

Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

Living in a multicultural and multi-faith society by its nature allows for different attitudes and beliefs about death, and the disposal of the dead.

Among a few of the religions, and for most secular people, the idea of cremation seems simple and environmentally “green” in their eyes. In fact the Protestant faith allows cremation and although the Roman Catholic faith forbade cremations until 1983, according to current Canon Law, they will allow cremations as long as they are not done for reasons contrary to the Christian teaching, but still advises burial as the norm. So as it isn't just a non-Christian practice, it seems only natural to question why the Orthodox Church takes issue with cremation. One of the questions asked of clergy today, is whether cremation is proper or not, and if not, why not?



Rather than just the callous disposal of a human body the formal rite of a burial has been a tradition for thousands of years. This is proven by the fact that we find graves of all sorts, ranging from pyramids to the simplest kind. Most of them include various artifacts from the dead people's everyday life, which tells archaeologists that they had a belief in the afterlife and eternity, or at least the continuation of life to a certain degree after death.



Other religions such as Buddhism, Ancient Greeks, Norse, etc.) considered cremation honorable and believed that the bodies should be burnt to release the soul from the prison of the body, which was thought to be bad, with the hope that the deceased would be reincarnated into either a better life or into a new body. A contempt for the flesh was held by several religions in the spirit of many Ancient Greek philosophers, and included the Gnostics, Montanists, and Manichaeans, and were condemned

by the Church Fathers. In opposition to this Ancient Greek (Platonic) philosophy, the Orthodox Church maintains that,

“...the soul and body are 'betrothed' and inseparable. Only the totality of soul and body together comprises a complete personality, a hypostasis...the unbreakable link between soul and body an 'inclination of affection', 'commixture', 'community', 'attraction' and 'acquaintance', are preserved even after death. Physical evil, namely the deprivation of some good physical quality, may come either by accident or by the exercise of human will. Evil arises in the soul due to misinformed choice, whether by the darkness of deception or a plot of the enemy.”

Commented [AM1]:

Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

Cremation and The Old Testament

Hebrew Scripture, which for Christians is an "*educator in Christ*", contains many references to the subject of burial. The Israelites took great care to prepare for their burial. The sons of the dead person had the obligation of properly burying their parents. It was a sign of respect which was obligatory to the army, at a time of war, and to every faithful Israelite. Even in the case of the death of Samuel where it states that *"All the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there"*, their subsequent actions indicate that the burning was not done to disrespect their bodies. Scripture relates that *"They took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days"* following the Talmud prescription for mourning¹.

Cremation, however, was not a Hebrew practice and was considered a heathen practice, even up to today for Orthodox Jews. For the Nation of Israel, it was considered shameful for someone to be denied burial (Psalm 78:3) and is listed as a punishment in Torah Law.² The disgrace of burning the body was also evident in the sin of Achan whose punishment was to be stoned and burned.³

The New Testament

The Apostles and the Church has maintained this burial tradition of the Old Testament. Even though Christ died the death of a criminal, He was not left on the cross but He was cared for by Joseph of Arimathea and placed in his tomb for burial. Another good example is the case of Lazarus whom Scripture tells us was buried. (John 11:17)

While Christ does not directly condemn this practice, He does tell the people that, *"...I have come not to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them...Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."*

Equally, Jesus was very clear to show the importance of the body taking great effort to ensure that His disciples understood that He had resurrected not in Spirit alone but in a physical body. He ate a meal with them and encouraged them to *"Touch me and see; a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."*⁴

The Early Christians, following the Apostles example, also buried their dead in the catacombs rather than cremate them and this practice of burying the dead continues in all Orthodox Christian's Churches throughout the world. It follows in the steps of our faith, and of the resurrection of the bodies together with the souls.

The Orthodox Stance on Cremation

There are several primary reasons for the Orthodox stance against the practice of cremation.

1. The Orthodox Church considers human life as a gift from God which, although we have free will, is His

¹ 1 Samuel 31:12-13

² Leviticus 20:14 and 21:9

³ Joshua 7:25

⁴ Luke 24:42 and John 20:27

Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

possession and should be returned to Him. As St. Paul says to the Corinthians, *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own."* (Cor 6:19)

2. There are no cases in the Old or New Testament where the burning of a body was done to honor the person. All accounts demonstrate an act to disgrace the person or peoples.
3. The process of cremation is a violent destruction of the body and thus dishonors the image and likeness of God. (See figures 3 and 4)
4. There is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological importance for those left behind to have the opportunity to mourn and witness with their own eyes the finality of death. This is best expressed in the final hymn of the Orthodox Funeral.

"Brethren, come, and let us give a farewell kiss give to him (her) whom death has taken, and offer thanks to God. For he (she) has departed from the bosom of his (her) kin; and he (she) hastens to burial..."

Another reason for burial of a body, from a Christian point of view is that burial offers us the evidence of God's presence in the miracle of incorruption. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches have the tradition of maintaining the relics of incorrupt saints, many of whom exude a pleasant and fragrant aroma and have proven to offer miraculous qualities of healing.

Freedom to Choose

People who support cremation say that they have a right to choose that, and that the Church should give in to their demands. The Church replies that they *are* free to choose the method of disposal of their bodies, but the Church is also free to follow her Holy Tradition and teaching and can

therefore deny to those wanting cremation an Orthodox funeral service and the memorial services which follow.

Consequences of Cremation

As to the question whether the souls of those cremated are rejected by the Lord, Orthodoxy can only say that the Lord can resurrect any body regardless of how it died and was disintegrated. We have the example of Saints who were burnt alive or were eaten by wild animals in the Colosseum of Rome etc. and it would be foolish to say that they will not be resurrected. This, though, is different from someone voluntarily wishing to be cremated and not buried in opposition to the teachings of the Orthodox Church.



Figure 4
Cremulator for grinding
of bones remaining after
cremation.



Figure 3
Bones remaining after cremation.

Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

In the Orthodox Funeral and Memorial services the hymns and prayers continually refer to burial and for the return of the body "to the earth from which it was taken."⁵ Thus, if a person decides to be cremated then the consequence of that action is that a funeral service cannot be conducted in the church. What is typically done in this case is that a Trisagion service is read at the grave. Also, a memorial service cannot be performed at the 40 days or after and the family cannot offer koliva.

In Conclusion

1. The burial of the dead is based on Holy Scripture, according to the belief that man was formed from earth "and to earth he will return".
2. Christianity, especially the Orthodox Church, teaches that the human body will rise at the Second Coming of the Lord, to attain the blessedness of the Heavenly Kingdom and that our bodies are not our own and are the "Temple of the Holy Spirit". Therefore, the body deserves the same respect given to it by the Prophets, the Apostles and the Early Christians.
3. The Church realizes that some people wish to have themselves cremated but reserves the right not to conduct a funeral service in respect of the Church's long-held tradition and justifiable canon law.

⁵ Gen. 3:19