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# DUST or ASHES: Cremation Choice Among Kenyan Christians

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## Abstract

This article explores cremation as an alternative way of disposing of the dead among African Christians in Kenya. It examines the theological justification for this practice as an accepted way of disposing of the dead. The study applies the Zerfass Model[2] to provide a theological basis for cremation: First, the theological tradition is studied; second, a situation analysis is conducted; third, critical correlations are explored; and finally, a theory is constructed. This study shows that burial predates Christianity, meaning that Christians adopted a common practice in their context. It further shows the weakness of using scriptural accounts as grounds against cremation, which they neither command, encourage nor condone. This study identifies motivations of Kenyan Christians who choose cremation. These reasons include changing cultural norms, exposure, Churches reform of funeral policies, and openness to new thinking. This study proposes that cremation would not offend African customs for

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[2] Roman Catholic theologian Rolf Zerfass invented the Zerfass Model in 1974. The model analyses a concrete situation which points to the departure of a present praxis. This model used to conduct a study in practical theology provides an outline for the research project that follows a logical framework of four steps: Introduction, Step 1: Theological Tradition, Step 2: Situation Analysis Step 3: Critical Correlation Step 4: Theory Construction and Conclusion (see Zerfass 1974:167-8).

disposing of the dead and offers theological grounds for accepting cremation as a Christian option for disposing of the dead.

## Introduction

Every time a prominent Kenyan Christian is cremated instead of being buried,[3] a debate ensues among Kenyan Christians on the best ways of disposing of their dead. The real contestation is on whether Christianity sanctions cremation.

The attitude of Christians has not shifted to favor cremation, despite the reforms churches have made on their funeral policies. For example, the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) adopted changes to accept cremations as a way of disposing of the dead in 1999 (ACK, Special Provincial Synod 2000, Min 3.9). But when Manasses Kuria, ACK's second Archbishop, cremated the body of his wife Mrs. Mary Nyambura Kuria in 2002 [4] astonished Christians disapproved of his action. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had relaxed her position on cremation for their followers following Vatican II.[5]

This article examines the debate about whether Christianity sanctions cremation. First, it explains the historical development of burial as a church practice adopted by most Christians in Kenya and highlights various customary African norms for disposing of the dead. Second, it examines incidences of cremations in Kenya, explaining why Christians are taking up this practice. Third, it sets up a critical correlation of the findings in the second step, with the normative traditions of the Kenyan Christians. Fourth, it applies the empirical data and theological discourse to offer a theory for action which

[3] On the increase of cremation among prominent Kenyan Christians, see https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/lifestyle/article/2001330357/high-profile-kenyans-getting-fed-up-with-overzealous-burials.

[4] The cremation took place on 8th July 2002, at the Langata Crematorium, only two days after she passed away at the Nairobi Hospital. As was reported by Eliud Miring'uh, *The East African Standard* (9 July 2002).

[5] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74: *AAS* 58 (1966).

revises the present praxis. It adduces theological grounds that allow Christians to accept cremation as another way of disposing of their dead.

## Theological Tradition

The core practice for disposing of the dead among Kenyan Christians remains burial, although increasing numbers of Christians are adopting cremation as an alternative. Upon death people perform particular rituals to care and dispose of the corpses. Bondi (2015: n.p.) identifies such ritualized burial as a primitive sign of religious faith. These rituals shadow a people's gained spiritual tradition, since they understand death as a transition to the afterlife. In this section I explore the historical development of burial as a Christian practice and various customary African norms for disposing of the dead.

Bunson (1991:87) dates the Egyptians' burial rites around c.6000 — 3150 BCE in the Pre-Dynastic Period, long before Judaism and Christianity. The most popular Egyptian practice of disposing of the dead was mummification, which was practiced as early as 3500 BCE. The Egyptians adhered to this practice in order to preserve the corpse buried in the arid sand. Mark (2013:1) describes an example of a preserved body of a person called "Ginger" which was discovered in a tomb in Gebelein, Egypt, dated to 3400 BCE. The Egyptian tombs were graves dug into the earth as the eternal resting place of the body (Khat), which protected them from grave robbers and the elements. These tombs became important in Egyptian civilization, as they used mud bricks to build more ornate graves, the rectangular mastabas. It was from the mastabas they developed the "step pyramids" and later the "true pyramids" (Mark 2013:4).

