

Annette Esser

The Scivias Institute for Art & Spirituality

As a teacher of religion, visual art, ethics and geography, who earned her theological doctorate from the University of Nijmegen in 2007 with a dissertation on ‘feminist spirituality’, I would like to introduce a project that I have pursued since 2008. This is about the foundation of the *Scivias Institute for Art and Spirituality*. Ideally, this institute shall be a community of teachers and students, and, practically, this is an educational academy that combines events, courses (e.g. on feminist spirituality, bibliodrama, and art therapy) retreats, summer schools, individual supervision, art-tours and pilgrimages.

Vision

My vision of the foundation of the *Scivias Institute for Art & Spirituality* in the Rhineland between Cologne and Bingen arose when coming into a crisis after my dissertation on feminist spirituality. I asked myself where I could and should go from there!? Aged over 50, becoming a professor or a priestess was no longer possible for me in Germany. Was it therefore my calling to hold academic lectures on spirituality or even to offer workshops in individual ‘Annette-Esser-flyers’ besides my main job as a teacher for religion, art, ethics and geography at a secondary school in Germany!? To me, this did not feel fulfilling or good enough. Thus, when I visited New York again, where I had studied *Psychiatry & Religion* in a PhD-Program ten years ago (1994-98), I asked myself in more depth how I would really like to talk about women’s spirituality which was the theme that I had written so much about. Then, it became suddenly all too obvious to me that I did not want to give lectures on spirituality, but - so to say as a mystic amongst theologians - I would like to work on spirituality always with therapeutic and creative methods. In my visionary insight, both spirituality and the arts belong together like two sides of one coin. For both express the two sides of creative action: one is the light or the source that longs for expression, while the other is the form or ‘gestalt’ that longs to sense its source of light and energy. In New York, my friend Joy Carol, theologian, novelist and workshop-leader¹, reminded me about a presentation that I had given on Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) in Harry Fogarty’s class *History of Healing* at Union Theological Seminary in 1998: “*I remember when you talked in class about Hildegard von Bingen!*“ This German visionary, prophetess, composer and healer

¹ Joy Carol, *The Fabric of Women’s Friendship: Celebrating the Joys, Mending the Tears in Women’s Relationships*, Notre Dame: Sorinbooks 2006.

and her holistic world view had become meaningful in feminist-theological, ecological, therapeutic and esoteric movements²; as a theologian I had translated Barbara Newman's English monograph on Hildegard³, and since I had also dealt with her in many ways as author and lecturer.⁴ So, suddenly, the Latin name of Hildegard's major visionary work „*Scivias*” meaning „*Know the ways - the ways of God – the ways of the living light!*” – was clearly there as the name for the institute that I felt called to found. This visionary name seemed to be perfectly fitting to the holistic work that I did not want to do alone but intended to build up together with others. So, I thought about theologians, artists, and therapists amongst my friends and acquaintances who were possibly searching for a mutual task, yet who did not have the courage or the power to found such an institute themselves. But was I the right person for such an enterprise!? I had always thought that others should initiate this and that I, in my job-search, would then try to join such an enterprise. But now this vision was like a calling. And, I understood that my time in America – aside from all that I had been critical of there – had given me the power and audacity (as Barack Obama put it) to present my vision to the world and to start such an enterprise as a feminist theologian.

The Enterprise of Founding an Institute

Back in Germany, I was lucky to find others who would like to share my vision and to start practically with the programmatic and organisational work of constructing the Institute that we agreed upon calling the *Scivias Institute for Art and Spirituality*. The first person was the art historian Manja Seelen, whom I knew from our mutual feminist-theological group at the German Catholic Women's League (KDFB); with her, I have started this enterprise. Since then, more than 20 women and men have joined in working-groups, conferences and training-sessions that we designed ourselves for this purpose. So, we have developed a basic course for

