

Cremation: An Acceptable Alternative to Burial

William P. Selig
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Many members have asked what is the Unificationist position on cremation. As a dynamic Movement relating to our Heavenly Parent, it is natural our traditions will continue to be reexamined and updated. Such is the case with our position on cremation.

The Tradition, published in 1985, was the first attempt to describe in an orderly form the official traditions of our faith – attendance, prayer, pledge, holy songs, holy salt, holy grounds, tithing, holy days and holidays, and birth and death rituals. It also put in writing for the first time our position on

issues such as abortion, contraception, circumcision, as well as cremation.

Regarding cremation, it was declared to be “not in accordance with the Unification view, as it does not allow the physical body a natural return to the physical (material) world.”



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Mother's Position

After the ascension of Rev. Sun Myung Moon in 2012, the movement's leadership passed to his wife, Mother Hak Ja Han Moon. On the one-year anniversary of Father's ascension, Dr. Chang Shik Yang, former FFWPU Continental Director, North America, spoke with Mother and asked about cremation. She acknowledged that cremation has become common in Korea among members. Statistics are not available for the movement, but in the general population of Korea, almost 80% of people who die are cremated, while in Japan it is nearly 100%.

According to Seoul's *Hankyoreh* newspaper, “A recent study shows eight out of every ten funerals is now carried out by cremation. It's the result of a combination of factors, including changing family structures, more favorable perceptions among South Koreans, and a lack of space for burials.” There has been a big shift in South Koreans' thinking due to Western influence and recently a strong government push to consider cremation as a way to save space. A law passed in 2000 requires anyone burying their dead after 2000 to remove the grave 60 years after burial.

Mrs. Moon said the choice of cremation is a personal and family decision and must be done with sensitivity and care. If cremation is the choice, then “it should be done with a sincere heartfelt prayer to heaven.” Members are called to respect this choice and honor the family's decision with kindness and respect. She said that the remains should be treated with similar esteem and dignity as would be afforded the body in a traditional burial.

Mother's updating of this position is of interest to members who might be considering choosing cremation for ecological, financial or philosophical reasons.

In giving her blessing, if that is the wish of the family, Mother has reaffirmed the importance to embrace the wishes of the family for the Seonghwa arrangements, and that the most important condition for the fulfillment of any tradition is the heart behind it.

Implications of Cremation

Based on the model of True Father's Seonghwa, the service embraces four ceremonies:

1. *Ipjeon* Ceremony: wash the body and place in casket.
2. *Gwihwan* Ceremony: farewell ceremony for family.
3. *Seonghwa* Ceremony: community send-off.
4. *Wonjeon* Ceremony: interment ceremony.

Each ceremony has a deep richness of spirit that, based on our experience, unites the family and

community closer together, and at the same time, comforts and envelops the ascended one with unconditional love. No matter how strongly we believe in the spirit world and the joy that we feel for our loved one as he/she begins life as an exclusively spiritual being, nevertheless, there is a sense of loss and grief that cannot be ignored. At the heart of each ceremony, we send off our loved one with a mixture of tears and gladness.

Now that cremation is accepted as an alternative option, members may decide to choose cremation for various reasons such as possible cost savings, availability of burial plots, and flexibility of timing of the service. If family members and friends live far away, cremation makes it possible to hold a service at a later date, but it is recommended to hold the Seonghwa Ceremony prior to cremation.

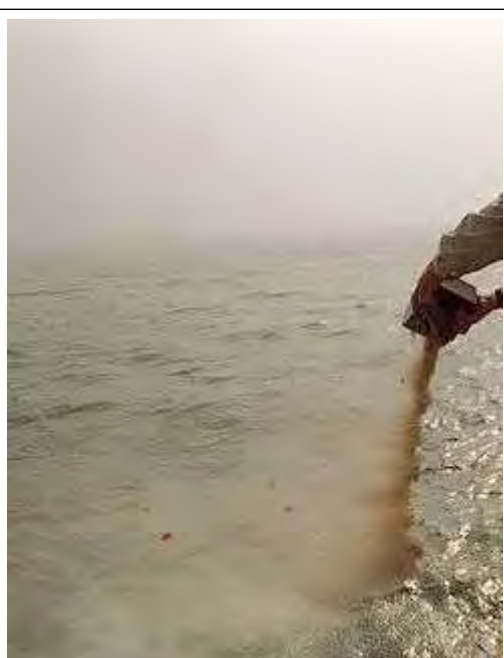
If cremation is chosen then obviously there will be changes to the Seonghwa service. For example, if the body is brought to the funeral home, the family can choose to proceed with the first three ceremonies – Ipjeon, Gwihwan, and Seonghwa.

