

The Future of Christian Funerals

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In this paper I want to explore a number of issues that have been on the agenda of the Churches' Funerals Group (CFG) in recent years. The CFG is an ecumenical group representing all the major churches and representatives of the funeral, burial and cremation businesses. As a Body in Association with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland the CFG is the official face of the churches to Government and other national organizations, which consult with it. CFG members sit on a number of government or 'trade' bodies. It is also a representative of the churches to both individuals and churches that wish to consult it, and over the years it has advised puzzled bishops, lay people and burial and cremation authorities. In addition the CFG takes upon itself the role of keeping itself informed about changes in theology, liturgical practice and the law relating to death and burial and, through published papers and seminars, encouraging and enabling the churches, clergy and lay people to be informed on these issues.² The various issues can be grouped under two headings: 'New patterns for funerals' and 'New patterns for disposal'.³

New patterns for funerals

Any funeral practitioner will be aware that the pattern of funerals has changed in recent decades. This section looks at how changes in our understanding of death and its significance have altered the way we act when faced with death.

Backward-looking funerals

An Anglican acquaintance, who was too young to have grown up with the *Book of Common Prayer*, recently told me that he had been asked to conduct a funeral service for an elderly member using the 1662 Funeral Service. It was virtually new to him and he said what a surprise Cranmer's words were: 'They were so hopeful and filled with the promise of heaven.' His comments bring into stark contrast one of the major changes which has taken place, not so much in funeral liturgy, but in what has been added to funeral liturgy.

The traditional funeral marked the transition from this life and pointed to the future life beyond death. Biblical images and Christian beliefs have viewed this future life in many different ways including purgatory, the

necessity or otherwise of continuing prayer by the Christian community for the person who has died, a time of sleeping, immortality of the soul, bodily resurrection, or immediate paradise in the midst of the heavenly host; all have played their part. The essential point is that such funerals are forward looking, eschatological in nature, concerned with the future life of the deceased. If the person who has died was a believer, the funeral service pointed to heavenly glory to come in which the deceased would play their part.

This meant that details of the life the dead person were of little significance, particularly if that life was to be compared to the future glory. Only if the person who had died was of particular social significance might the funeral service be followed some time later with a memorial service in which their life was ‘memorialized’ in words, readings and music.

In the last few decades, and increasingly in recent years, although the liturgy has not changed that significantly, the whole tenor of the service has changed to a backward or retrospective approach. The title ‘funeral’ has given way to ‘A service of Thanksgiving / Celebration for the life of . . .’. The quality of the service is judged, not by its assurance of heavenly glory, but by whether or not it captures the essence of the life of the departed. It celebrates all that they had been, and pays due regard to all aspects of their life: family, work, service to the community, hobbies and interests, and contribution to the life of the church. Different speakers with specialist knowledge are often called on to review aspects of the life of the deceased (instead of the minister trying to string together a few words and images gleaned from a pastoral visit). The deceased’s favourite music, hymns, readings and memories are a carefully chosen part of the service. Sometimes the deceased’s allegiance to a particular football team is commented on and memorialized by draping the coffin with a flag of the appropriate colours.

The advent of modern technology means that still and video clips of the life of the deceased can be shown either before or during the service. The memorial service for the remarkable few has become the right of everyone; to rephrase Andy Warhol, even in death everyone is famous for 15 minutes. What has been lost with the replacement of the traditional funeral service by the memorial service is the future religious trajectory of the service. It has to be a backward-looking ‘good send off’ rather than the celebration of a ‘safe arrival’.⁴

The memorialization aspect of funeral services has inevitably meant that the family now play a fuller part in planning the service. Participation, if there was any, used to be limited to the choice of hymns, and possibly

a Bible reading. Today, in many funerals, members of the family want to include readings, poems or songs that have little or no Christian content. It is possible for a funeral service to become less and less Christian, even though it may take place in the traditional framework.

