“That The Dead Will Cause No Offense To The Living”: The Cremation of Corpses, Religion, and Public Hygiene in Victorian England

Thesis

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Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth century religious institutions slowly lost their monopoly over death and the handling of corpses. This process was completed in terms of public policy in the first years of the twentieth century with the passage of the Cremation Act of 1902. This piece of legislation officially codified the burning of the dead body as an acceptable alternative of disposal. The debate over whether cremation should be allowed began in 1874, and those for and against it made their case energetically in documents intended for public consumption. Religious opposition to cremation was strong, and at the outset of the debate it seemed unlikely that cremation would be accepted. However as the population of British cities continued their exponential growth and as dead bodies were increasingly seen as dangerous sources of contamination, the cremationists’ arguments slowly swayed many to their side by the last decade of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that Christian theology had favored burial for more than a millennium, arguments based on a discourse of public hygiene trumped religious concerns. The embrace of cremation as an acceptable form of disposing of the dead is an important moment in the relationship between a secular government and religion.
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Until the nineteenth century death and the handling of the corpse had been the exclusive province of organized religion in England. Christian belief in the future resurrection of the body coupled with the fact that many pagan cultures had burned their dead provided the impetus for burial of the intact body to become the orthodox method for final disposition in the first few centuries of the Common Era.¹ However as religious authorities began to lose their monopoly on death in the nineteenth century, a small yet highly educated group of reformers began to agitate for the introduction of cremation as a new method of disposing of corpses that flew in the face of more than a millennium of Christian doctrine.² Steeped in the language of public hygiene, the cremationists cited the application of their community’s scientific knowledge as a modern and hygienic solution to the problem of what to do with the dead. The cremationists crusade began in 1874 and came to a head in the first years of the twentieth century with their victory in the passage of the Cremation Act of 1902, a piece of legislation which formally codified cremation as

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² Until recently the history of cremation in England has received little attention from scholars. The sociologist and reverend Peter Jupp, who currently resides as the president of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, has written the most authoritative works on the history of cremation in *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (New York, 2006) and “Cremation or Burial,” ed. David Clark *The Sociology of Death* (Cambridge, 1993). However, Jupp downplays the importance of the rhetoric of public hygiene and argues that if religious figures had only reconciled themselves quicker to cremation they would not have lost their hold on death and the disposal of the corpse by the turn of the twentieth century.
an acceptable method of final disposition.\textsuperscript{3} By reconstructing the public debate surrounding the legislative acceptance of cremation, my study will show that it has been an overlooked but profoundly important episode in the process of secularization, and it is further evidence of the increasing importance of scientific knowledge at the expense of religiosity.

In 1839 the leading British public health officer and secretary on the Poor Law Commission Edwin Chadwick was commissioned to investigate how the bodies of the recently deceased urban poor were being handled in England’s rapidly expanding urban centers. He went on to publish his findings four years later in 1843 as \textit{A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns}. Chadwick was deeply interested in public hygiene, and he especially wanted to draw attention to the unsanitary conditions present in the increasingly dangerous working class districts. Although a number of legislative acts had been enacted in the preceding years in an attempt to rationalize practices surrounding the dead and their disposal, to his horror he found that little if indeed anything had changed. The poor still continued to keep their

\textsuperscript{3} From its inception in 1874 until 1884, the Cremation Society of Great Britain sought the legalization of cremation, as its members were under the assumption that it was illegal. A court case decided in 1884 ruled that cremation was not necessarily contrary to contemporary British laws concerning the treatment of the dead body. The Cremation Society of Great Britain still actively pushed for an act of parliament to formally regulate the building of crematoria and the act of cremation itself, as cremationists became increasingly concerned that if left unregulated by the British Home Office, potential abuses would leave cremation open to future legislation that would make it illegal.
recently deceased “in the single rooms in which the families of those classes live, sleep, and have their meals.”⁴ This resulted in “the greatest injury . . . [being] done to the health . . . of the labouring classes in many populous districts from the long retention of the body before interment.”⁵ Despite attempts to alter the ways in which the urban poor were handling their dead, they were still relatively obstinate about keeping, or perhaps safeguarding, their dead family members corpses inside their own dwellings for a week and far too often, to the dismay of Chadwick, sometimes even much longer. In 1852 one London gravedigger, Mr. Wild claimed that a corpse might remain in a private dwelling anywhere from five to twelve days.⁶

The failure of the working class to update and sanitize their methods of handling their dead stemmed in part from their distrust of the medical community, which had been amplified by the recent, well-publicized trial of the serial killer William Burke that began in December of 1828 and concluded with his execution in January of 1829.⁷ Burke and his accomplice William Hare, who avoided Burke’s fate by turning state’s witness and testifying against his former partner, had sold their victims bodies to an Edinburgh based

⁴ Edwin Chadwick, The Health of Nations (London, 1887), 158.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Trevor May, The Victorian Undertaker (Buckinghamshire, 1996), 16-17.

