

# NUDITY IN ANCIENT TO MODERN CULTURES

by Aileen Goodson

(A chapter from her book, *Therapy, Nudity & Joy*)

"If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred"

---Walt Whitman *I Sing the Body Electric*

## Primitive Nude Living

Many of us may be unaware that nudity is a normal condition that has prevailed throughout most of mankind's existence. Anything from complete nakedness to casual body covering was a lifestyle component from prehistoric times through the Greco-Roman civilizations and into part of the Middle Ages.

Even today, in various remote areas of the warmer climes, naked societies persist as primitive tribes whose members do not wear clothes. These societies point up, among other things, how drastically our attitudes toward nudity and social organization have changed throughout human history. Unfortunately, modern civilization's puritanical laws of decency have labeled unclothed tropical-zone cultures as offensive and inferior. Missionaries, settlers, and tradespeople have effectively forced compliance with western dress codes wherever primitive cultures are found. Due to such diligence, we are now able to travel worldwide to exotic islands, join African safaris, and explore South American jungles without having to confront the "embarrassment" of viewing tribal nakedness.

Inexcusably, as civilization encroaches upon many of these out-of-the-way places, the aboriginal cultures are often severely damaged or destroyed by the invading virus of a technologically superior society. Enticed by trinkets and modern conveniences, the native populations almost invariably succumb to the customs, clothing, diseases, and problems of our intrusive culture.

In 1988, the January 3rd issue of *The Los Angeles Times* reported that the Yanomamis of the remote northern Brazilian territory of Roraima, a primitive and naked tribe, are in danger of extinction because the government has discovered gold and diamonds on their land. The Yanomamis are the largest known tribe still isolated from the outside world: "Yanomamis hunt with poisoned arrows, and many use primitive tools. They shun clothes, decorate their bodies with fruit dye and flowers, and live under huge palm huts in communities of 50 people. The population of Roraima is about 100,000. Anthropologists, the Roman Catholic Church, and Indian-rights groups fear that forced acculturation by an onslaught of whites will further reduce the Yanomami population, largely through disease. Because of their isolation, the Indians have no immunity against common viruses and can easily die from flu or a cold."

The Tupari tribe of the Rio Branco, in the Amazon jungles of Brazil, furnish another example of nude living among aborigines. Tibor Sekelj, who lived with the Tupari for four months, wrote: "It is no wonder that the Tupari never created any kind of clothing, for the weather is always warm. Their natural nudity fits perfectly into the framework of their surroundings and, except for ceremony or decoration, they never think of covering themselves."

Men of the Tupari set off before sunup to hunt. Those men and boys remaining in the village work at preparing the ground for planting or collect firewood and building materials. Meanwhile, the women attend to the children, collect fruit, spin cotton, and weave hammocks.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, their day's work over, men and women gather together, drink fermented *chica*, make bows, arrows, necklaces, and headdresses, and decorate their bodies. It is a life of unhurried simplicity.<sup>2</sup>

How remarkable it is that such idyllic scenes of ancient and perhaps prehistoric times still co-exist with our modernized, stress-filled lifestyles and complex governmental structures.

### **Nudity in Early Egypt**

A fascinating tale of early sun worship and nudity was unearthed in 1887 at Tell-el-Amarna, a small Egyptian village on the banks of the Nile some 200 miles south of Cairo. There, an Arab woman accidentally stumbled upon the baked-clay tablet archives of Pharaoh Akhen-Aton (1385-1353 B.C.). It was learned through the subsequent translation of these tablets that the brilliant young pharaoh and his exquisitely beautiful queen, Nefertiti, considered the sun, Aton, to be the true wellspring of life and thus justified the practice of nudism for spiritual and physical advancement.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the discovery of these tablets and other artifacts at Tell-el Amarna, the seat of Pharaoh Akhen-Aton's government, it is now well known that he was not only a great religious reformer and mystic, who disputed the pantheism of the traditional priesthood, but also a poet of great sensitivity. On the scattered stones that had formed the original wall of Aton's Temple, archaeologists have found and deciphered the pharaoh's famous "Hymn to Aton, the Sun God," a portion of which appears in the Hebrew scriptures as Psalm 104 of the Old Testament. "Through this poem," writes J. Herman in *King & Queen of the Sun*, "the pharaoh reveals himself to be a lover of beauty in nature, in art, and in man."<sup>4</sup>

However, some of the archaeologists who unraveled the story of the Sun Pharaoh had difficulty accepting what they found and became highly critical of Akhen-Aton and Nefertiti. "Brought up in an environment of Victorian and puritanical notions, they condemned these entrancing figures of Egyptian history because they discovered that not only the Pharaoh and his wife but also their children and officials went around with too few clothes (transparent at that!) or no clothes at all, that they practiced nudity in the royal palace, in the royal gardens and swimming pool, that they loved physical beauty, valued good food and wine, and led a frankly joyful existence."<sup>5</sup>

The spontaneity, freedom, and humanistic values espoused in the lifestyle of this remarkable couple brought scathing criticism and retaliation from the conservative priests of the "old religion." Upon his death, Akhen-Aton was succeeded by son-in-law Tutankh-Aton ("King Tut," famous for the fabulous gold and jewels found in his tomb in the twentieth century), who was coerced by the priests into eradicating Akhen-Aton's reforms.

"They practiced a religion and nudist way of life that was far ahead of their time," writes Dr. deHoratev of the Sun King and his queen. "They came to an age that understood them not." He adds, rather dejectedly, that although future generations may be more understanding of their message, "...our own day gives them a miserly recognition."<sup>6</sup>

While it is known that Akhen-Aton and Nefertiti were not the first Egyptians to luxuriate nude in the sun's rays (a fourteenth century, B.C. carving of a nude Sumerian priest is preserved in the British Museum, and a fifteenth century, B.C. painting of a nude Egyptian girl lutist is found on the wall of a Thebes tomb), he and his alluring consort did have their "day in the sun," breathing life into a freshly idealistic concept of community.

