that created dissension, but rather her desire to move her convent that ultimately caused her the greatest difficulty. She desired to be independent from the monks, both from a leadership position as well as financial freedom and spiritual freedom! Hildegard supervised the construction of the new buildings for the new convent; she procured funding, obtained financial gifts, and secured the property for the new convent as well. She began a correspondence with people who sought her advice, in the outside world. All of these actions involved an impressive array of lay people, priests, abbots, abbesses, secular rulers, and prelates, who sought her out at the convent.

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop, Jane, Mother Columba Hart, *Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias*, p. 13, 1990.

Hildegard van Bingen's book, *Scivias*, is also not a theological treatise. In the introduction to *Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias*, Barbara J. Newman states, "To students of spirituality Hildegard remains of compelling interest, not only as a rare feminine voice soaring above the patriarchal choirs, but also as a perfect embodiment of the integrated, holistic approach to God and humanity for which our fragmented era longs." She continues, "It remains true that Hildegard unites vision with doctrine, religion with science, charismatic jubilation with prophetic indignation, and the longing for social order with the quest for social justice in ways that continue to challenge and inspire."<sup>5</sup> It too is mystical in that it is a record of 29 visions that she experienced. She begins by explaining poetically what she experienced in her vision. Then she carefully dissects each phrase giving full measure of meaning to each sentence, as it relates to the total meaning of the vision. Jane Bishop, one of the co-translators, says in her note about the translation, that the Latin has the word *homo, vir, and mulier* for man and woman, due to the "pronouns agreeing in gender with the nouns they modify, rather than with the beings they express, as it is possible to write for long stretches in Latin without any suggestion of an exclusionary his or her."<sup>6</sup> It is quite possible that Hildegard was writing this for neither male nor female, but from an androgynous point of view. Hildegard refers to both males and females as humans in her writing. She understands God's communication with us as human beings, not as male or female. Nor does she instruct, advise, or give counsel in terms of male and female representation. Both genders are subject to equal comment and advice and are not addressed separately.

Hildegard's book, *Scivias*, is divided into three main sections: the Orders of Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. The third section or book has multiple visions. According to Barbara Newman, "the order of the visions is carefully arranged to afford multiple perspectives on the system of Christian doctrine."<sup>7</sup> Hildegard's writings differed from that of her male counterparts who wrote during her lifetime, who were theologians, in that she wrote primarily through her visions. Barbara Newman feels that if she had been a male theologian, her *Scivias* would have been considered to be a major work and an important contribution to medieval history, and religious context. For instance, in Hugh of St. Victor's summa entitled, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, c. 1134, he argues from a theological standpoint, where Hildegard would speak *in persona Dei*. In Hildegard's writings, it is clear that she focuses upon not being, "wise according to worldly standards, but that her weakness and foolishness have been empowered by God alone."<sup>8</sup> The Latin used by Hildegard is also a different from most used for theological works. Hildegard's *Scivias* also differs from male theological point of view, in that in her commentary on the Genesis narrative, she highly exonerates Eve and puts most of the blame on Satan for the fall of mankind.<sup>ii</sup> She also interprets I Corinthians 11:9 where Paul states, "Man was not created for woman, but woman for man," as "Woman was created for the sake of

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<sup>5</sup> Bishop, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Maddocks, Fiona, *Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias*, p. 56, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop, Jane, Mother Columba Hart, *Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias*, p. 22, 23, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop, p. 17.

man, and man for the sake of woman.”<sup>9</sup> I might add here, that Hildegard clearly is reflective of her culture, and of a holistic interpretation of scripture. She sees the value of both gender roles for male and female, and understands that they need one another, and work together to fit God’s plan of salvation and justification.

Another illustration of a difference in interpretation of Hildegard’s *Scivias* from that of Hugh of St. Victor’s summa *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, (written a decade before *Scivias*), is the lack of gender distinction in her writings. For example, when describing the Trinity, she introduces three similitudes from created things: “a stone with its dampness, solidity and kindling power; aflame with its light, heat and color; and a word with its wound, breath and meaning.”<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note as Barbara Newman indicates in the introduction of *Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias*, that none of the analogies is gender specific, and that the naming of Father and Son is balanced by a reference to, “the embrace of God’s maternal love, which is charity.”<sup>11</sup>

