An Investigation into the Phenomenon of Cremation in Today's Society

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

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Muncie, Indiana
November, 1980
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A time-consuming task such as an honors thesis could never have been accomplished by the author without the support of family and friends.

The author is indebted to her adviser, Dr. Charles R. Carroll for his patience, guidance, and assistance in the creation of this project.
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INTRODUCTION

Death is the final act of life that each living thing in our world must eventually face. Death is many times dreaded and feared because of its uncertainty and the mystique of the unknown. Along with death, many people are concerned with the physical body's disposal. It is this author's intent to explore the concept of death, placing specific emphasis on the means of body disposal known as cremation.

Cremation, as a body disposal method, is widely used today in Asian and European countries. However, this means has never gained major popularity in the United States.

Archaeologists have determined that some form of cremation even existed in prehistoric times, although they cannot be positive that the act was always intended and not accidental.

Throughout history cremation has been performed in times of epidemics, for environmental reasons and to fulfill religious beliefs, all of which will be further discussed later.

Cremation as a means of body disposal is an issue which needs to be evaluated for those concerned with their own futures as well as the futures of others.
Purposes of Study

Following the completion of class requirements for HSC 390, "Death and Dying," the author wished to further pursue the subject of death with emphasis on body disposal. As the research developed, the purposes became more clear and evident. The author intends to expound upon the following points and draw reasonable conclusions to the same. This research proposes:

1. to reveal the history of funeral rites, emphasizing cremation as one body disposal technique, and why certain individuals resort to, or oppose, cremation;

2. to determine the trend of cremation practices in the United States as compared to other countries in the world, and reasons for this trend;

3. to consider the legal, economical, and environmental factors involved in body disposition, emphasizing comparisons between cremation and other alternatives;

4. to recognize religious factors and denominational differences that influence actions regarding cremation as a body disposal technique;

5. to highlight the personal views of cremation among selected individuals in Muncie, Indiana;

6. and to perceive any limitations of burial preference and burial resources, particularly cremation, in Muncie, Indiana.

Methods

The author's research was somewhat limited due to the sparse quantity of information available on the subject of death and body disposal.
All books, as listed in the bibliography, were acquired from Bracken Library on the Ball State University campus and the private collection of Dr. Charles R. Carroll, professor in the Department of Physiology and Health Science.

Periodicals, although not numerous, were located in the aforementioned library. Although no government publications could be located on the subject, the author did receive several pieces of literature from Meeks Mortuary following a personal interview with Mr. Ron Shadley, mortician.

Personal interviews with Father Pat Click, Reverend Alan Byrne, and Mr. Bernard Freund of the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths, respectively, helped the author gain enlightenment on a more local level.

All conclusions drawn in this study will be on the basis of library research and interviews since time was a limiting factor in performing any sort of statistical survey.

It is felt to be of interest at this time also to mention the author's personal confrontations with various individuals' reactions upon learning the author's selected honors thesis topic. Reactions seemed to validate other research that reveals the reluctance of people to discuss or to consider the subject of death.
Definitions

For the sake of clarity and complete understanding of particular terms important to the text, the author has provided the following definitions:

CREMATION- the act of reducing a dead body to ashes by means of intense heat (approximately 2200° F.).

COLUMBARIUM- special room with niches (small storage spaces) in a crematorium where the inurned ashes may be placed.

CREMATORY- a specially designed furnace fired by oil, gas, or electricity, also known as a retort. It is capable of creating extremely high temperatures and is designed so that all smoke and gases are recirculated through heat chambers so there is very little discharge into a chimney.

INURNMENT- placing ashes in a small metallic or stone container and placed in a columbarium.

URN- container for cremated remains can be shaped in a square, rectangle, oval, or like a classic Grecian urn.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

History of Cremation

Funerals, as a custom associated with disposition of the dead, have existed since the early centuries of recorded history. This fact has been derived from tombs, literature, and monuments from ages past.¹

Archaeological evidence reveals that cremation as a means of body disposal was practiced in prehistoric times, although there is uncertainty whether the initial act was intentional or not.

Cremation was a pagan custom in the Graeco-Roman culture, but following the beginning of the Christian era, it had no place in funeral rites. As the Christian church moved out of the catacombs, its funeral rites became more public and elaborate.²

The modern cremation movement in the Western world began in Italy in the late 1800's by advocates fighting against the Roman Catholic Church's monopoly on burial arrangement.