## Nudity In Ancient Greece

Centuries later, Pharaoh Akhen-Aton's passion for holistic living was enthusiastically practiced by the early Greeks. While many cultures have recognized the contributions of ancient Greece to law, politics, literature, art, and philosophy, not much has been recorded about early Greek advocacy of freedom from clothing when practical and appropriate. The dress of both the upper and lower classes within Greek society was in accordance with the simplicity and forthrightness characteristic of Greek philosophy--that a draped garment that could be taken off in a second. Even the fancier gowns designed for both sexes, with jeweled or metal shoulder clips, were made from one piece of beautifully draped material.

"When a Greek wished to dance or work, he simply slipped out of his clothing and proceeded. It was the natural thing to do, and no one was dismayed by...seeing a nude person dancing or working. Archaeologists have found many vases depicting completely naked performers at festivals and laborers in the fields," writes Anthony J. Papalas in his article "Greek Attitudes Toward Nudity."<sup>7</sup>

Historians acknowledge this ancient Greek body-attitude mainly when they write about the athletic training that took place in the Greek gymnasium. The very word *gymnasium* is based on the root word *gymnos* (meaning "naked"), the gymnasium being defined, thereby, as a place where one stripped naked to exercise.

While nudity was so common in early Greek athletics and sculpture that historically it cannot be overlooked, historians tend to downplay or ignore the religious and philosophic foundations for nudism in Greek life. For example, the Greek gymnasium is rarely presented as a place for general education which, in fact, it was. Paul LeValley, in an article appearing in the naturist magazine *Clothed with the Sun* offers a more accurate picture.

"The Greeks could think of no higher tribute to their gods than to imitate them--to become as godlike as possible, both mentally and physically. It was the whole person that mattered: the well-developed mind in the well-developed body. Apollo, the god of athletics, was also the god of music. In fact, the athletes trained to music. The gymnasiums were where philosophers like Socrates hung about. Almost every major school of Greek philosophy was headquartered in a gymnasium.... As Greek religion declined and was replaced by philosophy, Socrates often advocated nudity as a form of honesty."<sup>8</sup> It is clear from this that the ancient Greeks sought balance--their goal of The Golden Mean in individual accomplishments as well as in matters of state.

Beginning with exercises in the nude, a typical day for the Greek student is described by Papalas in the article cited above: "After several hours of activity and instruction about the body, he bathed and went to his classroom--most often in the nude, for the mild climate of Greece did not require clothing except for some unusually cold days in winter.... Teachers and scholars attempted to establish an equilibrium between mind and body. The student, therefore, was required to devote the same amount of effort to physical progress as to mental."<sup>9</sup>

Pericles, the famous Greek statesman, general, and athlete, said that men should harmoniously work for "the perfect beauty of our bodies and the manly virtues of our soul.... We are lovers of beauty without having lost the taste for simplicity, and lovers of wisdom without loss of manly vigor."<sup>10</sup>

Darius, the Persian king, relying on the report of a spy sent to observe Greeks training for battle, mistakenly concluded from their attitude toward nudity and democracy that Greeks were weaklings. The army infiltrator returned to Darius with an account of how the Greeks spent their time prancing around in the nude "or sitting, partially clothed, listening to idiots propound

ridiculous ideas about freedom and equality for the individual citizen."11 Based on this information, Darius expected the Greeks would be an easy target, but his laughter turned to fear and grief when the Persian army was driven out to sea at the Battle of Marathon by well-trained opponents.

Though men of ancient Greece were offered an exceptional training as citizens (with the obvious exception of male slaves), Greek women were denied the high-level education of the gymnasium. This inequality was speciously justified by reasoning that women had less need for education because they were not permitted to participate in civic affairs along with the men. Such discrimination, however, diminished with the appearance of a women's rights movement.

Among the gains won by the women of this group was the establishment of female athletic competitions. During these games, women performed comfortably in the nude, as was the practice for men. "The Greek admiration for the human body and the willingness to display it were closely bound up with Greek honesty and intelligence. No one thought it wrong that young Spartan girls should go naked in public dances and processions. The young men who gathered to look upon the events displayed no lust or wantonness. Plutarch (the Greek biographer and historian) wrote that the appearance of these maidens was received with admiration, respect, and shamelessness."12

Eventually, nudity also became part of the tradition of the Olympic Games. Ancient historians suggest that the Olympic Games originated as far back as 1100 B.C. as peace treaty contests authorized by kings of the cities of Pisa, Elis, and Sparta. The games derived their name from the Valley of Olympia, where they were held. The first Olympic Festival for which there are records was held in 776 B.C. At least from that time forward, the Olympic Games were specifically dedicated to the Greek gods.

Athletes from Sparta are given historical credit for being the first to discard clothing while in training for competition. It's possible this occurred as early as the seventh century B.C. Since these pioneering athletes won an abnormally high proportion of the prizes because their bodies were not restricted by clothing, other Greek athletes began to emulate the nudity of the Spartans. Thereafter, nudity was an integral part of the Olympic tradition until 393 A.D., when Roman Emperor Theodosius, Christian ruler of Greece, banned the Olympic Games because he considered them to be pagan ceremonies. The gymnasias and all it stood for was then treated with contempt. It wasn't until 1896, some 1500 years later, that the Olympics were revived--but without nudity!

"Beauty to the Greeks was the very essence of virility. The perfect balance of mind and body followed the ancient Greek belief in 'meden agan,' which means 'nothing in excess.' And 'Kalos k'agathos'--the 'beautiful and good'--was the touchstone and secret of the preeminence of ancient Greece for more than five hundred years."13

### **Nudity in Ancient India**

It is now known that social nudity in ancient Greece was encouraged by the existence of nudity among the holy men of India. For example, when Alexander the Great heard reports of nude ascetics in India, he sent Onesicritus, a Greek philosopher, to investigate the gymnosophists (a name given by the Greeks to these naked philosophers). The findings of Onesicritus must have impressed and intrigued Alexander, for he then traveled to India (in 326 B.C.) to meet with a gymnosophist group, and this meeting then led to other exchanges between the two countries.14

Pyrrho of Elis, founder of the philosophy of skepticism, studied with the gymnosophists

and, upon returning to Elis, practiced their teachings, including nudism. 15 Further, when the Greek army was in India, the soldiers participated in numerous religious observances that were accompanied by nude sports activities. For several centuries thereafter, Greek athletes competing in India were occasionally reported as being both nude and in loin cloth.

