

## **BURIAL OR CREMATION?** **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

Some times back with in a short period of time I attended the last rites of three persons. In the last ceremonial rites one dead person was buried; a second person's body was cremated in a crematorium. In the case of the third dead person the last rite was performed in a Church in the absence of the dead body.

Usually the Christians conduct the last rite prayers in the presence of the dead body place in a beautifully decorated coffin box. But on that day there was no decorated coffin in the Church as the body was gifted to a medical collage for medical research according to the will of the dead person.

The dead bodies of three different persons were disposed off by 1) burial 2) cremation and 3) body-donation for medical research. All these three forms of body disposal are practiced today. So at times some people face the problem of the disposal of the body. Many people go by tradition or easy way out. Some people prefer electric cremation because it is easy and less expensive than traditional way of cremating a dead body by burning it on fire wood.

Usually people want to take away the body as soon as possible from their house and their lives. But rarely people think about the environmental pollution in disposing a dead body.

Today the most popular way according Christians. Muslims, Sindo people of Japan, Tao of China and Jews bury the body in six feet deep pit in a cemetery or burial place. In India Hindus bury only small children but the dead bodies are cremated by burning with fire wood. The Parsi people following Zoroaster religion leave their dead bodies on peace tower as food for the meat eating birds.

I believe that from the point of environment the most suitable way to dispose a body is the burial – returning the body to Mother earth in a six feet deep grave. In the Christian funeral rite, the Bible is recalled that, “You were made from soil, and you will become soil again” (Gen. 3, 19).

In burying the corpse the dead body is gradually transformed into fertile soil through the action of bacteria. Scientists tell us that the corpses of human beings and of animals are the best manure and most suitable for mother earth than chemical fertilizers. The Christians who believe in resurrection of the body bury their death in well kept and decorated graves and cemeteries with solemn burial rites and prayers. Often the Christians bury their dead in coffin boxes made of wood.

Some wood, sometimes very expensive wood, is wasted in burying the dead in a coffin. But a lot more wood is wasted in burning the dead body. According to an estimate some 300 to 500 kg dry wood is required to burn a corpse. So it is estimated that Gujarat alone need wood worth rupees 80 to 90 crore to burn their dead bodies in burning ghats or crematoria.

The environmentalists say that for woods worth Rs.80 to 90 crores, we need to cut woods from 10,000 hector forest land. But without thinking about the destruction of forest and the air

pollution caused by burning corpse, we have been burning our dead for centuries. But now we need to be aware of the destruction of forests and their dire consequences for humanity. By burning dead bodies and destroying forest we are positively contributing to increase the air pollution and environmental degradation.

In burning dead bodies we cut down oxygen-giving trees. And in burning the firewood we use oxygen which is badly needed to sustain our lives. So burning dead bodies mean destruction of both trees and oxygen. Then, there is also the killing of many species of insects which make their home in wood and forests.

Today as an alternative choice, many people use electric crematorium, which uses much electricity. But it cannot be a suitable alternative to open burning of dead bodies because in the production of electricity energy sources like wood, coal, gas, etc. are used or wasted. Then, electric crematorium too is costly like burning corpse with woods. Besides, our country does not produce sufficient electricity for home, office and industrial consumption. They say that an electric crematorium uses the electricity which could run a small factory. When we experience electricity cut and we know that electricity has not reached all parts of India, it is not appropriate or desirable to use electric crematoria.

The human dead body certainly desires our respect and demand honorable handling. So after life has left a human body we need to handle it with due respect without being too emotional. Considering the environmental safety and future of humanity we can dispose of a dead body only two ways. The ideal way is the body-donation for medical study and research. But for those who do not like to think of their bodies being cut and dissected in hospitable table, the ideal way is burial.

Here too I would caution those who buy expensive coffins and waste wood and money. I am happy to know that in some places and churches and Christians use a common coffin for burial rites and prayers and in the cemetery the corpse is buried in white linen and the coffin used to carry the body is returned to the Church. Then, the same coffin is used for all burials in a particular Church.

I am sure that all will agree with me that burial is environmentally the safest, financially the cheapest and socially very respected method of disposing a dead body. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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