This trend, and the dilemmas it presents to a Christian minister, is exacerbated when a minister is asked to take the funeral of someone the family says 'was not religious'. What is included and what could be left out? Many years ago, at a 'crem. duty funeral' (when ministers had no opportunity to meet the family beforehand), the funeral director whispered to me as we entered the crematorium, 'The family don't want any mention of resurrection or life beyond death.'⁵ When does a Christian funeral cease to be Christian?

Memorialization

Memorialization does not end with a funeral service; it is today playing an increasingly important part in the whole funeral process. Of course, the desire to be remembered once you are dead is not new; the 4,000-year-old Egyptian pyramids are a reminder of this. Nearer to home the late John Knill (1733–1811) of St Ives in Cornwall left a trust fund for a remembrance celebration to be performed by the community every five years after his death. It involves 10 girls less than 10 years old, two elderly widows, the mayor, a customs officer and the vicar, all dressed in period costume. They are required to climb a hill to a mausoleum and dance to specific music, one tune being 'All people that on earth do dwell'. The next celebration will be in 2011 and no doubt the inhabitants of St Ives who will perform hope that the trust fund that will pay them has been well protected from economic degradation.

Not everyone is as imaginative as Mr Knill in his or her desire for being remembered; most permanent memorials mark the place of burial. A helpful way to test the recent developments in memorialization is to visit first a traditional churchyard and then a secular cemetery. In the former little will have changed in memorialization over the years. The style of headstone, decoration and wording will have altered little. In the latter you will find evidence for all the creativity that stonemasons and others can conceive. Multicoloured gravestones, kerb stones, and chippings; lettering in all styles on stone or 'permanent' plastic gravestones; pictures of the deceased contained in a cartouche; multiple use of teddy bears, cars and other objects beloved by the deceased; bells that blow in the wind; lights that shine at night; and the widest assortment of plastic flowers. I have not seen it yet, but I am sure I will soon come across a sound-and-video dis-

play of the life of the deceased activated by remote control when passers-by venture near the grave.

The contents of a Church of England churchyard are strictly regulated by ecclesiastical regulations. But even these are increasingly coming under pressure as families want something 'relevant and modern' in memorialization. Often, when choosing a churchyard burial, they are not fully aware of the restrictions which Church regulations place on memorial design. If the regulations are breached a consistory court can demand, and enforce, alteration or removal. A south-coast funeral director was recently fined and required substantially to alter or remove grave arrangements that were not in keeping with the rules. (The unfortunate curate who had signed off the arrangement had recently come from abroad and was unaware of the implications of his actions.)

As secular memorials 'move with the times', how strict should the rules be? Should traditional churchyards stay 'stuck in the past' in terms of memorialization? Should teddy bears be banned, or 'Mum' and so on be judged unacceptable on a gravestone? The Church faces pressures that are increasingly difficult to sustain or uphold. In the case mentioned above, the Parish Church Council supported the wish of the relatives to keep the grave as it was, although it was so out of keeping, on the pastoral grounds of not wishing to upset the family further, but they were overruled.

The problem the Church faces was put well by an Anglican Dean, 'It is a question of keeping to that narrow line that allows people to express their grief, but not offend others.'

The inadequacy of crematoria as places of worship

Many funeral services are conducted by Christian ministers in crematoria chapels and not in a church. This practice is particularly convenient for the family of someone who has died and who bore no allegiance to a church or particular denomination. It is often forgotten that, although they may be called 'chapels', crematoria buildings are not church premises; they have not been consecrated for Christian worship. Although some may have been built in beautiful settings, with plate-glass windows framing lovely pastoral views, they are not well designed for Christian worship. All too often the catafalque is set away from the congregation's line of view, making it difficult for the minister to include the presence of the deceased in the service. If the minister stands by the coffin for the words of commendation and committal, for example, it is impossible to press the button in the pulpit to signal for music and the closure of the curtains. Everyone who has attended a crematorium service will know the dissonances associated

with recorded music, the 'in and out' process, and the whole sense of artificiality and lack of spiritual warmth and integrity. Douglas Davies has suggested that crematoria are factories and theatres, and they emphasize the way in which people 'act' in them in a way they do not in church.

