



Nudists in Christian history

by
Nick Mayhew-Smith

Nudism in Christian tradition

Christianity like all religions is based to some degree on precedent, heritage, traditions, and rituals that are passed down from generation to generation. There are aspects of religion and religious cultures that are resistant to change and innovation. You only need to read the adverse media reaction to some church institutions failing to come up with a satisfactory way of adapting to changes in social attitudes around sexuality.



Nick Mayhew-Smith

I met a well known Christian writer called Martin Palmer, an environmentalist, who has done a lot of work on bringing people from different faiths together, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian alike to work on green issues. His first interfaith meeting in the 1980s at Canterbury Cathedral, ended in death threats and an attempt to burn down the cathedral itself while he was inside.

Introducing innovation and change into religion has its dangers, and that's something I keep in mind when I talk about Christian naturism. But, and this is important, religions do value history and precedent. In religion we take comfort from the witness of our ancestors. Not for nothing do we have our saints, and I'm going to introduce you to a few nudist saints right now.

There have been many Christians in the past who embraced extended periods of nudity, sometimes quite public nudity too, as part of their lives. Precedent is important, and I think as Christian naturists we have a witness before us that we can carefully and respectfully build on.

To start with it's important to note that nudity was not nearly as laden with negative meanings as it is today, and that nudity for things such as washing, and hence baptism, was seen as mundane and unremarkable. I don't list Jesus Christ as any sort of nudist, but there were certainly attitudes and stories about him that reflect that he never shied away from nudity. Christ was born naked, baptised naked and died naked on the cross.



Baptism of Christ. Giotto

I present some historical figures who embodied ritual life without reserve.

Saint Ethelflaeda

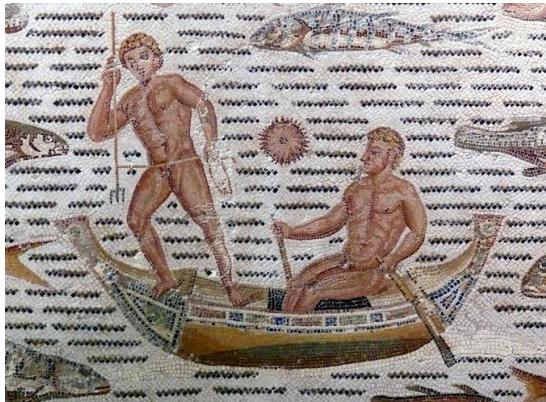
11th century abbess of Romsey Abbey, took a nightly dip in the river Test to say her prayers. One winter the queen caught a cold just from watching. She always went in 'nuda', as the author of her Life mentions – repeatedly.



Icon: www.annasicons.co.uk

Saint Peter

This is the same Peter as, “The rock on which I will build my church”. According to Catholic tradition, the first Pope. He was naked when he went fishing. Most fishermen and sailors chose to cast their nets without clothes in Classical times, when bare skin was more practical than robes. Peter opted for this traditional attire (John 21:7).



Museum of Sousse

But, the NIV tried to disguise the fact.

NIV: *As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.*

The original Greek text used the word: γυμνός which means naked. The Latin Vulgate is easier to translate: *Simon Petrus cum audisset quia Dominus est tunicam succinxit se erat enim **nudus** et misit se in mare*

Evagrius Ponticus

The first known skinny dipper in church history. A pioneer of early monasticism in the 4th century, he stood naked in a well all night to mortify his flesh. Before becoming a monk he had been overly fond of fine clothes, so perhaps this was also a penance.

The Spiritual Meadow

Devotional nudity is also witness from the margins, as in the 7th century text, “*The Spiritual Meadow*”. In one tale from early desert monasticism, two unclad monks attended church – without anyone batting an eyelid.

St Cuthbert and me at Coldingham

St Cuthbert sang psalms ‘*to the sound of the waves*’, along with sea otters in a beautiful duet with nature. Accounts vary as to whether he was naked: nudity is awkward to some Christians, but this hardy Celtic soul endured tougher challenges than a skinny dip.

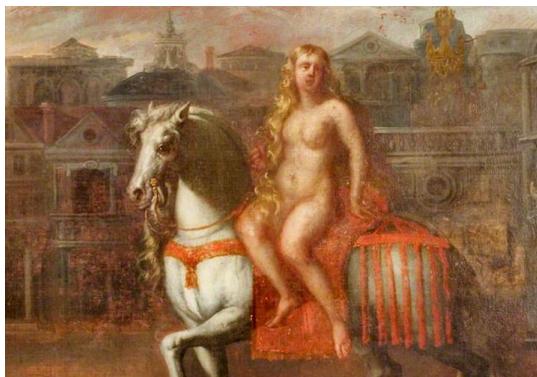


St Cuthbert 634 – 687

I went to the exact same bay where St Cuthbert is said to have bathed and recreated his ritual exactly. The bay is almost impossible to walk in because of the many boulders, but then I found that on the right there is a wonderful smooth sloping shelf, absolutely ideal for entering the sea safely. I'm 100% certain that is exactly where St Cuthbert walked naked before me!



