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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Art. V.—CREMATION.

THERE is no stronger evidence that these are indeed "the latter days" of the world, than the rapidity with which the gravest questions affecting our every-day lives are forced upon public attention, and brought, in spite of determined opposition, to a speedy settlement. Formerly any great change in men's ordinary habits, even where it did not affect any deeply-rooted and long-cherished sentiment, was wont to be canvassed again and again, now making some way in public opinion, now falling out of notice, it might be for years, and then coming up again with renewed force; until at last, when men's minds had become thoroughly familiarized by long discussion with it, some legislative adoption of it might ensue. How many generations passed before the doctrine of the divine right of kings to absolute authority ceased to be the belief of a large section of the English people! How slowly did Catholic Emancipation and Parliamentary Reform, and Jewish Citizenship and Vote by Ballot make their way into men's convictions! Those who could remember the first mooting of some of these questions in their early youth, found themselves still discussing them after their hair had grown gray with age. For how many years did public prejudice struggle against steamships and railways, and only acquiesce discontentedly in them after all! None of these questions affected the most sacred feelings, the most inveterate prejudices of men, as does this question of cremation, nor did their promulgation call forth so loud an expression of horror and repugnance. Yet, although it has scarcely been fifteen years before public notice, there are signs that men are beginning to yield a reluctant assent at once to its utility and its necessity. Crematories have been set up, and are in use in this as well as in several foreign countries; a court of law has pronounced the process to be legal; nearly eighty members voted for a Bill in its favour brought into the House of Commons. Even at the Church Congress in the present year, the very last place at which it might have been expected to find favour, many voices were raised in its advocacy. Doubtless there will be a determined struggle before it is generally adopted, but its adoption is, nevertheless, a matter only of time.

The considerations which have brought about such a change in popular feeling must needs, one would think, be of grave importance; and such is indeed the fact. The conviction has forced itself on the public mind, that the belief so long entertained of the efficacy of the earth as a complete disinfectant, so that when bodies have once been deposited beneath it there is no fear of any disastrous results—that this belief, I say, is a

fatal mistake. In proof of the truth of this conclusion the clearest testimony has been adduced. Eminent authorities, among them Sir Henry Thompson (the first in recent times to bring this question before public notice), Dr. L. Playfair, Dr. Milroy, Dr. Lewis, and others, have incontestably shown that the putrid exhalations from corpses are not absorbed by the surrounding soil, but escape in all directions, poisoning air and water alike. How many of the terrible diseases, which in past ages decimated the population, may have been due to this unsuspected cause, it is impossible to say. But there is no doubt that malignant diseases of one kind or another have continually resulted from intramural interments in cities; and so far from the noxious vapours from corpses dying out after a year or two, their capacity for mischief continues even after the lapse of generations.[1] The vicinities of graveyards have been shown to be notorious for constant outbreaks of cholera and other maladies. The evidence produced by the Sanatory Commission of 1850 was fully sufficient to establish this. There is no need to shock the reader by a recapitulation of the horrors then elicited.

No doubt the worst of these have been put an end to by the interdict laid on intramural interments, and the closing of crowded churchyards, for which cemeteries have been substituted. But these are, after all, only partial and temporary remedies, palliatives rather than cures. The corpses buried in these do not spread pestilence and death through crowded neighbourhoods, but they exercise a deleterious influence in the districts immediately surrounding them; and the time must come—and considering the rapidity with which population increases, come speedily—when the evil will be renewed in all its enormity. As Sir H. Thompson has pithily and conclusively put it: "No dead body is ever buried within the earth without polluting the soil, the water, and the air above and around it."[2]

But this is a conclusion which no right-minded man can regard without serious disquietude. It is often a very painful thought to men in the last hours of their lives that the evil they have done will not die with them, but will be bequeathed as a legacy of sin and misery to those who will come after them. The profligate thinks of the victims of his lust who will carry

[1] The opening of the great plague-pit in Spitalfields, a century and a half after the burial of the bodies, caused an outbreak of virulent disease among the adjoining residents.

