

Cremation and Christianity: English Anglican and Roman Catholic attitudes to cremation since 1885

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Britain was the first modern European country to adopt the widespread practice of cremation, and by 2010, it took place in around three-quarters of all funerals. Although the clergy had ceased to be the exclusive custodians of funeral ritual, their views and example remained highly significant in conveying approval, or disapproval, of cremation to their religious constituencies. This article explores attitudes to cremation among the English Anglican and Roman Catholic leadership in the twentieth-century. In the first half of the century, a number of high profile Anglican bishops promoted cremation by both teaching and example. The Roman Catholic Church, however, remained opposed to the practice, which it equated with atheism and inhumanity. Although the Catholic position began to soften from the 1960s, it is evident that some reticence about cremation remains. The different approaches to cremation illuminate a subtle religious and cultural fault line between the two ecclesial communities which has hitherto been little explored. The article highlights the role of the Cremation Society of Great Britain in working with members of both Churches to normalise cremation.

Key words:

Cremation, Christianity, England, Twentieth century, Church of England, Anglican, Roman Catholicism.

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Introduction

On 14 August 1919, Edward Lee Hicks, bishop of Lincoln, died in Sussex. Hicks had had a high profile during the First World War as President of the Church of England Peace League, and was well known for his socially and theologically progressive views. According to the *Times* obituarist, he was a man of ‘advanced liberal opinions’ which were combined with ‘definite high church views’.¹ He supported biblical scholarship, temperance reform and votes for women. In death, Hicks revealed that he had one final ‘advanced liberal’ opinion to promote: he was to be cremated, an action signalling a radical departure from the death customs of his day. His funeral arrangements combined the simplicity of cremation at Golders Green, with the ritual associated with the full ceremonial considered befitting for a bishop in his cathedral.² Perhaps some of those present in the cathedral remembered that Hicks’s predecessor-but-one, Christopher Wordsworth (bishop of Lincoln 1869 – 1885) had spoken forcefully against cremation less than half a century earlier, believing it to be a heathen lapse from Christianity that posed a threat to belief in bodily resurrection.³ The fact that Hicks’s next of kin opted for his cremation indicated that there had been a revolution in Anglican episcopal thinking on this issue in just a couple of decades.⁴ For the mourners

¹ *The Times* 16 August 1919 p.13.

² *The Times* 19 August 1919 p.13; the details of Hicks’s funeral arrangements are recorded in great detail by his biographer, J.H. Fowler (ed.) *The Life and Letters of Edward Lee Hicks (Bishop of Lincoln 1910-1919)* (London, 1922) pp.300-4. It has not been possible to trace his will, so we cannot know what directions, if any, he left for his funeral arrangements.

³ Christopher Wordsworth, *On Burning of the Body, and on Burial* (London, 1874). This was a sermon preached at Westminster Abbey at a very early point in the cremation debate. See also J.H. Overton and Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth Bishop of Lincoln 1807-1885* (London, 1888) p.274. Wordsworth’s biographers pointed out that his arguments against cremation had been so misunderstood or misrepresented that ‘he was credited with the absurd theory that the burning of the human body would be an obstacle to its resurrection. What he really did say was, that it might be an obstacle to the *belief* in its resurrection, a very different matter’.

⁴ James Fraser, Bishop of Manchester 1870-1885, was technically the earliest episcopal advocate of cremation. As early as 1879 he advocated it for social reasons on the grounds of the scandal of land removed from food production by the creation of large cemeteries, but he admitted that he hated the thought of cremation for his own family members. Peter Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (Basingstoke, 2006) p.50-1. The first bishop actually to be cremated was John Mitchinson, formerly bishop of Barbados and Master of Pembroke College Oxford, in 1918. His body was cremated at Birmingham, prior to his funeral at Pembroke, and interment at Wolvercote cemetery. His will indicates that he had left clear directions for the disposal of his body, but it does not elaborate further, although a desire for lack of fuss is evident. He directed that there should be no memorial or tombstone erected to his memory.

present that day in 1919, it would remain a rare spectacle. In that year, only 2,030 others cremations took place, which amounted to 0.35% of the dead population.⁵ Probably most of the mourners never attended another cremation funeral, for there was to be no crematorium in Lincoln until 1968.

This article investigates how cremation became normal for Anglicans, and increasingly less problematic for Roman Catholics, in twentieth-century England.⁶ The evidence is mainly derived from the views expressed by leaders of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Sometimes this was as a result of promptings for clarification from individuals or groups who favoured the practice, such as the Cremation Society of Great Britain, and the International Cremation Federation. On other occasions, it was an attempt to articulate a theological shift, or respond to changing cultural norms. It will be argued that as well as being intrinsically interesting, this topic exposes subtle religious and cultural fault-lines between Protestants and Roman Catholics during this period, shedding light on their different social and theological perspectives. Some Anglican bishops, such as Hicks, became enthusiastic ‘early adopters’ of cremation, and it was partly as a result of their example that the practice became increasingly widespread among members of the Church of England. Roman Catholics, meanwhile, held back, and even after the Vatican abandoned its official ban on the practice in 1963, cremation was frequently seen as a less desirable choice than earth burial. The widespread adoption of cremation in British society, constituting as it did a major disruption to earlier ways of dealing with death, has obvious implications for the on-

⁵ Douglas J. Davies and Lewis H. Mates, (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Aldershot, 2005) p.441.

⁶ The article also makes some passing references to Wales. For a complete study of cremation in Scotland, see Peter C. Jupp, Douglas J. Davies, Hilary J. Grainger, Gordon D. Raeburn and Stephen R.G. White, *Cremation in Modern Scotland: History, Architecture and the Law* (Edinburgh, 2017).

going debate about the nature and timing of secularisation and religious change, although a fuller investigation of this particular question is outside the remit of the present article.⁷

Graveyards, cemeteries and the beginnings of cremation

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in funeral customs and attitudes to graveyards, triggered by fears about disease, disorder and criminality.⁸ In the cities, overcrowded urban grave yards such as at Bunhill Fields in London, had become notorious.⁹ When burial grounds became packed too tightly, it was impossible for decomposition to occur properly, and sometimes graves were re-used too rapidly, before there had been proper decomposition of the previous occupant. Furthermore, decaying corpses were thought to exude dangerous miasmas – it was widely believed that infections were attributable to bad air.¹⁰ These threats meant that the understanding of the graveyard underwent a dramatic change; it lost its centuries-old meaning as the peaceful resting place of the local dead, who were awaiting a supernatural future through physical resurrection, and it became identified as a place of risk to the living. In London, seven new large private cemeteries were opened in the 1840s, but these proved insufficient to address the problem. Concern was also expressed about the feasibility of burying the poor in London, due to high land values, and the need for land ‘for the living’ – a view that continued to be expressed throughout the twentieth

⁷ An excellent summary of the present state of play in this complicated debate is found in Clive D. Field, ‘Another Window on British Secularization: Public Attitudes to Church and Clergy Since the 1960s’ *Contemporary British History* 28, 2 (2014) 190-218.

⁸ The best recent history of burial and graveyards is Julie Rugg, *Churchyard and cemetery: Tradition and modernity in rural North Yorkshire* (Manchester, 2013). See also Peter Thorsheim, ‘The Corpse in the Garden: Burial, Health and the Environment in Nineteenth-century London’ *Environmental History* 16, 1 (January 2011) pp.38-68. He highlights the fact that between 1875 and 1900, nearly 100 disused London graveyards were converted into public gardens or playgrounds, partly as a response to these fears about disease, disorder and criminality.

⁹ Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* p.33.

