

# Respecting both family and faith in cremation

6/5/04  
HUM 114  
"God Squad"

My husband and I wish to be cremated. My parents' cemetery plot in our local Catholic cemetery has room for us and we'd like to know if we can have our ashes buried there and have a memorial Mass. We feel cremation would be less costly and easier on our family. Besides, I never liked the whole funeral parlor deal.

V., Valley Stream

When a Catholic dies, the normal practice is to bury or entomb the body. Until the 20th century, cremation was not permitted for Catholics. The Roman Catholic Church dropped its ban on cremation in 1963 and allowed funeral rites for those who chose cremation in 1969.

In recent years, more and more Catholics in America have been requesting cremation. Only 5 percent of Americans were cremated in 1962, but by 2000 that figure had jumped to 25.5 percent.

If someone wishes to be cremated, the usual course of events is to have the body laid out in a funeral parlor with a closed or open casket, followed by a Mass in church. The rites ordinarily performed at the grave, crypt or cemetery chapel can be performed at the crematory building. If the body is cremated prior to the funeral, the cremated remains may be brought into the church for the funeral liturgy. The remains should not be scattered or disposed of in any way other than a dignified interment or entombment.

Orthodox Christians remain staunchly opposed to cremation. Cremation is still against Jewish law because it interferes with the natural process of decomposition ("from dust to dust"). Sometimes cremation puts mourners, both Catholic and Jewish, in a bind. The deceased wanted to be cremated, but the surviving family wants to bury them in a grave where the family can visit and pay their respects. A solution to this is to cremate the body and then bury the remains in a grave.

I fully believe in what my Lutheran religion teaches and preaches, but I need a little advice. I'm interested in ancient Egyptian art and would like to get a tattoo showing my name in hieroglyphics with Egyptian gods on each side in a "protective" stance. The tattoo would not imply worship or deification; I simply want to use the images as the theme for my body art. Before I do this, I want to be sure I would not offend the Lord or break a commandment.

Confused in Parsippany, N.J.

While some native religions use body piercing and tattoos as part of their religious practices, the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all hold the view that God owns our bodies and therefore "body art" is less a form of artistic self-expression than the desecration of a human body that God alone owns. It's the spiritual equivalent of pounding a



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RABBI MARC GELLMAN  
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nail into the wall of a rental apartment.

Judaism is firm on this view, forbidding the burial of anyone with a tattoo, although this law is violated routinely. Christianity does not classify tattooing as a grave sin, but it's hardly encouraged.

The spiritual issues we have with tattooing are that it's a form of self-wounding with infection risks for no medical purpose. Tattooing and body piercing also encourage the belief that the body as created by God is not beautiful enough but must be further decorated.

My wife is Catholic and I'm Jewish and although we're both in good health and middle-aged we're concerned about how we can be buried together. I know I'm supposed to be buried in the holy ground of a Jewish cemetery, but if we buy two plots in a Jewish cemetery, she can't be buried with me. I can't be buried in a Catholic cemetery, nor do I want to. We thought about being buried together in a nonsectarian cemetery but have been told most rabbis will not officiate at burials not held in Jewish cemeteries. Before we need to face this, we want to know how to face it.

A., Melville

You and your wife must make a tough choice. No matter who dies first, the surviving spouse must ask: "Do I think that I might remarry some day?" If the answer is yes, that spouse must honor the deceased spouse by burying him or her in sacred ground of his or her own faith. If the answer is no, then the two of you might look into a nonsectarian cemetery so you can be buried together. You can find a clergy person to help you. If one of you would consider a deathbed conversion, then it would be possible to bury the spouse who dies first in his or her sacred ground, followed by future burial of the other spouse alongside.

Making a decision now is better than looking up "cemeteries" in the Yellow Pages while your eyes are filled with tears.

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