



IS CREMATION CHRISTIAN?

BY STANLEY S. HARAKAS

More and more people in the United States are making the decision to have their bodies cremated after death. This decision is prompted by the growing number of crematoria in this country, and popularized by the media. Often we see dramatic scenes on television of the ashes of deceased actors or prominent figures being scattered to the winds.

For many Christians, cremation is now at least a viable alternative to burial, although they might not choose it for themselves. Others would have no hesitation about following through and would, in fact, see cremation as preferable to burial.

In this age of flux and change, Orthodox Christians too are challenged by alternatives to traditional practices. Issues such as

cremation are the topic of much debate, and arguments abound both pro and con. The result is that many have become confused, and are not sure what the Church really teaches or what their position should be.

Because of this confusion, I would like to present an Orthodox perspective on cremation and burial. What I have to say will not



The hand of the Lord came upon me
and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord,
and set me down in the midst of the valley,
and it was full of bones.
Then He caused me to pass by them all around,
and behold, there were very many in the open valley,
and indeed they were very dry.
And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"
So I answered, "O Lord God, You know."
Again He said to me, "Prophecy to these bones,
and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!
Thus says the Lord God to these bones:
'Surely I will cause breath to enter into you,
and you shall live.
I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you,
cover you with skin and put breath in you,
and you shall live.
Then you shall know that I am the Lord.'"

-EZEKIEL 37:1-6

ROMAN CATACOMBS REVEAL THE SPECIAL ATTENTION GIVEN BY EARLY CHRISTIANS TO THEIR DEAD.

be based so much on authoritative rules or legislation, but on general religious principles within Eastern Orthodoxy.

EARLY CHRISTIAN BURIAL PRACTICES

Cremation was widely practiced in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era, having crept in largely as a result of eastern influences. Despite the dominance of this practice, however, it was never accepted by early Christians. Instead, they chose to follow the Semitic custom of burial (cremation was never practiced by the Jews).

During periods of persecution, the Romans would often cremate the bodies of Christian martyrs as an expression of disdain. By doing this they also purposely destroyed the martyrs' remains so

that their relics could not be preserved. Despite this cruel practice, Roman catacombs reveal the special attention given by early Christians to their dead. They took great care to recover the bodies whenever possible, and to make sure that they were buried with honor and reverence.

As Christianity spread, it did not encounter any objections to burial, even among those who had formerly practiced cremation. In the 8th century, pagan cremation practices were legally prohibited in Christian countries. Thus, for over a thousand years in Western Europe, and even longer in Byzantium, the practice of cremation was unknown, except in unusual cases.

REAPPEARANCE OF CREMATION

In the 18th century, cremation

was introduced in France as a consequence of the French Revolution. It was legally approved there in April 1789. By the end of the 19th century, cremation societies had been established in all the nations of Western Europe, and laws were passed which legalized the practice. Nevertheless, it was not widely used, largely because of custom, ecclesiastical opposition, and expense.

What was the reason for this innovation? Why was a concerted effort made to change such a universal tradition as Christian burial?

Publicly its supporters claimed that cremation was more hygienic than burial and that it conserved public land. The Roman Catholic Church, however, saw through these arguments. The 1886 directive of the Holy Office attrib-

uted the movement to unchristian and specifically masonic motives (French Masonry at that time was clearly anti-Christian in character).

The Roman Church saw that the real motive behind this movement was a rejection of the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. It therefore sharply rejected cremation, not because it saw the practice as wrong in itself, but because of the underlying motives.

MODERN ORTHODOX RESPONSES

Like Rome, Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States and overseas have, for the most part, rejected the practice of cremation. The Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Archdiocese do not encourage its use. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has

And during times of pestilence, cremation is sometimes required by public health officials. In such cases the Orthodox Church has always been ready to look upon cremation as a necessary exception. The Japanese Orthodox Church, in fact, has adopted cremation as general practice. The high density of population and the lack of space for cemeteries in Japan make burial almost impossible.

CURRENT ARGUMENTS FOR CREMATION

What are some of the reasons given by those today who are contemplating cremation? The arguments vary. For many, perhaps the majority, cremation is a way of stating that life has ended with death. It is an assertion of the belief that death must be accepted

business in our society. Some avaricious funeral consultants push for expensive, ostentatious funerals featuring "livery-chauffeured Cadillac hearses in choice of colors," first-class steel caskets, and "water-proofed, guaranteed, airtight, underground vaults." The average person simply cannot afford it.

Even among those who can afford the expense, many sensitive Christian souls feel that such costly funerals have become a travesty of Christian faith, spirituality, and morality. Not understanding the other alternatives, they opt for cremation since it is far less expensive, and much less ostentatious.