¹⁰ Jennifer Leaney, ‘Ashes to Ashes: Cremation and the Celebration of Death in Nineteenth-century Britain’ in Ralph Houlbrooke (ed.) *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London, 1989) p.119.

century.¹¹ The years from 1850 to 1857 saw a range of legislative measures designed to tackle the graveyards problem. The various Acts of Parliament recommended the closure of religious burial grounds on the basis of public health, and the opening of new, locally-controlled, public cemeteries.¹² Thereafter, the clergy of all denominations would officiate in these cemeteries, but as guests, rather than as masters. It was a significant change, though it appears to have provoked relatively little comment at the time. The clergy were compensated for the loss of burial fees – two shillings and sixpence for every corpse from their parish or chapel that was buried in a local authority cemetery. In this way they yielded their traditional role as the custodians of all aspects of the death process.¹³

It was felt that what was needed was a very large new cemetery which could be accessed easily from London by rail. This led to the creation of Brookwood cemetery in Woking, about twenty-four miles from London, which became known as the London Necropolis. It had two separate railway stations (one for Anglicans and one for everybody else) that were built in order to receive coffins from London. The stations led directly to two separate cemetery chapels (one for Anglicans and one for everybody else). The new site was opened in 1854, and it became what it has remained, the largest cemetery in the United Kingdom, and possibly in Western Europe. It was on land adjacent to Brookwood that had been acquired by the Cremation Society that Britain's first crematorium was constructed, in 1879.¹⁴

¹¹ Jacqueline Banerjee, 'Brookwood Cemetery Woking, Surrey: A Brief History' *The Victorian Web* accessed 21 May 2017. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/parks/brookwood/history.html>

¹² See Rugg, *Churchyard and cemetery* for a full account of the legislation and its effects.

¹³ Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* pp.42-5.

¹⁴ Brian Parsons, *Committed to the Cleansing Flame: The Development of Cremation in Nineteenth-century England* (Reading, 2005) pp.59-88. An earlier attempt by the Cremation Society to obtain land for a crematorium in New Southgate was thwarted by the Bishop of Rochester, in 1875. Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* pp.54-5.

Historically, the burning of the dead and the scattering of their remains had been the fate meted out to suspected witches and heretics, which meant that burning and scattering had strong associations with the punishment of the wicked. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, a number of cremations took place which attracted notoriety, and sometimes also legal proceedings. They included Katherine Dilke, first wife of Sir Charles Dilke, cremated in Dresden in 1874, Henry Crookenden (a Roman Catholic) cremated in Milan in 1876 and Jesu Grist Price, a five-month old infant, cremated by his father William, on a hillside above Llantrisant, in 1884.¹⁵ In order for it to become tolerated, cremation not only needed to lose its associations with eccentricity and potential criminality, it also required reliable and aesthetically acceptable technology, and for that technology to be available in England, avoiding the need to send bodies to the continent. The judge in the William Price case, James Fitzjames Stephen, concluded that cremation was not an offence as long as it did not constitute a public nuisance.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the construction of the cremator at Woking, and the demonstration of its efficiency in rendering to ashes the bodies of a horse and various other large animals without the discharge of either smoke or smell, indicated that the technological problems had been overcome. Bodies could be safely and efficiently burned, and rapidly reduced to harmless compounds in a manner which posed no danger to the living. Following the Price judgement, human cremations were permitted at the Woking Crematorium from 1885. An agreement which allowed clients for the Crematorium to share in the private train service from Waterloo station enhanced the status of Brookwood and the Crematorium. An elegant classical columbarium, with niches for the storing of ashes in urns, was also constructed in the grounds of the cemetery, and gave an alternative to earth burial.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Crookenden and Price cases, and the processes by which cremation became legally acceptable in England and Wales, see Stephen White, 'A burial ahead of its time? The Crookenden burial case and the sanctioning of cremation in England and Wales' *Mortality*, 7, 2 pp.171-190. For the Price case, see also Jupp, Davies, Grainger, *et al*, *Cremation in Modern Scotland* pp.50-7.

¹⁶ White, 'Crookenden burial case', p.184.

The crematorium at Woking had no chapel in the first ten years of its existence, and there was no special ceremony at any of the early cremations. It looked like the large incinerator that it was, and early cremations attracted crowds of boys who sat on the grassy banks to watch the spectacle. When the chapel was built, in the late 1880s, it was in the gothic revival style, so familiar and reassuring to the Victorians, and also acceptable across the Christian denominational spectrum. The message was clearly intended to be that ‘nothing heathen or atheist is going on in here’. On some occasions, however, even after the chapel had been opened, it appears that cremations took place without a funeral service, thus posing a dilemma for clergy who were subsequently asked to inter the ashes. The issue of ‘Woking cremations’ prompted a discussion among the bishops of the northern province of the Church of England in 1896, and a resolution that the words of the funeral service needed to be adapted to accommodate the advent of cremation.¹⁷

The 1902 Cremation Act fully recognised the legality of cremation, and established regulations for it, and by 1904 there were nine crematoria in Britain.¹⁸ There was a notably low level of Anglican clerical opposition to the 1902 Cremation Act. This was partly because the Act provided a conscience clause for clergy with scruples about officiating at crematoria, but the clergy also seemed reassured by a general sense of the propriety of crematoria being secular institutions, built on unconsecrated land.¹⁹ When one in Birmingham Perry Bar was opened in 1903, it was built by a private company, but with the express permission of the

¹⁷ Lambeth Palace Library (LPL) *York Journal of Convocation containing the Acts and Debates of the Convocation of the Province of York, in the Session of February 13 & 14 and April 9 & 10, 1896*, pp.57-61. Although proposals were made for changes to the funeral liturgy in June 1896, they were not implemented, partly as a result of hostility from the Archbishop of York (W.D. Maclagan) towards the whole concept of cremation. See *York Journal of Convocation containing the Acts and Debates of the Convocation of the Province of York, in the Session of 2-4 June 1896* pp.249-51.

¹⁸ Parsons, *Cleansing Flame* pp.253-7; Banerjee, ‘Modern Cremation’ *The Victorian Web* accessed 21 May 2017 <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/parks/woking/1.html>

¹⁹ Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* pp.88-9.

bishops of Worcester and Lichfield and Coventry (Charles Gore and Augustus Legge).²⁰ Fifty years later, the Cremation Society was still alert to the need to handle the clergy carefully. Some notes in their archive, undated but probably from the 1950s, gave advice on how to manage a variety of religious and secular interests at the opening of a new crematorium. The mayor and a secular ‘VIP’ should be centre stage for the opening, but this should be followed by a procession into the building, after which the bishop and the president of the Free Church Council should dedicate the crematorium, in the chapel. ‘By doing it this way, the Clergy have the Dedication ceremony to themselves’.²¹ After the dedication, everyone should inspect the building. There should then be a tea, at which the VIP again took the prominent role by making a speech. The Cremation Society remained carefully attuned to handling a range of religious and secular sensibilities.

It is possible that the first Anglican clergyman to be cremated at Woking was Hugh Haweis in 1901; he had been a prominent member of the Cremation Society’s Council.²² An episcopal cremation took place at Woking in 1925, followed by interment at Brookwood cemetery. This was for Bishop Frederic Henry Chase, who had recently retired as bishop of Ely and was also a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. Chase was a man of different temperament and opinions to Bishop Hicks of Lincoln, a cautiously conservative figure who had devoted himself mainly to scholarship, and was ‘the champion of orthodoxy against any inroads of the modernists’.²³ Chase’s funeral was a much simpler affair than Hicks’s had been, six years earlier. The Saturday morning cremation had taken place with the vicar of St John’s, Woking officiating, and this was followed shortly afterwards by a service

²⁰ J. Douglas Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow* (Bramcote, 1990) p.8.

