

## Who do we pretend we are?

*"Stand naked, bare and uncovered before the Lord."*  
(George Fox, Epistle 11, 1652)

There's a famous German novel (later also made into several films), called *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*. Set in pre-1914 Prussia, it's the story of a homeless person coming out of prison. He tries to find work, but they wouldn't give him any, because he doesn't have a fixed address. And he tries to find a place to live, but wouldn't get one, because he doesn't have any work. He eventually manages to lay his hands on an old military commander overcoat from a second-hand clothes store. He walks out and - the passers-by no longer look down at the poor homeless wretch, but pay their respects to the alleged commander, and soldiers even salute him. It's amazing what a simple change of dress can do.

Even today, you're still often judged from what you wear. For example, certain branded clothing will show everyone that you a) try to pretend to have more money than you actually have, b) haven't got taste, and c) lack imagination and individuality. If you're a man and wear a cheap suit from Marks & Spencer's, people assume you're an office worker on a low salary, working for a big company. If you're a woman and wear one of those leather clubbing outfits that are hundredscore throughout the country, with an 'Oh-do-I-look-alright'-sorrow inscribed in your face, you're not from London, but from some provincial place (like, for instance, Birmingham). If you actually have some really individual, if not eccentric style, and throw a fierce 'I-don't-give-a-damn-what-you-think-of-me'-look at any conservative passer-by who may disapprove of your outfit, you almost certainly *are* from London. And if you're looking like Simon Gray and live in Birmingham - well, I better shut up now.

Wearing certain clothes rather than others creates a certain image of yourself. Wearing clothes at all has also some function - and it's not just about keeping your body warm and dry. (If this was all, even here in Britain there would be several weeks a year without having any need for wearing clothes.) It's also about hiding certain parts of our bodies from view by others - and sometimes, more paradoxically, making our bodies more attractive by covering *only* those parts with 'suggestive' clothing. In any event, it appears to me to have something to do with fear and a sense of vulnerability that makes us 'cover up' our bodies. We don't want to admit to who we really are, for fear of being rejected or ridiculed or simply of being seen with all our imperfections.

A fairly recent invention in our society (at most around 150 years old) is the widespread belief that it would be immoral to reveal our entire body. Regarding this belief, I've been through both extremes: At the tender age of 9, I thought it would be a sin to let my parents see me whilst I was having a bath; and at the age of 25, I found it perfectly acceptable to lie naked on a beach, surrounded by other naturists who were perfect strangers to me. The change from one extreme to the other came about through German Young Friends - and I was taken aback when I noticed that Young Friends in Britain seem to share some of the prudishness of British society as a whole. From a strictly practical point of view, there's certainly no reason why I

should put a towel around me before changing my underwear (or hide myself inside my sleeping bag whilst doing so). It feels particularly odd, given my experience that Young Friends in Britain are just as ready to accept everyone as they are, as are German Young Friends or naturists. So why should I hide part of myself from being seen by my friends?

I eventually decided to look at Quaker theology to see if it says anything about this issue - and, looking at the four Quaker testimonies, I came up with the following:

**Integrity:** Our bodies are an essential part of ourselves - much more essential than our clothes that we can change anytime. Even though the quote at the start of this article was probably meant metaphorically, it still hints at the fact that we shouldn't 'cover up' anything about ourselves. Why exactly is it that we should feel ashamed to show our bodies to others? Or feel offended about when seeing others without clothes? Is it that we can't face the 'naked truth' about ourselves or others? And if so, why can't we face it?

**Equality:** As already pointed out, clothes are often used to give some indication of our social class, status, profession, political views, etc. In a society that believes in equality, all those things don't matter anymore, and we're all equally valued, regardless of the clothes we were and regardless of what our bodies look like. In my experience, some naturist beaches come very close to this ideal. You could, of course, argue that it would be more 'equal' if all the bodily differences would be 'equalled out' by everyone wearing exactly the same. But before you go down that route, I'd recommend to read Aldous Huxley and George Orwell and study some of the history of the last two centuries (particularly the history of the *Gleichschaltung* during the Third Reich) - and you will no doubt realize that this is not really equality, but just enforced uniformity, inevitably bringing violent oppression with it.

**Simplicity:** When it comes to clothes, there's nothing simpler than not wearing any. The 'plain dress' approach of Quakers in the 18th and early 19th centuries was an attempt to rid Friends from any considerations for fashion or colours in clothing; but it was not too dissimilar to an enforced uniformity, as mentioned above, and, in any case, misled Friends to be preoccupied with outward things. Jesus told us that the lilies in the fields look more beautiful than King Solomon did in all his (richly clothed!) glory (the term 'in all his glory' interestingly has a different meaning today) - so why should we be bothered about what to wear?

**Peace:** An essential precondition for peace is that we all accept each other as we are - and this should include all aspects of our being, with the sole exception of certain kinds of behaviour. A truly peaceful society is, in my opinion, one where you can be yourself and show yourself as you are, without the fear of being rejected or ridiculed, or the anxiety that you might offend others.

Having gone through the testimonies, the question mark is even bigger: Why are we so anxious to cover ourselves?????

**Klaus Huber**