Hildegard’s visions, as discussed in *Scivias*, encompass the following areas of discussion: Baptism, the Trinity, the Church, Confirmation, the Priesthood, the Devil, God’s word, Salvation, God’s will, the law, God’s judgment, the last days, a new heaven and a new earth. Some of the highlights of these topics that relate to this paper are, 1) the emphasis on the Virgin birth. The virgin becomes a model for priests to follow. 2) Hildegard upholds the traditional model of a male for the priesthood, and says of women, “an infirm and weak habitation appointed to bear children, but as virgins they can possess the priesthood vicariously through their bridegroom, Christ.”<sup>12</sup> 3) While Hildegard claims to not be a theologian, through her visions, there are definite theological themes, and application of scriptural truth and knowledge. This indicates that she was well read, or at least had some familiarity with theology, and with writers of theology, such as Thomas Aquinas. 4) In Hildegard’s symbolic and visionary theology, she sees the feminine as representing “the sphere of synergy in which divinity and humanity work together for salvation.”<sup>13</sup> 5) Under the topic of the tower of the church, Hildegard uses one of the virtues, wisdom, to signify a female co-worker in creation; this female representation precedes Justice, fortitude and temperance. In addition, sanctity has symbolically three heads; two are sexless, and the left one, self-sacrifice, is female.<sup>iii</sup> In summary, it is very clear from her writings, that Hildegard had to be extremely careful about citing references to literary works and theological writings. She chose to highlight her insight and theological premises upon her visions, and as such, she functioned as a prophet, receiving direct revelation from God. With this claim as her foundation, she was able to set forth her understanding of scripture, and of these selected topics. Hildegard became a role model for other female writers to follow in history. She never did establish a school or a monastery of Hildegard as was done of a

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<sup>9</sup> Bishop, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Bishop, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop, p. 37.

“school of St. Barnard of St. Victor,” but she did have one disciple, although unsought by Hildegard, and her name was Elisabeth of Schonau.

Hildegard prided herself in not being a learned individual, but being simple-minded. She claimed that she could not possess the knowledge or intellectual abilities to experience, explain, or create her visions that they most certainly come directly from God, as she simply could not be the author or creator of what she is experiencing through or by her own understanding or efforts. This makes her more credible from a certain standpoint, because it is truly remarkable that such visions would flow from an individual that does not have much education, or great ability. Hildegard was a woman of principles; she displayed incredible stamina and courage at many points in her life time. She possessed a fiery temper, and an internal compass that would not allow her to compromise her positions, integrity, and spiritual judgments. This was true even being excommunicated, and her abbey being deprived of celebrating the Mass, sacraments, and singing the liturgical chants “In governing her community and advising her fellow superiors, she advocated a middle way between laxity and self-indulgence on the one hand and excessive abstinence on the other.”<sup>14</sup> Hildegard was able to run her convent in her own way. An example of this is the fact that nuns were allowed to wear jewelry when they received communion. Hildegard defended this action by basing it upon class discrimination. She says, “One would not put beasts of different species in the same stall, and even angels had their hierarchy.”<sup>15</sup> As for wearing jewelry, “it was perfectly acceptable for the brides of Christ to dress like noble ladies because, as virgins, they were exempt from the rule of female subordination that required matrons to wear veils and lay aside their elegant attire.”<sup>16</sup> While Hildegard herself was born to nobility, she gave up the titles and secular powers of nobility, but still retained its influence, prestige, and corporate wealth. Hildegard concerned herself with the abuse of authority, the negligence of clerics, and the arrogance of rulers. She was not concerned with the sinful lives of her subjects. Her focus was a devotion to speaking, living, and acting upon herself being the bride of Christ, and representing to others, for others, what she perceived the role of leadership within the church to be. Hildegard fought tenaciously for those ideas, and actions, that supported her beliefs. She was unwaveringly tenacious in this regard.