Cremation is thus perceived by some to be more Christian and more spiritually appropriate than an elaborate funeral. Such

FROM A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE, CREMATION RAISES SOME SERIOUS QUESTIONS.

a policy in its Yearbook which specifically prohibits the practice of cremation to Greek Orthodox believers. The policy statement is as follows:

"Various Christian groups, instead of burial, prefer the cremation of the dead, which was customary among many ancient peoples. The Orthodox Church, however, mindful of the fact that the human body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit and inspired by the affection toward her departed children refuses to deliberately destroy the body, and has adopted the burial of the dead, as it appears in the Catacombs, and in the graves of the Martyrs and Saints." The prohibition, however, is not absolute.

In some parts of the country, local regulations require cremation due to adverse soil conditions.

as final, and that the expectation of the resurrection is illusory.

Others, however, are moved by what they perceive to be the "poetic" aspect of cremation. For them, the scattering of the ashes upon the earth or the sea is a final affirmation of their unity with all things, a kind of "ecological statement." For still others, cremation is a way of affirming their belief that the true essence of a human being is his spirit. These people believe that preoccupation with the body has a morbid and crass character.

But many who consider cremation today are not acting on such a theological or metaphysical plane. Their reasons are much more practical. For them it is merely a question of economics and religious sensibilities. Funerals have unfortunately become big

Christians do not intend for cremation to be in any way an attack on Christian faith. Rather, they would consider it to be an affirmation.

AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN EVALUATION OF CREMATION

The history, as well as the various rationales for and against cremation, do not add up to an absolutely clear and unambiguous picture. Can we make some sense of it? Let's examine the issue from an orthodox perspective—first from a doctrinal, and second from a pastoral standpoint.

Doctrinally, cremation considered in and of itself, without reference to motives and intents, is not inherently wrong. This fact becomes obvious when we consider that, in any case, the body eventually dissolves and the bones

are scattered. Often, bodies of the dead are lost at sea, consumed in burning buildings, or destroyed in a variety of other ways.

Based on the doctrines of St. Paul in 1st Corinthians 15, the events surrounding the resurrection of Christ, and the creedal affirmations, Orthodoxy teaches that there will be a general resurrection at the Second Coming. The particular circumstances of death, burial, and the location of bones and flesh ("dust") are not a significant factor in this resurrection. God is all powerful. If He can raise children of Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8), He certainly doesn't need the actual dust and bones of people to resurrect them.

But what about the pastoral grounds for preferring burial to cremation? I believe that from this perspective, the arguments are most convincing.

First, burial is an *affirmation* of our personal belief in the resurrection. Scripture teaches, "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1st Corinthians 15:16-19). A Christian burial may not convince unbelievers of the resurrection, but it is a tangible proclamation that although our earthly life is over, we "*look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*"

Secondly, burial is a concrete denial of the pantheistic philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. The scattering of a person's cremated ashes, on the other hand, is very symbolic of these philosophies. These practices run counter to the Christian belief that individual personalities continue on after death. It is interesting to

note that the practice of scattering cremated ashes has been popularized precisely at a time when interest in monistic Eastern religions is on the rise in our society.

Lastly, while cremation is not wrong in and of itself, the philosophy surrounding it comes close to an ancient heresy which we as believers should avoid like the plague. This heresy, known as dualism, taught that the body was evil and unimportant, and that only the soul or spirit was good, since that was where the real "person" was to be found.

The Church Fathers firmly opposed such a teaching. Dualism not only rejects the material creation, it also denies the Incarnation

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of Christ. For if the body is evil, how could the Second Person of the Holy Trinity take on full human nature, both human soul and human body? And how could His human and divine natures be "indivisibly, unchangeably, and without confusion united in one hypostasis or person," the Lord Jesus Christ?

From a pastoral perspective, then, cremation, which tends to minimize the importance of the body, raises some serious questions. The longstanding Orthodox honor paid to the relics of the saints is a profound witness that the Church has always honored both the spirit and the material remains of the human being.

A CHRISTIAN BURIAL

Does this mean that we are obligated to the practice of ex-

pensive and ostentatious funerals? I do not personally believe that funerals need to be extravagant and costly. The Church only asks that a certain amount of respect be maintained for the human body that was once the temple of the Holy Spirit.

There is no reason why Christians should consider themselves obligated to conform to wasteful ostentatious funeral practices. In fact, the simpler the arrangements, the better. Nothing in the Faith, to my knowledge, would prevent anyone motivated by such feelings from joining burial societies whose purpose it is to provide simple, dignified burials.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have chosen such dignified burials as a way of proclaiming their faith in the coming Resurrection. Let us follow their example, refusing the philosophically tainted practices of our culture and holding fast to the hope of our forefathers.

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1st Thessalonians 4:14:17).



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