

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the South African anti-Apartheid icon who died last year, was reportedly cremated in a new process known as aquamation, which is believed to be an environmentally friendly way of using water to reduce the body to ashes. This week's clergy discuss how cremation, in any form, is viewed by their faith.

The Rev. Jaye Brooks

Developmental Minister, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset

Cremation is a choice that many Unitarian Universalists make during their end-of-life planning. Unitarian Universalists come from an array of religious traditions and bring those traditions with them, so there are many who instead choose burial.

One of my most vivid memories is of a family with five adult children at the time of their father's death. He had remarried after they were mostly grown. The children and their father's widow decided to scatter his ashes into the ocean. The night before the memorial service, the widow — mourning the loss of the husband she loved and keenly aware of his children's grief — tenderly shared out his ashes into five little ribbon-bound packages. Each child took a package, opened it and, weeping, scattered their father's ashes into the ocean.

Afterward they embraced the widow warmly and with gratitude. She had not been their mother, but in that moment she had shown the love and compassion of a parent. For her, the



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ASKING THE CLERGY

What does your faith say about cremation?

sight of them scattering her beloved husband's ashes was a comfort in the midst of her grief — as was seeing the beauty of the love that was still so alive in their family.

Rabbi Shalom Ber Cohen

Village Chabad at Stony Brook

Jewish law is unequivocal: The dead must be buried in the earth. While burning has historically been a means of destruction, burial expresses respect and love.

For instance, we bury a Torah scroll that can no longer be used. Genesis 3:19 says, "For dust you are, and to dust you will return." In Jewish law, the human body is merely on loan from

the Creator, who is its guardian and wants it returned just as it was given. We were created in "God's image and likeness" (Genesis 1:27), thus any violation of the human body is considered a violation of God himself.

According to kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), the soul does not depart the body immediately. Such an abrupt departure would be intensely painful for the soul. Decomposition allows the soul time to acclimate to its new heavenly abode.

The point of sharing this is not to create sadness or guilt for a cremation that already occurred because of information the bereaved had at the time. But the importance of Jewish burial should be shared with our friends and

family. We are taught that a soul is certain to evoke heavenly mercy and blessings upon those who ensured that its body was accorded its final proper respects.

The Rev. Randolph Jon Geminder

Rector, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Amityville

Cremation, long prohibited, is now permitted in Western Christianity — both Roman and Anglican. Eastern Orthodoxy generally doesn't allow it. The Western Church prefers that the body be present for the requiem Mass, with cremation to follow, although the liturgy is sometimes celebrated with the ashes reverently draped and positioned in the church. Although ancient cultures such as India and Nepal have long embraced cremation with public, open-air pyres, it took centuries to be accepted by Christianity. The conclusion was made that since the body disintegrates in the grave anyway, cremation is not a desecration of the mortal remains.

We have a crypt chapel at our parish that houses our columbarium for the internment of the cremains. (In the ancient world these receptacles with their depressions or niches resembled dovecotes. That reference remains: *columba* is Latin for dove.)

I do try to impress upon people that the ashes should be interred intact in a sacred space; certainly not on the mantel next to the TV and not shared in portions with family. As we say in The Prayer for Eternal Rest, "May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace."

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