In Alexander's time (356-323 B.C.) there were a number of ascetic sects in India whose members walked about naked as part of their spiritual discipline. The largest, Ajivikas, demanded complete nudity of its disciples. This group lasted about two thousand years before completely disappearing. Buddha was a naked ascetic before founding his own religion, and it has been suggested that Buddha had his followers wear robes mainly to distinguish them from the other sects.<sup>16</sup>

Today, most of the naked holy men of India are associated with the Jains, members of a major Indian religion founded about 500 B.C. Mahavira, founder of the Jains, insisted on complete nudity for the monks as part of their vow to give up all worldly goods. In time there was a split in this group, nakedness being too much of a hardship for Jains in the colder northern parts of India. These northerners donned robes and became known as *Suetambaras*, or "white clad," while the southerners were thereafter referred to as *Digambaras*, or "clothed with the sky." The Jains have many followers in India today.<sup>17</sup>

Paul LeValley, in his article "Ancient India," compares the Greeks with the gymnosophists: "The reasons each gave for their naked asceticism or their naked athletes were strikingly similar... [They spoke] of efficiency.... Every known group of naked Indian ascetics praised the values of the simple life which nudity encouraged. ,the lawgiver of Sparta, advocated nudity among his citizens for the same reason... [plus] reasons of health.... The gymnosophists praised nudity as a method of building endurance, as did the Greeks." Another reason given for nudity was that it promoted "independent thought and self-assurance...."

LeValley further states that "Mahavira scolded the Greeks, who mostly confined their nudity to the gymnasium, for being less assured than Indian ascetics. Mahavira often mentioned nudity as a method of becoming free from bonds...contentment with no clothes...."<sup>18</sup> Indians and Greeks both agreed that nakedness represented a state of purity and honesty.

LeValley also points out areas of difference between the two cultures, such as the Greek emphasis on the beauty of the human body, an issue of considerably less importance within the religious philosophy of India. Whereas the gymnosophists of India referred to their nudity as a "step toward attaining oneness with the whole universe, or *moksha* ('the bliss of enlightenment')," the Greeks considered nudity as a basis for and expression of the wholeness of the individual and society. The Greeks thus placed more emphasis on fun, music, dance, and physical pleasure.

"Perhaps the greatest value both groups held in common, Levalley continues, "...was the association of Indian asceticism and Greek athletes with the idea of peace."<sup>19</sup> The basis for the Olympiads, for example, was to bring together dissident Greek city-states for peaceful competition and friendship, while the Jains, on their part, practiced nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and vegetarianism. To this day, some Jains carry these principles to an extreme, always wearing nose and mouth masks so that insects are protected from accidental entrapment. Ghandi based his modern political and social reform movement on this Jain practice of *ahimsa*.

During British control of India, the gymnosophist practice of nudism was greatly curtailed. However, now that there is an independent Republic of India, the jains are again unhampered in their religious practice of nudity. In India today, some women have also joined the ranks of the naked Jain ascetics.

The Sakas, a Hindu sect of India, have transmitted their traditions of nudity to modern India through the thousands of explicit sculptures that remain on the walls of the city of

Khajurako. Built about 1000 A.D., this temple at Khajurako communicates its values to the modern visitor with a directness that leaves nothing to the imagination. "Tens of thousands of human and animal figures dance happily over and around the facade of these buildings.... Kings and commoners are depicted in joyous sexual union, completely naked except for beads, bangles, and decoration.... The beauty of the body was exalted, paraded even. And, since sexual function is part of the body, that too was exalted."<sup>20</sup>

The Khajurako temple is not an isolated example of a great tolerance for nudity in ancient India. Other Indian temples, such as the revered shrines at Konarak and Ellora, also display highly realistic erotic sculptures. These representations were obviously not regarded as obscene by the people who lived at the time they were created. Their directness of statement and their placement at central public locations shows that they were an essential part of the living experience of the community, part of the fabric of their social, educational, and religious life.

Art historian Mulk Raj Anand discusses these openly erotic sculptures in his book *Kama Kala*, using them to explain the differences between eastern and western attitudes regarding the human body and sexuality. Speaking of these celebrations of life, he says, "There is a mutual enjoyment which excites not laughter but reverence.... Worship of the sun [was] demonstrated in the energy which brings the human couples together.... The male and female forms thus become the manifestation of duality desired by the Supreme God, the earthly symbols of manliness and procreation. And just as our human love is seen as a symbol of the great love of the Supreme God, so the Joy of physical union reflects the limitless Joy of the Deity in creation."<sup>21</sup>

Mulk Raj Anand notes that sex has been driven into "furtive corners" in the west. He believes that modern attitudes of prudery originating from western religious teachings are an unfortunate part of western culture in general and do not adequately permit enjoyment or open discussion of the tenderness of coital practice.

While modern Indian tour guides cannot avoid showing these explicit nude sculptures of Khajurako, Konarak, and Ellora to tourists from other lands, it is reported by many observers that they are not comfortable in doing so. It is evident that the body freedom depicted in the public art of ancient temples is not incorporated into the westernized lifestyle of contemporary India.

