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Reimagining Heaven. Visions of Late Medieval Female Mystics

Eschatology is important for people of all times, but it had particular significance during the Middle Ages. Eschatological fears, especially triggered by plagues and wars, were common at that time. People lived in constant proximity to death. As a result, they were especially open to the hope of eternal life provided by Christianity. The experiences of female mystics are particularly interesting and valuable for understanding the eschatology of that period. Among others, really important are their descriptions of heaven which seem innovative for those times. They depict heaven not only as a perfect hierarchical structure but first of all as an experience of fervent love from God. Undoubtedly, the mystic women surprise with their original, fresh, and daring approach to matters related to life after death.

Key words: Eschatology, Haeven, mysticism, female mistics, Middle Ages.

Introduction

Eschatological themes, especially the fate of the soul after death and descriptions of heaven and hell, were some of the main themes of medieval mystical literature[1]. The focus of its interest was not necessarily the eschatological places themselves, but rather the experiences of the soul encountering Christ in the afterlife. This was an expression of the affective meditation developing at the time, focusing on the emotional, individual bond between one's soul and God[2]. An example

1 E. Gardiner, *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell. A Sourcebook*, New York 2018; R.M. Pollard, *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife,* Cambridge–New York 2020.

2 C.W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim. The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, Ithaca NY 1985, pp. 129-156.

of this tendency is late medieval female mysticism[3], flourishing from the 12th to the 16th century[4]. Women's mystical experience brought new light to the understanding of eschatological truths. Their writings attained a high reputation in the Middle Ages and became the real authority. This seems to be a particularly intriguing phenomenon, considering the social relations of the time and the low status of women.

This article is dedicated to images of heaven present in the writings of medieval female mystics[5]. Particularly interesting and valuable sources on this topic can be found e.g. in the mystical experiences of Hildegard of Bingen[6] (1098-1179), Mechthild of Magdeburg[7] (1207-1282), Gertrude the Great[8] (1256-1302), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), Birgitta of Sweden[9] (1303-1373), Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Fran-

3 The phenomenon of medieval women's mysticism is discussed from a historical perspective for example in the following publication: C.W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 170-209.

4 Z. Danielewicz, *Niebo. Historia przyszłości*, Warszawa 2005, p. 136.

5 E.R. Obbard, *Medieval Women Mystics: Gertrude the Great, Angela of Foligno, Birgitta of Sweden, Julian of Norwich: Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York 2002.

6 In Italy, Hildegard's texts were disseminated in a very popular collection of apocalyptic texts by Sybilla Tiburtina. Hildegard became known as the Sibyl of the Rhine and was mentioned in a line with other sibyls and apocalyptic prophets. Her popularity began to fade only in the 16th century. See: A. Holdenried, *The Sibyl and Her Scribes. Manuscripts and Interpretation of the Latin Sibylla Tiburtina c. 1050-1500*, Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT 2006; F. Beer, *Women The influence of prophecy in the later Middle Ages: a study in Joachimism*, Oxford 1969.

7 Mechthild wrote in German, but her works were translated into Latin shortly after her death. They had been known in Italy before 1300 AD and probably inspired Dante Alighieri. Some scholars believe that his description of hell was partially influenced by Mechthild's visions. See: Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Revelationes of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297). Flowing light of the Godhead*, New York 1998, p. 263.

8 Her revelations were recorded in Latin and received favourable responses from Franciscan and Dominican theologians, which led to the rapid growth in their popularity. Her writings were published in print as early as 1536. See: C.W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, pp. 178-179.

9 The revelations of Birgitta of Sweden were popular from the 14th to 17th century. They were available primarily in Latin (over 150 manuscripts). Birgitta's writings were also available in national languages; Italian, Swedish, German, English, and Czech translations had been produced by the end of the Middle Ages. In the 15th century her works were popular not only among theologians, but also at courts. See: C.L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*,

ces of Rome (1384-1440). Their writings were widely disseminated, thus greatly influencing theological reflection, preaching, catechesis and the faith of many Christians.

When examining their writings, one must be aware of the unique nature of this type of transmission. Mystical experience is very individual and personal; it is conveyed in a symbolic form through specific language. Therefore, the basic hermeneutical principle should be to engage the symbolic imagination in the analysis of the content. The distinction between vision and visualisation, introduced by Bernard McGinn to explain the mystical phenomenon, seems helpful. He understands the vision as a supernatural message given to a mystic and available only to him/her. On the other hand, visualisation describes this experience through various symbols and images taken from the Bible, culture, liturgy, theology, or art[10]. Thus, mystical literature is full of astonishing metaphors, images, and analogies extending beyond aesthetic value.

