

Images of massed cremation pyres reflecting the severity of the Covid-19 crisis in India have brought global attention to the ancient rite of cremation.

Delhi's largest crematorium, the Nigambodh Ghat, which used to require six to eight tonnes of wood daily, now needs 80 to 90 tonnes – every single day.

Against this backdrop of smoke and political obfuscation, of bitter flames and exhausted ash, lies the practice of cremation. Favoured by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists for millennia, but shunned by many others over the years, cremation is often simply held as an alternative to burial. But there's more to it than that.

It's not much of a choice though, is it – burial or cremation? The idea of choice, however, isn't much associated with death anyway.

We can't choose to die or not. It's a done deal. What sliver of choice we may have is to decide on a healthier lifestyle with less risk. But whether you smoke and drink or eat your greens, the manner and the timing of your passing will be something over which you have little choice. No matter what you get up to, when and how you expire is uncertain, except in cases of tragic self-will.

For the most part, death can visit at any time. On the way to the shops or on the way to the bathroom. Choice and death are only acquainted in macabre jokes and last-meal requests from inmates on death row.

Lack of choice, however, doesn't stop when we do, but extends beyond death, too. For most followers of Islam, Judaism, traditional African religions as well as Christians of different stripes, inhumation (a fancy word for burial) is preferred, even mandatory, while cremation is strictly taboo. Why?

For these faiths, burning a corpse is understood to be a defilement of the body, which is regarded as the temple of God, a holy vessel animated by a divine spirit that departs on death, perhaps to return. One does not tamper with God's creation is the prevailing belief. The Prophet Muhammad taught that to break a man's bone in death is the same as to break it in life.

The body, made in God's image, must be kept intact for all sorts of afterlife activity. In the article, *Cremation Threatens Zimbabwe's Ancestral Spirits*, Gordon Chavunduka, former vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe, writes: "If the body is cremated, that spirit would be blocked. Although it would remain alive, it would be angered that traditional burial rites had not been followed properly and could return to punish the family and community."

Local theologian Maake JS Masango acknowledges the same in *Cremation a Problem to African People*, where he foregrounds the problem of dwindling space for burial and somehow makes a case for change, with Biblical reference.

With not much land suitable for burial and sacred burial rites remaining inflexible, it's urban planners and local governments that are becoming vexed the world over.

Burial costs are rising. Burials are considered vastly more environmentally damaging than cremation, especially with tightened furnace emission standards.

In Beijing, for example, where cremation is encouraged, a grave plot costs more per square metre than an apartment. In some German cities, gravesites must be leased, not bought, and bones disinterred and bundled up by a specialist when the lease expires. The information on the headstone is inscribed on the skull and placed in a crypt.

Susan Brice, director of cemeteries for the City of Cape Town, identifies lack of space as the biggest threat to the future of burial practices – as it's been for the past 20 years.

In an interview for my podcast, *How to*



The changing case for cremation

The practice of cremation, favoured by Hindus and Buddhists for millennia but shunned by many others, is often simply held as an alternative to burial. But there's more to it than that. By **Sean O'Connor**

Die, she tells how this issue remains at the top of the agenda at the South African Cemeteries Association's annual conferences.

Cape Town, by the way, has about a 20% cremation rate, and although I think this information is out of date, it's considerably higher than anywhere else in South Africa.

Why? Lots of heathen ex-surfers, apparently, although Hindus, Catholics and Protestants are also quite happy to be cremated.

The latter, especially, seem to have gotten their heads around the "from dust you came and to dust you shall return" thing quite early, to include ashes, while the Catholic Church only sanctioned cremation in 1963.

Things can change and do. As related by

the consistently excellent 99% *Invisible* podcast, Singapore has a cremation rate of more than 80%. But it used to be 10% about 50 years ago. What happened?

In 1973, the Singaporean government decreed there would be no more ground burials at more than 70 cemeteries, due to lack of space for the living – the cemeteries were simply too big, some with gravesites 30m wide. Housing needed to be built, the living privileged over the dead. More than 100,000 bodies were exhumed and cremated from the largest cemetery alone, Peck San Theng, which was reduced to just 8ha from 324ha.

Although 50% of the interred bodies were claimed, then cremated and memorialised,

the other half were not, and were cremated together and scattered solemnly at sea.

Peck San Theng now includes a columbarium – a building for funerary urns. The same vigils and rites for the dead are carried out in these narrow corridors perfectly well. People adapt.

Incidentally, in 2007 the Singaporean government sorted out burial problems at the remaining state-run cemetery where inhumation was still permitted. Buried people are interred in a grid-like set of crypts which must be evacuated after 15 years, consistent with the Islamic practice of recycling graves, whereafter remains will commingle.

This is similar to practices in modern Greece, where you have to pay good money to keep people in the ground, and exhume at your own expense, too. The first and only crematorium in Greece was built as recently as 2018, and is privately owned.

There's also a new crematorium in Israel, after the first was burnt to the ground by Ultra-Orthodox Jews in 2007, and which now operates from a secret location.

Cremation is undoubtedly a cheaper and cleaner and more efficient way to dispose of bodies. Local prices for a "direct cremation" (the body straight to the crematorium soon after death, without a memorial service) are around R8,000 – although curiously, you'll get charged according to your socioeconomic status; I'm not sure why.

Alternatively, you could have a more expensive "attended" or "unattended" cremation, which means the deceased is in a casket at the memorial service, or not.

In Japan, 99% of people are cremated, and elsewhere, especially Switzerland, Canada and the Netherlands, it's more than 50%. In South Africa and the rest of Africa, cremation is a minority practice. It is regarded as sinister, an attitude helped by misconceptions, the most common of which is that "the ashes are all just mixed up". But why would they be? Do people think that the dead are not respected in crematoria?

In fact, the process is highly regulated, and each corpse is provided with a unique marker, usually made of a firebrick or a metal that won't melt at 1,000°C. Afterwards, this is located among the burnt remains, verifying the body that was cremated, which is now about 2.5% of its former weight. The remains resemble not pure ash but ash mixed with bits of disintegrated bone, which are ground up in a cremulator, which looks just like a giant coffee grinder.

For cremation, the deceased is placed in a combustible coffin and loaded up in a retort – that's the chamber in the cremator. I'm struck by the lovely choice of word – retort, meaning to "make return in kind" (from Old French *retort* and directly from Latin *retortus*, "turn back, twist back, throw back"). Incineration takes a couple of hours. The body organs vaporise, as do breast implants, but pacemakers can cause explosions.

And here's where choice finally kicks in! What kind of "cinerary urn" would you like?

This is something that can be acquired beforehand and stored in the garage. Some people get cremation jewellery made – and here, too, you have choice. Heck, you can even choose what colour your "ash scattering rocket" could be – a projectile that shoots up into the atmosphere and disperses you up there in the clouds.

Yes, you can send some of your ashes into the galaxies where you came from – if that's what you believe. Although by the time you die, who knows, your beliefs may have changed. **DM168**

Sean O'Connor is an end-of-life carer (death doula) and hosts the How To Die podcast on Apple and Spotify.