[2] The method employed by the Necropolis Society, and known as the "earth to earth burial," is no doubt a vast improvement on burials in brick graves and solid wood or leaden coffins. But this, too, is obviously only a *palliative*. The deleterious exhalations last for a shorter time, but while they do last, the effect is equally pernicious to health.

on the work of ruin and suffering which he began; the gamester and the swindler, of the families they have wrecked; the writer of godless and licentious literature of the dragons' teeth he has sown about the world, yielding crops of sin and despair, which will be reckoned to his account hereafter. They would fain annihilate these germs of evil, if they could, and leave none but wholesome influences behind them. So, too, will every right-minded man desire that no taint of disease or pain should result to his fellow men from anything that has belonged to him—from his body, no less than from his mind. The dying cry which Dickens puts into the mouth of one of the most detestable characters that imagination has ever drawn, is most fearfully accordant with the notion of an incipient hell: "Throw me on a dunghill and let me rot there to infect the air!"[1]

Supposing the above to be conceded, we have next to inquire what is the most befitting mode of disposing of the dead—not what is the simplest, the most picturesque, not even what is the most in accordance with traditional reverence, but what—having an eye to all these things—it becomes our plain duty to ourselves, no less than to our neighbours, to adopt.

There have been, and are, many forms of burial in use among men. The most ancient, it may be assumed, was the depositing of the body in some cavern or rift of the rocks. "Burying the dead out of sight" is the idea which would naturally first occur to men—the wish to behold no more an object which had become so full of painful association and natural disgust. Cain, it would seem, had hidden his brother's corpse, probably in some such place, hoping that all trace of his crime would be removed. In Abraham's time interment in caverns seems to have been the one in general use. There were doubtless secret places in mountains and hollow rocks, natural mausoleums, where any number of bodies might be deposited. There is no reason for supposing that in those early days graves were dug beneath the surface of the earth. When men dwelt in tents, frequently changing their place of sojourn, or in cities, which probably did not number many hundreds, the disposal of the dead would be an easy matter enough. If there were not natural hollows in the mountains sufficient for the purpose, artificial ones might easily be constructed, far enough removed from the living to occasion neither disgust nor injury. But when in process of time cities grew in size, and the dead were numbered not by units, but by tens and by hundreds, difficulty would be felt. Then probably the practice of cremation sprang up, and it is easy to see how. The custom of destroying by fire articles which had been closely associated with, or especially dear to

[1] "Nicholas Nickleby," chap. lxii.

the dead—his wearing apparel, his weapons, his ornaments, his drinking-vessels,[1] etc.—existed from an early date. No one should sleep on the bed where he had been wont to repose, no one wear his garments or signet-ring, or use the cup and plate whence he had taken his food. As some of these things could not well be buried in his grave, they were cast into the fire, and at the same time spices and balsams burned to signify the fragrant memory which the deceased had left behind. It was an easy addition to burn the corpse itself, and then collect the ashes, which were then entombed or preserved in urns arranged in rooms set apart for the purpose. These rooms were called by the Latins *columbaria*, from their resemblance to pigeon-houses, and were used by all classes for the reception of the remains of their departed friends, their names being inscribed on the shelves upon which the cinerary urns were deposited.

This was, in all likelihood, the origin of cremation, and we can understand that it would be especially resorted to when it was feared that an enemy might exhume a body for the purpose of offering insult to the remains, or of depriving it of interment, which was accounted by the ancients as the gravest of misfortunes.[2] Hence, no doubt all the burials in Homer's Iliad were by cremation, the Greeks and Trojans alike being in danger of suffering outrage at the hands of their enemies.

But it should be observed that although religious ceremonies were observed at the burning of the dead, they had no special connection with that mode of disposing of the body. Nor can it be said with truth, though it has been often alleged, that humation was the Jewish and Christian method of burial, and cremation the heathen. No doubt it was the practice of the Hebrew race to inter, though not always actually by excavation *in* the ground, without any destruction of the corpse by fire; and that there is strong reason for believing that they derived this practice by tradition from the early Patriarchs. But it does not appear that they regarded this mode of sepulture as a divinely appointed ordinance, or thought that any other mode would be a breach of duty. The patriarch Joseph ordered his body to be embalmed after the Egyptian manner,[3] in order that it might be conveyed by his descendants into the Land of Promise, and this is mentioned by St. Paul as an evidence of his faith.[4] After the establishment of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel it seems to have been a regular practice of the Jews to have "a great burning" at the burial of their kings. In the instance of Jehoram, King of Judah, about 900 B.C., it is said that the

[1] See Lucan, ix. 225; Virg. Æn. vi. 225, etc.
[2] Odyss. xi. 6; Horace, Od. i. 28; Ælian v. iv.
[3] Gen. l. 25, 26. [4] Heb. xi. 22.