²¹ Durham University Archives and Special Collections (DUASC) Cremation Society Papers, CRE/P/7/1 Notes on Opening Ceremonies for New Crematoria n.d.

²² Parsons, *Cleansing Flame* pp.42-4.

²³ *The Times* 24 September, 1925 p.15. Chase’s will contains no instructions concerning his wishes for his funeral.

at the cemetery attended by close family, and a relatively small number of clergy from Ely and representatives of the University of Cambridge.²⁴ For Hicks, by contrast, an all-night vigil had been held, followed by an elaborate funeral liturgy, attended by large numbers of clergy, ordinands, civic dignitaries, and representatives of the Free Churches, and culminating in the interment of the ashes inside the cathedral.²⁵ The *Ely Diocesan Gazette* sounded uncertain about how to report the simplicity of Chase's cremation. The correspondent used the language more typically associated with burials rather than cremations: 'Bishop Chase was laid to rest ... the grave lies some little distance westward of the church in St Etheldreda's Walk.' The readers were also assured that the cemetery chapel 'might well have been any one of our village churches in our diocese, so much Nature was there on every side'.²⁶ Brookwood was, in fact, a vast site of around 2,200 acres, and although attractively landscaped, not remotely like a fenland churchyard.

Attitudes to fire: the 'fiery place' gives way to the 'purifying flame'

The example set by church leaders was clearly significant in popularising cremation, and we shall return to this shortly. Its growing acceptability arose also from declining theological objections. A decline in a literal belief in hell among many (although by no means all) Anglicans and Free church people gradually made the action of fire and flames seem less symbolically worrisome. F.D. Maurice had famously articulated the theological objections to eternal damnation in the 1850s, and they had been widely taken up by the large number of Anglican clergy, Nonconformist ministers and other Christians over whom he had an influence.²⁷ But fire continued to frighten. When the clergy of the York province discussed cremation in 1896, the Archdeacon of Macclesfield had commented on the 'distressing, as

²⁴ *The Times* 28 September, 1925 p.17.

²⁵ *The Times* 20 August 1919 p.13.

²⁶ *Ely Diocesan Gazette* Vol X (November, 1925) No. 29 New Series p.83.

²⁷ Frances Knight, *Victorian Christianity at the Fin de Siècle: The Culture of English Religion in a Decadent Age* (London, 2015) pp.127, 148.

well as factually incorrect' liturgical alteration commonly made at cremation services 'we therefore commit his body to the flames'.²⁸ By 1911, such clerical scruples seem to have eased. The Convocation of Canterbury's Joint Committee on Religious Services advocated the substitution 'we commit his body to the fire to be dissolved, looking for the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come...'²⁹

The First World War further eroded belief in eternal damnation. As Michael Snape puts it, 'The mass bereavement that occurred under the impact of war merely put the seal on the fate of hell'.³⁰ But he notes that Roman Catholic army chaplains continued with the traditional teaching, although it was often softened by their tendency to issue general absolutions to everyone on the battlefield. This meant that those who were killed would be in a state of grace, and not destined for the 'fiery place peopled by hideous beings' which was graphically described by a chaplain named Father Leahy, in a sermon of 1916.³¹

There is some evidence that anxieties about 'going into the fire' were still deterring lay people from choosing cremation in the mid-twentieth century. The Anglican clergyman Charles Forder, who wrote a pastoral manual that was widely used from the late 1940s until the 1960s, suggested that people still might need help to appreciate the difference between the 'refining fire' of cremation and the 'everlasting fire' of hell. The very phrase 'refining fire' was theologically loaded, although he did not explore it further. Instead, he recommended that if a cremation took place before the funeral, it should probably only be

²⁸ LPL, *York Journal of Convocation containing the Acts and Debates of the Convocation of the Province of York, in the Session of 2-4 June 1896* pp.267-70.

²⁹ LPL, *Convocation of Canterbury Report 450: Report of the Joint Committee on Religious Services to be used in connection with cremation, 1911*.

³⁰ Michael Snape, 'Civilians, Soldiers and Perceptions of the Afterlife in Britain during the First World War' in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History, 45 (Woodbridge, 2009) p.375.

³¹ Snape, 'Perceptions of the Afterlife' pp.399-402.

attended by one or two male mourners and the priest, with the ashes brought to the church for a committal service³² On balance though, Forder preferred the cremation to follow the funeral service, as there was, in his opinion, ‘no really dignified method of carrying a small casket of ashes in and out of church’.³³ As so often in this debate, the discussion swiftly backed away from theology, and focussed instead on practical considerations. At around the same period, the Cremation Society tackled the issue of the flames head on, when it offered seven ‘aesthetic reasons’ in favour of cremation, of which the first was ‘fire, the acknowledged purifier’.³⁴

Although belief in hell became extremely marginal to the beliefs of many in England and Wales in the twentieth century, it did not disappear entirely. On the basis of a study of new churches founded in York between 1982 and 2007, David Goodhew concluded that the doctrine remained widely believed. ‘The most striking aspect of new church views of the afterlife is that, whilst they may be in haste to avoid anything “old fashioned” in liturgy, they are decidedly “old fashioned” in their conceptualisation of life beyond the grave ... Heaven – and for the most part – hell were seen as realities that all need to face’.³⁵ Whilst the position of adherents of the new churches on the question of cremation has yet to be explored, there is some evidence that those at the more self-consciously conservative end of the Protestant spectrum remained most resistant; in 1991, the Belfast Crematorium was operating at only 55% capacity, even though it had been open for thirty years.³⁶ The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland opposed the building of a crematorium in Inverness as late as 1990, citing as a

³² Charles Forder, *The Parish Priest at Work*, third edition, (London, 1964) p.296.

³³ Forder, *Parish Priest* (1964) p.296.

³⁴ DUASC CRE/P/7/1, notes for lecturers giving lectures on behalf of the Cremation Society, c.1946 – 1960.

³⁵ David Goodhew, ‘New Churches in York and the Afterlife’ in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, (eds), *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History, 45 (Woodbridge, 2009) p.408

³⁶ Lewis H. Mates, ‘Ireland (Eire)’ in Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* p.268. Writing in 1964, the Superintendent of the Belfast Crematorium gave ‘tradition’ and ‘unfamiliarity’ as the two main reasons why the population of Ulster were resistant to the adoption of cremation, explaining that Irish death customs were often rooted in lengthy and long established practices, and that cremation was regarded with ‘a great deal of apprehension’. *Pharos* 30, 4 pp.76 -77 (November, 1964).

reason the decline in biblical standards which had accompanied the rise of cremation in Britain.³⁷ A crematorium for the Highland region of Scotland was not finally opened until 1995.³⁸

Resurrected bodies

Amongst Anglicans and the more liberal Protestant denominations, where the decline in the belief in hell took hold, it tended to be accompanied by a second consideration that also made cremation more acceptable: a decline in the belief in the literal resurrection of the body, together with the loss of the notion that one would need one's physical body in the afterlife. The traditional view had been that the resurrected body would be part of the way in which identity would be maintained in the hereafter. Moreover, because Christ had been physically raised, it was believed his followers would be – as indicated in 1 Corinthians 15:12-23. There are, however, at least five theologies of resurrection implicit in the New Testament,³⁹ and there had long been a tension in Christian theology between the primacy of beliefs about the resurrection of the body and ideas about the immortality of the soul. The knowledge that thousands of young bodies had been horribly mutilated during the First World War had had a major psychological impact, pushing to the limit the traditional belief that God would re-unite the fragments. As the Anglican chaplain G.A. Studdert Kennedy had put it in 1918: 'We cannot now believe that there will ever come a time when these same bodies will burst their graves and rise from broken trenches and from shell holes, living men. If men ever believed it, we cannot believe it now'.⁴⁰ Another impact of the War had been the frequent suspension

³⁷ Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow* p.9.