Heavenly experience of love full of emotions and passions

Mysticism introduced significant elements to the medieval conception of the nature of heavenly happiness. To understand the novelty of this view, one must consider its context, namely the medieval ideal of courtly love[11]. However distant and unrelated these two things may seem, there is a connection between mysticism and courtly love. The ideal of courtly love fostered by poetry contributed to the emergence of a new conception of heaven. It was in opposition to the one

Woodbridge 2001, p. 19; D. Pezzini, *The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings*, in: *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars,* eds. B. Morris, V. O'Mara, Turnhout 2000, pp. 186-212.

[10] B. McGinn, *Visions and Visualisations in the Here and Hereafter*, "The Harvard Theological Review" 98 (2005), p. 235. See: M. Chmielewski, *A Meditative Dimension of Woman's Genius*, "Soter" 75 (2020), pp. 5-13.

[11] The idea of courtly love was born in the Middle Ages and was a revolutionary innovation to emphasising love and affection. See: J. Le Goff, *The Historian and the Common Man*, in: *The Historian between the Ethnologist and the Futurologist*, ed. J. Dumoulin, Paris 1973, pp. 204-215. For more on the courtly love ideal, see: R. Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love. A Critical Study of European Scholarship*, Manchester 1977. See also D.W. Robertson, *The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts*, in: *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, ed. F.X. Newman, Albany 1968, pp. 1-18.; H. Moller, *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, "The Journal of American Folklore", 287 (1960), pp. 39-52.

developed by scholastic theology[12]. The troubadours praising courtly love contributed to the valuing of affection, emotion, passion, and personal commitment. Until then, the feeling of love was relegated to the background due to the medieval concept of marriage[13], which was conceived primarily as an institution, a contract in which reason and prudence played an essential role. The development of courtly love restored feelings to their rightful place. It also made it possible to appreciate their role in the understanding of a person's happiness. As a result, the scholastic conception of heaven developed by scholasticism became unacceptable, as it stressed mainly the participation of the intellect in the happiness of the saved. The vision of heaven as a static, purely intellectual contemplation of God became incomprehensible to those who discovered the importance of love in human life or the proponents of courtly love; another obstacle for the adoption of a scholastic heaven was its extreme theocentricity summarised in a maxim: only God and myself. The key question was: how to combine human love with the love of God? The opposition between love for God and love for humans was concealed, though clearly present in the religious literature of the time[14], exposing the problem of the mutual exclusion of these two loves. Courtly literature resolved this problem in favour of human love. According to the troubadours' poetry (e.g., the works of Giacomo da Lentini), heaven is a place where lovers can enjoy eternal and sensual joy. God has been marginalised or completely vanished from such heaven[15]. Thus, there were two polar extremes: the scholastic heaven of the theologians and the secular one imagined by the troubadours. This polarisation arose from their contrasting attitudes to love and affection. The heaven of the mystics represents a third way. Yet this status does not imply being somewhere in-between

[12] The synthesis of Catholic teachings on eschatology is presented e.g. by P. Mąkosa, *The Roman Catholic Church's Late Medieval Teaching on Eschatology as the Basis for Visual Catechesis*, "Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej" 18 (2019), pp. 139-151.

[13] The medieval institution of marriage usually had little in common with love. It was primarily a kind of a social contract or alliance between two families that was forged for political and economic purposes. See: P. Dinzelbacher, *Pour une historie de l'amour au moyen âge*, "Le moyen âge. Revue d'histoire et de philologie, 153 (1987), pp. 223-240.

[14] A fine example of this approach might be the work of Guido Guinizelli from Bologna. In one of his works, he described a conversation with God in which a clear alternative is posed: it is either God's love and heaven, or human love. See: G. Guinizelli, *Al cor gentil*, in: *The Courtly Love Tradition,* ed. B. O'Donoghue, Manchester 1982, p. 265.

[15] C. MCDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, New Haven 2001, p. 95.

the religious and secular concepts but also expresses an attitude towards love and emotions. Mysticism portrayed heaven as experiencing the deepest love, focused on God, but not devoid of emotionality or passion. It was still theocentric, but it had a place for the whole spectrum of human feelings[16].

