Nakedness, Bodiliness and the New Creation

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Abstract: What is an appropriate Christian attitude to nakedness – to the visual reality of our bodies? 4th Century naked baptismal rites offer a provocative precedent. Nakedness, sexuality and sin are not irrevocably linked, yet we live in a culture which tyrannically associates them, driving many towards self-loathing and self-destruction. Shamefully, contemporary theology acquiesces in this. Our bodies are neither laughable nor shameful. Nakedness is not a sin. If we are to be free, the visual reality of our bodies is to be confessed and celebrated before God.

I am, I suppose, disabled. I have friends who are far more so. Over and above the pain and frustration of our physical condition, we live with humiliation born of the prejudice of those who find us unsightly, laughable or whatever and, on that account, unacceptable[1]. Does the New Creation tell us that when we get to heaven, we will have new and perfect bodies and be just like everyone else at last, and all will be well? What does that say about the bodies we have now? We *are* our bodies. Are we peculiarly and irredeemably distasteful to God in a way in which other people are not? What sort of foretaste does that make our present life? What sort of celebration does that make our eucharist? And what of those normally-bodied who have been taught to view their body with destructive loathing? My friend's beautiful daughter nearly died of anorexia. Has Christianity anything to say about what our bodies look like?

Three preliminaries: It strikes me as odd that Christian theology, having identified 'embodiment' during the1970s and 80s as an issue in urgent need of attention, has by and large identified embodiment with sexuality, and theologies of embodiment with theologies of sexuality. Second, two theological preoccupations, foretaste and embodiment, belong together. Third, the fact that there is a rich, ancient tradition of naked baptism suggests to me that nakedness and sexuality are by no means one and the same issue, though only a fool would deny their connectedness.

According to the 15th Century painter Roger Van der Weyden[2] not only do the damned go naked into hell, but the saved go naked into heaven. The naked baptismal rite celebrated this with glorious defiance, resisting all temptation to allegorise.

The Eden myths run deep in our culture, telling us that sin is about sex is about nakedness is about shame. Conversely, innocence is also about nakedness, is about childlikeness, is about sexlessness. But should it be like this? I think not.

1 Fourth century Christian nakedness

It might seem self-evident that nakedness, and public nakedness in particular, is contrary to holiness. It might seem equally self-evident that to be found naked in company in church at worship is not only the ultimate nightmare, but deeply blasphemous. Neither of these propositions is at all self-evident. In the first

four centuries of the Church many of our Christian forbears found no contradiction whatsoever between nakedness at worship, and holiness. Rather, they found deep theological significance in nakedness at baptismal rites. These were not private occasions. Baptismal candidates found themselves ‘naked in the sight of all, and unashamed,’ as Cyril of Alexandria reminds his flock.[3]

Modern theologians, historical liturgists aside, have made little of this remarkable phenomenon. Interestingly, John the Deacon, writing around AD500, notices something similar.

> They are commanded to go in naked, even down to their feet, so that [they may show that] they have put off the earthly garments of mortality. The church has ordained these things for many years with watchful care, even though the old books may not reveal traces of them. [4]

What was it about baptism that led Christians to consent to being baptised naked 'in the sight of all'? What did they want to ‘say’ that made nakedness an appropriate vehicle for its expression? I contend here that their reasons were explicitly and powerfully theological, speaking to us critically of our obsession with the body-perfect, and the connectedness of nakedness, bodiliness, sexuality and sin.

2 The body in Graeco-Roman society.

Pre-Christian Roman emperors posed naked for their public statues. To the Graeco-Roman mind, nakedness was an indication of nobility and intellectual superiority. Nakedness also indicated spiritual refinement. It was a *theological* statement.

Archaeology reveals important changes in the architecture of Roman public baths during the 1st century AD, indicating that mixed bathing had become the social custom.[5] Not everyone approved. Pliny reported with weary resignation that things are not what they were, and that women now exposed their genitals in public. Quintilianus, writing in the second half of the 1st century AD, feared that the consequence might be adultery.[6] But these were reactionary voices powerless to resist the pressure of change. Social status was the issue. A Roman woman expressed wealth, social ease and spiritual maturity as she stripped to her jewellery before society.[7] That she could do so without shame, without signs of sexual exhibitionism on her part, was a measure of her birth.

