

CREMATION AND THE BIBLE: A REFLECTION FREDERICK MAWUSI AMEVENKU¹

ABSTRACT

Around the world, dead bodies are disposed of in various ways. In ancient Egypt, corpses were embalmed before burial as in most parts of Africa. In other places corpses were thrown into the Sea to serve as food for the fish. Other people cremate dead bodies and still others bury their dead in the earth. Almost everyone eventually will have to make a decision about how to dispose of deceased family members. Usually, the choice of method is informed by religious, cultural, economic, ethical, social and ecological considerations. One method that has raised concerns within religious circles is cremation. On the one hand, cremation is considered as ecologically friendly, inexpensive and ethically right. On the other hand, it is viewed as theologically problematic for Christians. It raises questions about the Christian doctrine of Resurrection of the body. Should Christians be concerned about how corpses are disposed of? Does the Bible prescribe a particular way of disposing of corpses? What theological issues surround the choice of cremation as a preferred method? This study attempts to answer these questions and provides a Christian theological perspective of cremation, presenting arguments both in favour and against the practice.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, Ghanaians and other Africans did not bother to consider cremation as a means of disposing of dead relatives because it was not part of their cultural practices. In many traditional African societies, the method of disposal of the dead was a straight forward matter. The moment someone died, no other method than earth burial came to mind. By earth burial, we mean, the practice of enclosing a corpse in a casket or coffin and placing it in a grave to allow it to decompose into dust. However, burial practices differ according to every ethnic group and the status of the deceased. In any event, burial rites were often accompanied by ceremonies. With a constant rise in human populations around the world, concerns have been growing that corpses are occupying otherwise precious land space in cemeteries. Cemeteries are usually extended as and when additional burial sites are needed, and sometimes new ones are constructed without anxiety. Many communities now worry that this approach to land use is not sustainable.

Many graveyards are full. This has called for a rethinking of the mode of corpse disposal. The issue of getting additional land for burial is a major concern worldwide. This challenge has led some people to consider cremation as a solution to the problem, rather than viewing it as a cultural practice or even a religious ritual. Cremation is therefore now being regarded in many places as a quick, hygienic way to dispose of the dead. That the practice of cremation is beginning to receive attention within African communities is not in doubt. People have already established cremation homes and are seriously advocating that cremation be accepted as the best means of disposing of corpses. In Ghana, the first crematorium was established in the year 1950 in Cape Coast, followed by Takoradi in the 1960s, Accra in 1977 and Kumasi in 1993.² The Ghana Cremation Society was formed in 1986 and by 2005 it had 1500 members.³ Ghana has shown greater interest in the practice of cremation than other West African countries⁴ to the extent that corpses prepared for cremation are often brought into the country via Ghanaian embassies on the West Coast of Africa. The reasons for Ghana's greater interest in cremation are not clear. Joe Quarcoo, the chief cremationist at an Accra-based Ridge Cremation and Funeral Services added another dimension to this

¹ REV. FREDERICK MAWUSI AMEVENKU, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in New Testament Studies and Biblical Hermeneutics at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon-Accra. He is also an ordained Minister of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana.

² Douglas J. Davies and Lewis H. Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 219.

³ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 219.

⁴ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 220.

claim when he said, “Since there is no crematorium in the northern part of the country, people who die there and have to be cremated are brought down to the Osu Cemetery... I work across the sub-region and I bring down bodies from Abidjan for cremation in Accra because there is no crematorium there as well.”⁵ Clearly, people are patronizing the cremation practice in Ghana because Ghana’s facilities are better than some of her neighbors’. Carrying corpses from such long distances to be cremated indicates (at least) that the practice is gaining acceptance. For Quarcoo, the practice is gaining patronage because it is a “safe and hygienic way” of disposing human bodies.⁶ From 1999 to 2001, an average of about 2 per cent of the dead was cremated in Ghana as shown by Table 1.⁷

Year	No. of Cremation	Total deaths	Percentage of Deaths
1999	250	15 000	1.67
2000	300	17 000	1.76
2001	335	18 500	1.82

The table shows a growing trend in the rise of cremation practice in Ghana, though it is possible that not the whole range of statistics on the phenomenon may have been covered. Though there are discussions around the theology of cremation among theologians and churches, most African churches have not officially come out with clear positions on the issue. Consequently, it has become very difficult for both the clergy and the laity to take decisions on the subject when they are confronted with it. The question arises not because cremation is known to be a practice found in the Bible but because some Christians in various churches are showing interest in the practice.

