

The Objectification of Women - Part 1

Women are sexually objectified in our world today.

I doubt anyone would contradict that statement... although far too many choose to participate and indulge in the objectification rather than make any effort to refrain from or oppose it.

For the purpose of this article, I will take it for granted that people who wish to respect human dignity do not want to sexually objectify women. With that assumption so stated, I would like to make some observations about the sexual objectification of women in our world today.

Let me first define what I mean by “objectification” or “sexual objectification”...

Objectification is the perspective, or mind-set, that...

- assigns sexual meaning to the woman or certain elements of her body.
- focuses sexual attention on the woman or her body parts.
- considers the assigned sexual meaning to be the primary (or only) meaning found in her body or body parts.
- assumes that a sexual response is the only response a man can or will have to *seeing* the objectified woman. Said another way, seeing her body incites impure lust in a man’s heart.

In short, *objectification* sees the woman as principally a sexual object.

Objectification by Muslims

To the Muslim mind, it would appear, every last bit of a woman's natural beauty is a danger to a man's moral purity. Consequently, for the most extreme expressions of Islam, every inch of her body must be covered in order for her to avoid being a sexual temptation to men.



Even the face is considered a danger. A woman's God-given beauty—no matter which portion of it is seen—will cause a man to lust.

So, evidently, the answer is to so completely hide a woman's beauty that when seen, she appears to be nothing more than a walking pillar of draped cloth.



Would anyone disagree that this is an egregious example of the sexual objectification of women? No part of her is safe to be seen; every part of her is sexualized.

Of course, that is the extreme even in the Muslim world. But among Christians, some are not far removed from this extreme. I'll demonstrate that in a moment, but first, consider this example from the nation of India.

Objectification in India (a First-hand Account)

A few years ago, I had the privilege of traveling to India to do some Christian ministry through music. While there, one of the women on our team was asked to make sure that she kept her ankles covered. The man who asked her was from the Indian Christian Ministry that was hosting us during our ministry tour.

The outfit she was wearing was much like the one you see here... a rather normal looking dress, but with matching pants that cover the legs... *and ankles*.

Evidently, for the Indian man, he can safely see a woman's face or arms, but seeing any part of her legs triggers a lustful response.



This sexualized view of a woman's ankles is an artificially assigned meaning. It is not intrinsic to the nature of a woman's ankles. While it caught my Indian brother's attention enough to warrant action to "correct," I myself was completely unaware that her ankles were exposed. To my American mind, the ankles had no sexual meaning at all. Seeing them was not a sexual event for me at all... but it must have been so for him.

So in India, they do not sexually objectify the face or arms, but the body and legs are a danger to a man's purity.

An Observation...

Here in America, we look at these examples of sexual objectification and find them silly and overly prudish. We don't see any reason that a woman must cover her face and we count it demeaning to a woman to demand it of her. We don't see any reason to hide the ankles, and find that requirement to be senseless because we do not assign sexual meaning to them.

But there's something very important to realize as we ponder these first two examples: whatever body parts someone insists on being covered, those are the parts that they are sexually objectifying. The logic is simple: if a body part is not considered "sexual," it need not be covered at all.

Stated more simply... *That which we cover, we objectify.*

I'm not talking about valid reasons to cover the body for warmth or protection... I'm talking about parts of the body that we insist on covering for "moral" reasons; those parts of the body we believe will cause lust if they are seen by the opposite sex.

Why do the Muslims cover the face? Because they have assigned sexual meaning to it and so concluded that the sight of a woman's beautiful face will incite lust in men.

Why do the Indians cover the ankles? Because they have assigned sexual meaning to them and so concluded that the sight of a woman's ankles will incite lust in men.

Objectification in the American Church

The most “fundamentalist” Christians in America are among the worst to sexually objectify women.

They have a sincere desire to live in righteousness and purity before God. But they have determined that seeing the body of a woman will inevitably lead men to lust. The more of her body that is seen, the more likely the lustful response.

So, since they firmly believe that women are called by God to be “modest” (1 Tim 2:9 has nothing to do with how much skin is covered! See [Rightly Dividing 1 Timothy 2:9](#)), even swimwear cannot leave any skin above the knees or below the neck exposed.