³⁸ See Jupp, Davies, Grainger et al, *Cremation in Modern Scotland* pp.220-3 for a discussion of debates surrounding the Inverness crematorium.

³⁹ 1 Cor 15.52ff: 'Christians sleep until the trumpet shall sound'; John 17.3: 'eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ'; Rev 7: 'Christian dead and martyrs share immediately in heaven'; implicit in 1 Pet 3.18, and explicit in the Apostles' creed: 'dead visited by Christ in hell in the interval between Good Friday and Easter'; Revelation 20: 'there will be two judgements, one at death, and the other at the end of time'.

⁴⁰ G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London, 1918) p.168.

of traditional teaching about judgement, which was linked to the idea of bodily resurrection (Revelation 20.11-15). The bereaved had been consoled by being told by the clergy that the brave and heroic soldier was eternally with God, even if he had gone to his death with a shaky or non-existent faith or uttering profanities.⁴¹ Studdert Kennedy, in particular, sought to recast Christianity through the idea of divine passibility – that God himself suffered as the world suffered. This was in part an attempt to move Christianity away from being derailed by the sort of naïve questions that had hung around in the pre-War world – ‘Will I be resurrected with or without my false teeth, or my bad leg? How old will I be?’ The Spiritualist movement, which was at its height in the interwar period, promoted the notion that although the dead were ‘somewhere’ and could be contacted by the living; they were spirits, in a non-material spirit world. This was accompanied by a widespread desire during the War, and in the interwar period, to throw off the intense mourning rituals which had been associated with the Victorian and Edwardian ways of death – cremation offered one of the most obvious ways of signalling a break with the past.⁴²

Thus, by the interwar period, theologians were stressing the eschatological transformation of all things, at the expense of the resurrected body. Charles Gore and William Temple, two rather different Anglican theologians, promoted these views, and advocated cremation, with arguments that were quite similar. Gore indicated his favour for cremation as early as 1910, and was himself cremated in 1932. In 1910, he had declared:

What I should desire ... is that my body should be reduced rapidly to ashes, so that it may do no harm to the living, and then, in accordance with the Christian feeling, be laid in the earth – ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ – with the rites of the church. I do not

⁴¹ Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge, 2010) pp.190-8; Snape, ‘Perceptions of the Afterlife’ 371-403; Studdert Kennedy, *Hardest Part* p.174.

⁴² Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* p.98. See also Leaney, who argues that the widespread adoption of cremation was a significant step on the road to the privatisation of death in the twentieth century. ‘Ashes to Ashes’, pp.131-2.

see that there is any serious argument against such a practice, and, from a sanitary point of view, it has enormous advantages.⁴³

Within the spectrum of early twentieth-century Anglican churchmanship, Gore was an Anglo-Catholic, and more of a traditionalist than Temple. Writing for a theological audience in 1924, Gore stated that it was important to grasp that the resurrection of the body did not mean the reconstitution of the fragments of our own bodies; rather, he argued for a Pauline concept of ‘spiritual bodies’ – ‘we shall not sleep but we shall all be changed’ (1 Corinthians 15.51). What Christians should look for, he suggested, ‘is the perfecting of the whole creation for the fulfilment of spiritual purpose, through whatever final catastrophe.’⁴⁴ Writing for a cremationist audience in the same year, he expressed similar sentiments.⁴⁵ But the maintenance of personal identity in a post-mortem state was important for Gore, and he saw the loss of it as having serious consequences. He suggested that it might be appropriate to conceive the state of the ‘lost’ as being, not in eternal fire, but in an intermediate state in which personality and personal consciousness had dissolved. ‘The idea of actually everlasting torment is unthinkable’⁴⁶ he concluded.

William Temple argued along broadly similar lines to Gore when he addressed the question in various lectures given in the 1930s, including the Drew Lecture in 1931 and the Gifford Lectures delivered in 1933-4.⁴⁷ He began by stating candidly that it was ‘not easy to estimate the place which the idea of Immortality now holds in the actual religion of the English people. Certainly, it is nothing like so prominent as it has been in previous ages of Christian

⁴³ *Cremation Society Transactions*, 1910 pp.12-13; cited in Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* p.97.

⁴⁴ Charles Gore, *The Holy Spirit and the Church* (London, 1924) pp.302-5.

⁴⁵ Charles Gore, ‘Untitled Address’, *Proceedings of the Third Conference of Cremation Authorities* (Wembley, 1924) pp.3-5.

⁴⁶ Gore, *Holy Spirit* p.308.

⁴⁷ The Drew Lecture was entitled ‘The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics’ and the Giffords were entitled ‘The Moral Condition of Eternal life’. Some of the passages were identical.

history.⁴⁸ After dismissing the traditional belief in hell as offending ‘against the deepest Christian sentiments’⁴⁹ he proceeded to argue that the resurrection life implied a whole and entire new order of being, and this was far removed from what he termed a doctrine of ‘mere survival’.⁵⁰

Church leaders and the victory of ‘common sense’

Bishop Edward Lee Hicks had been an early advocate of what may be termed the ‘common sense’ approach to cremation, expressing his views on the matter in an article for the *Manchester Guardian* on 2 January 1908. It is a perfect early summary of what would become the typical English ‘common sense’ position on the subject:

The growth of common sense, the pressure of large urban populations, and certain obvious considerations of space and health, have compelled reasonable people to look at the problem of burial with open minds. Undoubtedly the sentiment of the Christian Church has always been for burial and against cremation. It is also natural to shrink from doing an apparent violence to the helpless dead. But there is nothing in cremation which violates Christian beliefs, and sentiment may well be reminded that the process of destruction in earth-burial is identical in character, though not in speed, with that of cremation. In a single Salford cemetery there lie buried beneath the ground as many persons as are alive to-day within the borough area. This is true in many another large town, and it is a simple condemnation of the system. On behalf of cremation I heard a good Christian use these words: ‘I have tried always so to live as to cause my fellow-men the least possible harm or inconvenience; I want to follow the same rule in my death’. I thought it effectually Christianised cremation.⁵¹

⁴⁸ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London, 1934) p.453.

⁴⁹ Temple, *Nature, Man and God* p.454.

⁵⁰ Temple, *Nature, Man and God* pp.461-2.

⁵¹ Fowler, *Edward Lee Hicks* pp. 219-20.

As already noted, at around the same period Gore had also expressed his support for cremation in ‘common sense’ language: ‘from a sanitary point of view, it has enormous advantages’.⁵²

In June 1935, the Cremation Society undertook a survey of church leaders, inviting them to state whether or not in their opinion ‘there is anything in Cremation offensive to Christian Opinion or contrary to Christian Doctrine’. The circular continued: ‘This is an aspect of the subject which affects a great mass of the Community, who will be interested and impressed by statements of the opinions of recognised Religious Leaders.’⁵³ The responses of fifteen of the diocesan bishops of the Church of England are recorded. Seven declined to supply a statement, and their responses were typically expressed as a cagey refusal to divulge their views, sometimes combined with the plea of excessive workload, rather than agreement with the idea that cremation was indeed ‘offensive’ or ‘contrary’ to Christian opinion or doctrine. Indeed, none of the surviving replies expressed any opposition to cremation.⁵⁴ The eight statements in favour ranged from simply agreeing with the proposition that there was nothing ‘offensive’ or ‘contrary’ (Blunt of Bradford) to stating that ‘no Christian can legitimately take exception’ [to cremation] (Barnes of Birmingham).⁵⁵ Only Perowne of Worcester tackled the issue of the early Christian ‘prejudice’ against cremation, on the grounds that cremation seemed a desecration of sanctified humanity. But he countered it by suggesting that ‘common sense’ made it evident that cremation was the best method of disposing of the dead in large cities. The bishops of Rochester and Chester made similar points, and Fisher of Chester expressed the hope that the public would be ‘educated’ to accept the practice ‘under our

⁵² *Cremation Society Transactions*, 1910 pp.12-13; cited in Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* p.97.