Quite recently, a situation arose where a family requested that their deceased son who had been cremated in a funeral home in the city be buried at his home village, whereupon they brought the ashes to the minister in charge of the home village, who wondered what to do with the ashes. The minister suggested that since a service had been conducted for the departed brother in the city during the cremation that amounted to burial, what to do with the ashes was a matter of private affair for the family to manage. When the family insisted on their request, the minister was compelled to call his superior on the phone for assistance. To his dismay, his boss said that the issue of cremation had not even crossed his mind and that he did not know what to do. This problem eventually reached the head of the denomination and has led to the search for a policy direction for the church based on a theological understanding of cremation.

Evidence of people’s uncertainty regarding the ethics and theology of cremation is common in Christian discourses these days. In view of this, the current study provides a Christian perspective of cremation, presenting the arguments both in favour and against the practice. Historical, biblical, theological and ethical arguments related to the practice of cremation are discussed so that (African) Christians can develop an informed theology of cremation.

UNDERSTANDING CREMATION

Cremation is the process of using a very high temperature to reduce dead human bodies to ashes. It may serve as a funeral or post-funeral rite but it is an alternative to the interment of a body in a coffin. The *Encyclopedia of Cremation* defines it as the practice of intentionally heating a deceased human body to a temperature “between 1,400 and 2,100 °F [approximately 760 to 1150 Celsius] to consume . . . the body’s soft tissue and reduce the skeleton to fragments and particles.”⁸ Amanda J. Baker has also defined cremation as “the purposeful reduction of human remains via burning and post-burn processing.”⁹ Thus, in cremation, mortal remains of a human are deliberately exposed to high temperatures for extended periods of time for conversion into ashes.

The remnants of a complete reduction (called the cremains) can be described as highly fragile, fragmented, commingled, and usually white or gray in color. After the process, almost everything (that is,

⁵Nii Laryea Korley, “Dust To Dust, Ashes To Ashes”, Graphic Online (15th August, 2008)

<https://www.modernghana.com/lifestyle/424/dust-to-dust-ashes-to-ashes.html> (Accessed on 21/4/16)

⁶ Korley, “Dust To Dust, Ashes To Ashes”

⁷ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 219.

⁸ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 131.

⁹ Amanda J. Baker, *A Taphonomic Analysis of Human Cremains from the Fox Hollow Farm Serial Homicide Site* (University of Indianapolis: Master of Science Thesis, 2004), 13.

the body and container) is reduced to 1.8kg -3.6 kg of inorganic ash that may be subsequently buried, stored in urns, kept in the house or disposed of in other ways such as scattering it over a body of water, or a plot of land, depending on the culture within which it is done. Funeral rites may be organized for the dead whether cremated or buried to decompose.

Cremation takes place in a chamber called a retort, of a crematory in a room called the crematorium.¹⁰ The process of cremation can be summed up as follows: After placing the body, in a cremation casket (usually made of wood or any other combustible material), it is transferred into the chamber through a mechanized door. Upon the arrival of the body in the chamber, the door, which is about a half foot thick, is closed either by hand or in some cases a switch, as many of the newer models have automated doors. The crematory operator then starts the machine which normally goes through a warm up cycle before the main burning begins. After the machine is warmed up, the main burner ignites to start the process of incinerating the body. As the heating goes on further, the body fats melt and ignites to add a pale blue cast to the body, much like an aura.¹¹ The heating goes on until the body is completely combusted into ashes. Afterwards, the cremains are collected in a tray or pan (tiny residue may still remain in the chamber and mix with the particles from subsequent cremations) and allowed to cool for some time. After cooling, the cremains may be “processed further by mechanically breaking the larger particles down, producing a consistent mixture of grain and powder, to be scattered or stored in an urn.”¹²

History of the practice of Cremation

An important aspect of cremation studies involves the understanding of the range of cremation practices throughout history. “Cremation has long been established as the prime funeral rite in many cultures of the world, where it frames life and helps to explain its nature and destiny. For some prehistoric, ancient and classical societies and civilizations, evidence of cremation lies in urn-burials, mounds and the literary creations of classical texts.”¹³ Most archaeologists believe that cremation was invented during the Stone Age, about 3000 BCE¹⁴ as a proper way of disposing of the dead. Without any special apparatus for the process, ancient people cremated their dead by placing the body in a log pyre over an open flame which burnt by fire into ashes. It is believed that it was a common practice among the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the Northern Athapascan people of Alaska, and various cultural groups throughout Canada. Ancient Rome used both burial and cremation to dispose of their dead.¹⁵ In ancient Rome, the deceased was usually carried from the house in a procession to a place on the outskirts of the city, where the corpse would be burned on a pyre until the body was reduced to ashes.