⁷ On the public outrage that ensued from the trial of William Burke and William Hare see Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection, and the Destitute (Chicago: 1987).
medical practitioner Dr. Robert Knox for dissection. Since the turn of the nineteenth century the demand for corpses that could legally be employed in anatomical research was far outstripping the supply, and Burke and Hare along with an untold number of other grave robbers who avoided detection had helped to fill that gap in the market by supplying medical schools with a steady stream of cadavers by illegally exhuming the recently buried.\(^8\) Because a premium was paid for fresh corpses, the business of Burke and Hare had catapulted from grave robbing to outright murder.

Along with the possibility of grave robbing, the fear of premature burial was especially widespread among the working class despite focused attempts by the medical establishment to label it as an unfounded urban myth.\(^9\) Rumors were rampant of individuals being declared dead only to regain consciousness later in the grave. To counteract the possibility of premature burial corpses remained slouched in chairs or

\(^8\) Following Burke’s execution in January of 1829, the Home Office passed the Anatomy Act of 1832, which allowed for the bodies of those who died in workhouses to be used for anatomical study. Previously only criminals who were executed for their crimes were included in the available pool for dissection. Those involved in creating this legislation believed that it would increase the legal supply of cadavers while also help end the practice of grave robbing. However, as Richardson points out, it was also in some sense considered an additional punishment for the indigent.

\(^9\) On public fears of premature burial see Jan Bondeson, *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of our Most Primal Fear* (New York, 2001) and George Behlmer, “Grave Doubts: Victorian Medicine, Moral Panic, and the Signs of Death,” *Journal of British Studies* 42 (April 2003): 206-235. There is some debate on how prevalent the fear of premature burial has been in the western world, but scholars speculate that if it was ever widespread, its height was in the nineteenth century.
lying prostrate atop tables or beds while surviving family members in the meantime carefully observed the body and waited for the onset of putrefaction, the only sure-fire sign at the time in their minds for determining the certainty of death.

Chadwick’s critique of on-going practices in handling the dead resulted in his call for further legislation directed to corpses and burial practices. His published report also greatly intensified an ongoing public debate on how to handle the ever-increasing number of dead who were quickly filling up land just recently allocated for cemeteries. The debate reached a provocative climax in the discussion regarding the legalization and regulation of cremation that culminated in the passage of the Cremation Act of 1902.

In the public clash over the acceptance of cremation, participants on both sides of the issue characterized their adversaries as violating accepted cultural binaries of the Victorian era. Those who argued against the burning of the dead colored their adversaries as irreverent, irreligious individuals who were attempting to diminish the public significance of Christianity and the solemn importance that should be accorded to their fellow deceased British subjects. To accept cremation as a method of the disposal of the corpse, in the words of those who opposed it, would be to undermine many of the tenants that Victorian society rested upon in the latter half of the nineteenth century: adherence to established religious practices, profound respect for the dead body, and an appreciation of traditional tenants of British culture that had well served the Empire. To opponents,
cremation was another sign of the degraded and debased era in which they lived.\textsuperscript{10} In the decades before the Cremation Act was passed, cremation was connected to contemporary observations on the rise of crime, the decline of morals, and the debasement of politics. As concerns of national degeneration circulated in late nineteenth-century England, the burning of the dead was a further threat to public decency, particularly for the religiously devout.\textsuperscript{11} Cremation also raised the possibility in the minds of some in late-nineteenth century England that it represented a possible escape from the future resurrection of the body and would place those who choose it beyond the judgment of the Christian God.

Many Christians on both sides of the debate were quick to point out that such a statement limited the power of what was supposedly an all-powerful God, yet many of those opposed to cremation were most concerned about the impact it would have on the uneducated working class and how it would act as an incentive to criminality.

\textsuperscript{10} John Carey explicitly makes this point in \textit{The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1039}. (Chicago, 2002), 51. Although the novelist Graham Greene remained against cremation throughout his life, Anthony Trollope was a founding member of the Cremation Society of Great Britain. As cremation split other professions of the well educated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so it did the literary profession.

In contrast, cremation’s proponents claimed that those on the opposing side were steeped in superstitious tradition, ignorant of the danger to the living from a putrefying corpse as modern scientists warned. The cremationists cited the progressive nature of scientific discovery and its positive impact on sanitary reforms over the previous decades. They typically regarded the acceptance of cremation as the next positive step in the establishment of an ever more hygienic society. The poignancy of this rationale was explicitly connected by Sir Spencer Wells in 1887 at the inauguration of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Nottingham who argued in favor of cremation that over the last century “the death-rate has been reduced, the life-rate has been extended.”\textsuperscript{12} Just as its opponents viewed the acceptance of cremation as further indication of the decline of Victorian society, so did those in favor of it often view traditional disposal of the dead as a problem of both public safety and morality. Chadwick himself noted that the “adverse conditions” of the working class districts “tend to produce an adult population short-lived, improvident, reckless, and intemperate, and with habitual avidity for sensual gratification.”\textsuperscript{13}

Opponents of cremation were right to be worried because the acceptance of cremation signaled a dramatic change in late nineteenth-century English society.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Times}, 31 October 1887, 3.