The mystical writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux greatly contributed to the spread of this new view of heaven. They were contained primarily in his commentaries on the *Song of Songs*[17]. This notion, however, found a wide resonance in women's mysticism. Its subject was not so much heaven as a place, but rather God Himself as the Lord and King of Heaven – the fulfilment of human longing[18]. The emphasis was thus shifted from a place to a person, which was the first step towards a new view of eschatology as a science concerning individuals and states rather than locations and objects. Medieval eschatology was characterised by a reistic approach, thus gaining a new perspective. Yet, it was not sufficiently established to change permanently the nature of the eschatology of the time and give it a personalistic shape[19]. In the mystical visions, a soul experienced heaven as a personal encounter with Christ the Bridegroom. The mystics focused on the relationship with Christ the Bridegroom, on feelings associated with it, and on the moment of eternal nuptials but less on descriptions of the abode of the saved. Despite this, such descriptions also occur in mystical writings. A frequent motif describing celestial reality and happiness is presented as encountering Christ in the secret wedding chamber. In one of the visions, Mechthild of Magdeburg saw her soul in heaven in the form of a beautiful, high-born lady, who is adorned by her servants for the meeting of the approaching prince. Afterwards, she is sent into the forest to await the bridegroom in the shade of trees, amidst the songs of nightingales. The meeting takes place in a beautiful setting,

16 M. Jagodziński, *Eschatologia w perspektywie komunii* (Lublin: 2020). Such a concept to some extent constituted an anticipation of contemporary theology, see: A. Proniewski, *Joseph Ratzinger's (Benedict XVI) Conceptualization of Eternity*, "Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej" 18 (2019), pp. 44-56.

17 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, in: *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 183, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris: 1862, pp. 785-1198.

18 C. McDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, p. 98.

19 Such a change took place only in the twentieth century, when eschatology ceased to be understood exclusively in relation to eschatological places. Instead, a personalistic approach to ultimate reality as a personal encounter with God was introduced. See: E. Zarosa, *Ostateczne rzeczy*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. XIV, ed. E. Gigilewicz, Lublin 2010, p. 936; J. Miczyński, *Il metodo personalistico nella teologia spirituale*, "Mysterion" 12 (2019), pp. 248-256.

at high noon, which undoubtedly has symbolic significance indicating the fullness of time. The prince takes the soul to the wedding chamber of his palace[20]. This convention of description, with its exposed element of intimacy and mystery, undoubtedly recalls courtly love and is subject to its rules[21]. This is not an isolated case in the bridal theology of the discussed period[22]. The soul residing in heaven, as a beautiful woman dressed in ornate robes becomes the central theme[23]. In the works of Mechthild, some scholars find certain undertones of sensuality regarding the relationship between Christ and the saved[24].

In another vision[25], Mechthild witnessed the moment when souls were taken out of purgatory and led into heaven. This was accompanied by the crowning of the saved ones by angels or, in exceptional cases, by God himself[26]. This scene and its symbolism, speaking of participation in heavenly glory became a vital part of the mystics' heaven. Gertrude the Great repeatedly described the soul united with Christ as a queen who sits with the Heavenly King on the throne. Threads similar to the thoughts developed by Mechthild are present in her visions as well, except that there are fewer references to romantic courtly love. They are rather inspired by images from the *Song of Songs*, often mediated by the commentaries by Bernard of Clairvaux[27]. It is thus a bridal mysticism, in which heaven appears as a state of eternal marriage and reign alongside Christ, the King of Heaven. In one vision, Gertrude saw herself dressed in royal purple, sitting at the right hand of Christ who embraced her tenderly[28]. According to the mystic,

[20] Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead,* 1.44.

[21] C. MCDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, p. 101.

[22] For more on the relationship between mysticism and courtly literature see: E. Wainwright de Kadt, *Courtly Literature and Mysticism*, "Acta Germanica" 12 (1980), pp. 41-60.

[23] See R. Perintfalvi, *Erotik und Mystik als Grenzüberschreitung: Das Hohelied 5,2-8 und die mystischen Texte von Mechthild von Magdeburg*, "Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research" 21 (2013), pp. 85-98.

[24] A. Otero Villena, *Experiencia mística y transgresión: Mechthild von Magdeburg y el eroticismo de Dios*, "Estudios eclesiásticos" 84 (2009), pp. 447-476.

[25] Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead*, 4.24.

[26] This theme is a reference to Revelation 2.10: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you; the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown".

[27] Gertrude from Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, New York 1993, 3.22; 5.4.

[28] Ibidem, 5.1.

together with the scene of the soul's coronation, this symbolic image also applies to Mary and the Church. In her visions, the soul united with Christ, Mary, and the Church constitute a single symbolic reality. Mary is an archetype foreshadowing the eschatological destiny of both the Church and the individual human soul[29].