The Egyptian burial rites were dramatic. They hoped that through their mourning the dead would enter a blissful eternal land through the grave. The burial pointed to a vision of eternity, with the graves containing goods as provisions for the afterlife. Nardo (2004:110) quotes Herodotus (484–425/413 BCE):

> As regards mourning and funerals, when a distinguished man dies, all the women of the household plaster their heads and faces with mud leaving the body indoors, perambulate the town

> with the dead man's relatives, their dresses fastened with a girdle, and beat their bared breasts. The men, too, for their part, follow the same procedure, wearing a girdle and beating themselves like the women. The ceremony is over when they take the body to be mummified.

The physical body was of immense importance to the Egyptians, as Mark (2013:2, 4) illustrates with the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony. The Egyptians conducted this ceremony to reanimate the corpse for continued use by the soul. They performed it by placing the mummy in the tomb where a priest recited spells and touched the mouth of the corpse to eat and drink, and its arms and legs to move about in the tomb (Mark 2013:4). So, to release the corpse on its journey to the afterlife, the people invoked more spells and recited prayers, such as the Litany of Osiris. Bunson (1991:198) considers, "the mysteries recounted the life, death, mummification, resurrection, and ascension of Osiris" as the core part of the Egyptian practice. Hence, proper burial rituals were very important and strictly observed. Even if one had lived an exemplary life, one would not reach paradise if one's burial did not adhere to all their funerary rites.

These Egyptian burial rites and belief in life beyond death spread into the Roman empire once Egypt became Roman province during the Ptolemaic Period (323-30 BCE) (Mark 2013:1). Other civilizations and religions of the ancient world gained the Egyptian belief and practice about the dead through cultural transmission and trade on the Silk Road. One could also trace the influence of Egyptian practices on Hebrew/Jewish practices during this time, which subsequently influenced Christian practices. There is scant evidence of burial rites and customs of the Church during the first centuries CE. There was no known distinct Christian burial form during the first two Christian centuries. The early Christians observed local burial customs (White 1997:197), which, according to Peterson (2001:195), explains the lack of Christian burial customs. Rowell (1997:19) contends that the rites of burial in the early Christianity were not controversial matters and so did not feature in apologetic or polemical works. Hence, references to them are only incidental, resulting in a dearth of information detailing the Christian burial practices. But, according to White (1997:197), only in the late second century did the first unique Christian concerns regarding in burial emerge. During the church's first three centuries,

cemeteries exhibited Christian care of their dead (Rutherford 1990:6). Roman catacombs bear witness to the early Christian's consistent practice of burying their dead.

Initially, Christians and pagans buried their dead in the same cemeteries. After the fourth century, Christians distinguished their graves, marking them with decorative representation and inscriptions. Christians differed in the burial motif as well. Christians did not remember their dead with sadness and resignation, but believed their dead preceded the living to the shepherd's paradise, "to the place of refreshment, light and peace" (Rutherford 1990:6).

The first Christians followed Jewish burial customs, which they modified to reflect both local practices and Christian hope (Brigham 1979:558). They not only adapted contemporary non-Christian funeral practices but modelled them to reflect their monotheism. This, Childers (1997:443) notes, defined Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Of all their influence in the Roman empire, Julian ranks the Christians' care for their dead in burial as top in converting the empire (Julian, *The Letter to Arsaces,* XLIX). Christians expressed the characteristics of their new faith in their belief in the body's resurrection through the reverence for the body in their funeral rites (Smith and Cheetham 1875:251), giving us a long-established liturgy of the Christian burial rites, comprising the funeral Mass, followed by the absolution over the body and burial in a consecrated or blessed grave. Long (2009:8) described this practice*:*

> They invited once more the community of faith, and in dramatic fashion, to recognize that Christian life is shaped in the pattern of Christ's own life and death. We have been, as Paul says in Romans (6:3-5), baptized into Jesus' death and baptized into Jesus' life: do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

The ACK shares other Christian denominations' understanding of burial as a pious tradition among Christians, a practice which, as McDonald (1971:134) notes, "the church has always tried to encourage by supporting it with an appropriate ritual designated to highlight the symbolism and religious significance of burial". Every death confronts African Christians with the

challenge of disposing of the corpse. They are torn between adhering to the tenets of the Christian faith and their African worldview, which believes that the dead have power over the living. In most African societies, life and death exist together on a continuum. Death is a rite of passage that ushers one into becoming an "ancestor" who continues to live in the community (Oginde 2019a: n.p.). Ocholla-Ayayo (Bondi 2015: n.p.), observes that the event of death amongst the Luo presented a "crisis of life" and an element in the life cycle of the individual. This explains why death and funeral rites, among the Luo and Luyia, involve not only the bereaved's immediate family but also their extended family and the community at large. Since death means exiting this world and entering the invisible world, proper death rites became a necessity to guarantee protection for the living.