The question has to be asked, can a satisfactory Christian service be held in a crematorium? I would suggest that the answer almost always is, no. Even less satisfactory is the brief service in the so-called chapel after a church service. All that should be said has been said in the church, the emotions of the immediate family have already risen and lowered, and the minister can either string the service out with a few extra prayers and possibly a hymn before performing the first part of the task for which the crematorium is designed.

My dissatisfaction with crematoria chapels goes beyond matters of design. I have indicated elsewhere⁶ my deep sense of dis-ease with the way in which the Church allowed cremation to be seen as an alternative to burial, without identifying the act of burial of the ashes as the significant final act of commitment. This has led me to the conclusion that cremation (and resomation, see below) is not the equivalent of burial but a method of preparation of the body for burial. Thus, what takes place in a crematorium building is an act that does not require any religious activity.

In the early days of cremation the urn containing the ashes was often placed in a coffin before being buried in a grave. It was always the intention of the early cremationists that cremation was a precursor to burial. It was partly the effect of the First World War, which distanced so many bodies (if they were ever found) from their families, which led to a reduction in individual memorialization and the popularity of the scattering of ashes in gardens of remembrance. In addition, increased geographical mobility and questions of cost led to the reduction in the number of graves and the popularity of cremation.

What was not originally envisaged by the early cremationists was that the crematoria building, which housed the cremator, would develop by the addition of a building in which mourners could have a service. Nor was it envisaged by the churches that the funerals of Christians would develop into two-centre rituals with the first part in the church and the second part (after a journey often of some complexity and distance) consisting of a few minutes at the crematorium. No wonder people were led to believe that 'two' services were sufficient in themselves, and the important issue of the final disposal of the ashes was overlooked. The words of committal at a burial or a funeral were almost identical so, it suggested, what took place in the crematorium was sufficient and the end of the matter.

The problem of the two-centre funeral was ‘solved’ by holding the whole service at the crematorium, but for a Christian it meant that the church they had attended, and which had played a significant part in their family’s spiritual and social life, was sidelined.

Because cremation was introduced so rapidly in the twentieth century, the Church never took the opportunity to stand back and ask the basic question, what are we doing involving ourselves in crematoria for the funeral of a Christian? If, as I have argued, cremation is a physical process that prepares a body for a particular method of burial, then Christians need take no part in ‘hallowing’ a factory process. The Christian parts of the funeral are the church service and the final burial of the remains of the person who has died as a body or as ashes. The pioneers of this approach have, in a strange way, been rural clergy who have committed the deceased (and I hate the phrase) ‘into the hearse’, which then makes its long way to a crematorium many miles away accompanied by the funeral director’s staff. This is not an abandoning of the deceased as long as a final burial of the ashes takes place.

The *Methodist Worship Book* provides a significant service for the burial of ashes, which completes the ‘disposal’ process in a Christian context. The scattering of the ashes by crematorium staff, who have no link with the deceased and may have no Christian involvement, is not a satisfactory final disposal. A period of 40 days (paralleling the post-Easter time before Ascension) is suggested for the gap between death and burial of the ashes. This can be a pastorally significant end to an initial period of mourning and can mark a turning point in the emotional orientation of close members of the family. It marks a moment of closure of the second (post funeral) part of the grieving period when involvement of Christian ministry is important.

Non-religious funerals

It is not easy to obtain figures on the number of non-religious funerals conducted by members of the British Humanist Association, secular celebrants or any family member or friend. In view of the fact that there are about half a million deaths a year I was surprised to see a figure quoted recently of only 15,500 secular funerals.⁷ I had assumed the proportion to be substantially larger; one south of England funeral director told me that he reckoned that up to a third of his funerals were secular, but his area may have been exceptional (and he may have ‘pushed’ the doubting in that direction).

