Cremation and Its Pagan Connections

By Nollie Malabuyo • October 7, 2010

In the Philippines, where financial costs are almost always the biggest factor in major life decisions, cremation is a much cheaper option over traditional burial. Although Roman Catholicism frowns upon it, its popularity has risen not only because of its lower cost, but also due to some prominent celebrities and politicians declaring that they would prefer cremation over burial.

Many Christians are “neutral” when it comes to this issue; it really doesn’t matter, since all people will be given new bodies in the resurrection of the dead. But our attitudes should not be shaped alone by economics, popularity, feelings, or convenience, but rather by what Scriptures say about this practice.

In this paper, I argue that burial, not cremation, is the proper treatment of the body of a dead Christian believer. To establish my argument, I first present a brief survey of the history of cremation as evidence that its origins are pagan and thus practiced mostly by unbelievers. Second, I present arguments against the most common pragmatic and religious apologies for favoring cremation. Third and last, I demonstrate Biblical and theological evidence for burial—and against cremation—as normative for believers.

What Did the Ancients Practice?

Burning the dead was a common practice among ancient Greeks and Romans as far back as 1000 B.C. By the 8th century B.C., it was the predominant practice, as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey tell of the cremation of the bodies of Greek gods Achilles and Hector after death. The Greeks might have adopted cremation from a northern people as an imperative of war. Soldiers who died on the battlefield were burned, and then the ashes were gathered up and sent to their homeland for ceremonial burial. Thus, cremation came to be associated with the valor and manliness of war heroes.¹

Burial was more common in ancient Rome until its dictator Sulla was cremated in 78 B.C. At least four Roman emperors who succeeded him—Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, and Nero—were also ritually cremated. During the cremation of Roman emperors, an eagle is released above the cremation pyre to symbolize his transition to a deity and his spirit’s release from the body. Later, cremation became a status symbol of body disposal after death because it was preferred by the rich and powerful, such as emperors.²

Although Greek and Roman cremation dated as far back as 1000 B.C., Hindu cremation was known as early as 1900 B.C. In Hinduism, cremation is based on the belief that a human being is made up of five elements of nature which need to be returned to their source at death. Four of these elements—fire, earth, water and air—belong to the body and by cremation, they are returned to their earthly sphere. However, by cremation,


the fifth element—the ether or fine matter—return to the higher world to which it belongs, and there it continues its existence in the afterlife. The ashes are then placed in urns or in a river, preferably the sacred Ganges.³

Cremation in Christian History

In the first century A.D. when Christianity was just starting to spread, cremation was widely accepted, but the practice rapidly declined after 100 A.D., especially after Emperor Constantine declared Christianity—with its belief in bodily resurrection—as a religion to be tolerated in the Roman Empire in 313 A.D. Its demise in the West culminated in 785 A.D. when Charlemagne made cremation a capital crime, saying that it was a “rite of the pagans.”⁴ Thus, from about 1000 A.D. to the 19th century, cremation was rare in Europe, except during the time of the Black Death from the 14th-18th centuries, when tens of thousands of victims were burned to prevent the spread of the plague.

From the medieval age until the 19th century, burning at the stake was reserved by the church for those they condemned as heretics and witches. Reformation forerunners such as John Hus and the Waldensians were burned, along with thousands of other 16th century Reformers such as William Tyndale, Savonarola, Thomas Cranmer, Nicolas Ridley, Hugh Latimer and Anne Askew. The Roman Catholic Inquisition burned thousands of accused witches up to the 19th century.

Why were they burned? The church thought that since they were wicked unbelievers, heretics and witches were to be consigned to the fires of hell as symbolized by the fire or burning. Superstition also contributed to the belief that they would never come back from the dead if they were burned.

A Phoenix Rising from the Ashes

Beginning with the French Revolution, with its emphasis on secularism and humanism away from the Christian religion, cremation slowly gained favor. The rise of large industrial cities contributed to crowded cemeteries and this in turn was associated with potential health hazards. In the late 19th century, Italy spearheaded the rise of cremation, starting with the development of the first cremation chamber in 1873, followed by England, Germany and other European countries. In America, the first crematorium was built in Pennsylvania in 1876. But even as it became popular, the Catholic Church officially opposed cremation until as late as 1964.

With the advance of cremation technology, cremation has become less expensive and so more popular. Generally, its popularity in a country is directly related to the predominant Christian religion: more Protestants mean more cremations. For example, in Protestant Britain, Denmark and Sweden, over 70 percent of the dead are cremated, while in Catholic

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Italy, Spain and France, the cremation rate is under 20 percent. And in Japan, where the Christian population is only about one percent, cremation is almost universal.  

Cremation has literally risen from the ashes of the stigma of paganism to the stamp of approval even by Christians.

**Why Burn, not Bury, the Dead?**

What are some of the reasons given for cremation versus burial? Most of the reasons are for the sake of convenience, hygiene and cost. Sometimes, cremation is done because it is the “last wish” of the person who died.

In a recent graveside funeral I witnessed, there were balloons released, supposedly signifying releasing the deceased’s soul to heaven or prayers going up to God. This is not too detached from Hinduism or Greek dualism. Some Christians even think of the soul resembling the Phoenix bird in Greek mythology that burns itself and its nest when it knows that its death is near. It then rises out of the ashes and repeats its cycle of life.