\textsuperscript{13} Chadwick, 182.
Although modern crematoria were at times built to resemble sacred structures, the burning of the body directly contradicted Catholic, Anglican, and non-conformists religious doctrine.\textsuperscript{14} Individuals who opted for cremation, along with their surviving family members, were given greater choice as to where their final remains would be placed. While some still chose sacred ground, others selected specifically secular settings as a final resting place for their remains. Funerals before and after the Victorian era never reached the level of public fanfare, expense, and pretension of what was called for in then. Although the historian James Curl deeply lamented the end of what he labeled the “Victorian Celebration of Death,” even he recognized that “ostentatious displays of grief were very much required by Victorian society.”\textsuperscript{15} While few members of the working class embraced cremation in its first years, it did offer the possibility of a more restrained approach financially when their loved ones died. Although cremation was not necessarily and overtly dismissive to religion, it offered British subjects a greater degree of freedom in choosing their method of final disposition.

While cremation is widely accepted in twenty-first-century England, in the late Victorian period many supporters were skeptical that it would be possible to obtain widespread public support. In 1875 Albert Bernays, a faculty member at St. Thomas’s


\textsuperscript{15} James Curl, \textit{The Victorian Celebration of Death}. (Newton Abbot, 1972), 7.
Medical and Surgical College, worried that the English public might never consent to cremation. Yet just seventeen years later in 1892 the editorial board of *The Times* pointed out that “the process of cremation had won many new converts” in the last few years and that “it was only a matter of time until it would be accepted by the majority of the general public.” What to contemporaries appeared to be a sea change in the opinion of the educated public on the efficacy of cremation can be attributed largely to the ability of its supporters to tap into a discourse of public hygiene that held a particularly powerful rhetorical hold on well-educated medico-legal administrators, a cadre of bureaucratic experts who wielded an especially large degree of political and social influence in late Victorian England.

The transference of regulating death from religious to medical authority was possible in large part due to the dangerous and often deadly language that corpses had been increasingly subjected to throughout the nineteenth century. Beginning in the last years of the eighteenth century, there was less tolerance for odors that emanated from bodies, living and dead. Developments in medical and natural scientific knowledge in the second half of the eighteenth century produced a set of representations of miasmatic

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16 *The Times*, 19 July 1875, 7.

17 *The Times*, 24 October 1892, 9.

18 For the relation between smell and miasmic science see Alfred Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*. (Leamington Spa, 1986), 11-85.
exhalations from decomposing matter that were believed to corrupt the surrounding air and as a result were seen as the root cause of various diseases. Following such views, medical and scientific professionals deemed various types of odor as life threatening. Particular attention was given to odors given off by the human body, its effluvial products, and especially the putrefying, decomposing body. To the miasmic mindset, putrefying fleshy smells were hazardous, not only for the continued survival of the individual whose body produced them, but also for the health of others, because such odors were believed to be ripe sources of disease. The health of the human body could only be guaranteed if the decomposing matter were kept far from the living.

Medico-scientific theories viewed the corpse as a putrefying agent that needed full understanding to facilitate more rational and efficient means of disposal in the name of public health and sanitation. As the editorial board of The Lancet wrote in 1892, “To pamper the body during life is foolish, but to attempt to preserve it after death deserves a much stronger expression.”19 Disgust for the dead body runs parallel in nature and temporality to changing perceptions of human excrement.20 The exponential increase in the size of English cities that began in the late eighteenth century helped to create a

19 The Lancet, 27 August 1892.

greater sense of repugnance and calls for more political measures to alleviate problems
that were viewed as “the unavoidable byproducts of human growth.”21 With the creation
of a medical and scientific discourse that stressed public hygiene and increasingly
demarcated the corpse as a danger to the living, the political approval of cremation was
thought to be a solution to the hygienic problem of death and, more explicitly, what death
produces—the corpse.

Throughout the nineteenth century, these changing visions of the body of the
deceased resulted in legislation that increased both the public status and legal power of
the newly minted bureaucracy charged with regulating death. While the apparatus of the
state gained the authority to regulate death and the dead body, it slowly stripped this
power from religious authorities. In 1836 The Births and Death Registration Act was
enacted with two primary purposes, to provide legal proof of death and to assist in the
accurate compilation of census data.22 The official legal pronouncement of death was to
be accomplished in the presence of a medical doctor, replacing the previous system in
which the local parish had been charged with both the identification and the recording of

21 Anthony Wohl, Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain. (London,
1984), 92-93.

22 See Parsons, 15-17.
deaths. Later that year the Attendance and Remuneration of Medical Witnesses at Coroners’ Inquests Act was enacted giving coroners the power to authorize physicians to conduct post-mortems and helped to establish their payment system. Following the implementation of these acts, the cause and time of death were to be determined whenever possible by officials with expert knowledge acting in strict coordination with each other and with their respective civil and medical chain of command. In support of such legislation, Chadwick wrote “that certificates of the causes of death . . . must not be merely hunted up by local registrars, but must be recorded by the members of the profession of medicine, who have directly observed the action of the causes . . . in strictly professional form.”

