



Scholl Institute of Bioethics

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The Scholl Institute of Bioethics is a nonprofit, Judeo-Christian organization that addresses bioethical issues including euthanasia, physician-assisted-suicide, the withholding or withdrawing of food and water from non-dying patients, brain death, organ transplantation, genetic engineering, and the rights of disabled or mentally ill persons.

ON “Recomposing and Dissolving” The Dead

by Betty Odello MSN and Elizabeth Hanink BSN

None of us like to think about death. Yes, we know it's inevitable that our human life will come to an end, but we don't like to talk about it or prepare for it. If we accept thinking and talking about death and help people prepare and plan for what will come, everything becomes much easier. Written instructions can be a huge comfort to the grieving family.

Today, we have a wide range of legal ways of disposing of bodies. We can bury them, burn them, or even blast them with water and lye (alkaline hydrolysis). More recently, we can turn them into soil much like kitchen scraps.

This newest method known as natural organ reduction (NOR), recomposing, human composting, terramation, or bio cremation is quickly becoming big business with more than one publicly traded company serving multiple states. NOR is a form of cremation that places the un-embalmed body in a pressurized metal chamber; then heat, oxygen, microbes and substances like woodchips or straw break the body down into soil or fertilizer over time. Unlike with green burial, where the body is simply laid to rest in a prepared piece of ground using biodegradable

coffins or urns, with NOR the remains can be placed intact in an urn or scattered as the family wishes.

In places where cremation is the only option due to physical constraints (such as land, water tables, and the like), recomposing is considered by some as an eco-friendly form of cremation, because it restricts chemicals

to a container, limiting their harmful release into the environment.

It is also widely understood that there are many legitimate reasons for cremation, for example, in times of plague, in places like New Orleans where there is a high water-table, where space is limited, or when the cost is prohibitive. Still, fire-based cremation burns fossil fuels, releasing tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Largely because of environmental concerns, legislation has already passed in Colorado, Washington, Vermont, Oregon, New York, and California that allows the varied new practices. We should, of course, be aware of all the options for laying our loved ones to rest; but as people of God, we should also understand that not every choice reflects the inherent respect due the human body.

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Though perhaps not morally wrong in an absolute sense, for some even conventional cremation communicates the body's lack of value and thus seems repulsive. Many Christians believe that our bodies will be transformed when we are resurrected with Christ. Some fear that, with cremation, resurrection won't be possible. Others raise no doctrinal objections to the practice, since cremation of the person's body does not affect his or her soul nor does it prevent almighty God from raising up the deceased body to new life.

Some religions, until recently, viewed cremation as sacrilege because it could potentially communicate that the body is not important. Opinions about this are shifting, though, resulting in a broader acceptance. Judaism now allows cremation, and a person cremated can usually be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The Catholic Church will now allow cremation but only if the ashes are kept together in a sacred place, preferably in an urn that would be interred in the family plot, a mausoleum, or a columbarium.

Because of the possibility of abuses and misunderstandings about our human nature, the Catholic Church still prefers full-body burial. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have issued a doctrinal statement (March 23, 2023) that human composting "fail[s] to satisfy the Church's requirements for proper respect for the bodies." Islam continues to refuse cremation, even as Hinduism continues to require it.

No matter what type of disposal is undertaken, it is important to show careful regard for the human remains of the deceased and to honor their memory. Though there are times when legitimate constraints limit our options, respect for deceased person should

always be paramount. What we do with the body matters. In cremation, whatever its form, there is the risk that for some the body is viewed as merely a part of nature instead of a constitutive part of who we are as persons created by God.

We are not akin to potato peels! Every death should remind us of our true worth as beings created in God's image, with an immortal soul, and His promise of eternal life with Him.

Interesting Facts

- **Alkaline Hydrolysis is legal in twelve states.**
- **Green Burial is legal in every state.**
- **There are 322 hybrid cemeteries in the United States.**
- **Home Burials are legal in every state except Arkansas.**
- **Cremation has grown in popularity from 9% in 1980 to 57.5% in 2021.**
- **NOR first was legalized in Washington in 2019.**
- **Grave recycling is legal as is stacking graves.**

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