The images evoked by this mystic are therefore polysemous; they refer to Mary, the Church, and the soul at the same time. Similar details of heaven's description, drawing on bridal mysticism, can be found in the works of other mystics, including Angela of Foligno, who emphasised the ecstatic nature of the union[30]. She described an experience of immense sweetness, joy, and delight coming from God entering her soul. In turn, the termination of this experience caused great pain and a sense of being abandoned by the beloved person[31]. Catherine of Siena also strongly emphasized the role of affection and fiery desire (*ansietato desiderio*) in heavenly marriage[32]. The mystics' use of erotic imagery, drawn from the *Song of Songs* and courtly poetry, brought an emotional element to the concept of heaven. It took on a more personal dimension and began to be perceived as a meeting of people and experiencing love[33].

Graduality of the heavenly reward

There is also a plethora of descriptions of heaven as a place in mystical literature. It is even possible to speak of a kind of celestial geography. One of such descriptions is Mechthild's vision recorded in the work *Flowing light of the Godhead*. While concentrating on showing

[29] This interpretation belongs to the mainstream theological tradition, derived from the Bible and developed in the allegorical exegesis of the Church Fathers during the patristic period.

[30] Angela of Foligno, *Complete works*, New York: 1993, pp. 64-78. In Angela of Foligno's case we may speak of two kinds of mysticism. One of these is spousal mysticism, while the other is apophatic metaphysical mysticism. In the latter, there is no relationality but solely the experience of the absolute and his essence. In this context, Angela experienced God also as a kind of darkness. See. C.F. Heffernan, *Angela of Foligno: Her Mystical Experience and her Influence*, "Magistra" 25/1 (2019), pp. 49-61.

[31] M. Stróżyński, *Mistyka relacyjna i metafizyczna w Księdze św. Anieli z Foligno*, "Filozofia Chrześcijańska" 16 (2019), pp. 7-25.

[32] See W. Giertych, *Św. Katarzyna ze Sieny*, ed. W. Giertych, Poznań 1987, p. 6.

[33] A lot has been written about the visions of medieval mystics and the presence of their ideas in Christian iconography by C. Frugoni, *Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography*, in: *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. D. Bornstein, R. Rusconi, Chicago 1996, pp. 130-164.

Christ's central role in heaven, she gives a rather detailed scheme of the place of eternal joy. In her vision, the heavens are not a homogeneous space, but are composed of a number of different places, which have their distinct character. The lowest part, called the First Heaven, is an earthly paradise, located in an unidentified place somewhere on earth. It is depicted as a garden. There, amidst lush vegetation, beautiful scents, and the sound of babbling rivers, Mechthild meets two Old Testament figures: Enoch and Elijah. She briefly mentions that this place is destined for souls who cannot yet enter heaven but are too perfect to be sent to purgatory[34]. Above the earthly paradise lies its celestial counterpart, the so-called "heavenly paradise": the Second Heaven. This consists of ten angelic choirs, which form a kind of a dome, with the number of angels per choir decreasing towards the top. There are empty seats[35] in the choirs, resulting from the fall of the angels after Lucifer's rebellion. After the Final Judgement, they will be occupied by the saved ones by their merits. Children who have not managed to acquire any merit before death will complete the lowest order. Unlike the other redeemed, they will not wear crowns symbolising their virtues. The other inhabitants of heaven will be crowned as a sign of the ultimate victory. The seats in the three highest choirs are reserved for the most distinguished souls: martyrs (the eighth choir), apostles (the ninth choir), and virgins (the tenth choir that once belonged to the fallen angels' leaders). Mary also resides in the tenth choir[36], resting on a special throne prepared for her. Ascribing the highest place in the celestial hierarchy to the Mother of Christ was considered a doctrinal axiom. Usually, it was a place at the right hand of Christ the Judge, above the angelic choirs that surround the divine throne. It was as an expression of faith in Mary's exaltation above all the angels. In Mechthild's vision, this exaltation has an added dimension; Mary's throne is mentioned thus expressing the conviction that she reigns together with her son. Still higher, above the dome of the Second Heaven, there is the Third Heaven, where the actual celestial liturgy takes place. It is the abode of God, His throne room, and the palace with the wedding chamber of Christ. No created being exists above the throne, only the infinite, incomprehensible, and inaccessible God's glory. Only holy virgins residing in the tenth choir of the Second Heaven have access to the Third Heaven. Only they will be granted the right to enter the

34 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead,* 7.57.

35 Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities. A Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 AD*, New York 2002, pp. 505-508.

