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“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”

Confronting The Public Nudity Taboo – Part One The Liberalization Of American Mores

By Anthony Laying

This article is the first in a three part series.

“... It seems inevitable that we will become increasingly comfortable with nudity so that, some day, pictures of naked models and actors and the presence of nude bathers on public beaches no longer will shock the moral sensitivities of most Americans.”

During the last 50 years, there has been a tremendous liberalization in American attitudes concerning sexual behavior, but public nudity continues to evoke disgust and ridicule. Even though legal restrictions have been relaxed and clothing-optional beaches are more numerous than ever before, as are the sunbathers who frequent them, most Americans continue to disapprove of nudity no less than their grandparents did. In spite of the fact that it now is quite acceptable to display nearly all of one's body poolside or at the beach, total nudity continues to make Americans very uncomfortable.

Proponents of nudity usually maintain a low profile, not wishing to invite what seems to be inevitable hostility. Given the present concern with “family values,” it is likely that such attitudes will persist for some time. However, there is a gradual trend in American attitudes about the human body, which suggests that the public nudity taboo may be abandoned one day.

Why have prudish attitudes toward nudity been so tenacious in the U.S.? Those who are middle age or older certainly are aware how other American taboos have declined or even disappeared.

For most, masturbation no longer is equated with self-mutilation and premarital sex has become a nearly universal norm. Like many other sexual activities, they have lost their immoral status. Even homosexuality increasingly is regarded as merely an alternative sexual orientation.

Remember how risqué it used to be to read about sexual encounters in a novel or to watch an impassioned love scene on the movie screen? Today, this is the stuff

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of daytime TV, considered quite tame by present standards. Modern literature and motion pictures, intent on titillating and shocking audiences, now must resort to creative violence and psychopathic horror. Scenes of urban cannibalism, serial murders, and mass destruction is rampant. Yet, even as our tolerance of and appetite for depictions of violence have increased greatly, a majority of us still find public nudity intolerable.

While Americans are much more sophisticated today on many subjects, nudity continues to induce very charged reactions. Even among scholars, the mere mention of nudity is likely to degenerate into wisecracks and old-fashioned moralizing. Commercial television

programming, prime time or not, still avoids nudity, though ABC's “NYPD Blue” does show partial nudity. Occasionally, topless women and mothers nursing babies may appear in a documentary.

Most of us are highly ambivalent when it comes to nudity. Privately, we have an appetite for reading about it or looking at pictures of nudes. Numerous successful novels contain explicit descriptions of sexual anatomy, and Playboy has 3,400,000 subscribers. Since commercial films are designed for public viewing, though, on-screen nudity is subject to strictures. Paintings of nudes by European masters and classical nude statues from Egypt, Greece, and Rome are exhibited to the public without much complaint. Yet, those who openly express tolerance of public nudity in the U.S. are likely to make themselves very unpopular.

Ironically, some Americans associate nudity with purity and innocence, having Adam and Eve in mind perhaps. From this perspective, primitive tribes that lack clothing may be seen as exemplifying some sort of pristine nobility. Others attribute tribal nudity to cultural backwardness. Both views are fully compatible with condemnation of nudity among “civilized” men and women. Although television documentaries that include pictures of minimally clothed or even entirely naked natives of Australia, Africa, the Pacific islands, and South America do not seem to offend mainstream audiences, any prime-time images of bare Caucasian breasts and buttocks are likely to cause a great deal of trepidation. Male frontal nudity is



especially taboo here. After “NYPD Blue” included some nude scenes, it had considerable difficulty getting sponsors despite its excellent ratings, though this generally no longer is the case, with some notable holdouts.

Banning nude swimming and missionary efforts to clothe “savages” still find a great deal of support in the U.S. Probably this is because many people seem unable to distinguish nudity from licentiousness. By associating unclothed bodies with sex and immorality, public nudity is considered obscene. As this view would have it, since sex in a public place is wrong, so is nudity.

Such American Puritanism has European roots. Even in Victorian times, a large proportion of Europeans never saw a naked human body, and attitudes from these eras are especially evident in the beliefs of American Christian fundamentalists. Ironically, numerous Mediterranean beaches no longer require clothing. France’s largest nudist colony (Cap’d Agde) attracts 40,000 European tourists each summer. Guests not only swim in the nude at this resort, but go about naked even while shopping for groceries and eating in restaurants. Scandinavia has a long tradition of nude sunbathing. It is difficult to find a Swedish public beach where most of the

bathers are not nude. Asia attracts numerous European tourists by offering them nude resorts and beaches. Gambia, in West Africa, is the choice of many Swedes who wish to holiday in the buff during the winter, even though locals are a bit shocked by such immodesty.

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Many Christians in Europe and the U.S. are thought of by others as relatively anti-sex. Certainly, the Catholic Church has this reputation, and fundamentalists long have insisted that “listening” to our bodies is what prevents us from listening to God.

Nevertheless, nudity taboos are not

peculiarly Christian. Women in Islamic societies have gone back to wearing traditional garments, reflecting Moslem fundamentalists’ insistence on covering the entire female body. Hasidic Jews believe that a husband must never see even his own wife’s genitals, requiring that couples make love in the dark. On the other hand, some Christian sects have advocated and practiced nudity. The Doukhobors, who migrated from Russia to Canada in search of religious freedom, shocked their Canadian neighbors on several occasions when they staged highly publicized protest demonstrations wherein the participants – men, women, and children – were entirely naked.

There is some irony here in that the Puritans, Victorians, and other Europeans inherited much of their culture from the Greeks and Romans. In classical times, public male nudity often was entirely acceptable. High-status males exercised, participated in sporting events, and conducted public rituals in the nude. Greek art portrayed males without clothing to emphasize their athletic ability, heroic stature, and beauty. To this ancient population, male nudity indicated empowerment, since women, slaves, and barbarians were not permitted to be nude in public. ✨