### **Teresa of Avila**

St. Teresa of Avila was born at Avila, March 28, 1515. Her father was pious, austere, stern, and well off financially to provide for twelve children. Teresa was sent to an Augustinian monastery at an early age to complete her education and for spiritual training. Teresa did not wish to become a nun. She eventually changed her mind, left her father and her home and jointed the Carmelite Order at the Covenant of the Incarnation. Not much is written about her time spent at the Incarnation, but she wrote a book entitled *The Interior Castle*. She reluctantly became a writer. Mother Teresa’s modesty is shared by Teresa of Avila, that although she did

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<sup>14</sup> Bishop, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop, p. 20,

as she was instructed to do by her editor, she asked, “Why do they want me to write things? Let learned men, who have studied, do the writing; I am a stupid creature and don’t know what I am saying. There are more than enough books written on prayer already. For the love of God, let me get on with my spinning and go to choir, and do my religious duties like the other sisters. I am not meant for writing; I have neither the health nor the wits for it.”<sup>17</sup> As Allison Peers points out concerning the layout and design of the *Interior Castle*, the scholastic writer, or for that matter, anyone with a scientific mind would have carried the logical arrangement of the general plan into every chapter. Such a procedure, however, according to Peers, would have left no outlet for St. Teresa’s natural spontaneity: “It is difficult, indeed, to say how far experiential mysticism can ever lend itself to inflexible scientific rule without endangering its own spirit. Since God is free to establish an ineffable communion with the questing soul, the soul must be free to set down its experiences as they occur to it. There is no life more real than the interior life of the soul; there is no writer who has a firmer hold on reality than St. Teresa.”<sup>18</sup> The reoccurring themes of self-knowledge, humility, detachment and suffering, are repeated throughout *Interior Castle*. It is interesting to note, that Mother Teresa and Teresa of Avila, both speak from positions of naiveté, and simplicity. It is equally interesting to note that both were concerned with humility, detachment and suffering. Acquiring these attributes has no gender bias. While the qualities might be deemed to be more accessible to women, since they are the bearers of children, none the less, they are certainly obtainable by anyone who desires to cultivate them. The fruits and the qualities of the spirit are not based upon gender. They are if you will, gender neutral.

As a female, Teresa experienced many things that she could not explain. She had to learn a way of living with these experiences, and a way of understanding and interpreting the events that happened to her, so she addressed these issues personally, in a type of logical manner. This earned her a respect, and she became an authority of such mystical happenings, and gained her credibility for an audience which had no other teachers or mentors. “She knew both her critics well enough to be quite frank with them, and as her command of mystical theology was stronger than theirs on the experiential side and weaker only on the theoretical, many of her comments must have been well worthy of preservation.”<sup>19</sup> In essence she wrote the *Interior Castle*, for her fellow nuns, and sisters, but in reality she gained a far greater audience, although she did not seek for this to happen. Teresa was certainly motivated to write this book, as she completed it within 6 months time period. This was also a difficult time with the Reform movements going on, and a great deal of upheaval going on around her. This is a point that needs to be made: Teresa was extremely motivated, and passionate, and experienced about what she was writing about and who she was writing it for. St. Teresa addresses several issues that she has direct knowledge of, or at least a great deal of wisdom in practicing each area as it relates to living a

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<sup>17</sup> Peers, Allison, E., *Interior Castle, St. Teresa of Avila*, p. 3, 1946

<sup>18</sup> Peers, pp. 3, 7

<sup>19</sup> Peers, pp. 3, 8.

mystical and spiritual life. These areas are: 1) Self-knowledge 2) Prayer and meditation 3) Fear of the Lord 4) Experiencing mystical visions, and dreams 5) Communication with God through various ways including prayer 6) God's favors given to people 7) the difference between a person's soul and a person's spirit 8) Spiritual union and spiritual marriage. It should also be acknowledged that St. Teresa had a male editor, (a priest, P. Gracian,) working with her. It is also true that Hildegard von Bingen also had a very close male companion who supported her and gave her great comfort. He was called St. John of the Cross. Male support of all of these women is also very noticeable and apparently extremely important to them personally. St. Teresa's book is a rare book. There are not many mystical guidebooks on how to live the mystical lifestyle in existence! Augustine's book, *Confessions*, deals with his own personal digressions about his life and his spiritual conversion. Augustine was a theologian, and clearly St. Teresa is not a theologian, nor does she claim to be! Her book is clearly not a theological treatise, although it is cemented in scripture, and supported by scriptural concepts and understanding. While Hildegard and Teresa were brilliant thinkers in their simplicity, (Mother Teresa and Joan of Arc were equally imbued with the wisdom and skill of practical thinking and inspirational guidance,) these women were not intellectually taught, or well-schooled. They lacked basic skills of writing, communication on a social level that would appeal to the everyday populace. Their language was the language of mysticism, of profound inner truth that finds its foundations in the soul. While most individuals were steeped in poverty, trying to survive, and in social mores of the times, these women were in a sense allowed to indulge in heavier matters of the heart, or spiritual issues, which called for a deeper kind of meditation, and discipline with regard to personal spiritual growth and transformation. They were given the privilege of remaining centered and focused upon their spiritual journey, their spiritual calling, and were given the focus and clarity needed to pursue their goals without being fenced in by gender issues. The realm of the spiritual provided a type of refuge from the societal norms of the day. These women had the freedom to pursue what they deemed was important.