36 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead*, 3.1.

wedding chamber. In one of her visions, Mechthild was invited there to receive a crown from Christ. The encounter with Him is described in terms of bridal terminology; she mentions kisses, a tender hug, and the delight of love. There is a motif of a clandestine meeting of lovers known from courtly love literature[37]. The applied metaphor seems rather bold and surprising concerning the eternal relationship between the saved ones and God. It represents the stark contrast to previous notions and does not fit into the scholastic framework. According to the mystic, in heaven virgins receive the supreme reward of a spousal union with Christ[38].

The distinctly hierarchical structure of Mechthild's heaven is an expression of the widespread belief in the existence of an organised hierarchy of spiritual beings that form the supernatural society of heaven. This thought was popularised by Dionysius the Areopagite, who, in his treatise *On the Celestial Hierarchy*[39], established a specific classification of angels. He distinguished nine angelic choirs arranged in three hierarchies, each containing three choirs (triple triads)[40]. This division has been widely accepted by theologians[41]. Such a heaven was also observed by Frances of Rome in her vision[42]. Her deceased son appeared to her in a vision and told her that he resided in Heaven, where he belonged to the second choir of the first hierarchy. Mechthild deviates from the nine-level division, favouring the ten-level model. Hildegard of Bingen also does not fully follow the classification provided by Dionysius. In her work *Scivias*[43], despite distinguishing nine angelic choirs (or orders) divided into three hierarchies, they do not form triads. The first and the third hierarchies consist of two choirs each. Meanwhile, the second hierarchy contains five choirs. The outermost, lowest hierarchy includes choirs of angels and archangels. Their task is to preach God's glory and to help people in reaching heaven (guardian angels belong to these choirs). These angels guard

37 C. McDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, p. 101.

38 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead,* 3.1.

39 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia – De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, in: *Patrologia Greca*, vol. 3, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris: 1857, pp. 119-583; See Pseudo Dionizy Aeropagita, *Pisma teologiczne*, Kraków 2005), pp. 71-216.

40 See C.S. Lewis, *Odrzucony obraz. Wprowadzenie do literatury średniowiecznej i renesansowej*, Kraków 2008, pp. 72-73.

41 See M.J. Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy,* New York 2014.

42 G. Fullerton, *The Life of St. Frances of Rome*, London 2014, pp. 75-77.

43 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, New York 1990, 1.6.

humans in the last moments of life and fight demons for the final fate of the soul[44]. The five choirs of the central hierarchy, which symbolically refer to the five wounds of Christ, form the following angelic choirs: Virtues (*Virtutes*), Powers (*Potestates*), Principalities (*Principates*), Dominations (*Dominationes*), and Thrones (*Throni*). Their purpose is to watch over groups of people, nations, and leaders. They also correspond to five categories of people: non-Christian believers, Christians, rulers, monks, and virgins[45]. Like Mechthild, Hildegard observes the saved ones taking their future seats in various circles of the celestial hierarchy, but her classification is different. The highest hierarchy is composed of two choirs: the Cherubim (*Cherubin*) reflecting God's wisdom, and the Seraphim (*Seraphin*) burning with the fire of God's love and residing closest to him. They eternally praise the glory of God in hymns, thereby conveying this love to the lower hierarchies. The hierarchical structure of heaven is also manifested in the manner of participating in the divine glory. The upper choirs reflect the glory of God and pass it on to the lower ones, who pass it on to the even lower ones. The descending movement is accompanied by an ascending one as the lower choirs (*inferiora*) are moved towards God by the higher ones (*a superioribus*)[46]. In this way, the celestial beings mirror God's essence[47]. Hildegard compares angels to sunbeams, sparks of fire, and elusive all-encompassing radiance. She calls them living spheres that adhere to the eternal light[48]. Heaven is therefore filled with various types of lightning. There are numerous angelic entities, who reflect the divine radiance in various manners. The metaphor of light, which is the symbol of celestial reality and eternity, forms an important part of the description of heaven also in the writings of Mechthild and Birgitta of Sweden[49].

Therefore, in the accounts of medieval mystics, heaven is an inhabited and well-organised realm, where all entities are subject to a

44 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, Lublin 2004, pp. 112-113.

45 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias,* 1.6.

46 Ibidem, 2.1.

47 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, p. 114.

48 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias,* 2.1.17. See M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, p. 112.