As the medical establishment began to examine and critique the deceased body, it also began to push for new regulations regarding the management of the scene of death.

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23 In reference to the opposition mounted by religious elements at the time, Edwin Chadwick reported, “The idea of a pure ‘civil’ registration was condemned by men with as much fervor as secular education or purely civil marriage. The representative of the dissenting bodies, and of the then ‘High Church party,’ assumed that the business of collecting certain of the facts was exclusively their business and was involved in their respective connexions, as if religious ceremonies as essentials of contracts or as the foundations of civil rights could not be kept distinct from the business of registration.” Chadwick, 79.

24 Ibid, 81.

Doctors began to criticize the overcrowded domestic spaces where the dying spent their last terrestrial moments. Up until that time it had been commonplace for as many members of the immediate family as possible to be present as the loved one slipped into death. The medical profession, however, started to warn that bystanders, and especially children who had for centuries been readily present in death-bed scenes, should be removed during the last breaths of the dying to ensure that they could avoid having to share the same air as the dying. With the dead theoretically removed from private residences, Chadwick pushed for public houses to be built in each village at the expense of the government. These buildings would allow surviving family members their tradition of visiting the dead without exposing them to the continuous host of poisonous vapors that were believed to emanate from corpses when the dead were left to rot in overcrowded dwellings.

With the recently deceased supposedly removed from private homes and temporarily placed under the watchful eye of the coroner, Chadwick also denigrated the practice of burying the dead so close to the living, especially in the haphazard manner in which contemporaries undertook that task. “Furthermore” he wrote, “the practice of interments in towns, in burial places amidst the habitations of the living, and the practice of interment in churches, ought for the future, and without any exception . . . be entirely

26 See especially Ariès.
prohibited." After decades of burials in urban churchyards, these spaces would become “full,” resulting in mounds of earth often six to ten feet high. After a century or so of burials, the churchyard would then be “leveled,” with all of the able-bodied parishioners aiding the local holy man in the grim task of exhuming the decomposing corpses out of the ground. Following a “leveling,” the ground would then be made as flat as possible to provide the requisite space for another few generations of burials. One particularly egregious example of this ghoulish practice was the small London churchyard established in the sixteenth century at St. Martin-in-the-fields. When it was first christened, ground level had been reported to be several inches below the doorways of neighboring houses, but by the 1830s the level had risen to tower five feet above these same houses. The macabre scene was first brought to the public’s attention in 1839 when Dr. George Walker, a London-based physician, published *Gatherings from Graveyards*. In the aftermath of the latest outbreak of cholera in 1831-32 (which killed as many as 50,000 British subjects) Walker concluded emphatically “the filth and corruption of the urban burial yards generated poison and disease.”

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27 Chadwick, 81.

28 Curl, 22.

29 Dr. G.A. Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards* (London, 1839), 16.

As the population continued its exponential growth, the problem became more acute. In 1856 The Daily News of London reported that “every publicity has been given to the dreadful scenes witnessed in town churchyards, where everybody knows that there has long ceased to be decent room for the dead.” What just a few decades ago was beyond the pale of polite discussion was now in the forefront of the public imagination, especially when pedestrians witnessed the churchyard scene “where broken coffins and dismembered corpses have shocked the mind and the senses of every passer-by.” Small urban churchyards were often the most horrific scenes of such abuses, and although St. Martin-in-the-Fields measured a mere 200 feet square, in the early 1840s it was reported to contain sixty to seventy thousand corpses. While the problem was particularly acute in urban areas, rural villages were not completely shielded from such problems. Although the burial ground for the church at Widford in Hertfordshire was less than one half of an acre, it had been in use for over nine centuries and was calculated to contain the remains of five thousand individuals.

31 The Daily News, 8 January 1856.
32 Ibid.
33 May, 24. Although the leveling of churchyards had the goal of removing decaying corpses, contemporaries were well aware that the condition that these bodies were in after decades in the ground made it all but impossible for those conducting the task to be able to complete it successfully.
34 Ibid.
Steeped in the language of public hygiene, burial reformers advocated newly constructed private and public cemeteries located further away from urban centers of the living and the traditional local churchyard. “National cemeteries of a suitable description,” Chadwick reported, “should be provided and maintained . . . under the direction of officers duly qualified for the care of the public health.”

England’s first privately owned and operated cemetery opened in 1821, and in these new private cemeteries run for profit the middle and lower classes began to bury their loved ones in more permanent and secure locations than before. The explosion of private cemetery companies reached its zenith in the 1830s, but following episodes of mismanagement by a handful of private cemeteries, the British national government became the primary administrator of the creation of cemeteries and burials. Ten years later Chadwick and Walker would see some of their proposals carried out when the Burial Act of 1852 strictly forbade burials in urban churchyards. By replacing the older sites of burial with modern, rational, and secular plots of land under public mandates, the civil authorities took a large step in further wresting control of death away from the religious authorities.