Lady Godiva



Painting by Adam van Noort

Coventry's Lady Godiva is famed for her naked protest against unfair taxes. Less well known is her legacy as a prolific church founder. Historians debate whether she actually bared all, but she was unarguably a powerful and independent-minded woman in 11th century England.

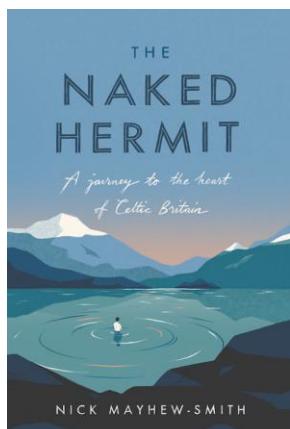
De Arte Natandi



Nick at St. Herbert's Island

Swimming was done naked through all of human history. One churchman who embraced it with serious dedication was Cambridge priest Everard Digby, a colourful figure who wrote the first book on how to skinny dip, *De Arte Natandi*, in 1587.

The Naked Hermit



I wrote this book¹ inspired by a naked hermit on Mount Sinai, a 4th century anchorite, documented by early writers. He went au naturel for 50 years, discarding all trappings of civilisation, praying in solitude with wild beasts and angels.

Baptism

Nudity was mandatory in early baptism (why wouldn't it have been?), embodying the spirit of rebirth without inhibition. Senior bishop St John Chrysostom wrote a brief mystagogy celebrating this, exhorting candidates to be like Adam and Eve and feel no shame about nudity.

St. John Chrysostom (347-407),
Sermons upon the Epistle to the Colossians, II.2:

Then [in the Old Testament days] it was slave toward master, but now, friend toward friend... Then there was nakedness, now there is nakedness.

But then the nakedness was a consequence of sin; now there is no sin. Rather, now we strip to become freed from sin.

Then, he [Adam] put off the glory that had been his; now he [man] puts off the old man, and before he descends into the water, he puts it off just like a garment.

Mary of Egypt

St Mary of Egypt is the mother of all devotional nudists, going naked in the desert for 40 years as a penitential discipline.

She did finally pop some clothes on to receive communion from a rather startled St Zosimas, who originally mistook her for a wild animal.



Detail from pictorial life of St. Mary

In Conclusion

So there we have some people from Christian history who actively chose nudity in an outdoor and/or public setting as part of their witness, as part of their ritual and devotional life.

These stories have been downplayed or censored from the historical record; even the definitive *Patrologia Latina* removed the word 'naked' from an important text about Evagrius Ponticus. Others argue or mistranslate that 'naked' means 'light clothing'. But it really doesn't.

I don't claim any of these as naturists; that's a modern version of nudism more focused on recreational, mixed-sex nudity. They tell instead of rare and raw spirituality, embodying faith wholeheartedly, without reservation or inhibition about the body.

Nudity has a lot of different meanings, and naturism is just one form in which nudism can be experienced and put into practise.

To some of these nudists, being without clothes was a way of rejecting both civilisation and all human company. It was seen as a deliberate anti-social act. Mary of Egypt and the Naked Hermit of Mount Sinai both shunned human company, for them it was a matter of solitude, a way of embodying what it means to be a hermit to the ultimate degree. They weren't at all interested in social nudity, and in fact both ran away or hid when others came near.

Others saw their nudity as an act of protest against worldly power and authority. Lady Godiva is perhaps the closest to the modern Naked Bike Ride. Nudity is often a form of protest and she puts me in mind slightly of the early Quakers, who also rejected social conventions and rules and at times would run naked through the streets to show that human beings should be above social control.

Still others saw their nudity as a symbol of poverty, an extreme form of non-possession. If you read through that book *The Spiritual Meadow* that I have quoted from, where the two monks attend a church service naked, it is clear that this was an aspect of desert spirituality.

And still others were choosing to go naked as a matter of comfort and convenience, such as the bathing St Ethelflaeda and St Cuthbert, and St Peter on the boat. You could in theory in such circumstances wear something, but they clearly picked the nude option.

I think for me as a Christian naturist the one that most appeals out of all of these on a theological basis is baptism. It was communal nudity, it was an expression of innocence, it was linked to bathing and rebirth, and it has clear echoes back to the state of our original creation with Adam and Eve. As my picture showed I have also performed naked bathing rituals in Christian tradition and they have been incredibly powerful and moving, I even did some for the BBC.

Nick Mayhew-Smith
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¹ For an in-depth look at this and more naked spirituality, see Nick's book *The Naked Hermit* (SPCK, 2019), available on Kindle and Amazon.

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Christian Naturist Fellowship



The Christian Naturist Fellowship aims to:

- Provide support and encouragement for Christian Naturists.
- Help Christian Naturists to study the Bible and show how their Faith and Naturism are compatible.
- Encourage Christian Naturists to share their Faith with fellow Naturists.
- Provide answers to Naturists interested in finding how Christ is relevant to their lives.

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