### **Joan of Arc**

Joan of Arc was known as Jehanette, and lived in a small village in France. She excelled at sewing and spinning and was raised with the appropriate religious instruction. When she was thirteen years of age she heard a voice from God. She said that it was Saint Michael. There were also two other Saints that attended to her and gave her wise counsel, they were Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret. It was Saint Michael that told Joan that she would go to the King of France. The saints also told her that the King would be restored to France. Joan was perplexed not by hearing the voices of these saints but with the fact that they were telling her that she would help to establish the King and his Kingdom. She knew that she was a poor girl, who knew nothing of such things. Joan told no one of her visions, or of hearing voices from the saints that visited her. She displayed a tremendous amount of courage to act upon the guidance that she had received. Joan was also determined to accomplish what she had been told to do. It did not matter that she was a woman, nor that she was not schooled properly in battle or any

other skills needed to lead an army of men. As in the case of Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Joan was counseled to do what she did by saints of God, and this was her only source of guidance. Even though she was examined by scholars, no fault would be found in her desire to deliver the people of France from the terrible calamity that they found themselves in. She was of one focus, and one passion: to drive out the English, to crown King Charles at Reims, to rescue the Duke of Orleans from the hand of the English, and to raise the siege of Orleans.<sup>20</sup> The king gave Joan ten to twelve thousand men that she was to lead. She spoke boldly to her enemies, to the King, to the people, and to her men that she was leading into battle. She was confident of what she was called to do, and also confident that she would succeed. Joan told the English captain that he should surrender to the King of Heaven or lose the battle. When Joan doubted her mission, there would always be a guide or saint present to reassure her of her success in accomplishing what she was being told to do. She counseled King Charles to, “Go forward bravely. Fear nothing. If you will go forward like a man, you shall have your whole Kingdom!”<sup>21</sup> Joan seemed to know what to say, who to say it to, and exactly what words to use to convey her desires. She attributes all of this to the voices that she heard, to those who guided her. As with Hildegard and Teresa of Avila, Joan also had a man who assisted her by writing her letters.

Even though Joan was wounded in battle she continued her journey. She was eventually held prisoner. Joan was known to have performed miracles, such as raising a baby back to life.<sup>22</sup> Joan showed tremendous courage facing her accusers at her trial before her judges in the Chapel Royal at Rouen Castle. She spoke simply and clearly, stating that she was told what to do by God, and that she heard voices which gave her wise counsel. Joan wore men’s clothing, and when asked why she wore men’s clothing, she simply responded that it was “our Lord’s bidding.”<sup>23</sup> The questions asked at Joan’s trial were asked in a manner to intimidate her and make her look like she was crazy. She was counseled in her answers according to her own words.<sup>iv</sup> The people asking the questions felt that Joan was proclaiming herself to be worshipped as a saint. Joan simply answered honestly, giving facts, but always attributing her mystical understandings and actions to God. The questions asked of Joan are quite astounding by today’s standards. It was apparently not so difficult to believe that Joan had heard voices, or that she saw saints and angels, or that she performed miracles, but it was a major issue that she wore men’s clothing! Several times she was asked questions about wearing men’s clothing, the question was asked of her, “Which would you rather do-put on women’s clothing and hear mass, or remain in men’s clothing and not hear mass?” She answered, “Assure me that I shall hear mass if I am in women’s clothing, and I will answer you.”<sup>24</sup>

According to Sir Edward S. Creasy, “the public feeling in France was now favorable to an enthusiastic belief in a Divine interposition in favor of the party that had hitherto been

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<sup>20</sup> Trask, Willard, *Joan of Arc, In Her Own Words*, New York: Turtle Point Press, 1996, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Trask, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Trask, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Trask, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Trask, 120.