The family may choose to have an open casket for the Ipjeon and Gwihwan but according to our tradition, the casket must be closed for the Seonghwa. After the Seonghwa ceremony, the body would then be sent for cremation. The final ceremony at the Wonjeon would be scheduled for a different date since it may take up to five business days to receive the remains. The family may choose to rent a casket or to purchase a wooden casket or alternative container, a non-metal enclosure – pressboard, cardboard or canvas.

If the family chooses direct cremation without a viewing or other ceremony where the body is present, then similarly the funeral home will offer casket options such as an inexpensive unfinished wood box or alternative container that is cremated with the body. In this case, the family could have the Ipjeon and Gwihwan ceremonies at the funeral home and crematorium for family and close friends. A farewell service could then be scheduled at a later date for the Seonghwa and Wonjeon ceremonies.

It's difficult to conjure all the variations and scenarios. What's important and crucial to this sendoff ceremony is the heart behind it. I've always appreciated Father's words given December 18, 1998, in Washington, DC:

“(God) is happy because the moment of the physical body's death is the moment we experience the joy of leaving the finite realm of love in order to enter the infinite realm of love. It is the moment of our second birth. Then is God happier on the day we are born into the physical world, or at that moment we leave our physical body behind? At that moment, we are born a second time into the realm of the infinite expansion of love. We become His new children through death. Of course, God is happier at the second birth. I am telling you this because you need to know that you cannot have a relationship with God unless you are released from the fear of death.”



The author scattered the commingled ashes of his parents, per their request, near their Ocean City, MD, home where they lived for many years. It was a beautiful ceremony attended by the family.

The Value of the Body

The Principle helps us understand that the body has an incalculably sacred and reverent purpose. Our physical body has served as a temple or vessel, which carried the spirit of Heavenly Parent's son or daughter.

Nora Spurgin wrote in *Insights into the Afterlife* that the physical body is a reflection of the spirit body which lives on after the death of the physical body. “The spiritual body has the same identity, the same vibration; it simply lives in a different dimension. The higher one's development, or vibration, the brighter and more finely attuned will be his spirit.”

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*, said, “Death is like putting away your winter coat when spring comes. . . . It is a transition to a higher state of consciousness where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh, and to be able to grow.”

In *The Spirit-Person and The Spirit-World*, Kerry Pobanz describes the relationship between the physical body and the spirit. Once the body ceases to function biologically, it has fulfilled its purpose.

At Heung Jin Moon's Seonghwa Ceremony on Jan. 7, 1984, Father described the passing of life in the physical world to the spiritual world like “an insect coming out of its cocoon, getting rid of a shackle and

becoming a new body and a new existence, a new entity.”

Although all faiths recognize the holy value of the body, today most accept cremation as an alternative to burial, including Baptist, Episcopalian, Jehovah’s Witness, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Conservative and Reform Judaism, Lutheran, Methodist, and Quaker.

Eastern Orthodox Christians, Orthodox Jews, and Islam prohibit cremation. Mormons and Presbyterians do not prohibit cremation, but it is not encouraged.

Unificationism prohibited cremation for much of its history but now accepts it.

Historically some churches opposed cremation because of belief in physical resurrection. At some point, the thinking evolved that if God can resurrect a disintegrated skeleton after being buried for a 100 years, then He has the power to resurrect cremated remains as well.

For some, the evolution of thought concerning cremation has been whether the body slowly decomposing to its natural elements in the ground or rapidly by subjecting it to intense heat in a crematorium does not detract from its sacred nature.

Most faiths have concluded that, in the end, both methods fulfill the same objective: The body returns to the physical world. The difference in the process comes down to time: how quickly the process will take place – hours versus years.

I’ve been dealing with the Seonghwa ministry for many years and have seen situations when families chose cremation for different reasons, or situations where the member or family was no longer in the church and the children made the decision. In that case, the person had not taken the time to spell out their preference and the children who were not members decided to cremate.

Conclusion

The choice between burial and cremation is a highly personal decision. At this time in the Providence, True Mother considers cremation as an acceptable option to honor the body of a deceased Unificationist, if this is the family’s choice. It is a testimony to our Heavenly Parent’s infinite love.

Closing points: First, it is the responsibility of the family members to discuss what they want based on their spiritual beliefs, finances and philosophical concerns. Each family and each person is unique, so it is important to reach consensus on what will be done.

Second, whichever the final decision may be, it is imperative that the wishes are shared in writing. Writing a will, a living will (advance directive) and purchasing a cemetery plot are all important. This information and your details for a Seonghwa service should be shared in writing with family members and friends.

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