burning, which had been customary at the sepulture of his fathers, was omitted. The practice was evidently very ancient. Nor is it certain that on these occasions the body itself was not burnt, and only the ashes interred in the sepulchre. It is said of King Asa (2 Chron. xvi. 14) that they laid him in the bed (the bier in which he was borne to the grave), "and that the bed was filled with odours and sweet spices," which, it would appear, were then set on fire and burnt.[1] The natural inference would be that the body imbedded in them was burned along with them. So again (Jer. xxxiv. 5) the prophet promises that Zedekiah "shall die in peace, and with the burnings of his fathers, the former kings which were before him, so should they burn for him." If the aromatic herbs were heaped on the bed and set on fire, and the royal corpse laid on it, as seems to have been the case, it is difficult to understand how the body could have escaped burning along with them. In any case it is certain that the Jews resorted to cremation, when special circumstances made it expedient for them to do so. Thus they burned the bodies of Saul and Jonathan when they feared that insult would be offered to the remains; and, again, when the decomposition of bodies during an epidemic sickness threatened contagious disease, they burnt them in order to prevent it.[2]

Still less could cremation be properly termed the heathen method of burial. It was with them, not the rule, but the exception. According to Cicero[3] the Greeks in the earliest ages practised humation, and it was the prevailing practice with them down to the times of Constantine. Even in Socrates' day, as we may gather from his own words, it was regarded as matter of indifference whether a body was interred or burned. Such was also the custom among the ancient Romans. It was not until the later days of the Republic that cremation came into general use, and even then it was only the upper classes who practised it. With the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, cremation died out. Nor has it been revived until our own day. There was an attempt to adopt it during the period of the French Revolution, but it did not succeed.

There were various other methods of sepulture in use among one nation or another. Cremation was regarded with horror by the Persians, who considered it as a profanation of the sacred element. They left their dead to be devoured by wild beasts or vultures. Recent authorities assure us that the custom of the Parsees is nearly the same. They construct round towers thirty

[1] The LXX. say of Asa ἔθαψαν, not κατωρύξαντο. The latter word specially denotes humation; the former is common to both forms of burial.

[2] See "Pusey on Amos vi. 10."

[3] Cicero de Legibus, ii. 25.

and forty feet high, on the top of which are iron gratings, on which the corpses of the dead are laid. The flesh is devoured by birds, and the bones fall through the bars into the interior of the tower. The idea connected with this mode of burial seems to be that the disposal of the human body after death is a matter between man and his Maker, with which no one should presume to interfere. Some nations, as the Hindoos, fling their dead into rivers, where they are devoured by crocodiles or fishes. Some barbarous tribes eat the bodies of their relatives, esteeming that preferable to being devoured by worms. The Calatian Indians are related by Herodotus (iii. 38) to have upheld this notion, expressing at the same time the greatest horror of either burying or burning. Friar Odoric, Marco Polo and other travellers have collected evidence of the same practice among various Asiatic tribes. In some countries the dead are enclosed in wax, by which the bodies are preserved entire. In others, as among the ancient Egyptians, they are artificially preserved as mummies. In some, again, the remains are thrown into a mass of quicklime, which speedily reduces them to dust. This is the practice at Naples, where there are three hundred and sixty-five burial-pits, one being opened anew every day in the year to receive those who have died within the last twenty-four hours. This may be regarded as a species of cremation, and it is possible that some modification of this might meet the present difficulty.

Of all the above-named customs there are but two which it is possible for a civilized or a Christian nation to adopt—humation or cremation. The objections to the first-named have already been considered. It remains that we now deal with those made to the second. These, we must allow, let our conclusion be what it may, are of grave importance.

1. In the first place it is urged that the process of cremation is one revolting to natural feeling. Who could endure to fling into the fire, it is asked—and so entirely destroy all trace of anything that has been closely associated with anyone very dear to—the chair in which a parent was wont to sit, the book he delighted to read, the stick he carried in his daily walks? What mother could burn her dead child's favourite toys; what husband could fling away his wife's wedding ring? Yet these are but trifles compared with the body, in which the spirit dwelt during its earthly sojourn. But, let it be remembered that, in the first place, the chair and the book, and the toys, and the ring may be preserved unaltered, but the body cannot; and, in the next, that this is, after all, only sentiment, and sentiment cannot be allowed to bar the way where the social welfare of society is seriously at stake.