The manner and location of the burial among the Luo is determined by the individual's status in society, the nature of their death, and their deeds, as well as the rituals performed to appease the ancestors. The displaying of the deceased's body remains an important part of Luo custom. After observing burial rites, they disposed of the body in a rectangular grave about five feet or deeper. The Luo, like the Luhya and the Gusii, bury their dead within the deceased's homestead. They also bury their dead infants (including stillborn), although the Luhya methods differ from the Luo in insignificant details. Difference in burial methods, asserts Ocholla-Ayayo (1970: n.p.), highlights the differing social distinctions amongst members of the tribes, thus maintaining the societal order.

The rituals surrounding death amongst Africans are systematic. They keep ancestral links, guide succession and inheritance, and underscore the interdependence and the conjoined relations of living kin. The Luo observed these rites to prepare for the afterlife, which is part of the continuum that fulfils one's social responsibilities. It evinced the intricate relationship between the dead and the living in Luo nomenclature, which incorporates the name of the spirits (*nying juogi*). While the Luyia used funerals to please the ancestral spirits, strengthened by the notion during *Lisaabo,* a remembrance of the dead ancestors. Hence, the ritualistic slaughter of animals and the serving of food and drinks to mourners.

Nomadic communities, such as the Maasai, did not allow the sick or aged to die in the home. Instead, they took them into the forest, hillside, or lay them abandoned by the river. Once dead, the Maasai buried their dead under a tree in the sitting position with the deceased's chin resting on the knees. They then covered the body with stones. However, these landmarks were weak, allowing hyenas to sniff out the corpse and pull it from its tomb in a practice known as exposure.

The Kikuyu, like the Maasai, practised exposure, discarding their dead to the wild animals. In his biography, Francis Hall (2006:152-3) claimed to have buried victims of the disease himself, since, under the Kikuyu customary law, corpses ought not to be touched. The Meru, like Kikuyu, abhor contamination through contact with corpses. Hence, those who disposed of corpses, including their family members, underwent ritual cleansing and shaving.

But not every Kikuyu threw their deceased to hyenas. The rich were buried. According to Mbugua (2014:72-3), a *kĩbĩrĩra* was the burial ground where the Kikuyu took their dead. Before burial, they performed rituals which involved a careful wrapping of the body in a sleeping position with the *kĩbĩrĩra* facing the homestead. These were elaborate rites, costing sheep and goats beyond the means of many. The Kikuyu funeral rites culminated in a full *Gũkũra* ceremony, which showed the deceased person's spirit achieving ancestral status.

Today burial ceremonies even amongst African Christians often involve prayers in a church and at the dead person's home, alongside traditional rituals.

## Situation Analysis

Reasons for increased cremation incidences in Kenya vary. I identify them as individual preferences, relaxation of religious opposition, cultural changes, environmental reasons, public health emergency, and worldwide acceptance and analyze them in this section.

### *Individual preference*

The major reason for cremation in Kenya is honoring the departed's wish. For example, Archbishop Kuria honored his wife's preference for being cremated in 2002. According to Maurice Murimi, Kuria's son-in-law, "it was not the

family's decision but the express choice of our mother." Three years afterwards, Archbishop Kuria died, leaving a similar will to be charred. ACK Primate David Gitari, in 2005, did not interfere with his predecessor's wish for cremation.[6] Justifying his stand, Gitari pointed out that the ACK has always respected a family's decision on internment. The Roman Catholics take a similar position, giving individuals the right to choose the church for their funeral rites and the cemetery for their burial, to the individuals (Canon Law 1985: 1223 #1).

### *Relaxing religious perspective*

Apart from Muslims, who forbid cremation, most religions have considered cremation a legitimate way of disposing of the dead. Although Christian denominations prefer burial, all except for the Greek Orthodox allow cremation. The Kenyan Church is part of other global Christian denominations and shares these beliefs with them. Anglicans/Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists, permit cremation before or after the funeral rite. Presbyterians do not support cremation, but do not forbid it.