Timothy George, writing about cremation among ancient Greeks and Romans, submits that cremation became the norm among ancient Greeks and Romans because of their belief in the immortality of the soul, which led them thinking that there is no need to give special attention to the body.¹⁶ In ancient Greek Philosophy, the body was considered as the shadow of the soul and that the soul, considered as real, is to be cared for and not the body. Destroying the body after death was therefore not an issue for them. They reasoned to themselves that since the body was just a shadow and not the real object, there was no need to care for it in any “proper” way. Homer’s *Iliad* gives accounts of cremation and the interment of cremated remains with “its description of the funerals of the heroes Achilles and Patroclus and their wine-washed cremated remains that are, subsequently, buried.”¹⁷

Cremation and Roman Catholic Christianity

¹⁰ Wes Scantlin, *An Embalmer's Tales* (Np: np, 2010), 18.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=tRDLAQAAQBAJ&pg=PA17&lpg=PA17&dq>

¹¹ Scantlin, *An Embalmer's Tales*, 18.

¹² Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 131. An urn is a receptacle designed to permanently encase cremated remains. The device for crushing the particles into a finer sand-like consistency is called a cremulator.

¹³ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, xviii.

¹⁴ “The cremation process: Its history, Cremation and burial in the Bible.”

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/crematio.htm> (Accessed on 22/4/16)

¹⁵ James Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 1 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 518.

¹⁶ Timothy George “Cremation Confusion: Is it unscriptural for a Christian to be cremated?”, *Christianity Today*, 2002. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/27.66.html> (Accessed on 3/4/16).

¹⁷ Davies and Mates (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, xviii.

The Roman Catholic Church's negative attitude towards cremation was based on the arguments that (1) the human body is the instrument through which sacraments are received and as such it is a holy object which should not be destroyed by fire. (2) The body is an integral part of the human person, since the soul has no independent existence apart from the body, and as such, the latter should be disposed of in a way that honors and reverences it. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. (3) Cremation constitutes a denial of the resurrection of the body since it might interfere with God's plan to resurrect the body of the believing faithful.¹⁸

In 1963, Pope Paul VI, recognizing that, in general, cremation was being sought for practical purposes and not as a denial of bodily resurrection, lifted the ban placed on cremation in 1886 and in 1966 Catholic priests were allowed to officiate at cremation ceremonies. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Holy Office) issued "*Piam et Constantem*" stating among other things,

The constant pious practice among Christians, of burying the bodies of the faithful departed, has always been the object of solicitude on the part of the Church, shown both by providing it with appropriate rites to express clearly the symbolic and religious significance of burial, and by establishing penalties against those who attacked this salutary practice.¹⁹

The Roman Catholic Church permitted cremation in cases of necessity, but prohibited it for anyone who was making a stand against the faith. This fact reflects also in the new Code of Canon Law (1983) which states, "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; but it does not forbid cremation, unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching."²⁰

In 1997, the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacrament, at the Vatican, sanctioned the celebration of Funeral Liturgy, including Mass, in the presence of the cremated remains.²¹ According to the directives, the practice is allowed if:

- (1). the cremation has not been inspired by motives contrary to Christian teaching such as respect for the body or the resurrection of the body.
- (2). the local bishop judges it pastorally appropriate to celebrate the liturgy for the dead, with or without Mass, with the ashes present, taking into account the concrete circumstances in each individual case, and in harmony with the spirit and precise content of the current canonical and liturgical norms.²²

The ashes are expected to be placed in worthy vessels and placed on a table or stand prepared for that purpose. After the Mass, the church insists that the disposition of the ashes be done in reverence.