35 Chadwick, 81.


37 Walker, 26.
An additional piece of legislation passed in 1857 empowered the government to regulate burials further by making the Home Office the sole power that controlled exhumation. Before the establishment of modern public and private cemeteries, British subjects were well aware of “all the attendant horrors of overcrowded burial grounds, drunken gravediggers, body-snatchers, the ever-present stench of corruption, and the sight of bones carelessly thrown up from yawning graves.”

In an attempt to regulate unscrupulous undertakers who, many believed, overcharged surviving family members, reused coffins, and were also the primary candidates for grave robbing, in 1885 legislation was passed which changed their official job title to funeral directors. While awarding them a title that partially obscured what activities these newly minted administrators actually did, it also made them answerable to local civil authorities.

As the revolution of death continued well into the nineteenth century, communities of the living sought to further the distance between themselves and their dead. Already buried corpses began to be transported out of large urban areas to the scenic well-manicured cemeteries that have housed them ever since. The transformation of burying the dead from the common churchyard to a secular, minutely landscaped memorial park is

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38 Ibid.

precisely the invention of a certain hygienic mindset so prevalent and powerful at the
time, and is rooted historically in the nineteenth century.

The Cremation Society of Great Britain was formed in January of 1874 in the
home of its founder and first president Sir Henry Thompson. From its inception it had a
singular goal, at least in Thompson’s mind, of “obtaining and disseminating information
on the subject” of cremation “and for adopting the best method of performing the
process, as soon as this could be determined.” Those individuals in attendance who
assented to their membership in the society needed only to sign the founding declaration
that constituted their agreement with the Cremation Society of Great Britain’s aim. That
declaration read as follows:

We . . . disapprove [of] the present custom of burying the dead, and we
desire to substitute some mode which shall rapidly resolve the body into
its component elements, by a process which cannot offend the living, and
shall render the remains perfectly innocuous. Until some better method is
devised we desire to adopt that usually known as cremation.

Sir Henry Thompson was a well-known and celebrated figure of Victorian
England. He had studied medicine at University College, London and had seen Queen

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41 Ibid.
Victoria, Napoleon III, and King Leopold I of Belgium as patients. He regularly wrote to the general public under different pseudonyms, admonishing his fellow overly superstitious countrymen for their traditional beliefs in religion and in their advocacy of prayer for healing disease and illness. In 1867, seven years prior to publishing his first public statements advocating cremation, he had been knighted, and in 1899 he was made a baronet.

While the founding of the Cremation Society of Great Britain was the first of a number of pivotal events in the acceptance of cremation, the idea of disposing of the corpse by fire was not completely alien to nineteenth-century England. However the burning of the dead body, similar to the forced donation of the corpse for anatomical study, had been reserved historically for criminals. As an observer noted in 1841, “there is scarcely a nation of the earth which does not, or has not, at some point of its history, used fire as a punishment.” Yet at the time invoking the burning of the dead was a criticism of a bygone era, and “it was in that period of barbarism and cruelty called the middle ages, that this horrible punishment was most frequently applied.” In 1844 the

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42 For a biography of Sir Henry Thompson see Zachary Cope, The Versatile Victorian: Being the Life of Sir Henry Thompson 1820-1904. (London, UK: 1951). Ten years prior to the Price verdict, the Cremation Society of Great Britain was under the assumption that cremation was illegal.

43 “Burning as a Punishment,” The Bristol Mercury, 9 October 1841.

44 Ibid.
City of London assented to the cremation of hospitalized prisoners from Bridewell Hospital, shortly thereafter expanding this decree to include all deceased detainees in London. According to the engineer William Eassie writing some three decades later in 1878, “the project however, met with much opposition from various clerics, and the permission [to burn the body soon] lapsed.”

The publication of an anonymous pamphlet in 1851 entitled *Burning the Dead, or Urn Sepulture, Religiously, Socially, and Generally Considered*, resulted in an unnamed individual to respond to *The Lancet* that “the plan . . . for reducing a body to ashes appears as decent, speedy, and effectual a method as could well be conceived.” Even while some agitation predated the formation of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, prior to that cremation was typically viewed only as an appropriate method of disposing of the dead in cases of extreme emergency. The burning of the dead body had historically been restricted as a cheap, quick method of disposing of deceased criminals, during outbreaks of disease and was the only method appropriate for bodied that had washed up on shore, yet beginning in 1874 that began to change.

In the hope of persuading elements of the educated class to the arguments of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, Sir Thompson submitted an article for publication in

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46 *The Lancet*, 22 August 1857.
Contemporary Review in 1874 that gave the reader an explicit yet reportedly scientific rendering of what happened to the body after death. Following cessation of all bodily functions he wrote, “the pallor visibly increases . . . and the profound tranquil sleep of Death reigns . . . Here, then, begins the eternal rest. Rest! No, not for an instant. Never was there greater activity than at this moment exists still in the corpse.”\(^{47}\) The “activity” that took place in the body immediately after death, was, according to Thompson, the body’s first steps in returning itself to the natural world and thus completing nature’s design and stood in direct opposition to the Christian notion of the bodies eternal rest. Any hindrance or delay only complicated the process of decomposition and offered chance of contagion for those living in close proximity to the putrefying corpse.