While the Bible nowhere explicitly condemns cremation, *most of the Biblical examples of burning people alive or dead involved dishonor or God’s punishment*. Achan, together with his family and the loot he took from the city of Ai, were stoned to death and then their bodies burned because he disobeyed God’s command (Josh 7:24-25). The bodies of Saul and his three sons were desecrated by the Philistines before the people of Jabesh-gilead took them away and burned them. This was a partial burning, since their bones were left intact for burial. The people of Jabesh-gilead possibly did this to prevent the bodies from further dishonor (1 Sam 31:8-13). By burning the bones of the King of Edom—a pagan—the Moabites did an act of desecration of a human body, thereby provoking God’s wrath and judgment against them (Amos 2:1).

Fire also symbolized, and was actually used in God’s judgment on wicked people. When Judah learns that his daughter-in-law Tamar was pregnant because of sexual immorality, Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned” (Gen 38:24). Judah was merely pronouncing the just punishment prescribed by the Law of Moses against sexual immorality (Lev 20:14; 21:19). God himself sent consuming fire from heaven against evildoers: Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24; Jude 1:7), Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2), and Israel’s 250 rebellious chiefs (Num 16:35). On the other hand, escaping fire is related to escaping judgment, as in the case of Lot and his daughters and Daniel’s three friends.

Lastly, fire also symbolizes God’s eternal punishment on the unrighteous and ungodly (Matt 3:10-12; 18:8; 25:41; 2 Pet 3:7; Jude 1:7; Rev 8:7; 21:8).

**Why Bury, not Burn, the Dead?**

What are the most common reasons why Christians wanted their dead buried and not burned? For one, the human body was created by God and thus should be respected.

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6 “Cremation” by Ron Gleason.
Secondly, because Christ himself was the Word became flesh in the incarnation, and
given a glorified body at his resurrection, the human body should be hallowed as well.
Thirdly, the Holy Spirit indwells believers in both body and soul, and consequently, they
are holy and to be treated with honor. Lastly, Jesus himself, as the believer’s example, was
buried and raised bodily from the dead.

Scriptures have no direct or explicit command prohibiting burning or cremating the
dead. However, by “good and necessary consequence”—which the Old Princeton
theologian B. B. Warfield said is “a characteristic honoring of reason as the instrument for
the ascertainment of truth”—it can be concluded that Christians should not make this an
option for dealing with their dead. In addition to the four reasons mentioned above, there
are a few other paths that lead to burial as the prescribed treatment of the dead in
Scriptures.

First, all the dead in the Bible, except in the case of King Saul and his sons who were partially
cremated (1 Sam 31:12-13), were buried: in caves (Abraham, Sarah), on a mountain (Moses),
hills (Eleazar son of Aaron, ), under trees (Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, King Saul and his
sons), fields (Joseph), tombs (Gideon, King Asa), at home (Samuel), in a garden (King
Manasseh), and under piles of stones (Absalom).

Abraham made a great effort to find the right grave for his wife Sarah’s burial place
(Gen 23:3ff). His sons Isaac and Ishmael made sure to bury their father where their
mother was buried (Gen 25:9). Before he died in Egypt, Joseph instructed his people to
carry his bones out of Egypt to be buried in the Promised Land, believing in God’s
promise that Israel would someday return to their homeland (Gen 50:25ff.; Josh 24:32).
Moses died on Mount Nebo after viewing the Promised Land, and God himself buried
him on the mountain (Deut 34:5-6).

But the most compelling Biblical support for burial is seen in the death and burial of
our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Christ’s body was carefully prepared with spices, wrapped
in strips of linen, and then buried in a tomb owned by a rich man. This burial in a rich
man’s grave was even foretold by Isaiah, “And they made his grave with the wicked and with a
rich man in his death” (Isa 53:9), pointing to the importance of his burial.

Second, honoring the dead in the Bible involves proper burial in a burial place. Conversely, as I
previously discussed, the burning of a human being alive or dead is usually symbolic of the eternal
fire reserved by God on the ungodly. Thus, a body left decaying without being buried, to be
eaten by vultures and wild beasts, is one of the extreme symbols of dishonor or judgment.
Jeremiah 16:4 describes God’s judgment on Israel in this way. In the last days, the
unbelieving world will rejoice over the apparent death of the church—represented by the
two witnesses whose bodies will lay unburied for all to mock for 3-1/2 days (Rev 11:9-10).

Third, cremation is rooted in the pagan belief in the release of the human soul from an evil
body. If this sounds Gnostic and New Age, it is. And many Christians have bought in to
this view in accepting cremation: whatever we do with our body in death does not matter,
since the only thing that matters is our soul.
This idea is totally contrary to Scriptures. Paul uses an agricultural illustration in explaining death and resurrection. Our bodies are like corruptible seeds in the image of earthly Adam sown into the ground, but in the resurrection, we will have incorruptible, spiritual bodies in the image of the Man from heaven (1 Cor 15:42-49). Does the practice of cremating bodies have any connection with planting seed in the soil? Of course not! It is burial that Paul has in view in using the analogy of sowing seed in the ground.  

But what about the heroes of the faith who were sawn into pieces, burned at the stake, drowned at sea, eaten by lions, or blown into pieces or incinerated in fiery explosions? For sure, God could put their bodies back together perfectly with one word. The Bible is full of examples of God doing the impossible, especially in the creation of human beings inside barren wombs. If he wanted to show us the greatest example of his creative power, he could have allowed Jesus to be burned to ashes and then resurrected him with a glorified body!

In summary:

1. The history of cremation attests to its roots in pagan societies whose idea of a human being is similar to Greek Gnosticism, and who have no hope of a bodily resurrection.

2. Biblical data points to burial as the honorable treatment of the dead, and burning as desecration of or God’s judgment against the dead.

3. Biblical evidence also makes burial as the primary option for Christians who believe in a future resurrection of the dead.

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