

# The cremains of the day

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When I die (not soon, I hope), I want my remains to become cremains. That's the portmanteau word for ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

Judging by a recent story in our newspaper, I'm far from alone. Cremation is hot. (And if we can't joke about death, how can we joke about life? By the way, it's politically incorrect to classify people who oppose cremation as "the untouchables.")

Enough. Back to the subject. In 40 years the percentage of deaths in America resulting in cremation has risen from less than 4 to more than 30. Cremation is the funeral industry's major growth sector.

But wait. As a Christian, I hold to a doctrine called the resurrection of the body. It raises an old question: Will such a resurrection be possible if my body is burned up and mixed into the soil of my church's yard (which is my plan)? And how do other religions approach the question of cremation vs. burial?

It turns out that the resurrection question was the very one that made cremation unacceptable to the early Christian church. But that has changed — for many reasons. Those reasons, no doubt, include the acknowledgment that, as the Bible says, with God all things are possible.

Most branches of Christianity now permit cremation. An exception is Orthodox Christianity. Similarly Orthodox Judaism forbids cremation. As does Islam. In each case, there are nuanced theological reasons for the positions held.

In Islam, for instance, the Qur'an requires that dead bodies be treated with the same respect as living bodies, so cremation is considered sacrilegious and a violation of that responsibility.

The Vatican lifted the ban on cremation for Catholics in 1963, and for the last 40 years it has even been permissible for a Catholic priest to conduct a funeral service at a crematorium. Burial still is the preferred way for Catholics, but it's no longer the only way.

In many traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, cremation has long been the primary way of disposing of corpses.

When I was a boy in India, I witnessed the public burning of bodies at the edge-of-the-river funeral pyres when we visited the city of Benares, now known as Varanasi.

Our family home was on the banks of the Jumna River, near its confluence with the Ganges in Allahabad. Occasionally we'd see a corpse floating down the river. It was explained to me (whether accurately or not) that these were bodies of people whose families could not afford the fuel for a pyre, so a hot coal was placed in the mouth of the corpse and it was sent down the river.

Because religion is a primary source of humanity's thinking about death, it's no surprise that it also creates the rituals of death and tries to infuse them with eternal meaning. Making a choice between cremation and burial now is a prelude to those rituals.

Although I'm an advocate of cremation, I understand the attraction of burial. For instance, when I stand at the graves of my parents or grandparents, I find it inexplicably comforting to know that something of the flesh and bones I once knew as living beings still is under my feet.

As I say, this is a mystery to me. I understand it not with my head but with my heart.

At the same time, I find it profoundly moving and symbolic to imagine the atoms that have made up my body being plowed back into the soil for reuse. In that process, my remains would be living out liturgical lines I hear in my church every Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

In the end, our choice must honor our faith tradition, our family's needs and our own longings. But if we don't talk about such choices ahead of time, we'll never feel free to make the right one.