It is unlikely that a minister would be willing to conduct a wholly non-religious service, with no Christian content, although I have heard of local

preachers who feel that their public speaking training enables them to offer a pastoral role as secular celebrants. Even some secular celebrants offer a time in which those who wish to pray may do so, and readings at such services can offer non-Christian images of some form of life beyond this one (such as journeying over a new horizon; like a leaf which refertilizes the tree of life; and living on in our memory and their children and so on).

The problem Christian ministers face is the ‘creeping secularization’ of Christian funerals, which I have already explored.

Virtual funerals

Attendance at a funeral has traditionally meant the physical presence of the mourner at the church or crematorium. If a mourner cannot be present *Celebrating Common Prayer* provided an innovative (although based on a medieval custom) ‘Office of Commendation’⁸, which has been adopted by other churches, such as the Methodist Church. This is for use either on hearing of a death or on the day of the funeral by those not able to attend.

Modern technology has extended ways in which those not at a funeral can become virtual mourners. Increasingly crematoria offer a DVD of a cremation service that can be watched again or by those not able to be present. Significant funeral services are televised, not only those of royalty and important political figures, but also of people caught up in tragic and violent deaths. For example, the funeral of young Rhys Jones, who was tragically caught up in a gang shooting in Liverpool, was widely broadcast on television in 2007. The service was a creative mixture of the traditional and the modern. For example, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool preached a sermon and 11 Everton footballers, representing both the team Rhys supported and the years of his age, lit candles in his memory. The advent of 24-hour news channels means that television is more likely to show a whole service, rather than just a snippet on a news programme.

The internet provides a new channel for virtual mourners. Those of the Facebook generation set up sites on which tributes can be lodged, perhaps replacing the traditional letter of condolences, and the memorial website, www.gonetoosoon.co.uk, sets up some 3,000 sites a year specifically for this purpose. Entries on it can include words, photographs, video clips and music, as a means of paying tribute and identifying with the person who has died.

In at least one crematorium it is now possible to link up a CCTV camera to the internet so the service can, with the family’s consent, be watched by anyone. There has recently been criticism of one crematorium that charged the family £75 for the password that would enable friends not present to

log on to the service. Inevitably the local paper spoke about a ‘funeral pay-per-view storm’.

My wife and I, somewhat to our surprise, found ourselves making a virtual pilgrimage to the graves of her parents many miles from where we live using GoogleEarth. We ‘journeyed’ from London up to the hill country of Derbyshire and then came down to the village where Judith and her parents had lived. We ‘travelled’ from her family home, through the village and hovered over the chapel, with its distinctive slate roof, and came down as close as the definition would allow over the churchyard by the side of it, stopping over the area where their memorial stood. It was a surprisingly moving and significant experience, very different from our usual use of GoogleEarth, to see where we are going on holiday. It is perhaps worth reflecting that we can in this life only journey to heaven through the virtual world of our imaginations.

New patterns for disposal

I apologize if the use of the word ‘disposal’ in relation to dead bodies, which I have already used, offends the sensibilities of any reader but there is no better word. A number of factors have come together in recent year to influence the way in which the two methods of disposal, traditional burial and cremation, are being rethought. In this section we will look first at the environmental argument that is being waged between supporters of these two methods of disposal. Then we will look at various solutions being pursued to cope with the fact that the space for burial in many traditional cemeteries and churchyards is rapidly decreasing.

Cremation or burial, the environmental argument

The two ways in which bodies have been disposed of over the last 100 years has been either burial or cremation.⁹ Ever since cremation was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century a case was made that it was hygienic and environmentally superior to burial, and cremation is today the preferred option in 70 per cent of all funerals. This environmental case for cremation has been challenged in recent years. Crematorium smoke has contained mercury (from dental fillings), poisonous gas from plastic drapes in the coffin and other noxious fumes. The cost of cleaning up the cremation gases to new EU standards is put at £250,000 a cremator. In addition the cost of gas has increased the cost of cremation and pushed the concept of cremation into a non-ecologically friendly sphere. However, in recent year the environmental argument has begun to swing the other way again, although no final agreement has been reached.