The ACK proposed changes to her funeral policies accommodating cremation at its 1999 Provincial Synod (Gitari 2014:120-22). The adopted resolution states:

> The African culture has not yet accommodated itself to the practice of cremation. But if a Christian in his or her will wishes his body to be cremated, the church will accept that wish (Min 3.9 SPS/ 07/2000).

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) prefers cremation after the funeral Mass and demands burial of the cremains in the ground or at sea or entombed in a columbarium. They forbid the scattering or the family from keeping the ashes. Although the RCC pronounced herself on cremation earlier, they were slower in implementing it. During the Vatican II, the Catholic Church reformed her funeral and burial rites to a more relaxed approach, allowing cremation with one very explicit proviso. The RCC codified this modification in the latest Code of Canon Law:

[6] Archbishop Kuria was cremated on 20th September 2005, a day after his death.

> The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless they chose this for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching (Canon Law 1985: #1176.3).

But only recently has the RCC issued instruction on cremation. On October 25, 2016, The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed the objectionable ideas and practices of cremation.[7]

Some Christian theologians advocate for cremation as an alternative way of disposing of the dead. Concluding his research on Kikuyu burial traditions, Mbugua (2014:315–6) urges Christians in Kikuyu District to embrace cremation as a way of disposing of the dead, as this will reduce funeral costs. Cremation for an adult costs Ksh. 50,000 at the Lang'ata crematorium in Nairobi (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.). Kariokor is much cheaper, where the cost ranges between KSh. 13,000 for adults and KSh. 6,000 for children (Mwendwa 2022: n.p.). Further, Mbugua (2014:318) cites the lack of adequate places to bury the dead as another reason for cremation. According to Hitan Majevdia of the Nairobi County Health ministry, cremation should be a workable choice for Nairobi people (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.) because of the scarcity of space in cemeteries within Nairobi.

### *Changing cultural perspectives*

Africans are living under the constant pressures of globalization. It is a pressure to adopt the modern and jettisoning their traditional practices.

When MariaLouise Okondo, the European spouse of the former minister for labour, Hon. Peter Okondo, incinerated him in 1996, the family accused her of introducing Okondo to foreign customs. She went against Okondo's extended family's wish to bury him according to the Luyia-Abanyala customs. One's burial positioning amongst the Luyia has something to do with their "mythology or origin of the clan." Besides, the kin wanted to rid themselves of *bukhutsakhali* (the breath of the dead) through an Abaluyia funerary rite where the bereaved family members shave. But Okondo regarded these

[7] See discussion in section 4.2 and 4.3 below.

customs as foolish (Okondo 1996:5), arguing that her husband was not bound by Abaluyia customs anymore. Thus, she did not agree with the family's wish.

A former Kenyan sports administrator, Joshua Okuthe's wife, Ruth, cremated him in 2009 according to Joshua's will. Here, Okuthe went against Luo burial customs. His extended family attempted to protest this in court, trying to stop her, but she outwitted them. His family buried his empty coffin at a mock funeral in his Muhoroni home. This was in line with a Luo burial tradition of the cenotaph. Here they buried an empty tomb representing the deceased whose body they bury in another location. The Luo buried a "*yago"* fruit in the cenotaph or bury it by the lakeshore for someone who died by drowning or whose body they could not recover.

The family of Hon. Kenneth Okoth, the Kibera Member of Parliament who wanted to be cremated had to honour his wish. The individual choice has a chiasma. While African customs often trumped individualism in preference to societal customs, it held that the will of a dying individual is sacrosanct. The Luo espoused belief in the afterlife, which was integral to the belief that a person's social status during life and an individual's last words at death in effect determine his or her relationship with those left. They believed that the elderly have the power to bless or curse, hence their last spoken words could either bless or curse. The last words spoken at a funeral are therefore binding to the relatives. This was prevalent among the societies that revered the dead.

These communities that practiced exposure but adopted burial with the coming of Europeans to Kenya and are bound to change again. Hon. Kenneth Matiba, founder of Ford Asili Party, an opinion leader among the Kikuyu and Kenya people, and a leading politician, chose cremation in April 2018 over burial. Matiba in 1994 (Mumbi 2018: n.p.) rejected a state funeral or "dancing parties and harambees" upon his death. Another eminent Kikuyu who chose the incinerator over the grave is Africa's Classic Professional golf champion Peter Njiru, cremated in 2015 at Kariokor.