unsuccessful and oppressed. The idea of a Providence that works only by general laws was wholly alien to the feelings of the age. Every political event, as well as every natural phenomenon, was believed to be the immediate result of a special mandate of God. This led to the belief that his holy angels and saints were constantly employed in executing his commands and mingling in the affairs of men. The church encouraged these feelings; and at the same time sanctioned the concurrent popular belief that hosts of evil spirits were also ever actively interposing in the current of earthly events, with whom sorcerers and wizards could league themselves, and thereby obtain the exercise of supernatural power.”<sup>25</sup> So, the major focus at Joan’s trial was whether or not she represented angels or demons. It was not a gender issue, even though she was constantly questioned about wearing men’s clothing. The main focus of the trial was to determine whether or not she was receiving visions and visits from spiritual beings, and whether or not these spiritual beings were in favor of England or France.

Joan learned the technique of riding a horse into war. She handled herself with grace, dignity, courage, honor, and strength. She did not make it her focus to interfere with the military, but instead worked along beside them. The men believed her to be “the Heaven-sent Maid”<sup>26</sup> that would lead them to victory. She set an example of prayer and self-confession that she persuaded the generals and soldiers to do. Joan also traveled with her chaplain and her priests as they accompanied the soldiers as they marched. As testimony to her leadership, the men trusted that Joan was divinely appointed to lead them forward to victory. She spoke with confidence, and unwavering determination to complete the tasks that had been divinely given to her to do. Her belief in herself, her purpose, and her mission convinced others that she truly had been ordained to lead the people to victory, and to be successful in her mission

All of the women represented in this paper have a commonality in that what they stood for could not be rallied against by mortal man. They were upholding mystical and divine truths that could not be contended by mere human understandings. In a sense they used the church, the political agendas of the times to work in their favor. Gender really did not hinder the progress that they made toward their goals. It was not considered to be an obstacle toward their intended purpose. In some ways they used it to their advantage, as they did not have to contend with the established male hierarchy. They simply created their own path and pursued their own goals with fortitude, wisdom, creativity and strict discipline. In essence they were above reproach since they could not be included into the male hierarchy. They were free to create their own path, and perhaps more so with religious causes and events, since no one could dispute God’s mysteries, miracles, and the living out of a pious and Godly life. Religion created a type of shield against gender, as by its nature, religion allows for grace, miracles, causes, and religious fervor. Within this framework, women were allowed to speak, act, and become leaders in a religious world that did not acknowledge them in positions of authority. The women became political because politics and religion were closely linked. Each of these women met a specific need, either in

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<sup>25</sup> Trask, 143-144.

<sup>26</sup> Trask, 169.

their intimate circle, or for the greater good of society. Their passions, hopes, dreams, experiences, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding gave great clarity to the moment and in the times in which they lived. Their ultimate purpose was very clear, and they followed that passion and purpose through to its ultimate conclusion. Again, these attributes, traits, and characteristics of each of the women studied in this paper points to the conclusion that gender was not a significant issue. Gender issues, certainly did not hinder them from following or acting upon their passions, dreams, goals, and hopes. But, it must also be pointed out that they worked towards a common goal for the greater good of mankind as a whole. While, they were extremely humble, they also knew clearly who they were, what their role was, and how they were to fulfill their role. Who they were, was never in question or doubt, or what they were supposed to be doing was never in question. They certainly had dark moments of the soul, but even those melancholy moments never deterred them from moving towards their goal, or accomplishing through their actions, words, and deeds what they desired to do. It is important to note as well, that these women were supported by men. The men had the clarity to understand that these women were capable of being wise, of writing about mysteries, and events that needed to be addressed, that they were able to contribute to society in a large way. Even the Pope's acknowledged them.

## Discussion

This paper has taken a journey back through time to revisit from our history the lives of four women in light of what they believed and were able to accomplish despite the fact that there may have been gender issues affecting them and their actions. The question might now be asked, "How might we today as women apply their collective wisdom to our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" Postmodernism has impacted our society and has steered our culture from the philosophical ideas proposed in the Enlightenment that all assumptions, ideas, research, and the like were based upon credible and reliable information that could be trusted to be true and beyond questioning. The generations proceeding from postmodern thinking now believe that what once was taken as the golden rule, or rational thought, predominately produced by white Western male thinkers, is no longer the standard by which twenty-first century thinkers are forced to believe. There is a freedom of thought, a fundamental creativity which states that nothing is sacred, all ideas are valid, and no one opinion holds authority over anyone's ideas, or belief systems.<sup>27</sup> Women from my generation, (the Baby Boomers,) were educated to believe that certain gender prejudices were present, and that it was a given in culture. Postmodern women, in my opinion, are not in that category. They either cling to a desire to move back to a more traditional understanding of family and career, or they choose to adapt a totally different reality which they themselves create. I personally find both models unacceptable, since the first lacks a full understanding of what *traditional values* means, and the second model lacks suitable grounding, having no foundation, or concrete value system whatsoever! Anything goes! I believe that what a woman desires to choose to do in this Postmodern world is her choice. The difference is that she is able