While only temporarily delaying the process of decomposition, burial often resulted in myriad future calamities. In Thompson’s view only an act of parliament that would ban burial completely could save English citizens from the contagions infesting dead bodies. “Since every buried dead body enters sooner or later into the vegetable kingdom,” Thompson wrote, “why should we permit it, as it does in many cases, to cause an infinity of mischief during the long process?”\(^{48}\) When Thompson wrote his own history of cremation in Europe in 1899, he exclaimed that “the process of putrefaction


\(^{48}\) Ibid, 323.
after burial is one of a nature too horrible to be described . . . the violence done to those natural feelings of affection . . . would be intolerable.”

After its publication in 1874, Thompson’s first article drew an outpouring of interest in England, across the British Channel, and even on the other side of the Atlantic. Reminiscing about that first public article in support of cremation, Thompson wrote, “the degree of attention which this proposal aroused was remarkable, not only here but abroad, the paper being translated into several European languages,” and “in the course of six months . . . I received eight hundred letters on the subject.” Following Thompson’s essay, the British Medical Journal threw its weight behind cremation with the hope that “if a few hundred men of notable character, ability, and respectability were to agree to commit their bodies to the flames . . . they might soon be imitated by many more thousands.” In May of 1874 the Dublin University Magazine wrote in support of cremation that “the inevitable law of nature will have been fulfilled, not by the slow and loathsome process of gradual decay, but by the swift action of the funeral pyre which will leave the dead innocuous to the living.” Cremation then seemed to have a variety of

49  Henry Thompson Modern Cremation (London: UK 1889), 34-35.


51  British Medical Journal, 3 January 1874.

52  “Cremation” The Dublin University Magazine, 83 (May 1874), 592.
supporters mostly culled from the well-educated, reform-minded medico-scientific experts of late nineteenth-century England. Debates on public hygiene and the most appropriate methods of the disposal of the dead preceded Thompson’s article and the founding of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, but the year 1874 was the first of many turning points for the acceptance of cremation.

The passing of the Cremation Act of 1902 came at the end of more than a century of evolving discoveries of the dangerous, and often deadly, nature of dead bodies and their threat to the living. Those who argued for cremation to be regulated and therefore officially sanctioned by the British Home Office would employ the language of corruption and public hygiene that increasingly surrounded corpses. While the public debate originated in 1874 with the creation of the Cremation Society of Great Britain and the publication of Sir Henry Thompson’s article, the debate was further thrust into the public sphere ten years later by the trial of a man who attempted an ad-hoc cremation of his own dead baby boy.

In February of 1884 Dr. William Price was acquitted of the unlawful disposal of the body of his deceased five-month-old son, Iesu Grist (Jesus Christ).\textsuperscript{53} One month prior on the fourteenth of January, Dr. Price had placed baby Iesu’s body in a barrel containing

\textsuperscript{53} For a full yet brief narrative of the events surrounding the case brought against Dr. Price see Parsons, 100-107.
ten gallons of paraffin oil and “set it alight.” According to an eyewitness, after igniting the makeshift crematorium, “people returning from chapel were astonished to see the fire and rushed to the spot,” and an unnamed witness interceded and “the partly consumed body was snatched from the burning pile.”

In the local prosecutor’s legal brief, Dr. Price was indicted for failing to adhere to the appropriate legal strictures required when a death occurred in one’s home. Quoting the case brought against Dr. Price on the seventeenth of January, *The Times* recorded, “Any person under whose roof death occurred must provide sepulture and the means of carrying the body to the grave decently covered; also . . . the mode of internment should not do violence to the . . . health of the living.”

In deciding the case, the presiding judge Sir James Stephen ruled that “a person who burns instead of burying a dead body does not commit a criminal act, unless he does it in such a manner as to amount to a public nuisance.” Although the returning parishioners had been appalled to witness the attempted cremation of baby Iesu, the alleged affront to their sentiments did not factor into the case; rather legality was established solely on the grounds of the perceived impact that the mode of disposing of the body would have on the public’s health and hygiene. Following the ruling, advocates

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54 Qtd. in Ibid, 102.

55 *The Times*, 17 January 1884, 4.

56 Qtd. in Parsons, 102.
for cremation, including the Cremation Society of Great Britain, moved quickly and began to prepare their newly constructed crematorium at Woking for public use. In March of the following year 1885, Mrs. Jeanette Pickersgill became the first individual in England to be publicly cremated in a modern crematorium.

Although Henry Thompson and the Cremation Society of Great Britain applauded the outcome of the trial Dr. Price’s trial, and a handful of individuals began to be cremated, the group continued to agitate for the passage of legislation to regulate, and in affect sanction, cremation. According to Thompson traditional burial practices were so obviously and inherently harmful to the general public’s health and well-being that, “the grave yard pollution of air and water alone has probably found a victim in some social circle known to more than one who may chance to read this paper.” The language of the case brought against Dr. Price, Justice Stephen’s subsequent ruling clearing his name, and Sir Henry Thompson’s critique of traditional burial in favor of cremation all took into account the notion that the body of the deceased must be treated in such a manner that it would do no harm to the community of the living. Implicit in such a statement is the belief at the time that dead bodies, if not handled properly, could cause a litany of ill effects to the living.