The Bible and the Disposal of Dead Bodies

Scriptures clearly report that biblical characters showed great care and respect for the bodies of their deceased, with corpse burial being the most common funerary practice. For example, Abraham went to great lengths to secure a tomb in which to bury his wife Sarah, which was the first formal burial recorded in Scripture (Gen. 23:3–18). In fact, for three generations the patriarchs in Abraham's family were buried in this same tomb. Jacob buried Rachel on the way to Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19–20). The dying Joseph made his sons pledge to bury his bones in the land of Israel (Gen 50:25). Later, Moses carried out his wish by carrying his bones to the Land of Canaan to be buried (Exod. 13:19; Josh 24:32). Aaron, the first high priest, was buried in Moserah (Deut. 10:6); Moses was buried by God opposite Beth-Peor (Deut. 34:5–8) while Joshua, was buried in the hill country of Ephraim (Josh. 24:30). Samuel was buried near his home in Ramah (1 Sam. 25:1) and David was buried with the kings in Zion (1 Kings 2:10). In the OT it was shameful for one not to receive proper burial (Isaiah 14:18–20; Jer. 16:14). Nonetheless, there are at least three examples

¹⁸ Law, *Ready for Departure*, np.

¹⁹ Michael S. Driscoll, Richard B. Hilgartner, Maureen A. Kelly, John Thomas Lane, James Presta, Corinna Laughlin, Jim Schellman, D. Todd Williamson, Paul Turner, Catherine Combier-Donovan, Diana Macalintal and Genevieve, *The Liturgy Documents: Essential Documents for Parish Sacramental Rites and Other Liturgies* Volume Two (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2012), 293. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=7jFLDdixZ9IC&pg=PA293&lpg=PA293&dq>

²⁰ Paul O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 95.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=19C32G9cXEK&pg=PA95&lpg=PA95&dq>

²¹ Law, *Ready For Departure*, np.

²² Law, *Ready For Departure*, np.

of cremation-type activities in the OT. In 1 Sam. 31:11–13, it is reported that the bodies of Saul and his sons were burned partially after which their bones were rescued by the men of Jabesh-Gilead and buried “under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.” A second example of cremation-like activity in Scripture occurs in Amos 2:1-3 and then Amos 6:8–11 depicts “a horrible picture of a whole household having died, and a man’s uncle and a servant being only survivors left to burn the last body.”²³ Geo B. Eager acknowledges the argument that bodies were burnt in the valley of Hinnom in times of pestilence, though he disagrees with such position.²⁴

In the NT there is abundant evidence for corpse burial. John the Baptist was buried by his disciples (Matt 14:12). Lazarus was buried in Bethany (John 11:17–18); Stephen, the first martyr’s body was buried by certain “devout men” near Jerusalem (Acts 8:2) and most importantly, Jesus the Christ was buried in a tomb prepared by Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38–42). The early church buried the dead (Acts 5:6-10; 8:2). No instance of cremation, whether Jewish, Christian or heathen is recorded. The absence of cremation practices in the Bible is clearly because cremation was not a known method of disposing of the dead in the Ancient Near East. However, persecutors, in mockery of the Christian doctrine of resurrection, burnt the bodies of martyrs and scattered their ashes. This was an act of wicked persecution, not cremation.

Clearly, the Bible gives us evidence of corpse burial as the known practice of seeing of the dead. Abraham (Gen. 25: 8-10), Sarah (Gen. 23: 1-4), Rachel (Gen. 35: 19-20), Isaac (Gen. 35: 29), Jacob (49: 33; 50: 4-13) and Joseph (Gen. 50: 26), Joshua (Josh. 24: 29-30), Eleazar (Josh. 24: 33), Samuel (I Sam. 25: 1), David (I Kings 2: 10), John the Baptist (Matt. 14: 10-12), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 5-10), Steven (Acts 8: 2) and Jesus (John 19: 38-42) were all buried. However, this fact alone cannot be used to reject cremation because although corpse burial appears to be the norm in the Bible, Scripture cannot explicitly command or forbid a practice that its authors did not know about. Like many other contentious concepts therefore, a good theological response to cremation can only be formulated by analyzing the reason (s) for which a Christian would choose the practice instead of other methods of corpse disposal.

Arguments in Favor of Cremation

One argument in favor of cremation is that it has many advantages, including emotional, economic and hygienic benefits. It is argued, first, that the process of cremation offers a quick, purifying process which helps bereaved relatives to banish the thought of the body lying for decades in the ground while suffering slow decay. Second, cremains can be kept at home in a fashionable container or urn, thus offering the family the opportunity to remember the loved-one on a daily basis.