The environmental case begins with the recognition that a body is a body. Throughout our lives, from the moment of conception, we draw into our bodies elements from the environment and constantly return elements to the environment. Many elements are consumed in our bodies or pass through them; others remain within us until we die. Once we are dead we cease to borrow and start the process of returning to the environment the elements in our bodies that we have retained. A substantial scientific debate has been taking place in recent years as to which method of disposal is environmentally more acceptable. Both the gradual breakdown of a body, or the rapid breakdown by fire, affects both the rate at which and the state in which the elements are returned.

For example, a decomposing body releases methane gas as the carbon content breaks down. Each kilo of carbon produces almost two cubic metres of methane, which has a global warming potential of 23 times the equivalent volume of carbon. If the body is cremated the carbon content is oxidized at high temperature and each kilo produces two cubic metres of carbon dioxide which is far less damaging to the environment than methane. Carbon capture technology could reduce the damage further.¹⁰

Much has been made of the dangers of emission of mercury (mainly from teeth fillings) from crematoria chimneys. New regulations are requiring crematoria to have upgraded scrubbers that will remove mercury and other dangerous substances, so they can be recycled. If a body is buried, over many years the mercury in the teeth, particularly in acid soils, converts into soluble mercury salts which pass on into the ground water that in due course reaches the sea. Here it moves up the food chain from simple organisms until it reaches the higher forms, such as swordfish and tuna, from which it returns, in a more deadly form, into the mouths and bodies of the descendants of the person who died. The writer of 'Ilkley Moor baht'at' was ahead of his/her time.

The main point in the scientific debate is that, whether a body is buried or burned, the same potentially polluting elements are released into the environment in one form or another. Those who argue for cremation as being more environmentally acceptable point to the fact that the developing technology associated with cremation enables society to control the end form in which elements are released from a body so as to achieve the lowest impact on the environment and ultimately on us.¹¹ Certainly, from a theological position, concern for the environment must play a significant part when assessing how the human body both in life and death affects God's creation.

Reusing old graves

In Greece, and some other Orthodox countries, a body is buried for only a few years, perhaps six. It is then, in a religious ceremony, dug up, the bones are cleaned and stored and the grave reused. No one in Greece feels this is disrespectful or a cultural outrage. In this country it has been necessary either to obtain a Faculty (Church of England) or a Home Office Licence to disturb a grave or dig it up. However, in church graveyards, there has been an informal reuse of graves as ancient areas are used again, what is described as a 'natural incident of churchyard management', but the fiction is still maintained that once buried a body will stay there for ever.

The closure of many churchyards and urban expansion have meant that in some parts of the country, particularly London and big cities, space to bury bodies has either run out or is running out. A recent survey found that London as a whole had about 12 years of burial space left, and in some areas there was less time left. For a number of years there has been pressure on the Government to amend the law to allow the reuse of graves. There have been many years of consultation and uncertainty about moving on this front but politicians, fearful that a tabloid headline 'Government wants to dig up Grandma' would ruin their careers, have been wary of pushing on this issue. The Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for these matters, has quietly worked away at a programme to develop pilot reuse projects after it was discovered that it was not necessary to await a change in primary legislation. A number of pilot areas countrywide were being identified where proposed new regulations would be trialled.

The draft national guidelines covering the reuse of old graves were naturally careful, conservative and participatory. Local authorities and organizations such as English Heritage would be consulted at every stage, serious attempts would be made to trace possible owners, and a cemetery management plan would need to be drawn up. No grave would be reused if it had been used in the last 100 years or if an owner or member of the family objected and possible reuse would be widely publicized with a long consultation period. No Commonwealth War Grave would be reused. If remains were discovered when an old grave is opened they would be reburied at a lower level (lift and lower) so they remained in the same grave but deeper in the ground.

What remains are found after 100 years of decay depends on the method of burial, the state of the body and ground conditions. It is instructive to remember that when Cardinal Newman's grave was opened nearly 120 years after his death nothing of his body or skeleton remained.