The Romans had no difficulties over sexuality *as such*. To them, it was an essential (though unfortunate) tool whereby society could be sustained. The state was a divine entity. The duty of ensuring its continuity was, therefore, theological. Duty done, parents should attend to leading sex-free austere but useful public lives.

3 The Christian debate

According to Clement of Alexandria, when Salome asked the Lord 'How long shall death hold sway?' the Lord replied, 'As long as you women bear children.' He adds that the Saviour himself said, 'I came to undo the works of women.'[8] In other words, the Lord came to stop women having babies in order that death might die and the Last Day might come.

Clement took Christian virginity seriously as a spiritual exercise, but he also took it for granted that Graeco-Roman society was good and needed to go on. Inevitably, Clement had to address the question of public bathing. 'Unblushing pleasure must be cut out by the roots; and the bath is to be taken by women for cleanliness and health, by men for health alone.'[9] The sheer luxuriousness of the bath house was itself a cause for deep suspicion. He believed it scandalously possible that women *enjoyed* stripping in front of total strangers, just as they enjoyed the food and wine that accompanied bathing.

A second strand of Christian thinking (that ultimately triumphed) understood virginity much more radically, and had no interest whatsoever in the continuation of the state[10]. To have babies is to thwart the purposes of God! To be virgin was to be

actively working in opposition to the secular state for the coming of Christ. To men, the very existence, let alone the sight of (fully clothed) women was horrific. 'A woman's foot should seldom, if ever, cross your threshold,' wrote Jerome to Nepotian[11], a young cleric. Origen is conventionally supposed to have castrated himself having heeded Matthew 19v12. To Christians who thought this way, public nakedness was horrific. Most of our evidence for Christians using the public baths comes either from those anxious to condemn it, or (like Clement) anxious to control it. However, we should note the delightful Bishop Sisinnus of Constantinople (ca. 400) who, on being asked why he continued to bathe twice daily in the public baths, is reported to have replied that three times was inconvenient.[12]

4 Naked baptism

We have identified two Christian groups. For one, social nakedness was unproblematical, but for the other it was utterly unacceptable. Yet, during the rite of baptism, nakedness became a cherished symbol amongst *both* groups of Christians.

It is hard to overstate how astonishing this is. We appear to have no contemporary texts opposing nakedness at baptism. Plenty note with approval. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 387-471) writes, 'Immediately, then, upon entering, you removed your tunics. Having stripped, you were naked. ... Marvellous! You were naked in the sight of all, and were not ashamed.'[13] Theodore of Mopsuestia (pre-AD 428) says, 'You draw near to the holy baptism and before all you take off your garments. As in the beginning when Adam was naked and was in nothing ashamed of

himself.....' Tatian (Circa AD 160) remarks how initiates 'stepped naked into the baptismal pool.'

Margaret Miles[14] lists the kinds of biblical imagery that supported baptismal nakedness. She enumerates 'stripping off the old self with its practices,' (Col 3:9) and the imitation of Christ naked on the cross. Cyril speaks of being naked and unashamed (Gen 2: 25) and of undoing the damage of the Fall. He considers baptism in terms of death and rebirth. In baptism, one was putting off the old world (punning on the Greek '*kosmos'* which means equally 'world' or 'garment'.) Augustine likens baptismal birth to our coming naked into the world. The setting aside of shame is a constant theme. Tertullian understood baptism as a dying for Christ, observing that as martyrs die naked, so we are baptised naked. Gnostic texts speak of stripping off the old body to enter into the Kingdom of God.

Here is nakedness - that most blatant and public expression of bodiliness - working in the service of grace. We should resist any suggestion that nakedness is being employed lightly. It is a costly word to express a costly truth. The saints of God shall, on the last day, be unashamed before their God as were Adam and Eve prior to the Fall. At baptism, though we do not completely and immediately escape the ravages of sin, we do at least enter into the secure promise of God. Further, just as at the eucharist we enact a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, so too, in naked baptism, we enact in a symbolic washing from head to foot a foretaste of the restoration of the innocence, shamelessness and joy that is only for those who find themselves in the presence of God and without sin.

5 Excess

To be partially exposed might be acceptable (though each turn of the tide of fashion has its own view on exactly how partial) but to be totally naked is simply going too far. Excess is a theological category. It offends against Greek doctrines of balance and mean which have found their way into Christian prejudice, according to which fastidiousness (especially over things sensual) is a mark of holiness. Against this, Eugene Rogers[15] believes that St Paul argues God in Christ acts 'contrary to nature' in order to graft the Gentiles into the true vine[16]. He concludes, 'The sting is this: in saving the gentiles, God shows solidarity with something of their nature, ... their excessive sensuality.'[17] God, Rogers believes, is capable of revelling in our so-called excessiveness. And if God can do this, so should we.

