

Why cremation?

As values change, so do funeral practices.

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On December 6, 1876, in the tiny village of Washington, Pennsylvania, an Austrian-born immigrant named Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles De Palm became the recipient of what is described as the first cremation in modern America. It was not a pretty sight.

For one thing, De Palm had already been dead for more than six months. He died in May in New York City, but finding a proper site for a cremation in 19th-century America was not a simple matter. Finally De Palm's friends located a crematory that Francis J. Lemoyne, an eccentric physician and radical politician, had constructed for his own use on his Pennsylvania estate. To preserve the body over this lengthy delay, De Palm had been primitively embalmed, first with an injection of arsenic and later with a sterner treatment of potter's clay and crystallized carbolic acid, with definitely mixed results. When the coffin was opened on December 5 for the viewing of the now badly shrunken and discolored corpse, some marveled that De Palm was recognizable at all. A queasy newspaper reporter gasped, "No spectacle more horrible was ever shown to mortal eyes."

De Palm's cremation generated a three-ring media circus. Just before his death, De Palm had joined the newly formed Theosophical Society, a group of freethinkers and genteel social reformers, and, true to the Theosophical vision of that day, he left behind instructions to conduct his funeral "in a fashion that would illustrate the Eastern notions of death and immortality" and then to cremate his body. This was precisely the public relations opportunity the Theosophists needed to attract attention to their cause, and they set about making public ceremonies of both the funeral and the cremation.

The widely publicized funeral, held in New York's Masonic Temple, attracted over 2,000 people, many of them gawkers. Guided by the Theosophists' zeal to blend East and West, the officiants presided over a home-brewed liturgy of Hindu scriptures, passages from Charles Darwin's writings, scraps of spiritualism and transcendentalism, references to fire worship, and invocations of the Nile goddess Isis ("a hodge-podge of notions, a mixture of guess-work and jugglery, of elixirs and pentagons, of charms and conjurations," harrumphed the *New York Tribune*).

A raucous gaggle of journalists, some from as far away as Europe, crowded into little Washington for the cremation. They were joined by a horde of curious, mostly hostile local folk, who jostled outside the crematory cracking crude jokes and lending a carnival air to the proceedings. The actual event was relatively uneventful: a brief sizzle and a puff of smoke as the baron's body slid into the furnace, and then golden and rosy hues as it burned. However, most of the reviews were not kind. "Folly," "farce," "weird," "objectionable," "repulsive," "revolting," "a desecration" were but a few of the press judgments. "For all the ceremony that was observed," commented one reporter, "one might have supposed that the company had been assembled to have a good time over roast pig."

How things have changed between that time and the recent spreading of the ashes of rock idol Jerry Garcia on the waters of the Ganges River. From its inauspicious and controversial beginnings, the practice of cremation in America has grown into, for the most part, a perfectly acceptable, barely controversial, religiously sanctioned method of disposing of human bodies. Indeed, cremation is often heralded as an environmentally sensitive act of good stewardship and an enlightened alternative to burial. After stagnating at less than 5 percent for nearly a century, the cremation rate is now about 25 percent nationwide (over 50 percent in some western states) and rising steadily, and more than 40 percent of Americans say they are "likely to choose cremation" for themselves.

Stephen Prothero's well-researched and engagingly written history of cremation in the U.S. tells the fascinating story of this cultural transformation. Prothero, an assistant professor of religion at Boston University, skillfully traces these historical and sociological developments, from the De Palm cremation, which he describes in brilliant detail, to the 1999 scattering at sea of the ashes of John F. Kennedy Jr., "the most high-profile cremation by any American Catholic ever." Prothero combines a ready wit with his fine grasp of the sources to show that what many would consider a marginal, if not bizarre, subject is actually a malleable and telling symbol of

prevailing cultural attitudes about death and life.

The science of cremation is relatively simple: when elevated to a temperature of between 1,500 and 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, a human body is reduced in a matter of hours to a sanitary mixture of ash and bone fragments. But the meaning of cremation, the symbolic power of yielding human remains to fire, has generated controversy at least since the beginning of the Christian era. Early Christian funeral practices, both because they were based on the Jewish precedent of earth burial (including Jesus' own entombment) and because they were forged in combat with Greek notions of the liberation of the soul from the body, generally avoided cremation as an affront to the hope of the resurrection of the body. This anticremation stance hardened into doctrine and was enshrined in liturgy and canon law. Thus, by the fourth century, cremation was quite rare in the West, and in the eighth century Charlemagne declared it a capital offense. Only with Vatican II did Roman Catholics relax the centuries-old ban, and, while burial is still the church's preference, U.S. Catholic bishops have since 1997 been given discretion to permit cremated remains at funeral masses.

Prothero sees this positive turn toward cremation as the sign of a major shift in social and religious consciousness. Unlike some other commentators, though, who discern in the climbing cremation rates yet another sign of secularization and the erosion of ritual, Prothero finds evidence to the contrary. He sees it as an indication that Americans are hungering for more spiritual meaning, not less, and denser, more personally rich ritual practices. Not finding what they need in conventional funeral patterns, Americans are shopping around for something new, more suited to this deeply personalized, flexible and informal cultural moment. Cremation fits the bill. Seen this way, the 19th-century eccentrics and freethinkers who advanced the initial arguments for cremation were the first troops on the beach in a battle, as Prothero puts it, "by ordinary Americans to take back authority over the rites of death from professionals (undertakers and clergy included) and to reinvest those rites with meaning and purpose."