Economically, cremation is said to be less expensive than corpse burial for three reasons at the very least. First, cremation does not require much space as body burial does. In our communities, we find that cemeteries occupy vast lands. Usually these cemeteries are located at the outskirts of the community. As the community population increases, houses are built around the cemetery or the cemetery is relocated to a farther place. Relocation may have to be repeated when the community expands again. With the frequent increase in the world’s population, so the argument goes, there will come a time when there will be no land to serve as burial sites. When corpses are cremated, the community is spared the responsibility of reserving space out of the limited land for body burial. What happens at the point where there is no land for burial? This question is important because the land that we have is fixed and cannot increase in size, while the human population is perpetually increasing.

Second, it is argued that in cremation, no expensive coffin is required. Today, coffins constructed of mahogany, bronze or copper caskets may cost as much as \$10,000.²⁵ Since the process involves burning, the casket used in cremation is usually some kind of combustible material that can aid the burning process. Therefore, when one chooses to be cremated the family is spared the burden of purchasing expensive coffins and other related items. For some families, the choice of cremation is the result of the rising cost of funeral expenses today. This is not a strong argument, however because a bereaved family does not require a \$10,000 coffin to bury their dead. A cheap coffin can still be chosen for earth burial.

²³ Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 518.

²⁴ Geo B. Eager “Cremation” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol. 2* edited by James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 744.

²⁵ Ghana Caskets – Ghana Coffins Guide, <http://www.funeral-arrangements-guide.com/ghana-caskets-ghana-coffins-guide/>

Third, it is argued that cremation offers the family of the deceased some kind of flexibility in choosing a date for the funeral rights to be performed. In certain circumstances, when family members wish to delay the memorial service, cremation allows more flexibility in scheduling a later date because the burning can be done and the ashes presented during the funeral rites. In that case there is no need to worry about the cost to incur in keeping the body in the morgue for a long time. Yet the same flexibility argument can be employed to support other forms of burial, because in some African communities, burial rites could precede final funeral rites and corpses may not have to be kept in the morgue for prolonged periods just to delay funeral rites.

Arguments against Cremation

Many Christians object to cremation for many reasons. Here we discuss five reasons. First, it is argued from Scripture that the human body bears the image of God (Gen. 1: 27) and must be treated with dignity. The inference that follows this view is that the sanctity of the human body and its value makes body burial rather than cremation, more appropriate. However, this argument is based on the assumption that cremation does not dignify the body, which is not necessarily proven in Scripture. It is further argued that corpse burial is less than a “final” phase in a person’s transition and affords the bereaved family the chance to remember the person either at a grave site or vault. Funerals for those to be buried afford dignity and promoters for the burial process assert that the body belongs to God. This, however, does not suggest that cremation precludes funeral services organized to say goodbye to the departed.

Secondly, it is noted that through the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, and God uniquely hallowed human life and bodily existence forever. Therefore, the human body must not be destroyed through burning. However, when a body is buried in the earth, it is equally destroyed through decomposition. If the argument is stretched further to connect Paul’s teaching that the body is the dwelling place for the Holy Spirit and as such, the bodies of believers must be treated with reverence and honor (1 Cor. 3:16-17), the counter argument will be that Paul was admonishing Christians not to defile their bodies through sexual promiscuity and debauchery. He was not discussing disposal of dead bodies. While Scripture hardly presents to us a bodiless soul (if at all), suggesting that the psychosomatic unity of the human person must be preserved at all costs, it is only when it can be proven that cremation, but no other methods of body disposal destroys the psychosomatic unity of the body, that a condemnation of cremation may be warranted on the basis of this reasoning.

Thirdly, it is said that as Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believe their body burial is a witness to the resurrection yet to come. The opposing view is that Jesus was a Jew and since biblical Jews were not known to have practiced cremation, Jesus could not have been cremated. Arguing against cremation, Paul L. Freeman observes that, in spite of the economic advantage of cremation, Joseph of Arimathea spent a lot of money to prepare Jesus’ body and then placed it in his (Joseph’s) own new tomb (John 19:38-41).²⁶ Yet it is clear that cremation was not an option available for Joseph to choose from. This underscores the fact that burial must be practiced no matter the cost involved.