⁵³ DUASC CRE/P/3 Statistics and Surveys.

⁵⁴ The bishops who declined to provide a statement were Norwich (Pollock), Chichester (Bell), Oxford (Strong), Leicester (Bardsley), London (Winnington-Ingram), Winchester (Garbett) and Canterbury (Lang).

⁵⁵ The bishops who provided a positive statement were Salisbury (Donaldson), Rochester (Smith), St Albans (Furse), Ely (Heywood), Chester (Fisher), (Birmingham) Barnes and Worcester (Perowne).

modern conditions'. This particular response must have pleased the Cremation Society, as they were the body whose mission was to do precisely that. They published the results of the survey in their journal *Pharos*, with a further article in 1937, which contained more favourable episcopal pronouncements.⁵⁶ The articles were a clear indication of the Society's belief that securing and publicising endorsements from church leaders was the way forward to gaining greater acceptability from the public at large.

The Cremation Society also surveyed a small number of Free Church leaders, although with little positive result. Gilbert Laws from the Baptist Union and the Methodist John Scott Lidgett both declined to respond. Evangeline Booth, General of the Salvation Army, was said to be too busy to 'give attention to outside matters such as this'. Of those consulted, only Sidney Berry, Secretary of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, was unambiguously in support, explaining that he had been the crematorium chaplain in Manchester between 1909 and 1912. It seems likely that Congregationalists, with their high proportion of middle-class, progressively-minded members, were among Britain's earliest adopters of cremation. Indeed, the Cremation Society had advertised its message prominently in the *Congregational Year Book* in every issue during the 1920s:

Burial in populous areas is insanitary, wasteful, a menace to the health of the living, and has been described as the chief relic of barbarism. Cremation safeguards the living, and provides for the permanent disposal of the dead, with Reverence, Simplicity, and Economy Cremation has become an established fact, not only in this country, but all over the civilised world, and is rapidly superseding burial in all large centres of population.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Pharos*, 2, 1 pp.18-19 (October, 1935) and *Pharos*, 3, 4 p.22 (August, 1937). The Episcopal Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney added a positive voice from Scotland in the second article.

⁵⁷ *Congregational Year Book*. This advertisement appeared with almost identical wording in every issue from 1924 to 1929. It included various endorsements from prominent, and mostly dead, pro-cremationists, including

It is evident that the Free Church leadership did not speak with the same, increasingly united, voice that characterised the Anglican bishops. Addressing the Oxford Cremation Conference in 1938, Bishop Pollock of Norwich observed that ‘the Free Churches allow entire liberty, and have made no general pronouncement one way or another’.⁵⁸

The disposal of ashes

The question of how the ashes of the cremated should be dealt with exercised clergy from an early date, and it is a concern that continues to the present.⁵⁹ In 1911, the Canterbury Convocation strongly urged the interment of ashes in church or churchyard, either without further service, or with the recitation of a psalm or collect. ‘We desire to discourage the keeping of cinery urns within sight either of churches or elsewhere’:⁶⁰ a statement which seems to indicate that unapproved practices, such as the retention of ashes in the home, were already becoming established. As the decades passed, Church of England attitudes relaxed on the absolute requirement for ashes to be buried. In 1943, the Canterbury Convocation joint committee was once again discussing cremation. The question was put: was cremation a preliminary to burial, or was it a form of burial in itself? Clergy took the former view, while the bishops favoured the latter. There was also division on what should happen to the ashes. Some favoured the very widespread practice of scattering without ceremony in the grounds of the crematorium, which, according to the Archdeacon of Dudley, ‘discouraged sentiment’

Henry Thompson, Bishop James Fraser and Frances Willard, the American temperance reformer and suffragist. One, the Revd A.W. Palmer, a Congregational minister in Oakland, California, stated that cremation had ‘the distinct religious value of emphasising that it is the spirit, not the garment which the spirit wears, that is immortal’.

⁵⁸ DUASC CRE/P/7/6. Bertram Pollock, ‘The Attitude of the Church towards Cremation’ an address given at the Oxford Cremation Conference, 22 July 1938. It is interesting to note that Pollock was among the bishops who had declined to express an opinion in 1935.

⁵⁹ In 2016 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* – regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation, which restated the Catholic teaching that ashes should always be buried in a place set apart by consecration. The Anglican Church in Wales officially takes the same position.

⁶⁰ LPL, *Convocation of Canterbury Report 450: Report of the Joint Committee on Religious Services to be used in connection with cremation, 1911.*

and mournfully 'sitting beside a grave'. In the same year, *Pharos* reported that approximately seventy per cent of ashes were scattered.⁶¹ Indeed, Bishop Pollock had spoken positively of the practice in 1938:

The scattering of the ashes appears to appeal to many. The reasons vary; there are those who, in the deepest Christian sense, take what they call a poetic view of the return of the ashes, to remain unknown, except to God, on the bosom of the Mother Earth which, in its peace and beauty, was created by Him who is also the creator of our immortal spirits. Others are in favour of the practice from a noble revolt from the old-fashioned staging of funerals. Others again dislike the thought of death and everything connected with it and wish to get away and turn their back on the whole subject.⁶²

Other clergy favoured the burying of ashes in consecrated ground, and this was the view that in later years gained increasing support among clergy as the 'correct' outcome for cremated remains. In 1943, the resolution adopted was that ashes should either be buried, or scattered reverently in a garden of remembrance.⁶³ What exactly constituted 'reverent scattering' was to be debated further by Anglican clergy, with the precise nuances of 'scattering', 'strewing' and 'broadcasting' ashes being discussed at the Convocation of the Province of York in 1951. The essential point was that human remains should not be permitted to blow about in the wind. There was also a repetition of the condemnation of keeping ashes on the mantelpiece, lest it encourage the worship of relics.⁶⁴

Public acceptance of cremation rose steadily during the 1940s. In 1943, a columbarium was consecrated in the crypt of Sheffield cathedral, and for the first time a place for cremated

⁶¹ *Pharos* 9, 3 p.1 (August 1943).

⁶² DUASC CRE/P/7/6. Pollock, 'Attitude of the Church towards Cremation'.

⁶³ *Pharos* 9, 3 p.2 (August 1943).

⁶⁴ LPL *York Journal of Convocation containing the Acts and Debates of the Convocation of the Province of York, in the session May 1951.*

remains had been definitely set apart in an English cathedral.⁶⁵ In October 1944, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, died suddenly, and was ‘committed to the purifying elements’ with his ashes interred in Canterbury cathedral. Two years later, the body of his predecessor, Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang, was also cremated at the same Kent crematorium.⁶⁶ In the case of both prelates, and in contrast with the early episcopal cremations, elaborate funeral liturgies at Canterbury took place with the coffin present, and the cremation followed quietly later. Meanwhile, in 1943, and again in 1944, the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation (i.e. the bishops) concluded that ‘the practice of cremation has no theological significance’.⁶⁷ The Cremation Society was jubilant:

This very phrase has been recorded in resolutions passed by almost every national Cremation Society in the past seventy years ... when we are once more able to resume our communion with our colleagues in beleaguered Europe, the news that the established Church of England has confirmed this time-honoured principle, will, we hope, hearten them in the fight which they will yet have to wage in those lands where obscurantism still prevails.⁶⁸

The unmistakable message was that the cremationists’ post-war dialogue would be with Roman Catholicism, and so it turned out to be.