Procremation efforts in America began, Prothero observes, as a part of a larger movement toward purity and sanitation in public life. In the last half of the 19th century, the germ theory of disease was replacing the miasma theory in the popular mind just when American cities were becoming crowded, garbage-strewn, foul-smelling and cholera-infected. Every social reformer had a scapegoat. The religious blamed sinners for the diseases of society, isolationists blamed unwashed

immigrants and the cremationists blamed the dead.

Cemeteries, the cremationists argued, were festering grounds for bacteria from which germ-ridden seepage leaked poison into the ground water. One physician, pointing at Laurel Hill, Philadelphia's lovely garden cemetery located beside the Schuylkill River, warned, "When you drink Schuylkill water you are sampling your grandfather." Cremation was then the pet idea of elite radicals, who portrayed it as a logical, enlightened, pure alternative to the nonhygienic and superstitious corruptions of the past. "The crematory is the only never-failing germicide," argued the president of the New York Cremation Society. By the early decades of the 20th century, however, the idea that cemeteries were factories of contagion was largely discredited, and the cremation movement lost one of its key rationales. "Stripped of its prime justification in sanitary science," notes Prothero, "cremation after World War I became a rebellion in search of a cause," and the cause it seized was aesthetics.

Now the desire was to make cremation beautiful. Elaborate, architecturally pleasing crematories were built during the first half of the 20th century, and the rhetoric of the movement shifted to more elegant language. Furnace retorts became "cremation vaults" and ashes became "cremated remains," or even "cremains." Cremation was presented not primarily as logical and sanitary but as lovely and natural. As one 1916 procremation pamphlet claimed, "Nature has loaned to your soul, for its time upon earth, the use of the materials of which your body is made. . . . And in return what is your debt to nature?" Why, of course, it was to submit to cremation in order to "give it all back to the forests, the earth, the water, the air."

Despite the upbeat appeal of this new nature religion theme, cremation did not enter the mainstream of American funeral practices until the 1980s and '90s—that is, not until the baby boomers began facing the deaths of their parents. Although the cremation rate in the U.S. is still nowhere near that of countries such as Japan (98 percent) and England (70 percent), where the government subsidizes it, nearly 1,500 American crematories are now providing over 500,000 cremations a year. As Prothero notes, by the '90s "half of the new arrivals at Arlington National Cemetery were cremated remains." Even evangelicals, who had tended to believe that there was "no salvation after cremation," got on board, with Billy Graham declaring (over the Internet, no less) that cremation is "no hindrance to the resurrection." Gradually the funeral industry, which on occasion had been known to call critics of traditional funerals anti-American and even communist sympathizers, began to see marketing

possibilities in cremation (as one inside-the-industry ad put it: "Make money the modern way. Urn it!").

What caused the sudden upswing in the rate of cremation during the past 25 years? Some point to cremation's lower cost and to a consumerist buyer-beware mentality, egged on by the witty savaging of the funeral business in Jessica Mitford's 1963 runaway bestseller, *The American Way of Death*. However, Prothero, while acknowledging the wallop of Mitford's book, sees a different set of forces at work. "The most important cause of the cremation boom," he writes, "was a matter not of money but of style." Boomers choose cremation not because it is cheaper (in fact, with fancy urns and precremation ceremonies, cremation can be as expensive as a traditional funeral) but because it fits nicely into a highly mobile, innovative, convenient, spontaneous, informal lifestyle and is compatible with personalistic, "I have a body but I am a soul" spirituality. "Cremation, in short," claims Prothero, "allowed baby boomers to do death in their own way."

But is this a good thing? As one wag observed, he expects aging boomers soon to begin picketing cemeteries, carrying signs reading, "Hell no, we won't go!" Prothero is somewhat reluctant to offer his opinion about where America is heading on cremation, preferring, as he says, "to steer clear of both sarcasm and sermonizing and to stick instead to interpreting the historical record." But here and there his assessment peeks through. He views the trend toward newer cremation practices positively, both culturally and religiously, as needed and welcome expressions of simple, informal, participatory and authentically spiritual rites over against the ostentation of funeral directors and the routinized prescriptions of institutionalized religions.

In many ways, it is difficult to argue with this view. The fact that many in our society are moving toward do-it-yourself funeral rituals with the conveniently mobile device of cremation at the center is not a sign that we are becoming less religious; rather it is simply more evidence of our free-range, deinstitutionalized spirituality. As poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch said, "One of the obvious attractions of cremation is that it renders our dead somehow more portable, less 'stuck in their ways,' more like us, you know, scattered." But perhaps we should be more alarmed than Prothero would have us believe that our society has no reservoir of wisdom to draw upon at the time of death, no common time-honored and treasured rituals to tell the sacred story of life and death.

The important issue is not simply cremation versus earth burial. Most Christians now regard these practices simply as alternative means to reverence the body rather than as symbols of rival theological worlds. What is important are the social and theological narratives into which these acts are placed. When I remember the vague, bodiless, drifting, mapless, storyless quality of the Central Park ceremony in memory of the cremated John Lennon—when 100,000 people observed ten minutes of silence during which a cluster of white balloons floated toward the sky as a sign of John's departing essence, and Yoko Ono celebrated the triumph of spirituality over materiality by testifying that she "saw John smiling in the sky"—then I know that I will gladly pick up a corner of a heavy coffin bearing the body of someone I love and trudge, grunting under the load, across the muddy churchyard where I can stand before an open grave to hear once again, "Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall all be changed."