It has only been in the last century that the practice of cremation as a means of body disposal in the United States has been reinstated.³ The first American crematory was erected in 1876 by a prominent Pennsylvania physician, Dr. F. Julius LeMoyne. He
built it for use at the time of his own death and that of a few friends. 4

The forerunners of modern funeral directors or undertakers were cabinetmakers, ministers, and nurses. It was not until 1900 that undertaking was recognized as a full-time vocation, emerging as funerals became more complex. 5

The twentieth century funeral is predicated by Judaeo-Christian beliefs. The practices, burial merchandise, and methods of memorialization had beginnings in Rome, Egypt, Greece, and other civilizations. 6

Funeral directing became more and more of a professional service in the 1950's and 1960's and less of a trade or "business." 7

Today, death and cremation as a means of body disposal are more of a controversial topic than was perceived by primitive societies. Indeed, the biological revolution has probably attracted the attention of the political theorist, philosopher, and theologian. 8

Funeral Customs in Other Countries

Virtually every known culture has surrounded the event of death with a structure of ritual and practice designed to: make disposition of the dead body, somehow convey the meanings given to life and death by the group, support surviving family members
and aid their adjustment to life without the loved one.

Many countries throughout the world view cremation in a completely different light than the United States, which has never popularly accepted it.

Although prohibited in 1875, cremation is now nearly universal in Japan and mandatory in Tokyo.9 Catholics believe they must be buried in consecrated grounds paradoxical to the modern cremation movement which began in Italy.10

Fifty percent of all New Zealand and Australian deaths result in cremation annually.11 In West Germany, cremation occurs in 60% of Hamburg and 40% of Berlin.12

England lead the number of cremations, number of crematoria and percentage of cremations in 1958. Internationally, they follow only Japan statistically. Factors contributing to the high rate of cremation as a means of body disposal include: scarcity of land, support by medical directors, fashionable among wealthy Britons, and less expense.13

Cremation is not practiced at all in Ireland. If there is a request or reason for cremation, the body is sent to England or Scotland and then the ashes are returned.14

India, Bali, and Ceylon are three countries in which cremation is practiced by the vast majorities.
Indians congregate on the banks of the Ganges where the funeral pyre is built and lit. The family must watch to make certain the skull breaks, thus releasing the soul.15

The Balinese save money all their lives for their funerals. It is believed that cremation is a means where the soul may be released to enter heaven for judgement and is then returned to earth, reincarnated in another human body.16

Cremation Trends in the United States

In some countries, including the United States, it is generally felt that a funeral provides an opportunity to express love, respect, and grief and is a testimony that a life has been lived.

A trend in America today is a more simplistic funeral.17 Statistics show an increase in cremation as a means of body disposal, but it is not much.

Several reasons for the rise in cremation are less cost than ground burial (usually); a growing shortage of cemetery space; modern methods that are clean, quick, and efficient; and more religious tolerance.18

Other authors have suggested, though, that one reason cremation is not more popular is that we have a "body image" or "body consciousness" which makes us prefer a casket or vault to dissection or burning.19
Other reasons that cremation has gained little favor with Americans include: avoidance of death or anything associated with it; resistance to major innovation in sacred ritual and secular customs surrounding death; religious resistance; no economy of land is urgent here now as in England and Japan; and lack of information. 20

Since its introduction in 1876, the practice of cremation has increased slowly in percentage of total deaths in America. Only 13,281 cremations, less than one percent of all deaths, had been performed from 1876 to the turn of the century. 21 By 1950, the figure rose to only 3.8%, with half of the total accounted for by California, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington. 22

Studies have shown that even today the largest number of cremations occur on the West Coast, in Florida, or large metropolitan areas where the population is more dense or the people die far away from their family hometowns. 23 The latest figure found in this author's research indicated that seven percent of all United States deaths resulted in cremation in 1976. 24

Cremation and the Environment

In 1975, D.W. Peabody wrote an article that appeared in the New York Times that stated unless new burial procedures are adopted, every acre in the United States will be taken up by cemeteries within 500 years. 25

Burial options for cremated remains are placing
the urn in the family plot or columbarium niche or scattering the ashes.\textsuperscript{26} Indiana is the only state that legally prohibits the scattering of ashes.