Rogers claims that self-denial in the face of excess lies at the very heart of the orthodox Christian understanding of faithfulness. Where there is no self-denial and no self-imposed law, the argument runs, there is chaos and, in particular, promiscuity. It is, perhaps, more an argument for self-discipline rather than for self-denial, and in matters of sexual ethics, despite Rogers, it may well be right. But is it acceptable as a general theory?

For example, would Christians apply such an argument to friendship? Would they want to argue that only by denying themselves the dissipation of

innumerable friendships are they are able faithfully to live out their friendship to their chosen life-friend? Surely not! A friendship that demands that all other friendships be denied is jealous and exploitative. Christian friendship is about a self-denial geared not to satisfying one friend to the exclusion of all others, but to satisfying the needs of as many as possible It is exemplified in the New Testament story of the feeding of the five thousand, a story of generosity on a scale that cries out for the epithet ‘excess.’

The self-denial of sexual ethics is therefore a very peculiar exception to the norm of generosity. Its peculiarity is driven by the peculiarity of the sex act itself and its ramifications. Should nakedness be understood in the same terms as friendship or as sexuality? If the answer be friendship, then nakedness must be considered in terms of generosity, a costly and precious gift freely given for the benefit of others. The evidence of the early baptismal rite, suggests that this might indeed be possible.

There is something immodestly outrageous in the gospel account of the generosity of God. If we wish to value bodiliness, then we should value it outrageously. As Harvey Cox wrote over 30 years ago, 'Christianity has often tried to affirm the goodness of creation without delighting in human flesh. But it simply is not possible.'[18]

6 Ridicule

Most of us, it might be supposed, without our clothes, are ridiculous. Rowan Williams[19] endorses this argument, albeit in a sexual context, when he remarks, 'Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself.'[20] He continues, 'Plenty know that it [sexual behaviour] is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless.' Laughter readily turns to cruelty.

It ought to worry us that we find our bodies, by their very nature, risible. Does God ridicule us as we ridicule ourselves and each other? Or have we seriously misunderstood what it is to be a *bodily* child of God? The ridicule we (with Williams) fear comes from within our own circle of trust. This too ought to worry us.

Christians confess the truth about themselves worship from within a circle of trust, in holy vulnerability, in the knowledge that their truth is held sacred. Nakedness at its best is a visual confession of truth. It is to say, 'This is how it is with me.' That there is healing rather than ridicule in it is evidenced from the 4th century experience. It is evidenced (albeit in a lesser way) on Mediterranean beaches where people of all shapes and sizes find it a delight to be who they are in ways they feel they cannot in the normal course of their lives.

7 Fear and freedom

One of the New Testament hall marks of those who are in Christ is that they have exchanged fear for freedom.[21] Jesus tells the Jews that the truth will set them free[22]. Where there is no acknowledgement of truth before God and community, there can be no freedom.

Williams asks what we want our bodily selves to *mean.*[23] Visually, there could be no more radically opposed answers to this question than the burkah of late-20th Century Afghanistan and the public baths of 4th Century Rome. The burkah links sexuality to nakedness in the most absolute relationship possible. To see, is to lust. To be seen, is to lust, to invite lust, and to be threatened. Therefore freedom and safety lie in not being seen, in being hidden behind impenetrable walls. St Paul calls such 'freedom' the captivity of the Law.[24] The freedom of the public baths is another freedom. To see is not to lust, nor is to be seen either to lust, to invite lust or to be threatened. It is merely to be oneself, free in spirit.

Freedom and security exist in their public affirmation and celebration. That men, women and children of all ages may walk the streets patently at ease with their situation reassures far more than that police stand by armed to the teeth. So too, that men, women and children bathe in public baths, or lie at ease and play on beaches, reassures far more than that burkah-clad figures scuttle from haven to haven unscathed.

8 The body-perfect

It may be that most (if not all) people are aesthetically more attractive clothed than naked, but our attitudes to nakedness are not fuelled by aesthetics. It should concern us greatly that those with less than perfect bodies are ashamed. Those whose bodies are grotesque, damaged, incomplete or merely unable to perform as satisfactorily as most, suffer particularly, and none more so than the young. It drives children to death.