### *Environmental reasons*

The scarcity of land, hygiene, and environmental concerns also led to this embrace of cremation. Cremation makes better use of land. To reinforce cremation as a Christian practice, William E. Phipps (1981:222) posits: "as land

becomes scarcer, cremation is more widely endorsed." Environmentalists, including Wangari Maathai, argue that ecologically cremation is more environmentally responsible. They cremated the Nobel Prize winner Maathai in 2011 and buried her ashes at the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies.

### *Public health emergency*

The church has always justified the cremation of her dead in extraordinary circumstances, argues McDonald (1971:137). The Roman Catholic Church[8] allowed cremation in emergency cases where the quick disposal of bodies was a civil necessity, thus justifying disposing of corpses by cremation for public good in wartime or during serious epidemic.

### *Worldwide acceptance*

Awareness of benefits accrued from popular Eastern practices makes them more accepted worldwide. The global reality of increasing acceptance of cremation has drawn more Kenyans to consider it. These are no longer constrained by their tribal customs or church dogma, for many well-travelled and exposed Kenyans as reflected in public figures and entrepreneurs such as Mr. Jeremiah Kiereini, the former head of Kenya Civil Service, cremated in July 2019, the same month as the Guyanese Mr. Bob Colemore, the managing director of Safaricom.

According to the Cremation Association of North America, the cremation rate within the United States was 48.6 percent of deaths as of 2015, up from 47 percent in 2014. They predicted that the rate would reach 54.3 percent by 2020. The projected rate in Canada was 68.8 percent in 2015 and 74.2 percent by 2020.

## Critical Correlation

In this step, the article explores the critical correlation of the findings on cremation with the normative traditions. It interprets the discourse on disposal

[8] The Catholic Church has modified its position on the morality of cremation. Prior to Vatican II.

of the dead to show its salient aspects and discusses whether cremation is un-Christian and un-African.

### *Is cremation un-Christian?*

Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM) Bishop Dr. David Oginde, one the most articulate critics of cremation in Kenya, submits that "traditional Christian faith considers cremation as inconsistent with orthodox doctrine" (2019a: n.p.). He echoes conservative theologians such as Rodney Decker (2006:37) who took an "active discouragement" position, because he considers cremation to be defiance of God, a sin. These theologians base their claim on scriptural examples of burials, although no text explicitly commands Christians to bury their dead (Oginde 2019b: n.p.). Cremation, Oginde (2019b: n.p.) insists, was not acceptable among the Hebrews, except as a punishment as recorded in Lev 20:14 and Deuteronomy 21:22, 23. Oginde cites unfaithful Achan and his family, whom Joshua burned (Josh 7:25) but agrees that this was an exception.

Theologians who justify cremation from scriptures cite the account of the charring Saul's remains. To salvage the honor of King Saul and of his three sons, against the defilement of their corpse by Philistines, the men of Jabesh-Gilead burned and buried their remains (1 Sam 31:8–13). Phipps (1989:122) acknowledges the Bible's approval of their action. Indeed, David commended the men of Jabesh-Gilead for the honor they gave to Saul in their action (2 Sam 2:4–6).

Since the biblical narratives lack high uniformity and so give a conflicting position on cremation, it will be difficult to use scriptures to condemn the practice. For the Bible never commands, encourages, or condones cremation. It is possible to draw multiple principles from a variety of scriptural narratives. For Decker (2006:34), much of the Biblical materials is descriptive narrative and not prescriptive. Despite this acknowledgement, he insists that inhumation is most compatible with Christian theology and most effective in terms of Christian witness in the West.[9] But Decker (2006:36) concedes, "I

[9] This essay has not attempted to discuss the question of Christian practice in Eastern cultures or in countries where cremation may be mandated. I have insufficient knowledge of such matters to try such a discussion.

would not go so far as to declare flatly that cremation is sin. Sometimes it may be acceptable without embarrassment."

### *Does cremation offend Christian dogma?*

McDonald (1971:136) views opposition to burial as a hatred of Christian customs and ecclesiastical traditions. Those who oppose burial have a sectarian interest**.** Oginde (2019a: n.p.) connects cremation with the new age movement, which he claims will usher in cults and philosophies, bringing in a human revolt against God.

