
COULD CREMATION REPRESENT AN ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE TO BURIAL?

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Abstract

Following the pressure of the objective socio-economic reality (especially the overcrowding of cemeteries), the debate regarding cremation in Romania has been reinitiated. Therefore, there is a need for a critical moral judgment on this particular funeral arrangement in a society like ours, which lacks tradition in the field of cremation. The questionnaire we applied to 271 students from the Faculty of Medicine in Sibiu comes to show that this procedure has its supporters: over half of the respondents basically agree with its implementation, and about a quarter would personally prefer cremation. The supporters of cremation are especially males, from urban areas.

Most respondents expressed a desire to personally decide upon the funeral procedure they would undergo (about three-quarters of those surveyed), thus once more raising the question of the fundamental ethical principle of self-determination.

The last question of the questionnaire ("Do you think society is ready for a widespread cremation procedure in Romania?") had positive answers in only an insignificant proportion (3.69%), pointing out that implementing cremation in Romania is considered premature.

Keywords: bioethics, cremation, burial, opinion survey

1. Introduction

Most animals abandon their dead specimens on the ground, allowing the natural decomposing process to take its course. People however do not use this method because: on the one hand they are able to understand death and to think about the fate of the departed and, on the other hand, because the social needs impose the removal of the dead body. The moral-ethical dilemma derives from assigning a subjective intrinsic value to the lifeless human body. The imposed attitude of reverence concerning the deceased led to various spiritual and religious forms of commemorating the remnants. This however conflicts with

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the body's *post mortem* objective reality of decomposition - a process accompanied by an unpleasant transformation of the body, which grants it a macabre appearance and leads to the release of malodorous substances. These phenomena characterizing the putrefaction process require the removal of the body from permanent human settlements and from the space destined for everyday life. The way in which this removal was undertaken has known many variations over the ages. These variations bear nonetheless an obvious historical and social determinism, ultimately characterizing the degree to which the human community became civilized. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that Neanderthals were considered to be nearly human, because they not only cared for their sick and wounded, they also buried their dead people [1]. This ritual is therefore equated as a defining trademark of humanity, setting us apart from other primates, due to the fact that it demonstrates the surfacing of self-awareness and the existence of thoughts concerning one's own journey after death.

The main ways of removing the human body and which have remained widespread to this day are the following: burial, cremation and the placement in repositories/tombs [1, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disposal_of_human_corpses]. Other less common ways are:

- exposure to natural phenomena: leaving the body on the ground without burying it, or abandoning it to the animals (e.g. Towers of Silence - *dakhma* - the Parsi population Gujarat region on the west coast of India, where corpses are devoured by vultures) or 'body farms' where these are used for scientific purposes;
- burials at sea: throwing the cadaver into the sea/ocean or placing it on a burial boat (often associated with incineration - as in the case of the Vikings);
- chemical degradation: using strong acids or alkali;
- donating the body for scientific purposes: used for dissection and/or research - the remnants are usually subjected to incineration;
- cannibalism: ritualistic or of any other nature;
- space burials;
- mass graves: when dealing with epidemiologic dangers (the bubonic plague between fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries), war, genocide, natural calamities;
- dismemberment: the separation of the body into distinct parts, treated separately and in distinct ways (as for ex. in the case of the royal family of Habsburg or in the case of the relics of the saints);
- ecological methods: the burial in 'wild cemeteries' (for example in forests).

There also are means of artificially conserving the body, or at least of some parts of it (mummification, cryopreservation, taxidermy or plastination). Some of these techniques were used in ancient times, while others were the result of recent scientific findings [1, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disposal_of_human_corpses]. What should also be mentioned are the various destructive methods employed by killers in order to conceal a murder.

Cremation is [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cremation>] the burning of the body at high temperatures, its vaporization and oxidation, which reduces it to basic chemical compounds, as for example gases and tiny mineral fragments (with a macroscopic ashen aspect with tiny dry bone fragments) [2]. In many countries this procedure is carried out in specially designed incinerators, but countries like India or Nepal still practice open cremations.

The residues pose no health risk and thus may be buried or kept in memorial sites/cemeteries, or they may legally be taken by relatives and may eventually be dispersed in different ways. Cremation is thus not an alternative to the burial process, but rather another form of inhumation or any other means of removing the body from society.

Inhumation (or burial) is the ritual act of placing the dead person into the earth: it involves digging a pit or a trench, placing the deceased into the pit and covering him/her with soil [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burial>].

Human burial practices are manifestations of the desire to show respect towards the dead, but were nonetheless often based on the fear that the dead would come back and haunt the living, thus affecting their lives.

The act of burial, combined with the use of religious practices, can lead to the reconciliation of the families with the thought that their loved one is gone.

2. Motivation, purpose

The ethical debate concerning cremation started in Romania due to an undeniable socio-economic reality – that the cemeteries are overcrowded, especially in the urban areas. The recent passing away of Sergiu Nicolaescu and also his own as well as his family’s decision for his body to undergo cremation has brought this debate into the public focus [<http://www.optimalmedia.ro/stire-prim-plan/inhumare-sau-incinerare-o-discutie-readusa-in-actualitate-de-disparitia-lui-sergiu-nicolaescu-vezi-pozitia-bor/6738>, <http://www.agenda.ro/revolta-la-incinerarea-lui-sergiu-nicolaescu-rusine-nu-l-ardeti/273930>]. This indicated the fact that there is a need for a moral and ethical opinion regarding this matter.

The study we conducted represents a step in this direction, seeking to investigate the opinion of future health professionals with regards to the cremation-burial dilemma.