Ahead of the rest of the country London has successfully piloted an act through Parliament allowing reuse. At one cemetery coffins can now be buried in existing graves in more traditional and exclusive parts of the cemetery among old graves, with the headstone inscription carved on the reverse of the original headstone, an excellent example of recycling. However, the reuse of old graves will only have a significant effect when larger areas of old cemeteries can be used en bloc. In view of the very varied practice within the Christian churches over the centuries, there has not been any theological objection to reuse, though some Jews and Muslims have indicated that their burial plots should not be reused.

A trickier area of possible reuse concerns the many inner-city churchyards that were closed many years ago, converted into public parks and handed over for maintenance to the local authority. Many of them could be wholly or partially reused, because inner city areas often do not have any burial grounds, and families have to travel several miles to a family grave. However, the closure of churchyards legislation only covered closure and handing over to local authorities, and there was no mechanism envisaged to bring them back into use, if the church wished to do this. Many were and are glad not to have responsibility for the cost and problems of upkeep.¹²

Green or woodland burial sites

In recent years there has been a small but significant flight from the use of cemeteries and crematoria to woodland burial sites for the burial of bodies.¹³ These sites are judged to be more environmentally friendly, ecologically sound and are part of the 'green' movement. One authority says that there were in 2008 over 230 such sites (in 2006 there were 251 crematoria) so there may soon be more woodland burial sites than there are crematoria, but of course they are not so intensively used.¹⁴ They usually provide an unspoiled rural setting, often in parkland or mature woodland, which offers an informal, peaceful atmosphere. One, which opened recently outside London, covers 55 acres and has been carefully laid out with an eye to long-term sustainability.¹⁵ Burials' spaces are grouped in 12 plots, set in circles around existing large trees, with the option of a wooden marker. The use of wicker coffins or simple shrouds is encouraged. Access is by foot along gravel paths. Two motorized 'buggies' are available for people with limited mobility.

Some sites offer a 'gathering hall' where a service can take place or a reception afterwards. Some even have rudimentary church furnishings, such as a lectern; others may even provide a small electric organ. Other, more rudimentary sites have none of these and no toilet facilities. The more

‘luxurious’ the site the higher will be the cost of burial, and of upkeep.

Natural (or woodland) burial sites, there is no agreed generic title, although the word ‘Green’ is often used, offer many advantages over the cramped, regulated pattern of a traditional cemetery. Apart from the fact that they are not consecrated ground they do not raise any particular issues for Christian burial, but those considering using them should approach with caution. Many such sites are not inalienable land and could be used for another purpose in future years. The cost of upkeep of such sites, although less than that of a traditional cemetery (assuming it is properly maintained) will depend on money provided by future users. The question of memorialization is even more complex than it is in a traditional cemetery or churchyard. Each woodland burial ground has its own rules that vary from site to site. Families may discover too late that on one site they cannot have the memorialization, or even a marker that indicates the grave, whilst another may allow stones, as long as they are below grass level. Anyone who has stepping stones set in their lawn know that the grass grows over them in a year or so unless they are tended. How long will such stones or wooden markers identify a grave?

Even more complex problems arise when some sites will not allow metal-lined coffins and embalmed bodies to be buried in them. Suppose ‘father’ is safely buried in a woodland burial site and ‘mother’ dies on holiday abroad. Air safety regulations require a sealed coffin and the embalming of bodies. Would she be allowed to join her husband when her body is returned from a foreign country? What happens if a family decide to put up a memorial that is outside the regulations? The regulations of churchyards and cemeteries are written down, available for inspection and can be enforced; what happens about a woodland site? Traditional sites keep careful records of where bodies are buried; there is no requirement to do this at unregulated sites ¹⁶. Conventional sites, by the way they are laid out, enable the use of mechanical diggers to open graves without running over other graves, which may not always be the case with a woodland site, and what about the roots if mature trees are present? Whilst in the early years family members can remember where a relation is buried, as time passes trees grow, landscape changes and ‘Is that grandma’s tree or is it the one next door?’