The church refutes regeneration or reincarnation, reasons for Hindu cremation, as denials of individual uniqueness and the bodily resurrection. The Church affirms human beings are both physical and spiritual. Salvation applies to both, thus challenging the notion of Gnosticism in the first century that viewed the body as evil (Col 2:9). The church further holds that God's salvation and redemption include both the soul and the body (1 Cor 7:34; 2 Cor 4:16; 7:1; Rom 8:10), which will occur at the resurrection (Rom 8:23). Thus, a human being is complete when he or she is both material and immaterial, making the future resurrection imperative.

So, the once separated soul and body will be reunited at the resurrection*,* which is understood as a clothing of a naked soul (corpse). But theologians differ on the state of the corpse. Harris (1985:*98*–100) holds a monistic anthropology position, which expects an immediate resurrection at death. While upholding the corpse's importance, Decker (2006:21) maintains that, at "death, the corpse in the grave is referred to as a person. For instance, the dead body of Jesus in the tomb is referred to as 'him' not 'it'" (Mark 15:44-47, see also John 11:43). This position that a person — body and soul — is eternal and for which Jesus promised everlasting life (cf. Ad resurgendum cum Christo, 2016 #3*)* needs scrutiny.

Believers who are alive at Christ's second coming will get new bodies, while dead bodies, since buried, will decompose (Eccles 12:7). Present human bodies count for little in salvation, for God has designated new bodies for believers (1 Cor. 15:42-49; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Job 19:25-26). At death, the human body rots. Just like a seed that is cast into the earth, it dies and rots (1 Cor 15:36). Given

that the body is chemicals, it disintegrates at death, as David Wasawo (2014:50–1) explains:

> Are we not mostly made of oxygen, carbon and hydrogen, sixty percent of which are in the form of water? Are we not reminded that a man weighing 150 pounds contains 97.5 pounds of oxygen, 27 pounds of carbon, 15 of hydrogen, 4.5 of nitrogen, 3 of calcium and 1.5 pounds of phosphorus? Added to these are a few ounces each of potassium, Sulphur, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, and iron; and traces of iodine, fluorine, and silicon.

Wasawo (2014:51) notes how these elements are combined "to form thousands of very complicated compounds forming parts of cells, tissues, and organs, each performing its allotted function in the sentient being." But when life is taken out of the body, all these elements revert to the "soil" and "dust" whence they came.

### *Dignity of the body*

The church gives dignity to the human body because it is created in the image of God and is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the human body is her focus from birth to death.

First, unlike other creatures, God made human beings in His image, hence respect for the human body (George 2002: n.p.; Oginde 2019b: n.p.). Although Anglican Bishop Peter Njenga defended Mrs. Mary Kuria's cremation, he voiced a Christian objection thus: "I think the big problem with cremation is that people believe cremation subjects the body to torture" (Njenga 2002:3). Pope Pius XII affirmed this position while addressing those engaged in treatment of the blind on 14 May 1956 ( see Pius 1956: 462-3):

> The human corpse has been a dwelling place of a spiritual and immortal soul, an essential part of the human person in whose dignity it had a share. Since it is a component part of man and formed in "the image and likenesses of God."

Christians gave reverence for the body through burial because of faith in the future resurrection. Because, as Geisler (1998:34) notes: "burial preserves the Christian belief in the body's sanctity," the church developed meticulous

funeral rites - rites whereby they applied incense and holy water with prayers that the Lord will receive the person into paradise. So, burial became synonymous with the dignity of the individual's body, causing Oginde (2019b: n.p.) to allege: "For a corpse to be burnt by fire or left unburied to become food for beasts of prey, was the height of indignity or judgment." However, Brigham (1979:558) refutes that proper burial is essential for an individual's bliss in the afterlife, stating that sometimes undignified disposal of the body provided a lasting witness. As St. Augustine observed in *The City of God* (1.12):

> And so there are indeed many bodies of Christians lying unburied; but no one has separated them from heaven, nor from that earth which is all filled with the presence of Him who knows whence He will raise again what He created... Wherefore all these last offices and ceremonies that concern the dead, the careful funeral arrangements, and the equipment of the tomb, and the pomp of obsequies, are rather the solace of the living than the comfort of the dead.