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<sup>27</sup> Polkinghorne, John, *Quantum Physics, and Theology*, p. 3, 2007

to make the choice, rather than the choice being made for her. The Postmodern woman has the choice to make her own belief system, no matter what the prevailing culture dictates. There is a creative integrity within the postmodern individual, but there also appears to be an extreme lack of personal discipline, or structure, which results in a lack of respect, and a severe shortsightedness when it comes to thinking through issues, challenges, and problems. The average Postmodern does not think beyond one day, or very far into the future. She does she understands the complications of or consequences of her actions or mistakes. Life is lived from moment to moment. This impacts society in that there is suddenly no security, no future, no givens, no foundational principles or standards by which society lives. It becomes a type of *free for all*, with gender not a prevailing issue.

John Polkinghorne, author of *Quantum Physics and Theology*, says that, “the philosophical position that mediates between modernism and postmodernism is commonly called critical realism, the adjective acknowledging the need to recognize that something is involved that is more subtle than encounter with unproblematic objectivity, while the noun signifies the nature of the understanding that it actually proves possible to attain.”<sup>28</sup> This is to say that rational thought, or logical conclusions, based upon science, theology, culture, etc., are integrated through the individual’s thoughts of personal knowledge and experience. While this personal impact upon the interpretation of data is a given, it must be based with credible evidence to support the conclusions. One must understand what gender is or the ideas of it are, in order to refute or substantiate the reason for its existence, or non-existence. This comes by living and learning, not by detachment, but actual involvement and experience, such as learning to sew something. In this process, one takes the ideas of sewing, which theoretically are simple, but in reality take time to learn and perfect. It is only in the deep knowing of something, that knowledge is perfected, honored, refuted, and or changed. Postmodern women do not understand or appreciate what women through the centuries have had to do in order to work through the gender issues that have been taught, and practiced in the workplace. I personally believe that in order for Postmodern women to move beyond gender in navigating the future, they must first discern what is real and what is not, second, define how they understand and see themselves, and how they see themselves functioning in the world around them, third, they need to understand and define what their role will be in the future, or how they wish to contribute to society as a whole. I believe that what John Polkinghorne is saying in his book, *Quantum Physics and Theology* is that there are givens, (laws, and rules, not only in physics, but also life itself,) but there must be flexibility within those defined givens. Knowledge or new understandings must be founded in something, yet they are also unlimited in their final potential resting place. There is room for speculation, there is room for redefinition, there is space for creativity, but there is also a need for some kind of boundaries, or security, and our basic presuppositions may need to change. We may have to learn to live with the reality that there are no “givens,” no security, no reality but our own, and that we can create our own reality, in the

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<sup>28</sup> Polkinghorne, pp. 5, 6

midst of what may seem to be absolute chaos. I believe that is what Teresa of Avila, Hildegard von Bingen, Mother Teresa, and Joan of Arc did. They created their own understanding of reality, which in turn impacted the world around them. I think that this is what women of the twenty-first century need to be doing: Creating their own comprehension of who they are, what they wish themselves to be, and how they can live authentically in this world, speaking their truth, living their understanding of what life is, and helping others to do the same thing. We have to live in a type of tension between what is seemingly reality, and what we think is behind the reality.

The reality is that women today have to work, or need to work, both for personal satisfaction, and for financial reasons, that the work force is better served when both males and females are allowed equal status and respect. There is a balancing between the genders that is desperately needed in order for the work world to maintain a healthy perspective and competitive edge so to speak. Just as in quantum physics, as Polkinghorne has so eloquently stated, “There needs to be a balance between our personal convictions, beliefs, and actions in light of our personal interactions with the world at large.”<sup>29</sup> Women in the work force must recognize the need to function from a belief system that allows them to exercise their personal understandings, knowledge, and creativity within the parameters of their own personal work space. If they can work with integrity, and balance, they can accomplish a great deal. In other words, it is their own understanding of who they are, in any given setting that allows them to be creative, prosper, and contribute to their fields of study in an informed, creative manner that impacts with simplicity and clear focus, what they wish to impart. Teresa of Avila is a prime example of this kind of contribution to society as a whole, and specifically for mystics. Women who are experienced in their fields, self confident in who they are, and passionate about contributing to their particular discipline or field of study, will and can be respected, creative, and can make a significant impact wherever they find themselves.