² Elisabeth Gössmann, „Hildegard von Bingen“, in: Luise Schottroff / Annette Esser, *Feministische Theologie im Europäischen Kontext* (=ESWTR Jahrbuch 1993), 161-168. - Dorothee Sölle, „Grün des Fingers Gottes“. *Die Meditationen der Hildegard von Bingen*, Wuppertal 1989; „Aus der Dürre in die grünende Kraft. *Weltoffenheit und Ökofeminismus bei Hildegard von Bingen*“ in: Schlangenbrut 67 (1999), 9-12. - Gabriele Lautenschläger, *Hildegard von Bingen. Die theologische Grundlegung ihrer Ethik und Spiritualität*, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1993. - Ingrid Riedel, *Hildegard von Bingen. Prophetin der kosmischen Weisheit. Hildegards weibliches Gottesbild*, Stuttgart 1995. - Joseph Sudbrack, *Hildegard von Bingen. Schau der kosmischen Ganzheit*, Würzburg 1995. - Hanna Strack, *Frauen in den Visionen Hildegards von Bingen. Meditationen von Hanna Strack mit einer Einleitung von Elisabeth Gössmann*, Pinnow 1998.

³ Barbara Newmann, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, Berkeley 1987 (German translation by Annette Esser: Barbara Newman, *Hildegard von Bingen. Schwester der Weisheit*, Freiburg 1995).

⁴ Annette Esser, „*The Work and Experience of Hildegard von Bingen as a Resource for Women's Worship today*” (=Paper for the Degree of a Master of Sacred Theology, S.T.M., Union Theological Seminary New York 1995).

spiritual and artistic personality training; a spiritual and creative programme for (grand) parents and children; and *Scivias-Publication-Series*. Regarding our organisational structure, we have decided, after a difficult process, to build a registered society (*eingetragener Verein*). As a “Verein”, we hope to realize best our vision of a community of theologians, artists and therapists. In the German context this organisational also seems the best form to present convincingly to the public our work in the field of art, education and social affairs, and to cooperate with Church and State-institutions with whom we share these interests. Yet, even though we are building up this form of a non-profit organization, this does not mean that we intend to self-exploit our own work. As artists, therapists and theologians are often in precarious financial situations, we have to take course-fees, give fair income to the teachers, pay for the organisational work of the board, and, in the long run to create firm job-positions. In case of being successful, one day we might also have to found a non-profit organisation that is in charge of the Institute’s business (*Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung, gGmbH*). But let us see how “successful” we will be!

Ecumenical and inter-religious orientation

In the process of founding the Scivias-Institute, I – the founder – was suggested to be given an inter-religious prize, the INTRA-project-prize. This was due to my two decades of engagement in inter-religious dialogue that also led to a book-publication in 2009 (Esser / von Kellenbach / Mehlhorn, *Feminist Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue*). I always knew that in spirituality, we are using “Eastern” forms of meditation, deriving from Hinduism, Buddhism et al. like Yoga and Zen. Also, my own theological orientation between “Catholicism” and “Protestantism” has always been ecumenical. Yet, to name that what we already call our “scivias-work” fundamentally as ecumenical and inter-religious was still a step, - challenged by the prize-giving. I would like to add that especially the artists among us have applauded this inter-religious the orientation of the spiritual work at the Scivias-Institute. And, I am glad to say that we have now Hindu and Buddhist teachers among us – friends from my time of engagement in the NGO *Religions for Peace*. - Very concretely, the prize with its prize-money helps us now to build up this Institute in the spirit of Hildegard von Bingen.

Opening

In a certain way, the prize-giving in the Mosque of Duisburg-Marxloh on September 25, 2011 is the first introduction of the Scivias-Institute to the public.

The opening-conference with dialogue, artistic action and a membership-assembly will take place at the “Museum am Strom” in Bingen, in October 2012.

After this, we are now looking forward to the further development of the Scivias-Institute, in which we intend to see, to perform and to act as best as we can. Or, to say it in Hildegard’s words, we are co-workers taking part in the synergy between “Human” and “Divine”.