
The Wisdom of Women

By Thomas Berry

The wisdom of women consists not only in their individual contributions but also in their association with men in the nurture and well-being of life in all its forms: cosmological, social, economic, familial, and personal. This wisdom flourished throughout the Neolithic period of Western civilization. Now, after surviving in a suppressed condition throughout the patriarchal history of modern Europe and America, the wisdom of women is re-asserting itself in all phases of human activity.

In its full religious-spiritual expression, the wisdom of women seems to have developed in late Paleolithic times with the concept of the Great Goddess as the primordial source and destiny of the universe. Not a matriarchy, the Great-Goddess culture was a cosmology encompassing the origin and destiny of all existence. In its most complete historical expression in the West, it developed between 8,000 and 3,000 B.C. with the transition from late Paleolithic to Neolithic culture. The more we know about this era the more meaningful it becomes as that period when humans first began to form abiding human communities within permanent village settlements. In the mythic-religious life of the society, the time has special significance in the status occupied by women. Just how this mythic-religious status carried over into the determination of women's role in the public functioning of the society is not clear.

The patriarchal domination of women characteristic of Western society seems to have begun following the Neolithic age. Eventually women were denied full human status, were at times considered the product of genetic deficiency, were regarded as morally seductive to men, were executed in amazing numbers as possessed by evil spirits, and were systematically excluded from public decision making. It is revealing to look back into Neolithic history and discover that, in this phase of human development, at the very moment of an extraordinary advance in civilization, a female rather than a male divinity ruled the world as its creative origin, its numinous presence, and the meaning and destiny of every mode of being.

This was a period when the mythology of the times and even religious rituals centered on woman as primary archetypal symbol of the cosmological order. Such was the mythic world in which the first permanent villages were established. The new art of cultivation of the land provided a reliable food supply. Animals were domesticated, not only as a source of food, but also for their energy and as a means for transport. The earliest pottery

was shaped and the earliest sun-dried bricks. All these accomplishments and many others were attained within the goddess culture of the times.

Although evident in the northeastern Mediterranean basin throughout the late Paleozoic period, the goddess culture found full articulation only in the Neolithic age. At this time, because of the domestication of plants and animals and the settling into permanent villages, the relation of humans with the natural world was profoundly deepened. Historians today, marveling at the historical moment and trying to understand its dynamics, seek answers in the relation of humans to planet Earth.

In their search for explanation, our historical narratives have so far given little attention to the symbolic world in which Neolithic advances in civilization took place. We have presented the period simply in terms of the ever-increasing human capacity to exploit Earth, a process considered the purpose of human existence. Now we begin to understand that the Neolithic was a time when the human community deepened its understanding that there is a single Earth community and a single story of planet Earth binding all its component members. Following that period, some 7,000 years ago, possibly with the coming of Indo-European peoples with their warrior culture and male deities, a sudden change occurred. All the symbols were altered, foremost among them replacement of the goddess culture with male domination over all major expressions of the human. The patriarchal Western world as we know it began to take shape.

After the Neolithic period, women were progressively identified with their role in child-bearing, child care, early education, care of the home, gardening, care of domestic animals, and ministering to the comfort and emotional needs of men. In their relations with men, women were to be either utilitarian or ornamental. Public decision-making in all major fields—religious, political, economic, and educational—became the exclusive role of men. Both in the public life of the community and the private realm of the family, all important affairs were regulated by them. This distorted appropriation by men of all major dimensions of human life produced ever-increasing difficulty.

In the Western civilizational context, exploitation of women is paralleled by exploitation of the natural world. Here, again, men appropriated to themselves, not only the total value and direction of the human, but also the total value and control of Earth. The term *androcentrism*, a human-male-centered view of the universe, properly describes what happened, not only to the human commu-



Woman of the Cosmos, Artwork by Vijali Hamilton, photo by Vijali Hamilton

nity, but, as well, to the entire Earth community. The assumption by men of their exclusive right to define and manipulate human life and value and to exploit Earth and its resources is one of the basic reasons why Western civilization today founders in a dysfunctional natural as well as a dysfunctional human world.

In America, change in the situation has come about by the initiative of women themselves, beginning with 19th-century social issues. Thereafter, women have increasingly demanded the right to articulate and resolve other concerns at the highest levels of professional activity, often in distinguished 20th century universities. Once feminine competence in intellectual and professional spheres was established, it became possible for women generally to assert themselves throughout the range of human affairs, but especially in educational, political, religious, and economic fields.

Only through these activities of women can the human dimension of life recover its integrity. Neither men nor women have adequate significance if not articulated together within the integral human venture. A difficulty in this endeavor is the English language use of the term “man” to refer to both male and female genders in the human species. Many other languages differentiate their

terms for species and gender, as in the Latin term *homo* for the human species and the term *vir* for the male gender. But, again, there is a question as to what real effect this differentiation has had on the life situation.

In these years of transition into the 21st century, Western women no longer unresistingly accept exclusion from any phase of the public or private life of the society. However noble in themselves, the roles of child bearing, child rearing, nursing the ill, and home care—roles tending to close women out from the public functioning of the society—will no longer be accepted by them as their only roles.

For a healthy society all the basic areas—religion, governance, economics, education, healing, artistic and literary creativity—must accept women in the full range of their competencies. Among the best examples is that of Marie Curie (1867-1934) who dared enter the field of scientific studies and made discoveries of extraordinary insight. Many women followed her example, succeeding, not only in science, but, as well, in other professional occupations: Maria Montessori in pedagogy, Rachel Carson in bio-chemistry, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict in anthropology, Barbara McClintock in genetics, Hazel Henderson in economics, Marian Anderson in

song, Martha Graham in dance. The list could be extended indefinitely. In the new field of public media, women have particularly distinguished themselves, whether as writers, artists, or multi-media entertainers. Throughout the spectrum of human activities, women in our time have exercised abilities in a way and to a degree never possible in the more oppressive periods of patriarchal dominion.

Precisely in their critique of limitations involved in the patriarchal structure of social establishments have women been most helpful in shaping a truly human mode of being for both men and women. Their critique reveals to men distortions introduced into the civilizational process when they assumed total control of social, economic, and religious usages and standards, and limited the total meaning of what it means to be human. As a consequence of women's corrective presence and critical acumen, the integral sense of the "human" is now being recovered.

There is some question of the extent to which the intellectual insights, the sensitivities, the emotional-aesthetic experience of women differ from those of men. A case might be made for considering that it is not a question of more or less, of better or worse, but simply a question of qualitative difference. For, if the capacities of women are identical with those of men, then women would add nothing essential to the vision, judgment, and skills already present in men. Only if women have their own distinctive insights, their own sensitivities, their

own emotional-aesthetic experience can they sustain their full identity and their capacity for relating effectively with men in a complete expression of the human mode of being.

The human project cannot function properly under the direction of either men or women in isolation from each other. If the public life of the society is to be truly and optimally human, women must participate as equals in its deliberations and activities. This sharing of gifts and responsibilities is especially important in the various branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. In religious establishments, too, women need to be present, including administrative and ministerial roles, with corresponding positions of status and authority in law, medicine, education, and the arts, in all the professions. Wherever issues concerning the human community are under consideration, women need to be present.

Thomas Berry has been a scholar, teacher, and visionary for over seventy years and is internationally respected for his contributions in shaping the environmental movement. *Dream of the Earth* (1988), *The Universe Story*, coauthored with Brian Swimme (1992), *The Great Work* (1999), and *Evening Thoughts* (2006) are his major works. In his earlier academic career, he was the director of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research and founder of the History of Religious Program at Fordham University.