The “swimsuits” seen at right are the result (wholesomewear.com). I wouldn’t bat an eye at these “dresses” if I saw them worn to church on Sunday morning! I can’t imagine how miserable they would be to actually swim in.



Oddly enough, These Christians count the most beautiful part of a woman’s body (her face) safe to be seen by any man. But the rest of her body—from neck to knees—is considered to be a spiritual danger to men. Because they have assigned sexual meaning to these parts of her body, they believe that they will always cause a sexual response in men at their very sight.

This is the sexual objectification of women.



Non-fundamentalist churches are certainly less extreme in the details of their standards for attire, but ultimately we have to conclude that by the same measures we’ve been using for the previous examples, they also objectify women.

Most such churches have no problem with women wearing a “modest” 1-piece bathing suit in mixed company. They may even hold an all-church swimming party at the city pool where everyone in the church is invited. It is *not* presumed

that men will lust after the women in such suits, even though breast cleavage may be visible and the entire length of the thighs can be seen.

Some such churches may not break a sweat even if some of the women wear “sensible” bikinis. After all, the belly isn’t really “sexual” is it? Everyone knows that the real issues are the breasts and the pubic region, right? These are the parts that cannot be seen without producing a sexual response in men... or so it is believed.



“As long as the breasts are covered and at least shorts are worn, then the man alone is responsible if he lusts after the woman’s body. But if she exposes any more, she is to blame.” Maybe no one actually says that, but they often act as if it were true.

This is certainly less radical than fundamentalists’ view, but this too objectifies those parts believed to be “sexual” and thus in need of covering.

NOTE: In the article as originally written, I included several yet more “revealing” images of women. I provides them not to titillate but to illustrate. In the spirit of Romans 14, I have eliminated them from this version of the article so that men who do not yet have the freedom or ability to view an image of a scantily-clad or nude woman without lust could still read the rest of the article without violating his own conscience.

Objectification in Culture

In many cases, the objectification of specific body parts of both genders is formally and legally codified.

Laws and ordinances exist in our state and local governments which mandate that a woman may not be seen topless in public places. Provided her nipples are covered, however, she is considered to be within the law. Likewise, both men and women are not permitted to be seen in public without some sort of covering upon their loins and buttocks.

Almost no one seems to disagree with the assessment that these are indeed the body parts which produce the “automatic” sexual response in others when seen. Oddly enough, in this perspective, Christians find themselves in *agreement* with the rest of our culture... *including pornographers!* This fact alone should give us cause to reexamine our assumptions!

I'll state it plainly...

On these points, Christians and the pornography industry agree:

- **Seeing the breasts of a woman is sexually exciting for a man.**
- **Seeing the uncovered pubic or buttocks regions of either gender is sexually exciting to the opposite gender (or even to the same gender).**

Note here that the difference between the culture and the church is not in how they view these body parts, only in how they encourage people to react to them. The world says “Indulge!” and the church says, “Flee!” but the core belief about the nature of the body is identical!

Most Christians insist that these body parts remained covered at all times except with a doctor or one's own spouse. They do so from an honest and genuine desire to live a sexually pure and holy life before God. Nonetheless, they still objectify the woman's body. “*Because the body is sexual,*” they would say, “*cover it!*”

Our culture at large, on the other hand, tends to encourage and reward the use of the sexualized body parts to *emphasize* their sexual nature and invite sexual interest. Looking again at bathing suits, you can see from the images here [deleted] that the point is not to conceal, but to tantalizingly reveal, while at the same time maintaining minimal “legal”

covering on the primary “points of interest.” Without a doubt, they objectify the woman’s body. “*Because the body is sexual,*” they would say, “*flaunt it!*”

By covering the breasts (or at least the nipples), we actually end up emphasizing them and assigning artificial (and false) meaning to them... i.e. that they are sexual (breasts are not *sexual*, they are *maternal*). The specific covering of the nipples ultimately invites the observer to focus attention on the breasts and nipples. The exposure of most of the breast but not the nipple ignites the imagination to ponder that which is still hidden.

