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Why Are Americans Afraid of Being Naked?

in: Breakthrough Thinking

In the Netherlands people can be naked in their gardens, the beach and recently the gym. But in America, even chocolate sculptures can't be without clothes. Why is that?

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When Catholic protesters recently shut down a [New York](#) exhibit displaying a naked, life-sized Jesus sculpted from chocolate, the outcry wasn't totally unexpected. Labeled

offensive by critics, the artwork touched an angry nerve by pushing religion and nudity — two substances that historically don't mix — into the limelight. While the media was quick to exploit the story, it also expressed surprising modesty when it came to the naked Christ, avoiding the full frontal and opting for photos of the Lord's backside.

But in Europe, and particularly the Netherlands, where bakeries display anatomically correct marzipan nudes in their front windows right next to chocolate bunnies and chicks, such furor over confectionary draws a complete blank. On this side of the Atlantic, when it comes to nudity, Europeans happily assert they've got absolutely nothing to hide.

"The Netherlands is a liberal country where public nakedness is allowed, and that's the way it should be — that's why there's a law for it," says Ragna Verwer of the Dutch Naturist Federation (NFN), a 70,000-member-strong organization established to expand naturist activities.

According to Verwer, 1.9 million Dutch regularly get nude, going to nude beaches or stripping down in their own gardens, though she estimates the numbers are much higher as NFN doesn't include sauna-goers in its research. "Naked recreation is well accepted here. But we have to take care that things stay this way, which is why we often discuss these matters with local city councils and [recreation](#) areas to create more places."

Legally, in Netherlands people are allowed to be naked anywhere except public roads or when they annoy others, a law in play since 1986. It is not uncommon to find nude swimming sessions at public swimming pools, nude or topless beaches. Recently, Fitworld, a gym in Heteren in the eastern Netherlands, introduced Naked Sunday, offering locals the opportunity for bare [workouts](#). This quickly proved a popular idea — at least with journalists, photographers and television crews, who easily outnumbered participants on the opening day.

"I've done interviews with people from Russia, [Ireland](#), [Canada](#), Australia, America and Turkey," says Fitworld's owner, Patrick de Man, who says Naked Sunday was in part a competitive response to other gyms offering pole dancing courses, but also a response to a request from two of his naturist clients. De Man says the amount of attention he received both from home and abroad was surprising because "being naked is absolutely normal here," though admittedly, bare bench presses were totally new to Holland. But the owner has also received complaints from locals, mostly about [sanitation](#), and at least one member wrote on the club's website that he was switching gyms.



"A lot people from the church have sent me letters about God and stuff like that. But I tell them God was the first man of naturism. He and Adam and Eve were all naked on Earth," says de Man, taking the criticism rather pragmatically. True — at least until the couple donned their first fig leaves, provoking centuries of subsequent debate.

"Nudity is definitely not shocking or even arousing," says Mandy Servais, a customer at Amsterdam's Sauna Deco, in a robe wrapped loosely around her body, which for all intents and purposes, was naked, as Dutch saunas are visited in the buff. Says Servais, who has frequented saunas since she was a teen, "I think as a society we're very simple and take a practical approach to sex and nudity. We think that everything that exists is normal so there's no need to make a fuss. We're not really occupied with what others think."

Verwer mirrors Servais' response. "I think the Dutch believe let everyone have their dignity and do what they enjoy most. This isn't just how we think about naked recreation, the same goes for gays —everyone's accepted," she says.

While the Dutch seem to accept that underneath their clothing everyone's naked, the same laissez-faire attitude doesn't apply in the States, where the public has been schooled in the cultural ideology that "nude is naughty," and nudity is regarded as sexual.

Perhaps much of this attitude can be chalked down to America's cultural forefathers, the Puritans, whose deeply religious moral zeal made them fear nudity so much they refused to bathe, ensuring a future of national prudishness.

This might appear a huge contradiction given the American media's rampant appetite for sex, but how else to explain the fury over Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" and the

network's rush to cleanup before facing clampdowns and stiff fines? Or PBS's need to position the disclaimer "For mature audiences only" when broadcasting footage of Michelangelo's David.

A further inconsistency when it comes to nudity is what Americans regard as risqu : barely clad Victoria Secret models strutting their way across television or nude grandmothers? As Dove soap found out this March, it's the latter. The Federal Communications Commission, which regulates America's broadcast media, banned a series of prime-time ads depicting six middle-aged women posing nude for Dove Proage products, claiming it was inappropriate, though the ads ran successfully in Europe and Canada.



Ironically, Dove's parent company is the Anglo-Dutch giant Unilever. While a number of pro-family and women's groups complained the ad contributed to the further commercial sexualization of women — an ongoing and valid debate — clearly, older nudity is threatening because our culture rarely separates nakedness from sex, which is something the elder crowd, at least until [Viagra](#), wasn't supposed to be having.