The Roman Catholic position before 1963

Following the acceptance of the legality of cremation in Britain in 1885, there was a move towards setting up regional branches of the Cremation Society. One of these was in Manchester, initially with the Roman Catholic bishop of Salford, Herbert Vaughan, as its

⁶⁵ *Pharos* 9, 4 p.9 (November 1943).

⁶⁶ *Pharos* 12, 1 p.10 (February 1946).

⁶⁷ Peter Jupp, ‘Resurrection’ in Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* p.357; Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* pp.135-41; *Pharos*, 9, 3 p.1 (August, 1943); LPL *Chronicle of Convocation (Canterbury) Upper House debate on cremation, 24 May 1944* pp.184-90.

⁶⁸ *Pharos*, 10, 3 p.1 (August, 1944).

chairman. Vaughan's position was, however, swiftly rendered untenable when the Vatican declared cremation to be incompatible with the Church's teachings, in *Quod cadaverum cremationis*, in 1886. The decree stated that although there was 'nothing intrinsically wrong with burning the bodies of the dead ... in ordinary times cremation disturbs the pious sentiments of the faithful'.⁶⁹ By 1890, Vaughan was warning Catholics not to become involved with the Cremation Society.⁷⁰ Indeed, in an article in the *Dublin Review* he engaged in a lengthy defence of earth burial as the only acceptable option for Christians, and repeated many of the anti-cremation arguments about the violence and inhumanity of the process, offensive smell and potential for the concealment of murder.⁷¹ He concluded that cremation was 'thrice-condemned – by the instinct of nature, by the dictate of prudence, and by the decision of the Church'.⁷² He had moved a long way in five years.

The Catholic ban on cremation in 1886 was only coincidentally a reaction to changes in Britain, which was of course a very insignificant part of the Catholic world. It was Freemasonry, which was anti-clerical in nature and strong in Italy, that the Catholic Church identified as its enemy, not the Cremation Society of Great Britain. (Indeed, the Cremation Society, although it attracted support from prominent secularists, was, as we have seen, always careful to be respectful of religious viewpoints). It was the Masonic advocacy of cremation, coupled with the Masonic hostility to Catholicism, which led the Vatican to issue its declaration against the practice. Bishop Vaughan emphasised this, quoting a prominent Roman Freemason who had said:

⁶⁹ William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, *A Catholic Dictionary* (London, 1897) p.257.

⁷⁰ Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* p.78, citing C.F. Makepeace, *Manchester Crematorium 1890-1990* (Manchester, n.d. 1990) p.8.

⁷¹ Herbert Vaughan, 'Cremation and Christianity' *The Dublin Review* April 1890 23, 2 pp.384-402.

⁷² Vaughan, 'Cremation' p.401.

Civil marriage deprives them [the Roman Catholic Church] of the control of the family.

Lay education will shortly withdraw from them that of the rising generation. Civil

funerals and cremation pyres will rob them of their last pretension to rule over death.⁷³

The position was further hardened in 1892, when priests were forbidden to administer the last sacraments to anyone who had arranged to have their body cremated. Further statements on the subject provided clarification that the objection was primarily to cremation's association with Freemasonry and atheism, rather than to any intrinsic threat to the dogma of the Church, some secondary objections already familiar from Bishop Vaughan were also raised, including the 'inhumanity' of burning the human body, and the risk of destroying forensic evidence when death was due to violence or poisoning.⁷⁴ The repeated restatement of the link between cremation and Freemasonry made it easier for the Catholic Church to change its position over time, for if cremation ceased to be associated with Masonic ritual and atheistic thought, and instead became the stated preference of at least some of the faithful, then the objections to it began to lose their validity.

The 1917 Code of Canon Law maintained that burial was the norm, and stated that severe penalties were to be imposed on those who opted for cremation. At the same time, it was indicated that it might conceivably be used in exceptional circumstances, for example if a large number of people died in a plague. But the penalties were severe for anyone who chose cremation other than in these exceptional circumstances: they were to be deprived of a church funeral.

The Roman Catholic acceptance of cremation

⁷³ Vaughan, 'Cremation' p.394.

⁷⁴ William Devlin, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* vol 4 (London and New York, 1908) p.482.

Anxious to speak on behalf of ‘believing Catholics who from their human conception want to be cremated’, the International Cremation Federation (ICF) had been holding talks, apparently fruitlessly, with senior Vatican officials during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The unexpected news that Pope John XXIII would be summoning a Council in the Autumn of 1962 provided the opportunity for a fresh start, and for the ICF a change in policy. Rather than making an ‘official plea’, as in the past, it decided to focus instead on encouraging ‘personalities in key positions within the Roman Church hoping they will bring up the matter at the concilium’.⁷⁵ The President of the ICF (a Danish Lutheran, Dean Rald) made the interesting observation that ‘cremation should be a matter to which an ecumenic (sic) attitude might be adopted ... Cremation is not a religious question but a practical one for which we should be able to meet in co-operation irrespective of creed and philosophy of life’.⁷⁶ As if to underline this policy, *Pharos* published an article entitled ‘The Roman Catholic attitude to Cremation’ by a priest, Donald W.H. Dorsett, alongside Rald’s article. Dorsett, however, thought that cremation was a religious question, and that although it might become inevitable due to pressures on land, what was inevitable was not necessarily desirable. In common with other Catholic writers, he thought cremation undermined the idea of man created in the image of God. The body was intimately connected to the soul, and was something to be stored up as ‘a treasure which will one day be given back to us’. Its decomposition should not be hastened by mechanical means, but the corpse ‘treated with honour until time does its work’. In contrast to Rald, who had stated the opposite, he saw cremation as causing a difficulty for the belief in future bodily resurrection. Cremation undermined respect for the outward symbol of the body, in the same way that Puritans had undermined belief in saints, by destroying images of saints. He was candid about the gulf that had opened up between Rome and the general public on the issue: ‘What is regarded as modern civil progress is regarded by the Holy

⁷⁵ *Pharos* 28, 3 p.19 (August, 1962).

⁷⁶ *Pharos* 28, 3 pp.15 - 19 (August, 1962).

Office as a barbarous practice ... [It believes that] ... 'those who are hostile to Christianity are praising and propagating the practice of cremation with the purpose in mind among others of gradually removing from people's minds the thought of death and the hope of the resurrection of the body and so paving the way for materialism'.⁷⁷ If this article was representative of Catholic opinion, it appeared that a change on such a crucial point would be some way off.

In the event, change came sooner than anticipated. The Vatican issued *Piam et constantem* on 5 July 1963, which, although still preferring burial, gave Catholics permission to be cremated. Some of the reasoning offered was the same type of pragmatic argument that had been advanced during debates within the Church of England during the Second World War. Cremation itself was seen as a neutral act, not affecting the soul, nor preventing the final restoration of the body. Increasingly, it was being requested for reasons of health, economics, or what was described as 'reasons of public or private order'.⁷⁸ The Church felt compelled to accede in these practical requests, as long as it was clear that the choice of cremation did not stem from anti-Christian motives. By the following summer, practical guidance was being issued in the form of a papal instruction, which emphasised the importance of taking account of national customs, as well as economic and health consideration. The first cremation of a Roman Catholic in Britain occurred at Golders Green on 11 June 1964, following a service at a nearby Catholic church; no specific liturgical rite was performed at the crematorium.⁷⁹

Initially, priests were forbidden to perform ceremonies in crematoria. Whilst on the one hand the Church appeared to be adopting a liberalising measure, this practical ban seemed designed to retain the strong sense of ecclesiastical disapproval. The instruction of Paul VI

⁷⁷ *Pharos* 28, 3 pp.19 -23 (August, 1962).