### **Nudity in the Orient**

Until the twentieth century, the Japanese sense of modesty strongly differed from that of Europe or America. Nude communal bathing, for example, was a basic fact of daily life until fairly recently and still exists in rural areas that are distant from Japan's westernized major cities. Nevertheless, Bernard Rudofsky in his book *Are Clothes Modern?* observes that nudity was not an acceptable subject for traditional Japanese artists. "Even lovers bedded down on acres of quilts--a favorite subject in [Japanese] art--are always fully clothed, not because the artists were prudes but because the Japanese seem to like making love entangled in each other's garments.... [This non-Christian culture] not only skipped Original Sin but never felt a need for adopting it."<sup>22</sup>

However, the Japanese were far from being prudes! Their attitude that everything natural is moral is revealed in the "bridal books" published for hundreds of years in Japan as a means of practical sex education for young women. Through explicit text and pictures, this type of book prepared the unmarried Japanese woman for the sexual conduct that would, or should, take place after her wedding. Experienced couples were also provided with "pillow books," meant to be kept near the bed. These contained erotically stimulating illustrations to enhance marital

enjoyment.

Members of the Chinese upper class were much more inhibited and even considered their unclothed peasantry to be subhuman. Nudity, even in art, was seen as immoral. In his essay *The Future of Nakedness*, John Langdon-Davies tells a story about the Jesuit priests who were horrified to learn that the Chinese regarded the Christian books containing beautifully colored religious pictures of male and female saints in classical drapery as pornographic.<sup>23</sup>

In ancient China, strict custom even prevented a woman of high rank from being unclothed in the presence of her doctor. The only way she could communicate with her doctor regarding her physical problems was to point to the corresponding place on a miniature ivory or alabaster nude sculpture. These little statues, items of considerable importance for every respectable Chinese household in more ancient times, can still be purchased by tourists in Chinese sections of modern cities throughout the world.<sup>24</sup>

By examining the bathing habits of a culture, it's possible to determine body-image attitudes with some precision. The Japanese, Turkish, and Scandinavian peoples in recent times, for example, have traditionally enjoyed communal nude bathing, as did their earlier cultures. In the Greco-Roman empire, until its decadent and declining years, the two sexes usually commingled during communal nude bathing because the emphasis of the culture was on cleanliness, health, and socializing, not on physical sexual differences. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church suppressed such bathing practices.<sup>25</sup> However, communal nude bathing where the sexes were usually segregated survived in parts of central and northern Europe until, finally, the modern nudist movement initiated the currently relaxed European attitudes toward mixed-sex nudity in spas and on beaches.

The western world, from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century, was not known for body cleanliness. Since the unclothed body was thought of as sinful, the sensual practices of languishing in a nurturing bath or soaking in a communal bathhouse (such as the luxurious, body-pampering baths of the Orient) were not only unavailable for the vast majority of people but were unthinkable and unacceptable. Sponge or "splash" baths were the custom, and the use of perfume was more of a cover-up for infrequent bathing than a means for sexual allurements.

Turkish baths utilizing thermal hot springs were constructed wherever the Ottoman Empire ruled, introducing to many parts of Europe the pleasurable and health-promoting cycle of nude swimming, sweating, and massage regeneration. Both men and women of the Ottoman Empire used the baths as a social center, but always with the sexes segregated.

However, in Japan, a country blessed with natural volcanic hot springs, nude family and mixed-sex communal bathing were approved by the prevailing religions for over two thousand years. Some of the public bath houses in Japan today have private rooms of various sizes where families or social groups can experience the steaming pools in privacy. Most common, however, is the large community pool.

Originally a Shinto purification rite, the practice of social bathing in the nude spread throughout Japan and became as much a part of Japanese daily life as the rising of the sun. Shintoism, prior to 1945 the state religion of Japan, emphasizes personal cleanliness, both spiritually and physically. However, even the Buddhist monks built bath houses within their temple compounds. At the beginning of each day, these monks would gather branches of pine, holly, or boxwood trees in preparation for heating the thick-walled red clay "firebox" which was set on a floor of stones. The doors were opened to the public once the steam was up. Some bath houses offered tea ceremonies, while others provided fruit and other food. There were *sansulces* (bath boys) and bath maidens who offered their service of back scrubbing.

Therefore, most Japanese men and women have grown up accustomed to being viewed in

the nude and to seeing the nudity of others at all ages. Yet, with the faster pace of life typical of the larger cities in Japan and with the westernization of home architecture, the neighborhood bath house is losing its previous prominence. The communal, nude thermal springs, however, remain prized vacation spots. In many areas of Japan, the winters are bitterly cold, and the natural hot springs traditionally have been a pleasurable and healthful refuge--steaming oases nestled in craggy mountains and lush forests. Some of these pools have now become the sites of modern resort hotels.

The presently popular use of hot-tub spas in the United States obviously originated from these ancient and traditional customs of communal bathing so prominent in Japan, Scandinavia, and Turkey.

### **Witchcraft and Satanism**

To many people, the word *witchcraft* conjures up visions of evil Halloween hags on broomsticks or strange and perhaps depraved rituals of nudity and sex. However, some historians believe that witchcraft is the oldest religion in the world and, therefore, quite respectable despite the prevalent prejudices of Judaism and Christianity. These historians of religion say that witchcraft's fertility rites are only a worship and awe of nature, and that the monthly new-moon "esbats" and seasonal "sabbats" are only ceremonial rituals in an appeal to the gods for fecundity of the earth and fertility of its inhabitants. The word *witchcraft*, for example, actually means "craft of the wise," since Wicca, its root, means "wise one." As civilization developed, this old religion became a blend of fertility cults, Egyptian occultism, and ancient kabbalistic studies.<sup>26</sup>

This attitude was carried to such extremes that huge numbers of innocent people were murdered. It is now known that the great majority of those unfortunate victims had no connection with wrong-doing other than being identified as immoral and evil by their fearful neighbors and enemies. Of course, it is conceivable that there were a few witches at the time who used their potions and pills for personal profit and revenge, as their accusers claimed, just as some witches must have "cursed" their persecutors with great forcefulness. But the Wicca tradition as a whole was a religion celebrating joy, health, and fruitful harvests.

This old religion is having a renaissance today as part of the "New Age" interest in metaphysics and psychic phenomena. Meditation and hypnosis, traditional tools of witchcraft, are now popular methods of "raising consciousness" toward accomplishing personal and global changes. Flowers, herbs, and crystals, the natural sacraments of the old religion, are also widely used by New Agers in their healing rituals.