Whilst prayers may be said when a woodland site is opened the land is not consecrated and does not come under any church authority, a disadvantage to anyone wanting to be buried in consecrated ground. There are no theological problems associated with woodland burial, unless you believe all Christians should be buried in consecrated ground (and few do). As I have tried to indicate, the problems are practical and long-term.

Alternatives to cremation

Two alternatives to cremation have been proposed. The first, promission, which has not yet advanced technologically, is the freeze-drying of a body with liquid nitrogen until all the water content has been removed (a process similar to leaving food in your freezer not protected by a plastic bag). Once the body is completely dry it is vibrated and as it contains no water it is naturally reduced to dust. (I am not sure about the state of the bones in this process). The amount of electricity involved in keeping everything cold must be considerable making the process both expensive and possibly ecologically unsustainable.

A more credible alternative, and one which is at present being considered by the Ministry of Justice as an alternative to cremation, is called 'resomation'.¹⁷ With this process the body is placed in a metal tank that is filled with water and an alkali solution (potassium hydroxide). It is then heated to more than 170C for two to three hours, in a process called alkaline hydrolysis. This accelerates the body's natural decomposition to its constituent chemicals and at the end of the process the innocuous liquid can either be flushed into the drains or, and far better, be used as a liquid fertilizer. All that remains is the shape of the main bones, which are a white calcium ash. They crumble to the touch and can be collected in the same way as cremated remains. Similarly teeth crumble to the touch, which means that dental amalgam containing mercury and gold fillings can be recovered without any further expense. (Cremated remains need to be pulverized in a machine containing large ball-bearings, which produces a gritty residue and not ash.) The process has been technologically developed at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, USA, originally as a means for disposing of animal carcasses. Some 1,000 human bodies have been processed by this method. The cost of a resomator, at about £300,000, is less than that of a cremator, whilst the bill for using it would be about the same as a cremation.

One disadvantage of this process is that cloth, nylon and wood cannot be dissolved. This means that the body can only be 'dressed' in silk material, which does dissolve, and the body must be removed from a wooden coffin before resomation takes place. These are problems that can be overcome. For example, if one wished it would be possible to 'hire' a very classy coffin, specially designed for this new process rather than buy one, which would be much cheaper than a 'permanent' coffin. Implants, such as artificial hips, come out of the process sparkling clean and can be reused. (Crematoria retain fire-marked implants and now tend to recycle the expensive titanium, using the proceeds for charity.)

I was recently a speaker at an international conference of representatives of crematorium societies and associated organizations, whose livelihoods depend on cremation. After a presentation on resomation, a straw poll was taken and I was surprised by the size of the majority who thought that resomation would, in due course, succeed cremation as the main method of disposal.

Resomation does not raise any additional theological issues to those raised by cremation. However, I cringe at the thought of saying 'Commit *her/his* body to be resomated' (to say 'boiled', as a process akin to burning, would be even worse). But, as I shall say later, I have problems with any committal that is not a final committal, which for Christians has traditionally always been by burial.

To complete the alternatives to cremation, mention should be made of one other possibility. A few, very wealthy (and possibly gullible), people have arranged for their bodies to be frozen and preserved, in the hope that future generations will be able to revive them, and they will 'live' again. This raises many potentially tricky theological and sociological issues, but fortunately they do not need to be faced as, at present, medical science has not advanced to the stage of being able to revive frozen corpses, and may never be able to do this. One of the problems with this approach is the reliability of the company into whose hands people leave their frozen bodies. The hopes of some people, who in death paid a vast sum and underwent this procedure, were recently dashed. The company keeping their bodies in a deep freeze ran out of money and went into liquidation. Because of unpaid bills the electricity supply was cut off from the deep freezers and the bodies presumably went into a state similar to that of the company.