Although these four women represented in this paper lived in different places, and wrote in different time periods, their effect, influence, opinions, and basic beliefs were similar, and made a decisive impact upon their own cultures, but also upon future generations. The themes of gender prejudice were not effective or relevant in stopping what they were writing about, or what their actions were producing. They individually made a powerful impact upon their particular generation, and also future generations to come. We can however, understand that the prevailing gender beliefs did not seem to keep them from doing what they felt they were called to do. The gender beliefs systems held by culture, did not impede their ability to communicate their truths and beliefs, and it did not keep them from acting upon what they believed to be true. Mother Teresa was a woman and a nun in a very male hierarchical system, yet she was able through her actions, words, and beliefs to make a huge impact upon not only the Catholic Church, but upon culture. She impacted the church by causing many people to take up membership in the Catholic Church, or to have a personal faith in God, and to also put their beliefs into action. She worked

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<sup>29</sup> Polkinghorne, p. 7,

with many social agencies to produce change, gathered support from many influential institutions, and people, traveled to far places where people were afraid to go, and demonstrated that women were capable of creating and envisioning great change through simple gestures of kindness, and through actions that had purposeful, and meaningful results, for the sick, poverty stricken, and dying. She pointed the way to a new era of giving, and highlighted the fact that parts of the culture at large were ignored, allowed to be treated inhumanely, and were disregarded by society as a whole—a simple but profound reality. Was gender an issue with Mother Teresa? Perhaps gender beliefs existed in the church context, but it apparently did not keep her from discovering her true gifts, passions, abilities, and talents. In addition, she was able to profoundly impact not only the immediate church culture from which she functioned, but also society at large. Gender had no impact upon her ability to effect change, or to grow individually, or to use her skills, gifts, and abilities, or to impact society. Nor did she have the need to obtain a lot of educational degrees, as is the case with Teresa of Avila, Hildegard von Bingen, or Joan of Arc. They all found ways of impacting their culture and future generations. Most of the respect these women received was due to their actions, in other words the way they chose to live their beliefs out through their actions. They used their gifts, abilities, talents, spiritual wisdom, (although not necessarily through book learning), to give voice to their own experiences, both mystical and profound. Even though their experiences could not be validated, such as the appearances of miracles, visions, or spiritual manifestations, they were able to convey a strong witness by their actions, and their deeds, and their well spoken words of wisdom, validated through their experience. Because of this, they were highly esteemed, even in historical times of huge differences between men and women and the way society treated them. Hildegard even took on the Pope in a debate over a woman whom she desired to be a part of her convent. The Pope gave her an audience. Joan of Arc led the rebellion of the French revolutionary war. She actually led men into battle. Teresa of Avila wrote poignantly about being a mystic, and living as a mystic. She explicitly used her own experiences as an example to draw specific points of how one deals with issues arising in life, from a mystical viewpoint. It did not matter to her if her experiences were validated by other people or by culture as a whole. She gave voice to other individuals, who could identify with her and describes for others what it is like to receive and experience things that are not quantifiable, or inexplicable. Her words of wisdom are applicable for today's modern mystics, or for those who experience mystical ideas, visions, and cannot understand them. For those persons who are not the norm in culture, Teresa gives hope and comfort, and understanding along with wise counsel. Why was she allowed to do this? I believe in part because she was unusual, and that her experiences validated her words. Her actions gave credence to her writing. Again, gender bias did not impact her, at least certainly not for future generations, and not to those in her surrounding culture. Her words have lasted through the centuries and still resonate today! Her wisdom was of lasting purport. Even her mystical and spiritual insights were not rejected. This is another important point, since most of her experiences could not be scientifically validated. Her actions spoke louder than words. Her

experiences rang true for those who could identify with them, and her points of what to do with certain experiences were right on, or at least proved to be successful.