In the fourth place, it is argued that cremation signifies God’s punishment. Freeman posits that, “God has only one word about cremation in the whole Bible, and it is a strong word of disapproval. ‘This is what the Lord says; for three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment from them: because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime.’ (Amos 2:1)”²⁷ By this, Freeman underscores the fact that God uses fire as a means of punishing sin. Freeman’s observation is probably not correct because what the text describes is not cremation. Burning a dead body as a way of punishment is known in the Bible, in Christian history and in different cultures of the world but it is different from cremation. This point has the support of the Ewes²⁸ of Ghana who believe that it is witches and wizards or sorcerers and wicked people who, occasionally, deserve to be burnt when they die. Since such people were cruel to others, they must be burnt as punishment and to serve as deterrent to those who may be contemplating such wickedness or might have been already involved in it.

²⁶ Paul L. Freeman, “Cremation Is Not for Christians” in Christian Resources <http://www.wholesomewords.org/etexts/freeman/pfcrem.html> (Accessed on 3/4/16).

²⁷ Freeman, “Cremation is not for Christians”

²⁸Confidence Worlanyo Bansah, “Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana: Theological and Ecclesiological Responses”, in *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, Vol. 18 No. 2, Sept., 2014, 100-113, 105

Finally, it is contended that the God of the Bible detests the act of cremation as Freeman notes. Alfred J. Levell asserts that the OT reveals that the practice of cremation is detestable in the sight of God.²⁹ “Burning”, as he notes, “carries a mark of opprobrium or contempt”, “the thought of removing rubbish and unwanted material, and sometimes of judgment and desolation”³⁰ However, it is clear that the “burning” Levell refers to is not cremation. Geisler and Potter argue that burial of corpses is the Scriptural pattern and that there is no compelling biblical or even non-biblical argument in support of cremation.³¹ They however, admit that cremation cannot hinder the power of the resurrection and yet Scripture teaches believers to bury the dead in the earth. This, they observe, is of both practical and symbolic value in the Bible. The point of their paper is that while the Bible does not forbid cremation specifically, nonetheless it does show corpse burial as the practical, symbolic way of disposing of the dead. This, in their opinion is important to establish continuity between the present body and the resurrected body. Their argument is true to the pattern of burial evident in the Bible as has been explained above. The Bible cannot explicitly condemn cremation because cremation was not known to the cultures of the Bible. It is however, debatable whether one can formulate a Christian theological response to cremation or not.

Cremation and African Culture

A culture’s funerary practices form an important indicator of many social functions. Discussions of the issue of cremation cannot be complete without some cultural considerations. Apparently, people’s perception of cremation may be positive or negative depending on the given culture. According to Confidence Worlanyo Bansah, the Ewe of Ghana have, since time immemorial, instituted *amememe* (burning of a person) as the most prominent and severest means of discouraging people from indulging themselves in evil acts in the community.³² While this practice is different from cremation, its influence tends to affect Ewe Christian understandings of cremation.

The belief is that since those who are burnt upon their death practiced moral evil during their lives, burning their corpses is required to purify their soul in order that it might attain eternal life. Without this act, it is believed, “the souls of such people will be in limbo as wandering and restless evil spirits causing death and calamity in their respective lineages.”³³ It therefore serves as “expiation or atonement for the self-confessed or accused to reconcile with the ancestral world.”³⁴

Bansah’s view is contentious and highly debatable. To argue that the concept of eternal life is part of African cosmology is to view African indigenous religion through Christian lenses. African indigenous religions do speak of the afterlife but it is connected with belief in reincarnation, which is very evident in many African names such as Ababio (the person who has returned), Afetorgbor (the owner of the house-father-has returned) or Babatunde (father has returned). Even this is mostly a West African phenomenon and we are not unaware of the fact that defining “Africa” itself is a tall order. Besides, Bansah’s choice of term for the burning phenomenon that he tried to explain is problematical if not misleading. Since he was referring to burning of the corpses of dead morally evil individuals, *dzotortor amekuku* (burning of a dead person), in our opinion would be a better label.