⁷⁸ *Piam et Constantem*, 5 July 1963.

⁷⁹ *Pharos* 30, 3 pp.19 -23 (August, 1964) p.55-6.

had stated explicitly that ‘in order to demonstrate unmistakably the Church’s opposition to cremation, the rite of Christian burial and the accompanying public prayers may never be held at the crematorium itself, nor may the cortege be accompanied, even without ceremony’.⁸⁰ But if this had been intended to put off Catholics, in increasingly tolerant and religiously plural Britain, it backfired. In 1965, Fr John F. McDonald, who was about to become the Roman Catholic representative on the Council of the Cremation Society, told their summer conference that ‘many Roman Catholics – in perfectly good faith and under the natural and understandable belief that any clergyman is better than no clergyman – accept the presence of a minister of any denomination when they reach the crematorium’.⁸¹

Alternatively, they coped alone with their concern and sorrow. This also put a strain on funeral directors, who sometimes had to manage proceedings at the crematorium without any clerical support.⁸² At Golders Green, it was reported that the local Catholic priest, Fr Carmine de Felice, whose church, St Edward the Confessor, Finchley Road, was ‘only a stone’s throw’ from the crematorium, had stated that the church ‘could almost be counted the crematorium chapel’ for those seeking a Catholic liturgy before a cremation.⁸³ But this was clearly nothing more than a workaround, facilitated by a sympathetic priest, and to remedy this state of affairs, McDonald pressed for Catholic clergy to be permitted to officiate at crematoria, citing the example of Japan. In Japan, the practice of cremation was universal, and priests, fully vested, were permitted to officiate in the crematorium at the funerals of Catholics, and to use incense, holy water, and to say or sing all the parts of the funeral liturgy. He gently reminded

⁸⁰ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* Official Commentary, 24 October 1964 Ser. III, v 5; N.13 at pp.822-3. Cited in *Pharos* 31,1 pp.15 -16 (February, 1965).

⁸¹ *Pharos* 31, 3 p.51 (August, 1965); 31, 4 (November 1965) p.81.

⁸² *Pharos* 31, 4 pp.81-2 (November, 1965).

⁸³ *Pharos* 31, 4 p.82 (November, 1965).

his superiors that ‘the Holy See would not be creating a precedent should it decide to relax the ruling which at present forbids priests to go to the crematorium’.⁸⁴

His approach to Cardinal Heenan, the Archbishop of Westminster, on behalf of the Cremation Society was well received, and Heenan raised it with the Pope. This led to the ban on clergy attending crematoria being dropped in England and Wales in September 1966, with an extension to Scotland in 1967.⁸⁵ The Cremation Society were predictably delighted, claiming it as ‘another landmark in the history of the cremation movement in this country’.⁸⁶ It was reported that in 1965, about one thousand cremations of Roman Catholics had taken place, all without priests present. In 1966, there were thought to have been 2,350, of which about 600 had the service conducted at the crematorium by the priest.⁸⁷ By 1968, the figure had risen to an estimated 5,095,⁸⁸ and by 1970, McDonald was estimating a figure of 8,000.⁸⁹

McDonald had skilfully conveyed the Catholic position to the Cremation Society, and he also sought to explain the changing attitudes to cremation to his fellow Roman Catholics. Writing in the Irish Catholic monthly *The Furrow* in 1971, he carefully outlined the traditional position, whilst explaining recent changes. ‘It is now recognised that those who advocate cremation today are not motivated by reasons which spring from hatred of the Church and the Christian way of life but solely by considerations of hygiene, economics and other considerations of a private and public nature’.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Catholics had a range of legitimate choices when it came to determining what should happen to them after death.

⁸⁴DUASC CRE/P/7/6 The Revd J.F. McDonald on the Catholic Church and Cremation. Undated, but evidently between 1964-66.

⁸⁵ *Pharos* 32, 4 pp.91-2 (November, 1966); Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes* pp.165-7.

⁸⁶ *Pharos* 32, 4 p.91 (November, 1966).

⁸⁷ *Pharos* 33, 1 p.3 (February, 1967).

⁸⁸ *Pharos* 35, 3 (August, 1969).

⁸⁹ *Pharos* 37, 2 p.40 (May, 1971)

⁹⁰ John F. McDonald, ‘Cremation’, *The Furrow*, 22, 3 (March, 1971) p.137.

Canon law permitted them to choose the church for their funeral and the cemetery for their burial; now they might also choose the form in which their remains were buried. He argued that for some Catholics, cremation was ‘something which they have always wanted to do, but refrained from doing out of a sense of obedience to the laws of the Church’.⁹¹ He also warned the Irish clergy that even if cremation remained as yet unknown in Ireland, they should still expect to encounter it when Irish Catholics who had died in Britain had their ashes returned for burial ‘with his ancestors back in Ireland’.⁹²

In 1967, an official order of service for RC priests to use at crematoria was approved by the Bishops of England and Wales. In the same year, a Roman Catholic priest (probably McDonald) gave the address at the annual service of remembrance at Golders Green Crematorium.⁹³ The Roman Catholic position gradually evolved, and this was reflected when the new *Code of Canon Law* was issued in 1983. It stated that ‘The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching’.⁹⁴

Nevertheless, there remained, and still perhaps remains, a powerful sense among some Catholics that cremation was not for them. This has been explained as a combination of knowing that it is something previously disapproved of, and the sense that modern crematoria are alien, secular buildings lacking all the traditional iconography associated with Catholic churches. According to Kevin McGinnell, a leading Catholic liturgist with a particular interest in funeral liturgy, cremation tends to be mainly favoured by lapsed or ‘resting’ Catholic families. It certainly has little appeal to Irish, West Indian or Italian Catholics, as

⁹¹ McDonald, ‘Cremation’, p.137.

⁹² McDonald, ‘Cremation’, p.139.

⁹³ McDonald, ‘Cremation’ p.138; *Pharos* 37, 2 p.41 (May, 1971)

⁹⁴ *The Code of Canon Law with Index* (London, 1983) Canon 1176, 3; John Newton, ‘Cremation, Death and Roman Catholicism’ in Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* pp.108-9.

well as those in more recently arrived immigrant communities.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, there is some evidence of attitudes changing, with one Catholic priest in the North East informing the author that perhaps as many as ninety percent of the funerals that he takes are cremations. In 2011, an English Catholic bishop, Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia, was cremated.⁹⁶ Just how fast Roman Catholics attitudes will change on this matter will be an interesting issue for sociologists of religion.

Conclusion

This article has emphasised the fruitful partnership which existed during the middle decades of the twentieth century between the Cremation Society of Great Britain and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. Through its conferences and journal, the Society remained ever ready to seek out and publicise the views of both Churches on cremation, and to provide advice. Although it avoided formal theological debate, the Cremation Society adopted and adapted certain theological motifs, particularly purifying fire, in a way which permitted it to make a contribution to the twentieth-century's evolving theology of death. The notes it provided to guide its lecturers in the period from 1946 until the 1960s are revealing: lecturers were urged to focus on the aesthetic, the economic and the religious reasons in favour of cremation. In the first category, as we have already seen, was the emphasis on 'fire, the acknowledged purifier', followed by 'the idea of a garden' and 'freedom from the cemetery and its harrowing associations'.⁹⁷ The economic reasons in favour of cremation reinforced the aesthetic, concentrating on land conservation and the ugliness of cemeteries. The advice on tackling religious questions changed to reflect the shifting mood of the passing decades. In

⁹⁵ Kevin McGinnell, 'Why Catholics prefer Burial' paper given to the Cremation Society, 14 July 2005. Published in *Pharos International* 2006 72 (2) pp.3-4.