3. Method

We proceeded to conduct a prospective, observationally-descriptive study, consisting in handing a specially designed questionnaire, made up of 8 closed, factual and opinion questions:

1. sex.....male/female
2. age..... years
3. area of origin.....urban/rural
4. studies.....
5. do you agree to the cremation procedure?.....yes/no

6. which option would you personally choose?.....cremation/burial
7. would you agree to someone else (relatives, caretakers, etc.) deciding instead of you upon the funeral procedure you will undergo (cremation/burial).....yes/no
8. do you think Romanian society is ready for the generalization of cremation?yes/no/I don't know

The questionnaire was handed to 271 students from the Faculty of Medicine, 'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu. The mathematical-statistical processing of the answers led to the results presented below.

4. Results and discussion

The 271 respondents were third and fourth year students, studying the following fields:

- Dentistry, 3rd year – 68 students (25.09%);
- General Nursing (GN), 3rd year – 31 students (11.44%);
- General Nursing, 4th year – 33 students (12.18%);
- General Nursing, 4th year (further studies) – 139 students (51.29%).

Thus, almost three quarters (74.91%) belonged to the GN specialization, only a quarter belonging to Dentistry.

The gender distribution of the 271 respondents showed a clear predominance of females (explainable by the fact that the above mentioned fields of study are mainly chosen by the representatives of this sex): only 40 respondents were male (14.76%) and 231 female (85.24%), with a F/M *sex ratio* of 5.775. We also noticed, the predominance of the urban area of origin (81.55%), over the rural one, with an U/R ratio of 4.42.

In terms of age distribution, due to their membership in the 3rd and 4th year of their studies, there was a natural preponderance of those in the 20-24 years age group (42.07%). However, given that over half of the respondents were part of GN 4th year, further studies specialization, we also had a high frequency of people belonging to the 35-39 years age group (23.25%) and to the 40-44 years age group (15.13%). In other age groups the distribution was as follows:

- 25-29 years: 10 (3.69%);
- 30-34 years: 19 (7.01%);
- 45-49 years: 19 (7.01%);
- 50-54 years: 5 (1.84%).

To the general question: "Do you agree to the cremation procedure?" more than half of the respondents gave an affirmative answer (56.09%), but 119 (43.91%) said were against it.

However, when asked about their personal choice regarding cremation or burial, only 65 respondents, representing 23.98%, would choose cremation. Over three quarters would choose to be buried (202) or are still undecided (1.48%). Even among the 152 students who basically agreed to the cremation procedure, over half (54.61%) would still choose inhumation, while (2.63%) haven't decided yet.

The investigation of the epidemiological coordinates of the 65 students who would choose to be cremated at the end of their lives revealed interesting aspects:

- the F/M ratio decreases, as compared to the general respondent group, from a *sex ratio* of 5.775 to one of only 4.909. The male percentage increased from 14.76% in the general group to 16.92% in the group of those who chose cremation (54 female – 83.08%, and 11 male – 16.92%);
- among those opting for cremation, there is an increase of the urban area factor: 59 respondents – 90.77%, compared to the 81.55% in the general group; only 9.23% - originated from a rural area; the U/R ratio significantly increased, from 4.42 to 9.83;
- the distribution by age group has not registered any noticeable changes, offering the same low factor in the age groups: 20-24 years (38.46%), 35-39 years (21.54%) and 40-44 years (16.92%) and being even lower in the age group 25-29 years (6.15%), 30-34 years (7.69%) and 45-49 years (4.61%), presenting similar percentages to those of the general group. We witnessed a significant percentage increase only in the 50-54 year age group - from 1.84% to 4.61%.

Almost three quarters of the respondents (72.32%) disagreed with someone else deciding about the final funeral method (burial or cremation) at the end of the respondents' lives; only 27.68% declared their indifference regarding this aspect.

These findings demonstrate the increasingly important role of self-determination within our society. This is especially true when the matter concerns our body and its fate (especially during special situations laden with a high moral/ethical dilemma, like the inhumation/cremation procedure). The tendency of the people is to choose on their own, according to their own inner beliefs, while at the same time respecting the options of others regarding this matter.

The last question contained in the questionnaire aimed to grant a conclusive answer to the cremation/inhumation dilemma in today's Romanian society. The answers were relevant: only 10 of the respondents (3.69%) considered that our society is ready for widespread cremation. Over half of the respondents (56.09%) gave a firm negative response in this sense, while another 40.22% were unable to decide. Thus 261 students (96.31%) answered 'no' or 'I don't know'.

5. Conclusions

Following the pressure of the objective socio-economic reality (especially the overcrowding of cemeteries), the debate regarding cremation in Romania has been reinitiated. Therefore, there is a need for a critical moral judgment on this particular funeral arrangement in a society like ours, which lacks tradition in the field of cremation.

Our survey comes to show that this procedure has its supporters: over half of the respondents basically agree with its implementation, and about a quarter would personally opt for cremation. This option is rather chosen by male respondents originating from urban areas.

Most respondents expressed their desire to personally decide upon the funeral procedure they will undergo (about three quarters of the people surveyed), which reinitiates the debate regarding the implementation of the fundamental ethical principle of self-determination.

The answers to the last question of the survey (“Do you believe that Romanian society is prepared for the generalization of the cremation procedure?”) were affirmative only in an insignificant proportion of 3.69%. This can be regarded as a final conclusion, suggesting the fact that implementing cremation in Romania is premature and is influenced by the manner in which the above-mentioned ethical dilemma is solved.

References

- [1] C. Mims, *Encyclopedia of death*, Romanian translation, Horizons, Bucharest, 2006, 204.
- [2] ***, *Cremation Equipment Operator Training Program*, Matthews Cremation Division, Apopka (FL), 2006, 1.