Despite these burial options, a survey conducted by the Casket Manufacturers Association of America in 1974 showed that 82\% of the 1,060 respondents preferred earth burial for their loved ones and 62\% preferred it personally.\textsuperscript{27}

The American Cemetery Association estimates there are 10,000-12,000 active, non-federal cemeteries in the United States today. However, the National Association of Cemeteries counts 50,000-55,000, including all cemeteries that have at least one burial annually.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Economical Factors}

It has been found that cemetery costs in cities and rural areas vary. In 1973, the Veterans Administration uncovered the average non-government burial to be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of plot, crypt, or columbarium</th>
<th>$295</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open and close grave or cremation</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marker</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffin enclosures</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. cemetery expenses</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For burial alone \textsuperscript{29} $810

Cremation eliminates the expense of the typical cemetery plot, vault, opening and closing a grave and
the marker or monument.\textsuperscript{30}

The average funeral and burial costs $2,000 or more.\textsuperscript{31} Depending upon the type of memorialization selected, costs of cremation are approximately $100. In this case, memorialization is the permanent placement of cremated remains according to the family's choice and available facilities.

Further breakdowns of funeral costs and expenses are exhibited in the following tables.

**BREAKDOWN OF FUNERAL DIRECTOR COSTS**\textsuperscript{33}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Salary expense</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building occupancy</td>
<td>12.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and operating expenses</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of funeral artifacts</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit before income tax</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

100.0

**EXPENSES OF FUNERAL PRACTICES**\textsuperscript{34}

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupancy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection costs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral service supplies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel, including owner's compensation</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

100.0

Statistics of 1969 record that less than 23,000 funeral homes handled the 1,900,000-plus deaths of that year, an average of 85 funerals each.\textsuperscript{35}

Jessica Mitford's investigation into the American funeral found that the most expensive columbarium in
1963 was $250, while the most expensive grave was $1,000. She also discovered one fear of funeral directors was harder work for less profit should cremation find popularity in the majority.36

However, if cremation did become the most commonly used form of body disposition, there is no guarantee that cremation costs would not increase.37

The Telophase Society

Although cremation is a generally less expensive way of body disposal if obtained through a funeral director's services, one group in California formed an organization that guarantees even lower rates.

The Telophase Society (telophase is the last phase in the division of living cells) was founded in 1971. A fee of $15 to $25, depending on age, entitles any member to being cremated and having his ashes dumped into the Pacific Ocean within 24 hours of his death at which time the final payment of $250 is owed.38

Since its inception the Telophase Society has performed more than 1,000 low-cost cremations and 10,000 current members are entitled to the same services.

Legal Requirements

When a person dies, his body is regarded as being in the control of next of kin.39 Instructions to the next of kin or other person responsible for the
disposition are legally sufficient in the United States and England. But no burial or cremation can take place until a licensed physician completes a death certificate stating the cause of death. Before cremating a body, a crematorium requires signed authorization from the next of kin.

Before the cremation process, the body must be placed in a wooden coffin, cardboard container, fiberboard or some lightweight metal coffin which can be completely incinerated with it. Only Michigan and Massachusetts have specific coffin requirements.

Religious Views

The author sought assistance in this area concerning body disposition, particularly cremation, from local sources in the Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic faiths which enhanced the material available in books and periodicals.

Protestant

It would be nearly impossible to describe an authoritative stand for or against cremation in the Protestant faith due to the great number and variety of churches. Generally, though, the churches permit individual members to make their own decisions.

Reverend Alan Byrne of the College Avenue Methodist Church sees cremation as an answer to limited
burial facilities, like the burial grounds he saw in Europe and the Middle East where bodies were stacked on top of one another.

The individual beliefs and customs of each church influences people the most. He cited the words of Paul in relation to the resurrection of the body as being spiritual, not physical.

Reverend Byrne said only one of twenty in his congregation would probably consider cremation as a means of body disposition. But, it must be accepted by the Methodist sect, because the wife of their Bishop Rains was recently cremated in Indianapolis.

Reverend Byrne's personal choice is not cremation. He has chosen to be buried in his family's plot where four generations of the Byrnes family are. He said visiting that gravesite reminds him of his roots and is comforting to him.