49 S. Kobielus, *Światło i biel w tradycji wyobrażania chwały eschatologicznej zbawionych. Wczesne chrześcijaństwo – średniowiecze*, "Communio" 61/1 (1991), p. 128.

multi-level hierarchy. It should be added that while angels and particular groups of the saved have a precisely defined place in this celestial structure, there is no such specificity regarding individual saints. The mystics were less clear and specific about the distribution of various saints' places in heaven. For instance, Mechthild briefly mentions a special place destined for the Dominicans. Yet, the hierarchical nature of heaven is not only manifested in its structure. According to Mechthild, the heavenly reward is also gradual. There are two ways of rejoicing in God. The first, is the beatific vision of God (*visio beatifica*), which is available to all the saved. However, as the martyrs and apostles are closest to the throne of God, the intensity of their visions is also greater. The second form of heavenly bliss is reserved for holy virgins and is referred to as beatific union with Christ. Their connection to Christ is inseparable. Although the other saints can see him directly feeling blissful joy, only the holy virgins experience this union which is characterised by the greatest intimacy[50]. Similarly, Gertrude the Great distinguishes these two types of happiness: seeing Christ and uniting with him. The sight of Christ is universal and available to all the saved and angels. By contrast, the access to the bridal chamber, where the experience of happiness is more intimate and individualised, is reserved for the holy virgins. For scholastic theology, this kind of familiarity with God was unacceptable. In its view, no creature has access to the Heaven of the Holy Trinity (*coelum Trinitatis*). Hildegard holds a similar belief regarding the unique place of holy virgins in heaven. She locates them in the highest echelon of the central sphere in the celestial hierarchy[51].

Limitless celestial liturgy full of musical harmony

Another motif used by mystics to describe heaven is the celestial liturgy. In one of her visions[52], Mechthild saw the saved ones singing, dancing, and adoring the Holy Trinity in a flow of light shining down upon them. In her description of the celestial liturgy, heaven appears as a dynamic space filled with movement and having little in common with the static Roman Rite. It also significantly departs from the static *visio beatifica* of the scholastics[53].

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50 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead,* 3.1.

51 C. McDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, pp. 106-107.

52 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead*, 4.24.

53 C. McDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, pp. 100-101.

Perceiving heaven as the liturgy is particularly characteristic of Hildegard's visions. She views the celestial liturgy as the ultimate harmony and defines it in musical terms. Numerous hymns contained in the collection *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum* contain such metaphors: *O orzchis Ecclesia, O ignea spiritus, Quia felix puericia, O presul verte civitatis*[54]. Significantly, these are works with a liturgical purpose. This is because Hildegard believed that the earthly liturgy was the prelude and anticipation of the heavenly one: heaven begins here on earth and is the most present in the liturgy. At the same time, the Church on earth remains in communion with the Church in heaven; thus, they are virtually a single Church, possessing both terrestrial and celestial structures. Hildegard speaks of this dual structure in *Scivias* and the hymn *O orzchis Ecclesia*[55]. To describe heaven, she uses several neologisms and an invented language (*lingua ignota*), which testifies to the impossibility of conveying this reality in any human tongue[56]. Because of its dual structure, she describes the church through a paradox, employing two contradictory adjectives: limitation and limitlessness. The first term corresponds to the earthly church whereas the latter refers to the Church of Heaven. The very same paradox applies to the liturgy; the earthly one is limited, while the celestial liturgy is limitless. Yet, both form an indivisible whole. This dual nature is a characteristic of the Church both on earth and in heaven.

In Hildegard's visions, heaven is a community imbued with the Holy Spirit and singing a hymn of glory. The mystic poetically captures this aspect of heaven through a musical metaphor and compares the eternal life of the saved to a symphony. For a proper understanding of this aspect of heaven, one must first be familiar with Hildegard's idea of music[57]. It is founded on the principle that the Holy Spirit is the source of music. Therefore, the union between the soul and God, which is the work of the Holy Spirit as well, is the loveliest and most

54 Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia. A Critical Editions of the Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*, London 1988.

55 S. D'Evelyn, *Heaven as Performance and Participation in the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum of Hildegard of Bingen*, in: *Envisaging heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Muessig, A. Putter, London/New York 2006, p. 155.

56 J. Schnapp, *Virgin Words. Hildegard of Bingen's Lingua ignota and the Development of Imaginery Languages Ancient to Modern*, "Exemplaria" 3 (1991), pp. 267-298.