Much of the evil that has been attributed to witchcraft is actually part of the quite different traditions of Satanism and/or Devil Worship. Cults of this type were based on atheistic hedonism rather than on nature worship. Like witches, the members also practiced ritualistic nudity, but their emphasis was on orgiastic sexuality. Their "black mass" was centered around a nude woman as the altar, and their rites included liberal usage of drugs and hallucinogenic potions.

Their theology was and still is different. Anton Lavey, whose Church of Satan was founded in San Francisco in 1966, believes that even if there is a God, He is unable to intervene in human events. Since Satan, according to LaVey's devotees, is the symbol of the material world and man's carnal nature, he becomes the worshiped idol. At one time, Satanism was acknowledged to be a functioning religion (or anti-religion) in Europe, but never on a large scale.

Through the ages, rituals of vengeance through animal and human sacrifice and weird

stories of rituals with nude dead bodies have been associated with Satanism. While the possibility of the existence of secret devil-cult practices in modern times cannot be ignored, LaVey's Church of Satan seems to be a nonthreatening version of devil worship. But horror stories of killings and sexual abuse do surface on occasion and are often attributed to the rituals of "devil cults." For instance, on a recent television program (1989), Geraldo Rivera interviewed a law enforcement officer who stated that the infamous cult of mass murderer Charles Manson had been linked to the "Son of Sam " group, purported to be a satanic cult.

### **Early Christian Nudists**

There are a number of ministers and priests in the contemporary nudist movement. In fact, the modern nudist movement was largely organized by ordained religious leaders, as discussed more fully in Chapter 8. These religious leaders used as their justification the many parts of the Judaic-Christian Bible which speak of accepting the human body without shame (such as references to those apostles who were fishermen, naked at their work). Religious nudists use these quotations as an answer to the fundamentalist preachers who sermonize about God's demand for clothing.

For example, the Rev. Martin Wadestone, author of "Nudism and Christianity," writes: "Actually, in the light of the Bible, there is no sin in nudity itself; but if a person uses the nudity for lustful or immoral purposes he has misused it, and this constitutes a sin. The Bible does not speak against nudity nor does it teach that the body is shameful. There is reference to shame in nudity, but this shame was produced in the mind of man, not by divine ordination."<sup>28</sup>

This was also the belief of at least five groups in the history of Christianity: the Carpocrations, Adamites, Adamianis, Encratites, and Marcosians. Most of the historical information we have concerning the beliefs and practices of these early Christians comes to us, in fact, through the recorded criticisms and diatribes of Roman Catholic Church authorities, since these authorities have largely destroyed the writings of those they considered heretical.

Platonic philosopher Carpocrates, born in Alexandria, Egypt in the second century A.D., believed in one God as creator of the world and all things in it. He combined the Christian ideal of the brotherhood of man with portions of Plato's *Republic*, advocating that the glories of God should not be hidden. He urged Christians, both male and female, to look upon the natural body with gratitude for the creative force of God-love. His disciples suffered ridicule and sometimes severe persecution but continued their practices into the fourth century A.D. Records indicate that nude statues and a museum were created to honor this sect. It was the Carpocrations who first portrayed Christ's body in the exposed form commonly seen to this day.

The Adamianis existed in the second and third centuries A.D. They were a group that hoped to regain the innocence mankind lost in the Garden of Eden and, consequently, worshiped in a state of nakedness and lived as a nudist community. It's believed that groups of Adamianis used deserted pagan temples for their own rituals.

Some generations later, Encratites and Marcosians, who developed out of the Adamian tradition, appeared on the scene. The Encratites were vegetarians and many, if not all, practiced nudism. In ancient Gaul (France), a Gnostic teacher named Marcus and his followers became known as Marcosians and were well established in the Rhone Valley by the third century. Irenaeus, a conservative Christian writer of the day, criticized their nudity and religious beliefs, remarking: "Marcus is regarded by these senseless and brain cracked as working miracles."<sup>29</sup>

The Adamites (no connection with the Adamianis) were an active sect in Bohemia during

the fifteenth century A.D. They were part of the Hussite Reformation. This group set up numerous religious nude communities.

Natural-living Christians were referred to by traditionalists as "Gnostic heretics," because their Christian doctrines were influenced by esoteric teachings and Eastern mystical thought. Henry de Horatev has written that, while in one sense they could be considered Gnostics, "they were not Gnostics but just plain radical Christians."<sup>30</sup>

These "in-the-buff" religious groups were not exhibitionists, preferring to live in isolated and inaccessible seclusion, protected by the forests in Gaul, the deserts in Egypt, and the islands of Greece. They built sturdy stone walls for privacy and protection from the hostile communities surrounding them. DeHoratev reflects, "How much it is to be regretted that the only records we have of the early Christian nudists come to us from hostile censorious quarters! Let us hope that someday, in some European or African monastery or tomb, there will be discovered a cache of lost Gnostic books which will shed new light on the persecuted groups of the nudists of antiquity, just as the Dead Sea Scrolls have brought new understanding to the old Hebrew literature."<sup>3</sup>

### **Nudity as Protest**

Nakedness has been used throughout history as a form of protest as well as an expression of positive human values. If one's aim is to get noticed, in a clothed society stripping is certainly an effective method of gaining attention. This was a tactic used by some hippies in the 1960s and also by a number of religious protesters throughout history. For example, regarding the famous St. Francis of Assisi: "On being rebuked by his bishop, he snatched off his clothes and walked naked through the streets."<sup>32</sup>

While it is possible, of course, to interpret this as an act of religious humility rather than protest, there is no doubt about the Doukhobors of Canada, who left Russia in 1898 and still exist in small colonies to the north of the United States. An extremist and individualistic sect of anarchists who separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1785, the Doukhobors numbered some 15,000 persons when they first came to Canada. Calling themselves "Sons of Freedom," they were constantly in trouble with the law because of their refusal to conform with Canadian laws governing educational, civic, and cultural standards. The Doukhobors often protested en masse in the nude. Their first nude parade was in 1903, and though the demonstrators were prosecuted and jailed, they continued this unique manner of making a statement for several decades.