Another observation to make when looking at these women's lives is that they were the first to observe a particular event, circumstance, or situation and give a meaningful solution to whatever the situation, event or circumstance needed. It was their clear insights, actions, words, and experiences that led others to trust their judgments. To illustrate this important point, let's examine professions that are not normally viewed as jobs or skills that women would do. For instance, choral conducting, my own field of study, is heavily male dominated, at least at the professional choral level. I began this paper with an illustration of how I personally was feeling the pressure to conduct more like a man. The question may be asked, "What makes women successful in the male dominated professions? Using choral conducting as an example, most professional choirs are used to a male role model for a conductor. Let's say that this is the case. When a woman decides to conduct, or is given a position of being the Artistic Director of a professional choir, she doesn't automatically have everyone's total respect, in essence she has to prove that she deserves to be respected. There might be an automatic assumption with a male conductor that goes with his gender that would imply that he is capable just because he is male. In a sense men are given a type of unconditional acceptance or respect due to the fact that they have always historically done the conducting. Hypothetically let's say that this is true. So, the woman conductor then has a time period in which to prove herself, by her knowledge, skills, abilities, talents, expertise, wisdom, and actions. If she is able to be successful as a choral conductor, she will eventually build a respect from the singers. This takes time, trust, perseverance, consistency, and self-confidence. Incidentally, other women are usually less likely to accept women in positions of authority or over them. The women's actions and words must be carefully and skillfully chosen in order to not trigger a gender driven response from the singers, such as she is a *bitch* or she is a prima donna, or she is really stuck on herself, or I am not going to do what she says, because she thinks she knows everything! Perhaps it's because men are in our society the more authoritative figure. Although this is changing, it is generally accepted that men are the head of the family, or the final authority. It is easy therefore, to not trust or to question a woman's authority. The woman then needs to through her actions, words, beliefs, and skills impart what she knows in an efficient, pleasing, fun, yet knowledgeable way. If she is successful in this, over time, she will gain credibility and acceptance. I do not believe that women cannot be choral conductors. I also think that society does dictate a more male dominance in the choral world, but I would draw the conclusion that women can be successful, not as imitating male leadership, but as establishing their own identity, and living out their own truths in ways that impart to others their gifts, talents, and abilities, and skills without having to shove it down their throats, or imitate men. Not necessarily that we do things better than men, but women have to find ways of connecting with men and other women that makes meaningful contribution to what needs to happen in a given event, circumstance, or situation. They cannot not only be driven by success. It needs to be a genuine reflection of the true gifting, thoughts, experiences, and understanding of the conductor to the singers. When the conducting gestures

are effective and successful, and the rehearsals are fulfilling, uplifting, inspirational, and exhilarating, then the woman conductor is successful, not because of her gender, but because she is crafting her gestures and speaking words of wisdom musically, that make sense and create an atmosphere of success, joy, learning, and encouragement, without fear. It is a different type of leadership.

## **Conclusion**

All of the women that I have studied, while being strongly independent, yet humble, were introverts, yet they collaborated with others to create their books, their music, accomplish their mission, or their tasks, and delighted in doing so. They didn't question what they experienced, nor did they rationalize it away. This gave them a type of individual credibility that propelled them forward. It was unique in that others did not experience life in the same way that they did, yet they were able to give credence to their experiences by using them for the good of others around them. They were aware of their own shortcomings, but had a bigger vision of what needed to be accomplished despite their own position. Their passions, ignited, and fueled their dreams, and gave birth to new ways of seeing old ideas, highlighting what was ignored, and addressing and giving credence to valid feelings, and experiences, by using their own actions, experiences, gifts, abilities, and talents to help create a new way of solving or exploring issues, for both individuals and society. Gender was not a prevailing issue to them. In fact, I would say that gender may have been an accepted norm, but it certainly did not keep them from living out their own truth, and making a profound impact upon society and future generations. They didn't fight it, nor was it something that prohibited them from doing what they felt was important. In fact, it may have been the very factor that enabled them to develop their skills, abilities, and talents far beyond what they would have if gender would not have been an issue.

In conclusion, the question may be asked, "Why does gender even have to exist?" The answer is a conclusion that I have drawn for myself, and that is to remain faithful to my belief systems, to carry out those beliefs into the world through my individual actions, to partner with others who believe as I do, and to continue to seek for solutions to challenges that confront us in the work place as women.

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