57 Thompson, 321.
Throughout the era of debate on cremation in England, individuals and organizations involved, whether for, against, or ambivalent, used a similar language to argue that reforms of the burial system were desperately needed. No matter what future course of action would be taken, it was clear to those who were in a position to make their opinions known that the status quo was in need of change in the name of public sanitation. “As regards the practice of burial in its relation to cremation and the relative advantage of different modes of interment” the editorial board of The Lancet wrote, “there is in our opinion, hardly any sanitary question which requires more careful discussion of which as yet owes so little to the deliberate declarations of authority.” In 1887 Sir Spencer Wells exclaimed that the contemporary burial system was in dire need of reform and that “as population increases, it has become evident that more than this must be done if the living are to be protected from the dead.” The protection from the dead became a major public health issue, and it was not only “during life . . . that men are thus in many ways troublesome and offensive to each other,” but that the dead “still continue to vex and poison the mortals who survive them.”

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58 The Lancet, 14 January 1893.

59 The Times, 31 October 1887, 3.

60 The Times, 12 January 1875, 10.
In 1888, at the Liverpool Medical Institution, Fred Lowndes urged his fellow medical professionals that “the disposal of the dead was too important a subject to be ignored or treated with indifference by the members of the profession whose care was the health of the public.” Many of the proponents of cremation like Lowndes, Thompson, and Wells were trained in health and medicine. Their arguments were often a call to duty for other health specialists because “medical practitioners [know] better than any other persons what occurs after death.” To not act on this knowledge recently gained would be a dereliction of public duty as an anonymous author wondered in 1892, “Why is it that the body should be so offensive after death? Surely to remind us of our mortality and to induce us to act rationally.”

The most powerful arguments wielded by the cremationists was that the dead body could poison the living, and that in the name of public safety it needed to be “cleansed by fire.” In 1874 Henry Thompson helped to mark out the linguistic territory that cremationists, and even their opponents, would continually examine. “The process of decomposition,” Thompson wrote, “is one that has a disagreeable, injurious, often fatal

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61 *The Lancet*, 18 February 1888.

62 *The Lancet*, 27 August 1892.

63 Ibid.
influence on the living man if sufficiently exposed to it.”\footnote{Thompson, “The Treatment of the Body after Death,” 321.} Further appealing to the supposed rationality of his social-reform minded audience, Thompson speculated “that the graveyard pollution of air and water alone has probably found a victim in some social circle known to more than one who may chance to read this paper.”\footnote{Ibid.} Later that same year Spencer Wells went even further in employing Thompson’s rhetorical strategy: “The public health is endangered by the present mode of burial. The dead are poisoning the living.”\footnote{\textit{The Times}, 1 October 1884, 3.}

The possible contagion of the living by the dead acted as the \textit{raison d’etre} for many supporters of cremation. As reports of the spread of a cholera epidemic on the continent were announced in the press in the summer of 1884, a proponent of cremation speculated that “Supposing the first victim of cholera was to be decently cremated, together with all his clothing and the emanations from his body, there would be” in terms of that first victim to fall from the disease “a complete disinfection.”\footnote{\textit{The Times}, 14 August 1884, 2.} Fernan de Ayala, who affirmed that up until his recent conversion he had been a “weak advocate for cremation,” gave witness to the fallout from his attendance at a recent funeral where...
traditional burial had been employed.\textsuperscript{68} De Ayala wrote that when he arrived “at the grave, [he] was horrified at the awful stench which emanated from it,” and since this exposure his “wife had been far from well . . . so my doctor says, of the awful stench.”\textsuperscript{69}

The argument from public hygiene held such a powerful epistemological basis that those who did not want to see cremation become public policy employed it as often as supporters did. “To the intense horror and amazement of the inhabitants” upon learning that a crematorium was being built in his parish, the Vicar of Woking complained that “the site selected is almost in the centre of the parish, in the midst of a growing neighborhood, and is in close proximity to private residences, cottages, shops.”\textsuperscript{70} Yet he was quickly answered by supporters of cremation because, “he hardly seems to have attacked cremation itself, but the fact that a society should have the temerity to build a cremation apparatus in his parish.”\textsuperscript{71} So even while the Vicar had used the language of public hygiene in response to the nearby crematorium’s construction, his objection was

\textsuperscript{68} The Times, 4 August 1884, 4.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} The Times, 31 December 1878, 8.