### **Body Freedom Related to Status of Women**

Even after European religious practices placed tight restrictions on body freedom and sexual enjoyment, there were periods of relaxed attitudes, perhaps as a reaction to prolonged social and sexual repressions. Jorge Lewinski, author of *The Naked and The Nude*, notes that some historians connect such fluctuations with a changed status of women in these cultures. He points to the early Middle Ages as being strictly patriarchal, dominated by priests with repressive attitudes toward nakedness and sex. The later Middle Ages, however, are noted for chivalry, troubadours, admiration of women, and more relaxed attitudes. The Renaissance was an era of greater prestige for women, with its Greco-Roman dress and appreciation for nonreligious nude paintings. The increased body freedom appears to be related to the flourishing arts movement of

the period.

Then came Calvin and Luther, who brought back patriarchal moral restraints during the Reformation movement. This was again followed by a relaxation of morals in the eighteenth century which, for a short time, restored women's social position. Next, there was a deep plunge into the restrictive, patriarchal Victorian period---from which the feminist-oriented twentieth century has not yet completely emerged.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Puritan Ethic, Victorianism, and Body Shame**

*The whole man from head to foot is thus, as it were, drenched in a flood of wickedness so that no part has remained without sin and so everything which springs from him is counted as sin.*

---John Calvin, 16th century Reformist

*Our weakness lies not in our works but in our nature; our person, nature, and entire being are corrupted through Adam's fall.*

Martin Luther, 16th century Reformist

John Calvin, a Frenchman who was incensed by the wealth, flamboyance, and moral license of the ruling Catholic Church, became a leader of the Reform movement. Forced to flee his country, Calvin received recognition in Switzerland as the founder of protestant Presbyterianism. He also gained fame as a founder of the "puritan ethic."

Martin Luther, a German monk, was the "Father of the Reformation." In 1517 he broke with papal authority to form the Protestant Lutheran Church, rebelling against what he saw as the moral laxity and extravagances of the Catholic Church and its aristocracy. Luther brought fundamentalist, no-nonsense religion to a ready and willing middle class.

With the advent of Protestantism came biblical interpretations which stressed, as never before, the impurity and sin inherent in the human body. Also emphasized was devil-fear. While God was mind and spirit, the Devil represented evil and tantalizing body sensuality. Suspected witches were persecuted and put to death on the flimsiest of hearsay. A test for detecting a witch in England (abolished in 1219 but said to have been practiced until the 18th century) is described in Robert T. Smith's *Cult and Occult*. "First they stripped her. Then they tied the thumb of her right hand to the big toe of her left foot. Then the thumb of her left hand to the big toe of her right foot. Then they threw her into a river or pond. If she sank and drowned, she wasn't a witch. If she floated, she was helped by the Devil and they would pull her out and execute her." <sup>34</sup>

The puritan ethic came to America with the Mayflower. Our first settlers were hard-working Protestant pilgrim pioneers who had neither the time nor the inclination for frivolity. Their body guilt and shame became the law of the land, and this law was even more extreme in the United States than overseas. In Europe, extreme prudery was largely confined to the middle class, since the aristocracy and lower classes were apt to take more liberties with the rules of religious moralists. However, in America, the moral prohibition against so-called "acts of the Devil" was stronger.

During the 1600s and 1700s, any deviation from the norm in behavior or lifestyle was suspect. Hysterical zealots carried out witch hunts that were even more senseless than those in Europe. And a law in effect while New Jersey was still a British colony allotted the same penalty given witches to women: "...whether virgins, maids, or widows who shall after this Act, impose

upon, seduce, or betray into matrimony any of His Majesty's subjects by virtue of scents, cosmetics, washes, paints, artificial teeth, or high heeled shoes." 35

In Europe, the few years of physical and emotional body-freedom experienced during the Napoleonic period shifted to the version of puritanical repression known to history as Victorianism. A middle-class morality was developing that emphasized self-reliance, self-control, and love of work. This fit well with the views of religious moralists, whose beliefs were now supported by the ruling monarchy. In England, Queen Victoria (who reigned from 1837 to 1901) and Prince Albert set patterns of conduct that were accepted as the new morality of Europe and North America.

Shame regarding sexual desires and activities reached such extremes that a woman in the mid-1800s minimized and hid all body parts except her face. She wore layers of petticoats and was enveloped in clothing from high-collared blouse to floor-length bustled skirt, a bonnet completely covering her head and a shawl drawn around the body. "Even a lady's hands were hidden. An 1840 Victorian ladies' journal advised that "Gloves are always graceful for a lady in the house except at meals." And some women did not appear at the table "barehanded. They wore fingerless mittens."<sup>37</sup> Men were also expected to be "proper" in both dress and manner.

However, obliterating the body was not sufficient for the morality of the Victorian period. Sexual words and references to body parts were removed from "proper" language to prevent the stimulation of sinful sexual desires. It was offensive to mention the human body in the mixed company of polite society. Legs became "limbs," a chicken leg became "dark meat," and a chicken breast "white meat." Some people took modesty to the extreme of covering such items as piano legs. Thomas Bowdler brought "respectability" to Shakespeare by publishing ten volumes of his works with all words alluding to sex or nudity removed.

The Victorian age lasted from mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Victorianism created a society of contradictions by placing body taboos on normal biological urges and needs. Medical textbooks of the time stated that any woman who had sexual pleasure was abnormal. Frigidity for women was considered desirable, and doctors prescribed sedatives for those who were not frigid. While it was acceptable for men to have sexual desires, the medical profession warned that male indulgences would lead to a permanent drain on their psychic and physical resources.