When women wear such bathing suits or other clothing for the purpose of calling sexual attention to themselves by highlighting certain body parts with their clothing, they are objectifying themselves, and inviting their own objectification by those that see them.

Providing Fertile Ground for Pornography

Since both Christians and the rest of culture at large have agreed to keep the breasts, pubic region, and buttocks covered, the pornographers can capitalize on that restriction and use it to sell us something we otherwise never have occasion to see: *the fabulous beauty found in the unclothed feminine form.*

Make no mistake... it is the prudery of our culture that facilitates and empowers pornography.

God never intended for feminine beauty to be always hidden. In fact, when we read the creation account in [Genesis 1 & 2](#), we discover instead that God's original design was for mankind to live completely *un-clothed*! While the man and woman stood before Him fully naked, God looked on all of creation and pronounced it "very good" ([Gen 1:31](#)). If sin had not entered the world, men would have been exposed to naked female beauty throughout the day—every day—within human society.

"But we're fallen now and can no longer look upon a woman's body without lust!"

The pornographers are delighted for you to continue believing that, *but it's a lie.*

A survey of the entire Bible will show that God never tells a man that he may not observe the naked beauty of any woman except his own wife. Never are women commanded to keep "this" or "that" body part covered for the sake of sexual purity or to prevent lust in men.

Why is it that in the church today, we are *so convinced* that keeping body parts covered is God's will for us... *when He never told us to do so?*

These rules are *entirely man-made...* and *they sexually objectify women!*

We, in our own dubious "wisdom," have assigned sexual meaning to a woman's body parts. Then, we've created rules for righteousness based on the assigned meaning. The result is a false standard of righteousness based on man's wisdom rather than God's Word. And—for the record—*the rules don't work* (see [Col. 2:30-32](#) for God's definitive statement on the utter uselessness of man-made rules of righteousness).

We Experience What We Expect

I suppose that many a man would testify that his *own* experience (and the experience of every man he knows) has demonstrated conclusively that men really are “automatically” aroused at the sight of a woman’s body. And, as everyone “knows,” the breasts and buttocks are the only real triggers.

“What about the ankles?”

Those don’t produce the sexual response, right? Perhaps that’s what most men would say... but what about the Indian man? *“Yes, the ankles incite lust, too.”* he might say. *“They also need to be covered. I know... because I’ve experienced it.”*

“What about the face?”

Of course, the face doesn’t incite lust... *or does it?* Ask the Muslim man. *“Yes! Absolutely! The face of my wife must be covered or other men will lust after her!”* And if he were honest enough to admit it, he would claim to know this for sure, because he himself is tempted to lust after other women when he sees their faces!

Think about it...

- If in a **Muslim** culture, every woman is covered head to toe to counter lust, then if any one woman appeared with face uncovered, *every man’s eyes would be drawn to gaze at her beauty!* And because his beliefs so dictate, every man would expect and experience lust at the sight.
- In an **Indian** culture, if every woman’s legs are covered to her feet, then the one woman whose pants reveal her ankles will be noticeable to every man who sees her. Because the sight is so rare, it produces a visceral response in him that he interprets as sexual.
- In a **Fundamentalist Christian** context, if every woman wears a high neck blouse and a skirt that reaches mid-calf, then the woman who wears a V-neck blouse (showing some cleavage perhaps) and a knee-length skirt will be a scandal in the church and every man will have to work very hard to avert his eyes from the “lustful sight.”
- In **Society-at-Large**, if every woman dutifully wears pants and a top of at least some sort, then the woman who goes topless or nude will attract the attention of every man

within sight. Because it's expected, each man will either indulge the sight for lust or turn away to avoid lust.

