

“Cremation and Religion: Recent Practice or Ancient Tradition?”

In American society, the process of cremation is generally considered to be a relatively “new” practice, introduced within the last few decades as a more cost-effective alternative to a costly traditional burial. Despite the frequency of this common misconception, the history of cremation in reality spans thousands of years and countless societies. From the Islamic to the Hindu faith, cultures from around the world have spent years forming official opinions on the practice of cremation, whether negative or positive.

From the point of view of certain religious authorities, a funeral involving cremation, while not necessarily prohibited, is somewhat at odds with traditional doctrine. For example, practitioners of Islam have long understood cremation to be impermissible, unless extenuating circumstances, such as need for transportation of the deceased, make it necessary (219). Similarly, adherents to the Jewish religion also prefer a tradition burial, generally not acknowledging cremation as a viable alternative to interment (206). When observing these various views, the ancient nature of these cultures clearly illustrates that the burning of the deceased is by no means a modern invention.

Although certain religions frown upon the practice of cremation, there are many cultures that deem the burning of the deceased a necessary element of funeral proceedings. Within Hindu culture, for example, cremation is not only an ancient tradition, but also a sacred one. According to Hindu doctrine, burning the deceased’s physical remains “releases the soul from the body, allowing the liberated soul to go forward to the next life.” Historically, the Hindu funeral rite is a very complicated process, where the deceased is carried around the pyre counter-clockwise as the family looks on. From applying incense to draining water from a pot, the process of Hindu cremation has developed many specific traditions over the past centuries (225).

While traditional Hindu funerals typically involve an open-air cremation, Hindu practitioners in the United States have been forced to find alternative options. For this reason, among others, crematoriums and cremation container companies, such as McDonald Containers, have become essential for funeral homes that cater to certain families. (Fatteh 225-227). While many may continue to view cremation as simply a modern creation, the process is, in reality, a tradition that has withstood the test of time, remaining relevant today not only to certain religious cultures, but also to families in search of economical alternatives to expensive funeral proceedings.

Fatteh, Abdullah and Naaz Fatteh. At Journey's End: The Complete Guide to Funerals and Funeral Planning. Los Angeles: Health Information Press. 1999.