2. But, in the next place, it is contended that the artificial

destruction of the body would weaken popular belief in the resurrection of the body. This is the contention of so wise and good a man as Bishop Wordsworth, and coming from him, it must be treated with respect. But, excepting the weight of his name, I am aware of nothing that can be said in its favour. No doubt the heathen are recorded by Eusebius (H.E.v.i.) to have burned the bodies of Christian martyrs, and flung the ashes into the rivers to destroy, as they thought, all idea of their resurrection. But how can their vital ignorance of that great doctrine be any rule for us? They evidently thought that it would be necessary for all the particles which had formed a human body to be brought together, before it could again be raised to life, utterly misconceiving the great miracle revealed in Christ. But we know how vain and impotent would be the efforts of men to prevent its accomplishment.[1] We might, if we chose, alter somewhat the famous passage in Campbell's poem, "Hallowed Ground," and say:

> But cast his ashes far and wide,
> Who for his Lord has lived and died;
> Yet he at Resurrection-tide
> Shall rise once more,
> The same, though blessed and glorified,
> He was before.

No doubt, again, the metaphor by which St. Paul describes the resurrection (1 Cor. xv. 37 ff.) has a more direct application to the interment of the body in the earth than to its reduction to ashes. But the doctrine of the resurrection does not depend on any metaphor, but on the truth of the resurrection of Christ Himself, the first-fruits of the dead, as we are to be its after fruits.

3. Nor can much more be said for those who argue that the process which nature has provided for the reduction of the body to its native dust is the one which reverence requires us to follow. The words of Genesis iii. 19 inform us of the penalty which sin has brought on man, but do not specify the means by which it is to be effected. Nor is there anywhere any intimation that it is the Divine pleasure that human remains should be reduced to dust by the agency of worms. That is simply the result which would ensue if man did not interfere; but he is free to modify its horrors, or shorten the period of danger to himself by any means that are not forbidden.[2] Sir H. Thomp-

[1] So the late Lord Shaftesbury exclaimed, when he heard the above objection stated, "what then has become of the blessed martyrs who were burned at the stake!" Bishop Fraser and Canon Liddon have given an emphatic denial that any Christian doctrine can be affected by the manner in which this mortal body of ours crumbles into dust.

[2] It might fairly be contended that the preservation of the body by embalming, or desiccation, or burial in wax and lead, are inconsistent with Gen. iii. 19.

son has well remarked that, in the instances where nature throws off diseased portions of the human frame to preserve life, it is no breach of the Divine will to shorten the period of suffering by the use of the surgeon's skill. Nor, again, can it be undutiful to relieve the pangs of childbirth by the use of anæsthetics. No doubt God has said to woman (Gen. iii. 16): "In sorrow (or strictly, *in pains*, λύπαις, lxx.) shalt thou bring forth children." But who can doubt that anæsthetics are God's merciful revelation to mankind in this age, which they are to use and be thankful? In the well-known passage (St. Mark ix. 26) where our Lord quotes the destruction of bodies in the valley of Hinnom by worms and by fire as emblematic of hell —that being the well-known idea of the Jewish people—He gives no kind of intimation that the one process was what may be called the rightful and the other an unlawful one, but speaks of them simply as two modes by which the human frame might be reduced to dust. It is an *obiter dictum*, no doubt—if any saying of our Lord's could be called an *obiter dictum*—but it has its significance nevertheless.

4. The above considerations will answer another favourite class of objections, that cremation is *dishonouring* to the human body. The heathen, it is urged, might regard it with contempt, because in their eyes it was the mere instrument of carnal indulgence; but the Christian recognizes in it the temple of the Holy Ghost and the companion of the soul throughout eternity. As such it deserves all possible honour. No believer will undervalue this argument. But it seems strange that the destruction of human remains by fire should be regarded as more degrading, at all events, than the ordinary progress of corruption. I do not propose to enlarge on "the horrors of the charnel-house, the loathsome banquet of the beetle and the worm," which Washington Irving has so graphically represented as being the favourite study of a mind which had become morbidly insane.[1] It cannot be doubted that they were designed by Providence as a rebuke to human pride; nor can they ever fail to be so. Yet it is lawful for man to mitigate the evil resulting to himself from them, even as it is lawful for him to allay by medicine the agonies of disease. And why should fire be accounted a degrading agency at all? It is the Divinely-appointed means of purification—*the* purification which all must undergo—the trial (St. Mark ix. 49; 1 Cor. iii. 12) which will test their work on earth, whether they are to be presented, cleansed, and sanctified before God or consumed by His wrath. What fitter process whereto to subject the body? What more suggestive of solemn and wholesome thought? Everything connected with fire in