Second, Christians regard the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. It receives the sacraments. But this role ceases upon death. Decker (2006:16) concedes that the Holy Spirit does not indwell our bodies after death, yet still makes a limp claim that the body is still united to Christ: "… if the body is a member of Christ due, in part to the resurrection." A person's existence does not end at death, as materialists believe, for White (2021: n.p.) points out, there is a connection and continuity between the human soul and body, otherwise a future resurrection would be unnecessary.

The allegedly preserved body, Phipps (1989:222) contends, "is a Promethean rejection of Isaiah's judgment that 'all flesh is grass' and Paul's claim that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God'". This is because death neither destroys the person nor reduces his or her uniqueness and individuality.

Cremation does not constitute an objective denial of Christian dogmas. Rather, as MacArthur (2022: n.p.) submits, "cremation isn't a strange or wrong practice—it merely accelerates the natural process of oxidation." So, Christians should accept cremation if it meets the demands of due respect and dignity for the body and if the ashes are treated with the same dignity. Phipps

(1989:222) suggests that "a memorial worship service after cremation sets the transitoriness of the physical in bold relief against the everlastingness of the spiritual. The 'consuming fire' has transformed but not destroyed the essential self of the person honoured at the service."

Since Christians adopted and developed the tradition of burial from pagan and Jewish practices, under different circumstances, Christians today may also adopt cremation.

### *Resurrection of the dead*

Given that Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, Christian burial was a witness to the resurrection yet to come (George 2002: n.p.). Burial therefore embodies for Christians the symbolism of the resurrection, giving it a deep religious significance. As for McDonald (1971:135), laying the body in the grave to wait for the last day is better than submitting the corpse to fire. But holding such a view implies that resurrection is physical, a position disputed by Phipps (1981:55):

> Paul did not believe that the residual dust in a tomb would be the substance of a new heavenly organism. When the apostle writes about 'the resurrection of the dead,' he does not mean the reassembling and the reanimation of the corpse. The expression 'spiritual body' (1 Cor 15:44) which he uses, does not refer to the physical skeleton and the flesh that hangs on it. Rather, in modern terminology, it means the self or the personality. Paul's view is compatible with body disposal by cremation. Contrariwise, those who adamantly advocate earth burial because it enhances resurrection have a weak New Testament foundation on which to stand.

Cremation has no effect on the soul, nor does it hinder God's almighty power from raising a body to life again. How the body is dissolved and corrupted by death will not hinder its resurrection. For if God can quicken a rotten seed, turning it into something productive, why should it be incredible that God will quicken dead bodies? The dead will change like dead seeds change, being quickened, raised to stalk, blade, and ear.

So, it does not matter to God whether a person's body was buried, cremated, lost at sea, or eaten by wild animals (Rev 20:13). The Almighty can re-create a new body for the person (1 Cor 15:35, 38). For cremation does not affect the soul. Neither does it prevent God from raising up the deceased body to new life.

### *Is Cremation un-African?*

While Christians accept cremation as a choice today, many Africans regard the practice as too radical and too foreign. However, communities such as Meru, Kikuyu, Kamba, and the Kalenjin, that once practiced exposure of corpses, learnt to bury. They might now adopt cremation as well to improve on their customary practices, a reason propounded by Matiba (Mumbi 2018: n.p.): "after all, according to their customs, the Kikuyu never buried their dead. They used to take the bodies into the forest to be devoured by hyenas. Was that not wisdom?"

Westernization among Kenyans blunted the belief that spirits of the dead have influence on the living and the fear of being haunted should anything untoward happen when they dispose of their dead differently**.** Until now, Africans held that the dead affect the living. One's death allows them to become an ancestor, given that they received an "exact" burial, bounded by abundant religious formalities. Failing to receive such could result in the deceased becoming a malevolent spirit. Hence, the weight given to "proper" death rites as a "guarantee of protection" for the living, to secure a safe transitional for the dead. For instance, the Luhya valued giving honor to the ancestral spirits, hence pleased these spirits through offering sacrifices.

The Luo permitted incineration under exceptional circumstances. Here is a paradox. Africans, among the Luo and Abaluyia, maintained that the dead influenced their living kin. Hence, they adhered to customary funeral rites to counter the dead from tormenting the living. They reject cremation because it cannot satisfy the funeral rite norms of the Luo and may lead to the suffering of the living. It is likewise the Luo customary antidote to such malevolent ghosts. According to Ocholla-Ayayo (1970: n. p.), the Luo exhumed and burn the remains of a departed who are haunting their kin.