Elizabeth Stuart begins her disturbing essay on the disabled thus: 'The disabled body queers a great deal of the pitch upon which the theologies of sexuality and gender have built themselves. For a start, ... the disabled body casts a shadow over the efforts of these theologies to claim embodiment as good.'[25] For very many people, their experience of their body oppresses them. Some, it kills. Yet in an important sense we are all disabled, for in our mortal physicality we are all broken, both here and now, and in our future.

There is a sexual aesthetic at work in the culture of the body-perfect. Its power is rooted in the fallacy that there is indeed a perfect body shape. This conceded, all who rightly sense that they ought to be able to feel good about their bodily self and that others ought to be able to feel good about them, are trapped into a deceitful double Sisyphic labour: they must make themselves as like the perfect body as possible, and they must conceal that they are unlike the perfect body as

much as possible. The flaw is easily exposed. We each embody our own essence, not some shared essence of our kind. Nakedness defies the body perfect. Our ultimate good is to live out our own essence before our fellows to the delight of God.

We delight in each other and God delights in us as we are, and it shall be so also at the heavenly banquet. Could it not be that in the 4th century baptismal rite, as the old and the young, the unfit and the fit, the incomplete and the complete, and the disabled and able confessed before God and before each other in full, visible acknowledgement of the brokenness of their bodies, there was a powerful sacramental rhetoric at work, a witness to God in Christ's salvific participation in their brokenness?

9 Conclusion

How are Christians to celebrate and witness to the life of freedom in Christ? Should they handle poisonous snakes with impunity, and run towards soldiers' bullets trusting in their immortality? Such actions are bizarre, tragic even, but not mad. They are celebrations of the discovery that all that once seemed to matter most no longer imprisons the soul. Celebration matters. Celebration precisely *is* the life of foretaste to which Christians are called. How then should people in a society that is held in the bondage to the identification of bodiliness with sex, sin and the tyranny of the body-perfect celebrate their freedom in Christ? The answer proposed here is by celebrating the truth about themselves; celebrating a bodiliness that is manifestly

not in bondage to either sex or sin; a bodiliness that concedes that all bodies are in some sense broken. For the truth is that all bodies (whatever their condition) are by some extraordinary mystery vehicles of God's delight in us, and, necessarily, vehicles of our delight in each other.

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[1] In this, I include both adults and children. I include those whose disability is unmistakable, and those like myself whose condition might be judged (and dismissed) as marginal.

[2] An illustration with comment to this effect appears in Stephen Pattison, Shame – Theory, Therapy and Theology, (Cambridge: CUP 2000) pp 311 & 312

[3]. Margaret R Miles, Carnal Knowing – Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West. (Boston: Beacon Press. 1989) p 33

[4] Miles p34

[5] Some commentators have resisted this conclusion, arguing without any evidence whatsoever that the provision of only one bath *must* imply that bathing times were controlled so as to prevent men and women bathing together. There is no 'must' about it! The argument, in the face of ample evidence to the contrary, is too contrived to be credible.

[6], Roy Bowen Ward, 'Women in Roman Baths', Harvard Theological Review 85:2, 1992 pp 134 - 135

[7] Peter Brown, The Body and Society (London: Faber 1988) p 315

[8] Brown p85

[9] Clement. The Instructor (Anti-Nicene Christian Library. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1869) Bk III, Chap ix. Vol IV p308

[10] 1 Cor 7:29

[11] Jerome. *Letters* 52.2

[12]Bowen Ward p 145

[13] Miles p 33

[14] Miles. p33

[15] Eugene F Rogers Jr. Sexuality and the Christian Body. (Oxford: Blackwell 1999) p63

[16] Rogers. p64

[17] Rogers. p65

[18] Harvey Cox. The Feast of Fools. (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press 1969). p52

[19] Rowan Williams, 'The Body's Grace' in Charles Heffling (ed), Our Selves, Our Souls & Bodies (Boston Mass: Cowley Publications 1996) pp 58 - 68

[20] Heffling p58

[21] Luke 12: 7 & 32

[22] John 8:32

[23] Heffling p64.

[24] Rom 7:6

[25] Elizabeth Stuart , 'Disruptive Bodies: Disability, Embodiment and Sexuality' in Lisa Isherwood (ed.) The Good News of the Body– Sexual Theology and Feminism, (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) p166