Nevertheless, the pride of the Victorian husband in having a "proper" wife was a facade that hid a dark side. There were more prostitutes per capita roaming the streets of London during this time than at any other period of that city's history. A flourishing trade in pornography and a profitable trade in virgins existed. Young girls were abducted: "The going rate on the clandestine market fluctuated between five and forty Pounds, according to their age and beauty."<sup>38</sup> After having been disgraced, these girls often joined the ranks of prostitutes.

This was the heyday of surreptitious "French Postcards," printed photographs of nude females that by today's standards would be considered little more than coy or mildly suggestive. However, these postcards were undoubtedly "racy" to the deprived male who had no other opportunity to satisfy natural curiosity about the female body. Along these lines, it was reported that the famous poets who were symbols of nineteenth century romance, Elizabeth Barrett and her husband, Robert Browning, never saw each other's nude body.

There was censorship of books, art, theater, and dance. However, nudity was allowed in paintings of an allegorical or cherubic nature. It was also permissible to view the torture of nude or transparently draped saints, and pictures of the sensuous, suffering male Saviour were displayed in respectable homes. "In the penumbra of a chapel, Saint Sebastian triumphed on a canvas and in stone as a glorified pinup of the pious, while Adam and Eve, the perennial

exhibitionists, could always be depended upon to rescue nakedness from oblivion. In plain daylight, however, the human body was carefully hidden from sight. Clothes were hermetic."<sup>39</sup>

However, reality in secular art provoked violent reactions during the Victorian period. Such familiar works as Gustave Courbet's *Bathers* and Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia* were considered obscene. While French writer Emile Zola passionately defended Manet, the extensive collection of Greek and Roman statues displayed in the Vatican was "fig-leafed." Nude sculptures sent to museums by missionaries were mutilated or covered with loin cloths.

In the late 1940s, a team from *Life Magazine* was assigned to take the first direct-color photographs of the renowned Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Church authorities were cooperative with one exception. All photographs of Michelangelo's famed ceiling had to be cropped before publication to remove the frontal nudity of the figures. However, there was no restriction on photographing the murals on the lower walls. It was learned that one of the previous popes had assigned an artist to take care of lower-level nudity by painting drapes over exposed midsections. Since the famous ceiling was so inaccessible, its figures had not been subjected to draping.

The United States had Anthony Comstock, notorious for his crusades against anything suggestive of sex or sensuality. A special agent for the US Post Office starting in 1868, he waged a relentless fight against "smut," resulting in the confiscation of the masterpieces of such famous painters and writers as George Bernard Shaw, Tolstoy, Zola, Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert. His censorship powers limited the body freedom, art, and reading material of the nation for four decades. And his repressive mandates remained part of the U.S. postal regulations for many years after his death. <sup>40</sup>

The literati of the day were constantly at war with Comstock. Writers and critics complained that "...many of his cases concerned books and plays and pictures which were pornographic only by the wildest stretch of the imagination."<sup>41</sup> Comstock's obsession with what he considered smut made him privy to many of today's masterpieces of erotica, such as the works of D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, the Kama Kala temple art of India, and many sculptural and pictorial works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, was given police powers, and carried a gun while looking for lewdity. "On one occasion he entered a brothel and offered three women fourteen dollars to strip naked, then arrested them when they did." <sup>42</sup> The predecessor of Comstock was "hell and brimstone" Rev. John R. McDowell. This protector of the masses from the evils of licentiousness was secretly a collector of pornography.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most cruel and destructive manifestation of Victorianism was the insensitive treatment of native cultures by religious missionaries and European colonists. With no regard for native pride and dignity, for their religious customs, nor for the practicality of their dress and lifestyle, arrogant victorianism demanded conformity with European customs. Forcing clothing on those peoples whose cultures had previously permitted them to experience body freedom was not only demeaning and humiliating but an effective and constant reminder of their "inferior" heritage and status. An 1894 report by a former governor of a Tonga village describes these conditions: "It was punishable by fine and imprisonment to wear native clothing; punishable by fine and imprisonment to wear long hair or a garland of flowers; punishable by fine and imprisonment to wrestle or to play ball; punishable not to wear shirt and trousers and, in certain localities, coat and shoes also...."<sup>41</sup>

The Christian missionaries created cover-up garments from whatever source was available. They often forced the natives to wear sacklike coverings, but odd assortments of discarded clothing from the Continent were also given to them. Richard Harrington tells of

seeing "a strapping black stevedore in Leopoldville wear a child's pink bonnet, unaware he was ridiculous to the eyes of the white man. I have seen African women with castoff brassieres arranged above their breasts for use as pockets."<sup>45</sup>

"Since the natives had never learned to wash or mend clothes, it took them a long time to adapt to European garments, which were at first worn until they fell to pieces. There was a great decline in cleanliness with resulting skin diseases and other infections."<sup>46</sup> The natives were subjected to the same kind of embarrassment in having to be seen in clothing as we, in a clothed society, would feel upon being forced to abandon ours. It is a wonder that more missionaries didn't end up in the cannibal's pot!

However, there were always voices of protest against the moralistic, antisexual, and body-shame edicts of the Victorian period, especially from the educated classes. In 1833, Thomas Carlyle wrote a much-discussed book, *Sartor Resartus*, in which he challenged the dogma of the indispensability of clothing. He discussed the moral, religious, and political influence of clothes, humorously observing that if there were nakedness in the House of Lords, their power would be diminished. Also, he philosophically considered the possibility of a nude world.<sup>47</sup>

Benjamin Franklin wrote of his daily ritual, a nude cold-air bath each morning while reading or writing. Franklin is reported to have been seen swimming the Thames in London without clothing. In Leysin, Switzerland, Dr. Charles Rollier was obtaining cures of tuberculosis and other diseases by prescribing sunbathing as an element of treatment. British writers and artists, such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley, ridiculed the mores of their society and demonstrated their beliefs by occasionally wearing extreme clothing or displaying unconventional behavior. In America, writer Henry David Thoreau and poet Walt Whitman expressed strong feelings about the need for back-to-nature innocence and body freedom.