This recognition, among Luyia and Luo Christians, that the dead are impotent, has blunted the fear of ancestral wrath, and so disposed of traditional obstacle to cremation.

## Theory Construction

In the construction stage, this paper applies the empirical data and theological discourse to offer a theory for action and, thus, revises the present praxis. The theory is aware of the presuppositions of cremation.

As the church expands, she confronts diverse human conditions and encounters new cultures not within the experience of the biblical traditions upon which Christians can find answers. Though we have no concrete biblical injunctions to guide us on how to dispose of our dead, the Bible's broad narratives can help us frame firm conclusions, which ought to be theological considerations, cognizant of our various cultural issues.

The first significant decision by the Council in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, which declared that the new gentile Christians did not have to enter Jewish religious culture, opened Christianity to adopt the cultures it entered. The lack of Christian culture the way we have an Islamic culture (Walls 2000:792–9) points to the cultural diversity and flexibility built into the Christian faith from the beginning. Gentile Christians did not have to receive circumcision and keep the Jewish law, which ended a tribal mode of faith, which included the need for circumcision and keeping the law. This stand opened Christianity to other things.

Christianity lacks a specific Christian lifestyle. Therefore, Christians are to work out, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a way of being Christians in their context. Since disposing of the dead is a cultural construct, not a doctrinal edict, like in Islam, the decision to bury or cremate ought to be theological. McDonald (1971:137) observed that long before the Vatican II changes, the RCC allowed Japanese Catholics to be cremated. Cremation as an age-old national custom was compulsory in Japan. The bishops in Japan negotiated and got a concession to bury priests and members of religious orders and congregations of both sexes.

This theological argument provides a basis for Christians in Kenya to consider cremation along with burial as a way of disposing of the dead. Although both Anglicans and Roman Catholics have adopted cremation, they never proceeded beyond their pronouncement. The ACK, for instance, has not developed cremation protocols or liturgies despite their funeral reforms. Beyond the resolution, they put little effort into preparing Christians for it. A general Christian cremation infrastructure remains undeveloped.

The church should set cremation protocols in tandem with Christian dogma. Through the Holy Office's instruction, the RCC maintains that those who choose cremation must not deny the dogmas, including the immortality of the human soul and the bodily resurrection of the dead. Cremation done in adherence to Christian dogma should enhance and not mute the expression of Christian faith.

Where Christians choose cremation over burial, this wish ought to be clarified to avoid conflict upon death. George Omwansa, (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.) a council member of the Lawyer Society of Kenya, who has handled several cremation disputes, observed that often the entire family was not aware of the cremation wishes of the departed. As a result, a section of relatives stepped up to oppose cremation in favor of burial, thus causing trouble.

The church in Kenya should give families and individuals choosing cremation guidelines to help them in their decisions, and make sure they cremate as the church recommends[10] and that the cremains are buried in a dignified manner in a person's last resting place either at a cemetery, a church, a columbarium, or a mausoleum.

The church should develop an associated ceremony or liturgy to accompany cremation. While the memorial service can remain unchanged, the church needs to create a liturgy and order of service to assist clergy conducting cremation services and the committal of the cremains.

We also need to develop public and Christian crematoriums. The largest crematorium in Kenya is the Hindu crematorium in Kariokor. Since the Hindus

[10] In Canon Law, Catholics may choose the church for their funeral rites and a cemetery for their burial. This is a choice by law (Canon Law 1223#1).

run most crematoriums in the country, thus, easy for people to associate cremation with Hinduism or modern-day agnostics.

## Conclusion

Although the Churches have pronounced themselves on cremation as an acceptable alternative means of disposing of the dead, many Christians remain reticent to switch to cremation from burial. This article has addressed the reason for Christian reluctance by answering the objections raised against cremation. This study was not a biblical response to cremation. Instead it focused on presenting a theological response to the belief challenges facing Christian disposing of their dead. I have, in this article, established a theologically informed course of action, an action that removes the inhibition of Christians in Kenya to cremation as a way of disposing of the dead, consistent with the existing traditions of Christian faith and African customs. This article exposes salient aspects surrounding cremation, establishing that it does not offend Christian dogma, nor does it assault African customs.

In offering a plan for action to revise the present praxis, this study has proposed a way forward for Kenyan Christians, having established that Cremation offers Christians a valid and acceptable alternative to traditional burial.

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