Jewish

There are three branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Mr. Bernard Freund, local attorney and adviser of the university's Jewish Student Fellowship, is a member of the most liberal, or Reform, branch where there is no opposition to cremation.43

One reason Judaism is opposed to cremation is its apparent denial of belief in bodily resurrection.
The Orthodox must be inhumed within 24 hours of death, but never on the Sabbath. They are totally opposed to cremation, and a Jew who selects this means of body disposal cannot be interred in a Jewish cemetery.

Like the Orthodox, the Conservative oppose cremation, based upon ancient scriptural precedent and teaching, but will allow cremated remains to be interred in a Jewish cemetery.

Roman Catholic

Traditionally, the Roman Catholic Church has been against cremation, because it is felt that this method of body disposal demeans and dishonors the body and may be a denial of hope for resurrection.

Catholics have taken a more liberal stand recently concerning cremation and permit it under the following circumstances: customary in country, danger of disease, no suitable gravesite available, or civil law requirements as in Japan.44

Father Pat Click of the St. Francis of Assisi Newman Center said the Church now allows cremation if permission is obtained from the local bishop for good reason.45 Usually this is because someone has elected to donate his body to science.

In his eight years of residency at the Newman Center, Father Click has known of only three Catholics who desired cremation.
If a Catholic chooses to be cremated, the cremation must take place after the Mass. Father Click said this is important because loved ones need to see the corpse since that is part of the grieving process.

Cremation in Muncie

The only crematorium in Muncie is located in Meeks Mortuary. Ron Shadley, mortician, said Meeks serves an approximate 50-mile radius. The nearest crematoria are located in Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, and Dayton, Ohio.

For $100, a person can be cremated, and a plastic bag with the body's remains will be placed in a white pasteboard urn. These ashes, under Indiana law, must then be entombed in a columbarium niche or buried, a cost not included in the $100 fee.

Meeks has other types and styles of urns which range in price from $25 to $500.

Only four percent, or 60 to 70 people, of Meeks' annual business are cremated and Shadley said this number has not varied for several years.
SUMMARY

"The soul is not anchored to a tombstone or a tiny plot of ground. Let us seek the way to honor our dead not because they died but because they lived."

--Walter J. Hickel
U.S. Secretary of the Interior, 1969-70

The author has attempted to explore the concept of cremation in hopes of better understanding the many factors involved in choosing a means of body disposal. The author felt that the only way to accomplish this effort was through research of history, trends, cultures, and other elements important to the topic of discussion.

Religious, legal, economic, and environmental factors have tremendous influence on all segments of human life, including the final act of dying. In the death process, this author found these factors to have great bearing on the decisions of body disposal, too.

Religion's major concern in allowing cremation or not is the resurrection of the body.

Legally, a person may make his desire known for cremation after death, yet surviving next of kin have the final determination, because the body becomes the property of the survivors by law.

Economically, the act of cremation is much more feasible than the traditional American funeral and
environmentally more sound, too.

This author assumes the government could enforce laws mandating cremation as in Tokyo, which would give people no choice, but this is not the American way. It is this author's recommendation that anxiety about death, and the act of cremation, could be somewhat alleviated by increasing the amount of available information on the subjects, increasing education on death, and encouraging discussions. For too long, death has been looked upon with fear because no one is able to describe or define its total meaning.

An interesting story that appeared in the author's research was of a woman's decision to have her father's body cremated. Her conscience made her choose cremation after talking to the cemetery director. She had had a fear of flames like a bonfire, but was reassured that it would be surrounded instead with light, like the sun, which consume it. After thinking of cremation as a clean, quick incineration rather than the slow decomposition of an earth burial, she was convinced of the cremation process as means of body disposal. This comparison could probably persuade more people to choose cremation, also.

Yet, this author feels that Americans have a sense of tradition, religion and materialistic value that no law or condition could change for a long time.
FOOTNOTES


5. Benton, p. 179.


15. Habenstein, pp. 122, 123.


22. Habenstein, pp. 752, 753.

23. Grollman, p. 245.


26. Irion, p. 46.


29. "Consumer Reports" editors, p. 139.


33. Raether, p. 17.

34. Raether, p. 35.


36. Raether, p. 15.


42. Reverend Alan Byrne, personal interview.
43. Mr. Bernard Freund, personal interview.
44. "Consumer Reports" editors, p. 166.
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