⁹⁶ Kevin McGinnell, 'Celebration of the Catholic Church's 1964 decision' paper given to the Cremation Society, 2014. Published in *Pharos International* 2014 81 (1) pp.16-19.

⁹⁷ DUASC CRE/P/7/1 'Some notes for lecturers giving lectures on behalf of the Cremation Society'. Other aesthetic reasons focussed on the idea of beauty in death, and the preservation of the countryside.

the earlier version of the notes, the lecturer was encouraged to tackle head on the issue of the irrelevance of cremation to the possibility of physical resurrection: ‘If the cremation of a human being in 1946 tends to lower that human being’s chance of rising again on the last day, how very small a chance have the Early Christians of the 1st and 2nd centuries who were burned at the stake for their beliefs. In any event, one must place a certain reliance on the omniscience of the Almighty.’⁹⁸ By 1960, however, the advice was to ‘confine your comments to a matter-of-fact statement as to which Sects favour and which oppose cremation’.⁹⁹ Alluding to the cremations of Archbishops Lang and Temple was still seen as a positive move, but speculation about the resurrection of the dead had become a topic to be avoided.

The evidence shows that the British rapidly adopted the practice of cremation from the 1940s. In 1968, the point was reached when over half of deaths resulted in cremation; in 1982 it reached two thirds,¹⁰⁰ and by 2010 it had reached three quarters. Douglas Davies has remarked that this development has been ‘one of the most remarkable pieces in the jigsaw of social change over the last century’.¹⁰¹ For most of those of English-Protestant heritage, this transition in death customs seems to have been largely unproblematic; it was seen as a natural part of the shift into ‘modernity’, which combined the ‘common sense’ approach to death which had been exemplified by Hicks and Gore together with, for those of the Christian faith, an abandonment of anxiety about the mechanics of physical resurrection. By the second half of the twentieth century, Britons had become well accustomed to the realities of living in an industrial, technologically advanced society, and found it easy to accept, rather than be

⁹⁸ DUASC CRE/P/7/1 ‘Some notes for lecturers’.

⁹⁹ DUASC CRE/P/7/1 ‘Some notes for lecturers’.

¹⁰⁰ Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* pp. 449, 454.

¹⁰¹ Douglas J. Davies, *Mors Britannica: Lifestyle and Death-Style in Britain Today* (Oxford, 2015) p.131.

fearful of, the industrial process which is cremation. Furthermore, belief in hell fire declined to such an extent that neither the symbolism nor the reality of cremation seemed problematic.

There were various psychological and practical reasons which increased the acceptability of cremation. Until the relatively recent arrival of the woodland burial movement, and despite the chimney emissions and the enormous quantity of gas used, cremation was seen as a greener and cleaner alternative to land-hungry burials. It was also sometimes presented as less psychologically stressful for the bereaved: ‘cremation, so much nicer and quicker’, with the corpse gone within an hour or so of the funeral, tended to be a euphemism for ‘you don’t really want the body of your loved one rotting in the ground for years, do you?’ Jennifer Leaney has argued that the sense of revulsion towards putrifying corpses was a powerful element in persuading Victorians and early-twentieth century Britons of the benefits of cremation.¹⁰² As we have seen, the Cremation Society had long promoted the idea of fire as a means of purification, and the slogan ‘purification, not putrefaction’ was probably as apt in the 1980s as it had been when the early cremationist Sir Thomas Spencer Wells had first uttered it a hundred years earlier.¹⁰³ Although earth burial was presented as the ‘natural’ option, the slow and mysterious processes of natural decomposition could have little appeal for people who increasingly were not attracted to slowness and mystery. Furthermore, cremation rapidly produces what the early twentieth-century French sociologist Robert Hertz termed ‘dry remains’, which he argued were easier for the bereaved to come to terms with than the ‘wet remains’ associated with a corpse.¹⁰⁴ At a practical level, although the price differential between cremations and funerals has become smaller in recent years, largely as a result of the need to improve the technology in order to make crematoria emissions less hazardous, cremation has long been presented as the cheaper and more convenient option. It

¹⁰² Leaney, ‘Ashes to Ashes’, pp.129-31.

¹⁰³ Parsons, *Cleansing Flame* pp.88-90.

¹⁰⁴ Douglas J. Davies, ‘Robert Hertz: the social triumph over death’ *Mortality* 5, 1 (2000) pp.97-102.

avoided some of the problems associated with burial, such as the purchase and maintenance of a plot and the commissioning of a gravestone. Perhaps it particularly appealed to the English middle-class belief that expensive funerals were a sign of wastefulness and bad taste.¹⁰⁵ In a modern version of Bishop Edward Lee Hick's argument about wanting to create the 'least possible harm or inconvenience', people were increasingly inclined to request that their funerals should be as simple and unostentatious as possible.¹⁰⁶

By the late twentieth century, the British were seeing cremation as having another advantage; it gave the opportunity for a more personalised, privatised outcome, with relatives able to make choices about the cremated remains. These could include the scattering in a special place, keeping the ashes at home, the retention for later mixing with the ashes of other loved ones – even the pyrotechnic option, which involves having some of the ashes manufactured into fireworks.¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, as early as 1911 the Anglican clergy were warning against what they saw as the misuse of cremated human remains, and in 1951, they were condemning the 'eccentric' practice of climbing Snowdon or Helvellyn to scatter ashes.¹⁰⁸ Yet by the twenty-first century, even some Roman Catholics appear to have been attracted by these options, for why else would the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have explicitly condemned the retention of ashes in the home, their division among relatives, their scattering on land, sea or air, or their preservation as mementos, or within pieces of

¹⁰⁵ Leaney argues that in contrast, working-class funerals have been more likely to remain lavish affairs, designed to confer status on the deceased. Working class families were therefore more likely to continue with traditional burials. 'Ashes to Ashes', p.130. In 1964, *Pharos* reported that in Barnsley, it was said that 'private householders preferred cremation, while council house tenants preferred a burial'. *Pharos*, August 1964, 30 p.71.

¹⁰⁶ Rugg, *Churchyard and Cemetery* p.366.

¹⁰⁷ Nor is it only among those without a religious background that such practices are taking place. When the eminent Anglo-Catholic ecclesiastical historian Professor Nigel Yates died in 2009, some of his ashes were made into fireworks, and were fired into the night sky above the Welsh town of Lampeter, where he had lived and worked. For more on the destiny of cremated remains, see Davies, *Mors Britannica* pp.135-40.

¹⁰⁸ LPL *York Journal of Convocation containing the Acts and Debates of the Convocation of the Province of York, in the session May 1951.*

jewellery?¹⁰⁹ The practices associated with cremation have changed in many ways from the early cremations of the Anglican bishops Mitchinson, Hicks and Chase, where the act of cremation preceded the funeral. Writing in 1984, the Anglican liturgist Michael Perham advocated what would in fact have been a return to that early procedure, with the act of cremation as merely part of the process of preparing a body for burial. The ashes would then be present at a funeral service, and interment would take place locally.¹¹⁰ But the distance between Perham's suggestion and what has become the usual practice today is vast. The human capacity to make new rituals is perhaps no where better illustrated than in the growth of rituals relating to death. This is one aspect of the matter that theologians would do well to ponder.

Total word count including abstract and footnotes: 9,000.

¹⁰⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (Rome, 2016) paras 6-7.

¹¹⁰ Michael Perham, *Liturgy, Pastoral and Parochial* (London, 1984) pp.142-3.