The use and abuse of ashes

When cremation became the preferred route for disposal of bodies, approximately 70 per cent of ashes were left at the crematorium for ultimate disposal. I have written elsewhere of the regrettable negligence of the churches in assuming that cremation was the same as burial, and ignoring the fact that, after cremation, there are bodily remains that should receive a final committal and burial. An acceptance of the fiction that pressing the button in the crematorium chapel to draw the curtain was the same as lowering the body into the grave meant that the ashes became the responsibility of either the crematorium or of the family. Crematoria went to great length and expense to provide gardens of remembrance (something unknown until the early twentieth century) in which ashes could be scattered (again a new twentieth-century ritual). The churches felt no need

to play any part in the final disposal of the remains, seeing no link with this and the act of burial. It was left to the local authority staff to scatter the ashes, and in some cases, to create their own prayers and liturgies as they did it. The main churches did not provide liturgies for the burial of ashes until nearly the end of the century, by which time their theological significance, as a part of the body of a person, had been lost to Christian conscience.

Since the late 1970s the proportion of ashes left at the crematorium for scattering has declined, so that now about 70 per cent of ashes are removed by the family and taken back into their possession. Some are taken to existing graves, to be added to a place where another loved one is already buried, others are buried in a separate plot in a graveyard, but many are kept at home in a new method of memorialization.

The free availability of the ashes has therefore opened up a whole new area of memorialization activity and ritual. People are able to do with the 'dry' ashes things they would never dream of doing (or be allowed to do) with the 'wet' body. This is not the time or place to illustrate the bizarre and strange new ways in which memorialization is now taking place, but it is important that the Christian Church takes note of the extent to which the rituals of burial associated with death have 'escaped' its control.

Traditionally the Church has been the primary interpreter of death and has associated death with burial. We are buried that we may rise again, as Christ was buried and rose again. Cremation, and the subsequent release of ashes with no control over how they are used, has taken from the Church its dominant role in the interpretation of death. This may now be lost, and may never be recovered, but for those who are part of the continuing Christian community, the tradition of burial with Christ that we might be raised with him is a tradition worth preserving both theologically and practically.

NOTES

- 1 Revd Dr John Lampard is vice-chair of the ecumenical Churches' Funerals Group and has been a member for the last 20 years.
- 2 The Chair of the CFG is Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, a leading expert on funeral rites and liturgies.
- 3 The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily express the views of the CFG.
- 4 This reorientation from future to past is well analysed in Davies, D., *The Theology of Death* (London: T & T Clark, 2008).
- 5 This was in the early 1970s and I have not been aware of 'crem. rotas' in more recent years.
- 6 See my chapter, 'Theology in Ashes: How the churches have gone wrong over

cremation' in, Jupp, P C, *Death our Future: Christian Theology and Funeral Practice* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2008).

- 7 *The Independent*, 19 September 2007.
- 8 *Celebrating Common Prayer: a version of the daily office*, (London: Mowbray, 1992).
- 9 It is still possible to arrange the burial of a body at sea. This has to take place in one of three designated areas around the coastline where trawlers are unlikely to catch a coffin in their nets.
- 10 Gardeners might like to note that there is a similar pattern if waste matter is composted (CO₂) rather than buried in landfill when methane is produced.
- 11 I am grateful to a paper read by Dr Andrew Mallalieu of Facultatieve Technologies Ltd at a conference at the House of Commons for the scientific information here. It would seem that resomation (see separate section) might be even more environmentally acceptable.
- 12 While completing this article in Spring 2009 the Government announced that it did not propose to proceed with new regulations on re-burial. Over 12 years of work has been 'buried'.
- 13 The case for green, or woodland burial, has been well argued by Peter Owen Jones, 'The Challenge of Green Burial' in Jupp, (ed.) *Death our Future*, 148–157, but he does not address any of the potential problems outlined below.
- 14 Although researchers try to keep track of new burial sites there is no one organisation with responsibility for keeping statistics.
- 15 I am grateful to Revd Michael Ainsworth, who attended the opening, for this description.
- 16 If suspicions about the cause of death occur (Dr Shipman etc) exhumation may be required, which could be difficult if a grave is not marked.
- 17 I understand that the word 'resomation' was intended to be derived from the word 'resolve', with the '-mation' the same ending as 'cremation'. Those familiar with the Greek word 'soma' (body) will have some difficulty in not associating it either with re-incarnation or some sort of bodily reformation!