[1] See Irving's "Tale of the Young Italian."

the Scripture is grand and ennobling. If it is the emblem of God's wrath, it is also the emblem of His mercy. In fire He appeared to man in the wilderness and in the temple. In fire He came down on the Day of Pentecost. It is to fire that the sacred writers have likened the Deity Himself (Deut. iv. 24, Heb. xii. 29). If we would have a case still more directly apposite to the burning of the body, that of Elijah cannot be overlooked. He was taken from Elisha's side in the fleshly body, but he must needs have entered heaven in the spiritual and glorified body. What was fleshly and corruptible in him must needs have been purged away by the fire in which he was enveloped. Fire being the emblem of clearing away all in us that offends our Maker, it seems strange indeed that any should consider its application to the human body after death as *degrading*.

To turn to more practical aspects of the matter; it is commonly argued that the total destruction of the body immediately after death might frequently facilitate the escape of murderers from punishment by destroying the evidence which might have proved their guilt. But this might be remedied without difficulty. An examination by experts of human remains before they were subjected to the crematory might be made, in every instance, imperative; and in this event the detection of poisoners would become, not less, but more probable than is the case at present.

Again, there is the complaint that if the body be "resolved into dust and scattered over fields and gardens"[1] there will be no spot directly associated with the departed, no grave to which affection might resort to muse and to weep, no place where man may look forward to merging hereafter his own dust with that of the beloved. These complaints may be condemned as selfishness, or derided as sentiment; but the feelings involved are among the most sacred which humanity cherishes, and their moral value no wise man will disregard. If cremation were irreconcilable with them we might well hesitate ere we adopted it. But the dust and ashes of our beloved may be preserved as entirely as is now the case, and without the painful thought of the continual and revolting decay ever going on. Nay, by cremation the ashes of husband and wife, of dear and devoted friends may intermingle without injury or danger, rest together to the very end of time, rise together at the Resurrection Day.

We cannot afford to sacrifice any of the precious privileges we at present possess — the sleeping under the shadow of the

[1] Sir H. Thompson, "Cremation," p. 9. But he afterwards explains that cremation is quite as compatible with the remains of the dead as the present practice; indeed, it may be said to be more so.

Church, her blessing over our remains, the special place where our dear ones lie, and where we hope to lie ourselves.[1] Happily we are not called on to forego any of these things. It only remains to make such changes as will adapt the proposed new mode of interment to the religious sentiments and requirements of the present day.

These need not be many.

In the first place it will be necessary to have a crematory attached to every burial ground; or possibly a movable furnace which should be taken by night to the house where the dead is lying; and where the reduction of the body to ashes should be made, previously to any other ceremony, by officials properly appointed.

Then the ashes should be enclosed in a coffer, which might be carried into the church by the nearest relative or chief mourner, the funeral *cortége* accompanying the remains, as now.

Then the present service should be read from end to end, exactly as now, only that the word "remains" might be substituted for "body" when the coffer is deposited in the ground, or other receptacle provided for it.

What this might be is a matter for further discussion. A building might be erected suitable for the purpose, in which families might have their special nook, or strangers and those who have near relatives might find a common shelter—kinsmen, friends, neighbours, fellow-parishioners awaiting, in one common home, the Voice that will summon them to arise. I cannot but think, however, that the bosom of our common mother must ever be the fittest resting-place for the ashes of her children; and that nothing that art can devise will ever exceed the beauty of the country churchyard.

H. C. Adams.

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[1] The wish to associate one particular spot with the memory of the dead, to decorate it with flowers and hallow it with prayer, may be a weakness, but it is one very dear to humanity. There are those, indeed, who cannot understand this—who would regard, for instance, the sea, when such localization would be impossible, as the grandest of all cemeteries, where they would wish the remains of those they have loved and honoured to lie. But this is poetry, rather than natural feeling. When it is remembered how many penitential tears have been shed over the ashes of men in their lives slighted and wronged—how many holy resolutions formed by the graves of pious parents, how many heartfelt thanks rendered for holy teaching and example, how many joyful hopes of reunion cherished—we shall hardly consent to substitute anything for the simple grave of the departed.