57 See. *Vision: The Life and Music of Hildegard Von Bingen,* ed. J. Bobko, M. Fox, B. Newman, London 1995. See also B. Miljević, *Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen*, "International Magazine for Music" 42 (2013), pp. 167-182.

perfect sound. Hildegard draws from Boethius, who differentiated two kinds of music: *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music) and *musica humana* (the metaphysical music, or the spiritual unity of man resulting from the combination of irrational and rational elements). Hildegard creates an analogy to this model; the Holy Spirit is for man what music is for instruments[58]. The slow refinement and spiritual growth of man, accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit, restores the primordial harmony ruined by the original sin[59]. As the human soul is symphonic (*symphonialis est anima*)[60], it attains full harmony in heaven and becomes a pure sound produced by the Holy Spirit[61]. Hence, the musical metaphor perfectly captures the essence of the eternal happiness of the saved. In heaven, angels and saints sing and create a perfect celestial harmony in which not a single voice can be absent, for each one is unique. The fullness of glory can only resound through communal participation, which plays a key role in this concept. Every redeemed person has a unique role within this great symphony and contributes to achieving complete harmony. For Hildegard, the variety of voices and instruments making music and myriads of harmonious sounds are a metaphor for the community of the saved ones. Their happiness lies in the perfect harmony with God and with the saints while preserving their own individuality and personal uniqueness. Hildegard enriches the descriptions of heaven with a variety of musical instruments and relates them to the saved[62]. Just as each instrument adds its timbre to a symphony, each saved person contributes to the embellishment of the celestial song. Hildegard's reflections on heaven are summarised in the concise expression

58 S. D'Evelyn, *Heaven as Performance and Participation in the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum of Hildegard of Bingen*, pp. 157-158.

59 The original harmony was a gift that man enjoyed in paradise. It was expressed in clean singing. Hildegard often used the image of a singing Adam, endowed with an angelic voice, to reflect a state of happiness of paradise. See. Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistola 47*, in: *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 197, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris 1855, p. 220; Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia. A Critical Editions of the Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*, p. 25.

60 Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistola 23*, in: *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis,* vol. 91, ed. L. van Acker, Turnhout 1991, p. 140.

61 For Hildegard, harmony and symphony were synonymous. See B. Matusiak, *Hildegarda z Bingen. Teologia muzyki*, Kraków 2003, p. 52.

62 Hildegard attributes the allegorical meaning to instruments linking them to particular groups of the saved. For instance, she associates drums with martyrs. See. Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia. A Critical Editions of the Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*, p. 23. See also B. Matusiak, *Hildegarda z Bingen. Teologia muzyki*, p. 129.

celestis armonia, which links heavenly harmony with worship[63]. This term must be understood in its liturgical context. It describes heaven by analogy with the liturgy as an eternal festival during which joyful music resounds, which is an embodiment of God's glory and the perfect harmony of the saved. Hildegard believes the liturgy represents a fundamental hermeneutical key because, in her view, it is the space where heaven and earth are united[64]. She repeatedly returns to this analogy. She perceives heaven as the eternal liturgy, the song of glory, and the community participation. The *musica coelestis* will fully resound at the end of time when salvation is completed. Descriptions of heaven are also present in the works of other late medieval women mystics, yet they are not as novel and multifaceted[65].

Material and spiritual image of Heavenly Jerusalem

The model of visible-invisible and material-spiritual is applied to the Church Triumphant in Heaven. Hildegard's description of heaven is thus marked by a certain duality which is expressed in a two-track narrative and the use of double terminology. It portrays heaven as a city by juxtaposing the word *urbs* to imply its material aspect and the term *civitas* to indicate the community that inhabits it. Therefore, it is the Heavenly Jerusalem made of precious stones, which means a very concrete reality[66]. Because of the close bond between the Heavenly Jerusalem and the Church on earth, all human activities that contribute to the growth of the earthly church simultaneously contribute to the expansion of the Holy City in heaven. The construction of the Heavenly Jerusalem will continue throughout the entire history of mankind and will be completed at the end of the world when the battle between good and evil comes to an end[67]. On the other hand, Hildegard describes heaven as a perfect harmony of sound and smell: something that is intangible and spiritual. She develops this aspect by referring to the Greek term *chrisma* (anointing) and St. Paul's

63 S. D'Evelyn, *Heaven as Performance and Participation in the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum of Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 159.

64 Ibidem, 160.

65 T.W. Petrisko, *Inside Heaven and Hell. What History, Theology and Mystics Tell us about the Afterlife*, McKees Rocks 2000, pp. 57-61.

66 P. Dronke, *The Symbolic Cities of Hildegard of Bingen*, "The Journal of Medieval Latin" 1 (1991), pp. 168-183.

67 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, p. 299.

teachings on the mystical body by saying that heaven is a mystical body that sings a heavenly symphony, filled with the Holy Spirit. Here, diversity is the essential feature as it best captures the essence of heaven as the complete harmony[68].