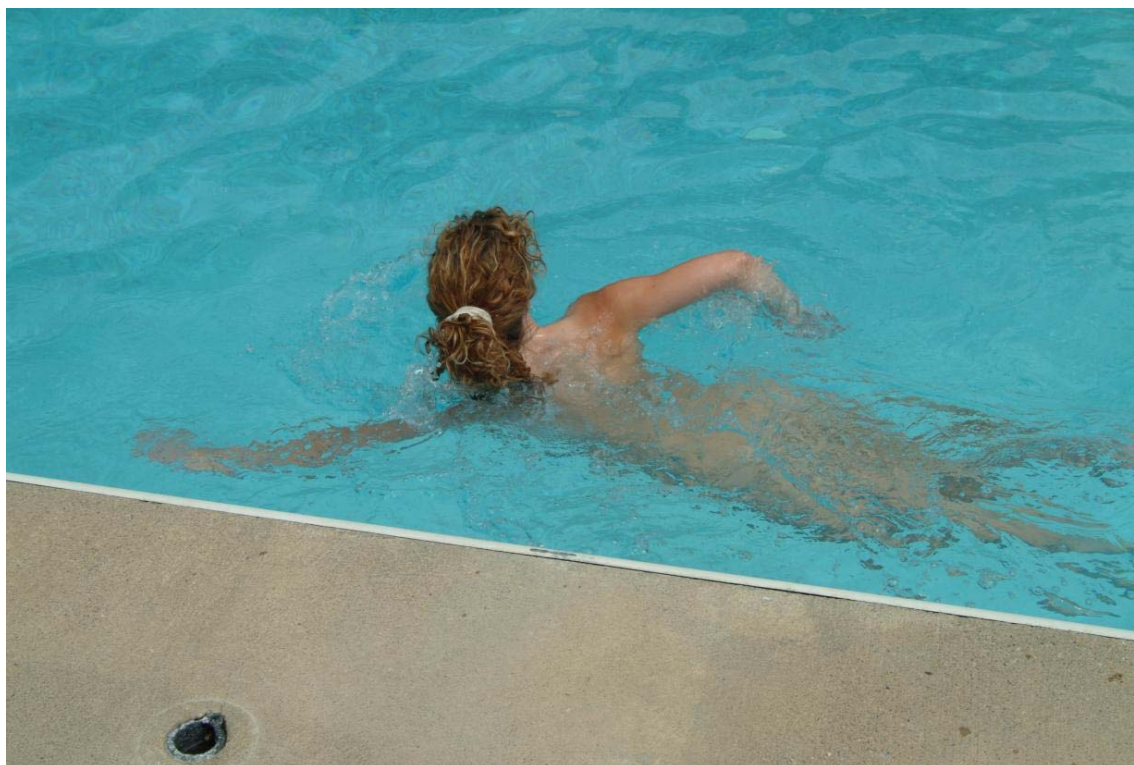
On a similar note, in 2004 Wal-Mart, never one to balk at profits, refused to sell Jon Stewart's book "America," which featured doctored nude photos of Supreme Court judges. Old, saggy bodies were simply too offensive compared to, say, the number of slasher films Wal-Mart also carries.

Of the Dove Proage ads, says Claire Taylor, who works in international advertising, including projects with Ogilvy & Mather, the company responsible for the Dove ad campaign, "If the ad featured 20-year olds, there'd be no problem. It's so hypocritical."

Taylor, an American who has lived in Amsterdam for the last 25 years, thinks the negative reaction stateside is due to "puritanical prudishness," which doesn't balk at violence or soft porn on television, yet is offended by older nudity. "Now seeing older bodies — that's reality TV if you want reality," Taylor quips.

Another, perhaps sobering, reality: America has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the industrialized world, according to the American Association of [Pediatrics](#), and a rate that exceeds the Dutch by nine-fold. A healthy attitude to nudity as well as sex, something the Dutch are regaled for, might have a positive impact as more exposure typically leads to greater information.

Still, in America, being naked remains complex. Because our associations are often limited to porn, hippy naturalists, or the \$400 million a year nude recreation industry, nudity is either seen as sexual or a gimmick. Take journalistic "undercover" exposes — a choice phrase, given the situation — on nudists at play ("Just look at those guys playing tennis!").



Or the media's buzz over photographer Spencer Tunick and his nude landscapes. Tunick,

who specializes in photographing hundreds of naked bodies sprawled together in abstract forms against an urban backdrop, has definitely pushed social boundaries at home. But in Amsterdam, where Tunick is due this summer, it's a different story — or no story. "Is it a big deal that's everyone's naked when everyone's naked?" asks Servais.

In Europe, then, clearly neither moral outrage nor public disorder greets nudity. Men don't go wild, women remain safe and the zero fashion statement remains just that, something with zero impact.

Taylor, who has fully adapted to Dutch ways, has taken her American sisters to the sauna when they visit and watched their transition from shock to comfort. "They're both overweight, so at first they were horrified. But one of my sisters quickly got used to being naked and it felt natural. When you see that other people are flabby and kind of falling apart, it's OK," she says, laughing. "Listen, you got to check out each other's parts, but seeing the Cesarean scars, fat rolls, cellulite, eczema and aging bodies of the over 50s crowd puts it all in perspective — you realize how absolutely unique a gorgeous naked body is. Americans might associate nudity with eroticism but here, it's only associated with nakedness," she says.

But there is a glimmer of hope. Sometimes nudity can be a useful, positive statement, even in the States. Like the World Naked Bike Ride, a sort of "Critical Ass" of cyclists organized to protest car culture, promote sustainability practices and celebrate creative expression. Organized by Conrad Schmidt, a South African living in Vancouver, British Columbia, the international event is clothing optional.



"It's a way of challenging the stifling conformity we get here in Vancouver and North

America, and certainly nudity laws challenge a system that needs shaking up," says Schmidt, who has been surprised how trouble-free the rides have been on a whole, though in America, Chicago tried to shut the event down and Los Angeles, never a hotbed of community activism, boasted a larger police-to-participant ratio.

"In Portland, people are always riding naked these days, but what's strange is they're apparently harassed more by the police when they're clothed," he says. "Nudity is tough for law enforcement because it involves the concept of indecent exposure. There's no good definition of what's indecent about the human body."

Via [AlterNet](#)

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