Bansah’s position as an African Christian theologian further allows him to argue that as a means of reconciling one’s spirit with the ancestral world, burning prevents the possible return of the ghost and wards off evil spirits. To accomplish this purpose, burning among the Ewes is usually performed at night at the graveside of the dead person. There is however a contrary view in which corpses are believed to be dragged along major streets of Ewe villages in the full glare of bewildered onlookers before finally being taken to the outskirts to be burnt and disposed of. This death ritual, as Bansah adds, has had a very great impact on the people in terms of shaping their morality— it deters people from practicing evil like abortion,

²⁹ Alfred J. Levell, *Cremation Not for Christians: The Voice of Holy Scripture* (Harpenden: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2000), 4.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=TMfbN4Rz2PIC&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq>

³⁰ Levell, *Cremation Not for Christians*, 4.

³¹ Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter, “From Ashes to Ashes: Is Burial the only Christian Option?” *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1998), 1-7

³² Bansah, “Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana,” 105.

³³ Bansah, “Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana,” 100.

³⁴ Bansah, “Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana,” 100.

murder, witchcraft, and so on.³⁵ In this way, burning is seen as contributing positively to the life of the society. Even though the purposes for which burning is practiced, among the Ewes are morally sound, the practice is obviously not normative, since it is targeted at the wicked evil doers only. Even if the practice is equated to cremation, all that would happen is that Ewes may argue for cremation for those who were judged by society to be evil and exceedingly wicked. It then would have nothing to do with making a free, personal choice to have one's body cremated after death. To cremate everyone, in the context of the Ewes, even if cremation were equated with *dzotortor amekuku* will be the same as declaring everyone a wicked person in effect.

Even though cremation is a foreign burial practice in African societies, many Africans reject cremation because of beliefs in the ancestors and in the commitment to burial as a medium that permits an on-going sense of contact with the dead. In such societies, burial of bodies is the common way of disposing of a corpse, and to arrange a proper burial is esteemed as a pious manifestation of honor due the dead. Proper burial is necessary to avoid the wrath of the ancestors. Among the Akans of Ghana, the long preserved tradition of corpse burial as a sign of respect for the dead is known. The Akan word for burial is *sie*, the meaning of which seems to suggest that the Akans believe that the corpse will not remain in the ground forever. To *sie* means "to consciously hide something precious at a safe place so that one can go for it anytime the need arises." This is quite different from the expression *to twene* which means "to throw away" or "to dispose of." The rationale behind this is the understanding and belief that the dead is to be kept safely and could be visited at any appropriate time. Even though when one goes to visit a deceased relative's grave, he/she does not see the dead physically, there is emotional satisfaction which comes from the mental picture of the dead. It is believed that proper funeral rites are a guarantee to serene, calm life and smooth entrance into the spirit world, the abode of the dead ancestors.

The choice of cremation may deprive an individual and a community of these important grieving rituals. Cremation, as Rachel Applebaum notes "bypasses the honor and respect given to the deceased, steals away the last chance for a final goodbye and removes the opportunity for the family to show their ability to care for their family."³⁶ In most African cultures, where the dead is still loved and properly catered for, cremation cannot easily be accepted. Many people cannot imagine the process of burning a dead body into ashes as a way of disposing of the dead. It is painful and stressful to imagine that a loved one is going to be burnt into ashes, especially against the backdrop that it is evil, sinful people who are burnt as punishment in many African countries, and in Christianity as eternal punishment for the wicked, unbelieving people. In that sense, it is the common feeling that when a person is being cremated, it is as if that person has already been sentenced to hell. Yet, this does not mean that cremation should be denied one who requests it before his/her death.

Theological Challenges of Cremation

The relationship between cremation and the resurrection is a theological challenge. Geisler and Potter argue that body burial symbolizes the Christian hope for the resurrection, than cremation because body burial points to salvation *in* the body, while cremation better symbolizes salvation *from* the body, a pantheistic view.³⁷ This does not mean that cremation can prevent bodily resurrection. There is no biblical data which indicates that cremation has power to prevent God from resurrecting the dead. Scripture nowhere places any limit upon God's power to resurrect the dead. John wrote in his Apocalypse,

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. (Rev. 20:12-13).

In the text, the sea, Death and Hades are mentioned as abodes of the dead from which they were resurrected to face judgment. There is no mention of how their bodies were disposed but it each person was to be judged. It probably shows that God's ability to resurrect the body does not in any way depend on how his/her body was treated after death. The body that is buried or incinerated is not the one that will ultimately

³⁵ Bansah, "Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana," 107.

³⁶ Rachel Applebaum, "Spatial Manifestation and Trends of Cremation in Pennsylvania" (Unpublished Master Thesis submitted to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 7.