## Twentieth Century Modernism

At the turn of the century, famous American dancer Isadora Duncan started wearing loosely draped clothing in ordinary life and on the stage, saying, "I live in my body like a spirit in a cloud." She captivated audiences in America and Europe with the graceful new freedom and expressiveness of her performances in filmy, flowing Greek tunics. By her break with convention, Duncan not only started a new fashion in dance but opened the way to twentieth century modernism in clothing, making the corset obsolete.

The rebellion against Victorian clothing took another turn in Germany where, in 1903, Richard Ungewitter wrote a book, *Die Nacktheit*, which advocated a return to ancient Greek attitudes toward nudity for hygienic and moralistic reasons. In 1905 Paul Zimmerman opened the first resort for social and family nudism, Freilichtpark (Free Light Park). At the same time another German, Dr. Heinrich Pudor, wrote a book titled *Nacktcultur*, which discussed the benefits of nudity in coeducation and advocated the enjoyment of sports free of cumbersome clothing. "Dr. Pudor called nudity aristocratic and slavery to clothes a plebeian characteristic, stating that all nations which completely disregard the rights of their people to nudity rapidly become decadent."<sup>48</sup> The nudist movement (now international in scope) sprang from such simple beginnings, in bold defiance of what had become a century-long mentality of body denial.

The women's suffragette movement had begun to challenge the status quo prior to World War One, but it wasn't until after the war that the tight reign of repressive morality began to shake loose. When their men were sent off to war, women took charge of managing their families

and worked at jobs never before available to them. By the 1920s women had emancipated themselves from restricting dresses and were showing off their bodies in abbreviated blouses and short skirts. Women even discarded the crown of femininity by "bobbing" their hair. Furtive curiosity about nakedness was replaced by the openness of nudity in entertainment. Burlesque striptease, Ziegfeld's Follies, Earl Carroll's Vanities, and George White's Scandals were spectacular and sensual displays of the joy and beauty of the female body. On the bolder Parisian stage, musical productions included full nudity.

However, the permissive glamour of the 1920s "flapper" era was tempered by the great depression that followed. By this time the body was liberated from cumbersome clothing, sexuality was publicly acknowledged, and it didn't seem possible to go back. Nevertheless, there were, and are, many indications that our culture as a whole has not broken completely from its heritage of guilt and shame rooted in the "original sin" written about in our biblical roots.

The naked body is still considered unnatural. Nudity on American television is rare. During the daytime hours, when children are watching, nudity isn't permissible. Children are protected from the "damaging" effects of viewing a natural, normal, and harmless human body, but body violence is condoned as entertainment for our children and ourselves. Such confused value systems help fill the psychiatric couch!

- 
1. Quoted from an anonymous article in *The Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1988.
  2. Tibor Sekelj, "Living in the Jungle," *Nude Living #39* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1967).
  3. Henry deHoratey, "The Nudist Pharoah," *Nude Living #9* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1962).
  4. J. Herman, "King and Queen of the Sun," *Nudist Adventure #15* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1968).
  5. deHoratev, *op. cit.*
  6. *Ibid.*
  7. Anthony J. Papalas, "Greek Attitudes Toward Nudity," *Nudist Adventure #13* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1967).
  8. Paul LeValley, "Ancient India," *Clothed with the Sun*, Vol.6.4 (Oshkosh, WI: The Naturists, Inc., Winter, 1986-87).
  9. Papalas, *op. cit.*
  10. Lynn Poole and Gray Poole, *History of the Olympic Games* (New York: Ivan Obolensky Publishers, 1963).
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. Papalas, *op. cit.*
  13. Poole, *op. cit.*
  14. LeValley, *op. cit.*
  15. deHoratev, *op. cit.*
  16. LeValley, *op. cit.*
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Murray Wren, "A Nudist view of Social History," *Nudist Adventure #9* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1966).
  21. Mulk Raj Anand, *Kama Kala* (Nagel Publishers, 1959) (from a book review in *Evergreen Review* cited in *Nude Living #2*) (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1961).
  22. Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?* (Chicago: Paul Theobald Publishers, 1947).

23. William Hartman, Marilyn Fithian, and Donald Johnson, *Nudist Society* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1970).
24. Marvin K. Opler, "The Absence of Clothes Doesn't Mean the Absence of Morality," *Sexual Behavior Magazine* (January, 1973).
25. L. Clovis Hirning, "(Clothing and Nudism," *Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, eds. Albert Ellis and Albert Abarbanee (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961).
26. Nathaniel Lande, *Mindstyles, Lifestyles* (Los Angeles: Price/Stern/Sloan, 1976).
27. Justine Glass, *Witchcraft, the Sixth Sense* (North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Book Company, 1974).
28. Martin Wadestone, "Nudism and Christianity," *Sundial #19* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1964).
29. Henry deHoratev, "Early Christian Nudists," *Nude Living #2* (Los Angeles: Elysium, Inc., 1961).
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. Bernard Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971).
33. Jorge Lewinski, *The Naked and The Nude* (New York: Harmony Books, 1987).
34. Robert T. Smith, *Cult and Occult* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1973).
35. Lawrence Langner, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* (New York: Hastings Rouse Press, 1959).
36. Edmund Kieman, "The 19th Century and Nudity," *Nude Living #1* (Los Angeles: Elysium Publishing, Inc., 1961).
37. Emily Coleman and Betty Edwards, *Body Liberation* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1977).
38. Lewinski, *op. cit.*
39. Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body, op. cit.*
40. Lewinski, *op. cit.*
41. Hartman et al, *op. cit.*
42. Dennis Craig Smith with Dr. William Sparks, *Growing Up Without Shame* (Los Angeles: Elysium Growth Press, 1986).
43. Lewinski, *op. cit.*
44. Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body, op. cit.*
45. Richard Harrington, "The Vanishing Nude," *Nude Living #27* (Los Angeles: Elysium Publishing, Inc., 1965)
46. Hirning, *op. cit.*
47. Kiernan, *op. cit.*
48. *Ibid.*