In each case, the lustful response is expected—and experienced—whenever a man sees some portion of feminine beauty that is always otherwise hidden from his view. That which he expects to lust after, he *does* lust after. ***This is why the Muslim, the Indian, the Christian, and the average Joe all find their beliefs about what feminine body parts incite lust to be confirmed in their own experiences. Their expectations are self-fulfilling.***

Their standards for lust do not align with each other, so they can't all be right. Yet, in each case, he thinks his perspective is vindicated because whatever the man *believes* will incite lust in his own heart... *does*. Conversely, whatever he has concluded will *not* incite lust, *doesn't!* No, they can't all be right, but they *can* all be *wrong!*

Here is the truth:

- To *believe* that something will incite lust is to *sexually objectify* it.
- That which we *believe* will incite lust, we require to be *covered*.
- Consequently, ***whatever we insist on being covered, we sexually objectify.***

And, that which we sexually objectify will incite lust in us when we see it.

Naturists do NOT Objectify Women!

Since to require the covering of a body part is to objectify it, it follows logically that the only way to ensure that no part of a woman's body is sexually objectified is to completely reject the claim that *any* part of a woman's body must be covered. This, in fact, is the belief and practice of naturists.

Think about it...

- At a **Naturist Resort**, if every woman is fully nude, then... well... then what? There's nothing hidden. Nothing more to reveal. Nothing more to imagine. No body part is emphasized by its "need" for covering. There's no one enticingly showing "just a little more" and men are *not* expected to lust (it's pretty rude). There's no expectation in a man's heart and mind that he will lust at what he sees, so he does not "automatically" do so.

We do not objectify that which we do not cover!

This is not to say *at all* that Naturists have become blind to the magnificent beauty God built into the woman's body! Of course they notice it! Of course they appreciate it! The fact is, only those that do *not* objectify the body can truly appreciate its beauty for what it really is... *God's handiwork*. And the Christian Naturist—above all—can see the reflection of God's image there ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)) and turn his or her admiration into praise to God.

(Fine artists and medical professionals also know and experience the non-objectifying exposure to full female nudity. See the links at the end of this article for more information.)

So, I invite you now to see the following images differently than perhaps you normally would. Notice that by the full exposure of the body, there is nothing emphasized. The breasts are simply a part of the woman's entire person. The pubic region turns out to be a rather insignificant part of the whole. The overwhelming total impact is of exquisite beauty. *This beauty reflects the glory of God! It is not for anyone's selfish indulgence!*

[At this point in the article, I included two chaste female nude black and white, and a painting by John William Godward called "A Pompeian Bath" with a completely nude woman standing at an ancient bath.]

What is true of the woman is also true of the man. This magnificent work by Michelangelo frankly includes the male genitals without apology, without emphasis, and without fear. They are simply a part of the man... every man, in fact. We need not fear nor despise their exposure. At Creation, our Father hand sculpted each and every part of the man's body from the clay. And His work was... and is still... "very good." ([Genesis 1:31](#))

[Here I inserted a photo of the statue of "David" by Michelangelo]

Closing Comments

As odd as it may seem to our culture today, and especially within Christendom, we should counter the sexual objectification of the human body not by covering it judiciously, but by its frank and honorable exposure.

Every boy among us who grows up seeing the beauty of women's faces on a daily basis, learns to observe that beauty without objectifying it. If every boy grew up seeing the loveliness of female nudity on a daily basis, he would learn to observe that even the female body's beauty without objectifying it.

Is there any other strategy in our culture today that offers any real hope for such a God-honoring perspective of humanity? Is there any other way to combat the objectification of women? *I don't believe there is.* We will never defeat the objectification of women in our culture until we first expel it from our own hearts.

Oh, Creator God, in Whose image we are all made, please make it so... Amen.

— Matthew Neal

Recommended Links:

- ART: Gordon College, a Christian college in Wenham, MA, offers (or offered) an art major that included the study of the nude. They posted a very powerful statement explaining their reasons for doing so. The page is no longer available on their site, but it can be found on the "Web Archive" [here](#).
- Another good article: [A Christian Perspective on Nudity in Art](#)
- Pastor David L. Hatton is an active pastor and an obstetric nurse. He came face to face with full female nudity in his medical profession and discovered that the "automatic" sexual response to seeing a woman's body was a false expectation. Read his story here: ["My View on Nakedness"](#)
- [007b.com](#) is a website written by women and for women to promote breastfeeding, the natural God-intended design for breasts. In the process it clearly exposes the falseness of breast-obsession/breast-taboo that pervades our culture.