³⁷ Geisler and Potter, "From Ashes to Ashes", 6

dwell with the Lord after resurrection. Paul notes that the resurrected body will be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual (I Cor. 15: 42-44). In applying Paul's passage to the morality of cremation we shall assume "a uniquely imperishable and incorruptible new body of immortality different from the body of our present state which is rather mortal, perishable, corruptible..."³⁸ and subject to decay. Burial of the body gives explicit expression to the analogy of the seed sown resulting in a future harvest; it is a distinctive testimony to the future Christian hope of resurrection. O'Callaghan quotes Augustine as saying, "If those who do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh bury the bodies of the dead, even more so should believers do so, because the dead body will rise up and remain forever, and this becomes a public witness to this very faith."³⁹ This argument is of symbolic value only. It does not mean that God will not be able to resurrect the cremated body, if we bear in mind that a buried, decomposed body becomes part of the earth that covers it and yet no believer doubts that God can resurrect a buried body.

CONCLUSION

We have pointed out that though cremation is not a Jewish practice evident in the Bible, the practice of cremation has no power to frustrate God's plan to resurrect dead believers. God can resurrect human ashes just as conveniently as he can resurrect the dust formed after the decomposition of the buried corpse.⁴⁰ There are various reasons why African Christians disagree over cremation, including the fact that in some African societies only dead people judged to have been morally evil are burnt (as punishment, not cremated). We conclude therefore that, if cremation is to be opposed, the basis for the opposition should not be a doubt of the power of God in raising a burnt body from its ashes. The weight of Christian tradition favors corpse burial because of the Jewish culture that underlies much of the Bible which did not practice cremation. Even though there are biblical references for both the act of burial and of burning (not cremation), cremation is not a method of corpse disposal in the Bible. In the history of the Church cremation has been a matter of debate. As Plummer has rightly observed, "The examples of the Jews, the fact that Christ was buried, the association of burning with heathen practices, and perhaps rather material views respecting the resurrection, have contributed to make cremation unpopular among Christians."⁴¹ Plummer goes as far as to add that "there is nothing essentially antichristian in it."⁴² For this reason, the Bible should not be used as a proof text either for the necessity of burial of the dead or for "cremation on demand." Also, cremation does not determine the final state of a person. The eternal state of a person does not depend on what happens to his/her corpse. Anyone could die through a plane crash, fire disaster, earthquakes and tsunamis that are accompanied by fire or some such means. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop is right to argue that "The critical issue surrounding death is not the method of [disposing the corpse] but the spiritual condition of the deceased."⁴³ At death a person is faced with two options. "If the deceased person is a believer, that person is eternally saved and goes to the presence of the Lord, regardless of how his or her body is disposed of. On the other hand, if the deceased is an unbeliever, he or she is lost eternally."⁴⁴

This paper suggests that the selection of cremation may be considered in certain situations. For example, if the dead is known to have chosen it before death on basis, not contrary to Christian beliefs or if a family wishes to transport the cremated remains to a distant place, and they are convinced that their Christian views on resurrection is not contradicted by their choice, cremation useful. However, if cremation is chosen as a secret wish of a professed Christian because he or she belonged to a cult that imposed the choice as a condition for membership, then it is problematic. It cannot be said to be a Christian choice if someone chooses cremation in order to profess his/her "belief in the perishable character of matter, to deny life after death or God's power over matter."⁴⁵ Thus, a person may choose to be cremated if he/she has no intention that violates the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. If cremation is chosen, the various elements of the funeral rites should be conducted in the usual way and, normally, with the cremains present. The

³⁸ Bansah, "Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana: Theological and Ecclesiological Responses", 107.

³⁹ O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope*, 95.

⁴⁰ Bansah, "Cremation among the Ewe of Ghana", 107.

⁴¹ Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 519.

⁴² Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 519.

⁴³ Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2012), 222.

⁴⁴ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 222.

⁴⁵ O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope*, 95.

cremated remains must be treated with respect and should be interred in a grave or an appropriate place. Respect for the body obliges the burial of cremains, but “scattering” them will not prevent resurrection. Finally, “charity requires us to adopt any reverent manner of disposing of the dead which science may prove to be least injurious to the living”⁴⁶ which does not deny our own faith either.

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⁴⁶ Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 519.