The aspect of heaven described by Hildegard through the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem was elaborated in the third book of *Scivias*[69]. Both the vision of a celestial city and its architecture are very extensive and contain a great deal of detail. It constitutes one of the most explicit and vivid accounts of the Heavenly Jerusalem in medieval literature[70]. In Hildegard's work, the meticulously rendered architecture and inhabitants of the city bear mystical and symbolic significance, allegorically referring to various events or individuals from human history. Thus, the city is inhabited by personifications of the Virtues (Celestial Love, Discipline, Modesty, Mercy, Victory, Patience, Longing for the coming of the Messiah, Constancy, Celestial Desire, Compunction, Contempt of the World, and Concord)[71] and is filled with symbolic buildings: the tower of anticipation of God's Will, the pillar of the Word of God[72], the pillar of the Trinity[73], the pillar of the Saviour's humanity[74], and the Tower of the Church[75], The throne of God hovers on a luminous cloud over the eastern part of the city, emitting beams of light in all four cardinal directions. This creates an infinite circle of light around the city reaching as far as earth. Hildegard calls it the Circle of Divine Power (*circulus divinae potestatis*)[76], It is intriguing to note that God's throne is situated outside the city, as it infinitely surpasses its structure. The Heavenly Jerusalem lies at the foot of the throne, on

68 S. D'Evelyn, *Heaven as Performance and Participation in the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum of Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 156.

69 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, 3.2-10.

70 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, p. 300. See also C. Trottmann, *Sujets de la Jérusalem Céleste. L'humanisme comme mise en perspective eschatologique de l'homme et de sa liberté chez Hildegarde de Bingen et Bernard de Clairvaux*, in: *Spiritualität in Europa des Mittelalters. L'Europe spirituelle au Moyen* Âge*: 900 Jahre Hildegard von Bingen,* ed. J. Ferrari, S. Grätzel, Remscheid 1998, pp. 91-104.

71 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, 3.3; 3.10.

72 Ibidem, 3.4.

73 Ibidem, 3.6.

74 Ibidem, 3.8.

75 Ibidem, 3.9.

76 Ibidem, 3.1.

an iron mountain symbolising faith[77]. Topography itself is therefore a reflection of the hierarchy of beings and expresses a fundamental ontological truth. The infinite God cannot be contained within a finite being as he is beyond everything, including the eschatological heaven.

The Heavenly Jerusalem is depicted as a fortified city surrounded by luminous walls. It is constructed on a square inscribed in a circle formed by a beam of light flowing from the throne of God[78]. The square is symbolic: the four ends of the Heavenly Jerusalem face the four corners of the world, signalling that salvation is universal and includes all peoples and nations. The different parts of the city are symbolically inhabited by various attributes of God and divine persons. For example, the northern part is the seat of God's zeal (*zelus Dei*)[79], the eastern part – of God's justice (symbolised by Noah), the southern part – of the Son of Man (his throne is erected here)[80], and the western part which is dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Outside the celestial city one can see the land where people live before crossing the border of death. From the northern end one can observe the infernal abyss: the land of darkness[81]. Hildegard also discusses the attire of the Heavenly Jerusalem residents. According to her, saints are dressed in purple silk robes and white shoes[82]. In one of her visions, she saw a huge crowd of radiant figures, wearing gold and jewels. Their attire is meticulously described; it contains many symbolic elements such as the images of the Holy Trinity, the Lamb, and the angels located on their heads, foreheads, and above ears, respectively[83]. The details of the costumes vary from vision to vision, but their common feature is lavishness. This contrasts with claims made by some medieval theologians, who believed that the inhabitants of heaven were naked. This opinion, however, was rather isolated at the time and was discarded with the growing aversion to nudity perceived as sinful and derogatory towards human dignity.

77 Ibidem, 3.2.

78 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, pp. 300-301.

79 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, 3.5.

80 Ibidem, 3.10.

81 M. Kowalewska, *Bóg – Kosmos – Człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen*, p. 306.

82 Such an image is expressed in the song *O Jerusalem, aurea civitas* which is a reference to the Book of Revelation. See A. McGrath, *Historia nieba*, Kraków 2009, p. 34.

83 Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, 2.5.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, female mystics of the Middle Ages presented visions of heaven in a unique way. In their revelations, death and judgment appear primarily as a prelude to everlasting happiness full of love and affection. Furthermore, their conception of heaven significantly differed from the scholastic approach. They portrayed heaven not only as a perfect hierarchical structure but especially as experiencing God's passionate love. The analysis of female mystical literature leads to the conclusion that medieval mystics were indeed surprising. They surprise the reader with their original, fresh, and bold approach towards the issues related to the afterlife. Undoubtedly, this is due to the unique, supernatural nature of the sources available to them. Unfortunately, due to its elite nature and limited reach, many novel ideas failed to anchor in mainstream medieval eschatology and waited for a long time to be rediscovered.

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