\textsuperscript{71} The Times, 01 January 1879, 10.
undermined because, as the author of the letter goes on to note, “He sees no objection to huge cemeteries in our midst.”\(^\text{72}\)

Perhaps the most vocal critic of cremation, the artist and surgeon Seymour Haden, argued that cremation would be more dangerous to public health due to the fact that the “gases given off by the buried body are given off gradually, and in exact proportion to the . . . requirements of the atmosphere and the growth of vegetation.”\(^\text{73}\) In contrast, when the dead body is cremated these “gases” are “given off suddenly” and “are in excess of such requirements, and surcharge and poison the atmosphere, and would suffocate instead of nourishing the vegetation.”\(^\text{74}\) Yet *The Times* remarked that according to the sanitary record, while the incineration of the body can be “recognized by its peculiar odour,” it was “considered by sanitarians to be perfectly innocuous.”\(^\text{75}\) Once the corpse was subjugated to the “purifying fire of cremation,” it “cannot possibly contain pestilential germs or carry infection.”\(^\text{76}\)

\(^\text{72}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{73}\) *The Lancet*, 17 May 1884.

\(^\text{74}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{75}\) *The Times*, 23 January 1879, 7.

\(^\text{76}\) Ibid.
Although the language of public hygiene was a powerful tool that was used to debate the merits of cremation, both sides were also attentive to tradition and what they often termed “public sentiment.” Many supporters were consciously aware of the radical nature that cremation offered, and some publicly stated that it might take a century or more for the general public to accept the burning of the dead body, a notion not lost on those who energetically argued against its adoption. “The practice of cremation is a startling innovation in this country,” the Vicar of Woking wrote in 1879, “and ordinary people may surely be pardoned for being unable to fall at once with the more advanced and enlightened views of the cremationists.”77 Perhaps aware that he would lose the contest if he answered in terms of public hygiene, the churchman went on to lambast cremation as “repugnant to our tastes and feelings” and “foreign to our habits and customs.”78 Not wanting to be seen as simply a narrow-minded, overly superstitious cleric, he asserted that public opinion was undoubtedly on his side, “neither are we peculiar in this matter, for our feelings are shared by a very large section of the public.”79 While supporters of cremation may want to undermine pure sentimentality in favor of reason, “sentiment cannot always be thus roughly pushed on one side; sentiment holds a

77 The Times, 10 January 1879, 11.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.
place in the daily life of most of us—mingles itself with sorrows and our joys.”  

When the Bishop of Manchester brought up cremation in a sermon he “felt a sort of shudder at the idea of burning the dead” and yet speculated that as people became more used to the idea, in “a hundred years or so it might, perhaps, become the custom for bodies to be burnt.”

In 1879 when *The Lancet* had not clearly taken sides on what at that time was debate on the legalization of cremation, the editorial board made clear what would be a powerful impediment to its adoption: “What . . . are we to think about the process of cremation itself? Is it, as some of our correspondents urge, so horrible, so liable to abuse, so contrary to law and to reason, that it ought to be put down absolutely?”

The aristocrat Francis Scott cited the superiority of tried and true British burial customs in writing that “he did not care to imitate the habits and customs of those who bury their dead in the holy river of the Ganges.” Instead Scott simply desired as loyal British

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80 Ibid.

81 *The Times*, 25 March 1874, 12.

82 *The Times*, 15 January 1879, 9.

83 *The Times*, 31 January 1879, 12.
subjects that those we agree with him be left to enjoy their own national and religious customs.\textsuperscript{84}

Aware of the public relations threat that sentiment coupled with national cultural tradition had on the wider British audience, Spencer Wells argued that cremationists must also attune their arguments to it, and in 1888 noted that “those who argued against it from a sentimental point of view had undoubtedly a strong case and gained the sympathies of a large portion of the public.”\textsuperscript{85} One year later an anonymous “Minister of Religion” argued that those who support cremation must use “all the aids of publicity” to make their case known and that they dutifully need to assure the public “that the process of cremation does in no way derogate from the outward signs of honour and affection which are due to our loved ones.”\textsuperscript{86} Responding to an unknown “Mr. Lawrence” in 1891, Spencer Wells claimed that “it would not be difficult to modify the public sentiment if the people understood more of the process of decay which goes on for many years after death.”\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{The Times}, 4 December 1888, 13.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{The Times}, 30 December 1889, 10.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{The Times}, 21 August 1891, 14.
Supporters of cremation went to great length to ensure the reading public that the incineration of the corpse presented no threat to public decency. “There is nothing irreverent to the dead in cremation,” inscribed the author of “Burning and Burying” in *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature.*[^88] Rather the burning of the body “would be much better” than “the nasty custom of interment” which makes the loved ones “think of the grave, corruption, and worms.”[^89] To counter the notion that those who decried cremation “possess a monopoly of the ‘sentimental support,’” Henry Thompson noted that “On the contrary, there are numbers of people . . . to whom the idea of lying in a cold, damp grave, to undergo for fifteen or twenty years a process of loathsome decay, is inexpressibly horrible.”[^90] In a personal testimonial after witnessing a cremation and in deference to the appropriateness of the incineration of the dead body, a foreign correspondent in Italy noted that he could “from personal observation testify, with all due regard . . . to the sentiments and feelings of the relatives and friends who attend the ceremony.”[^91]

[^89]: Ibid.
[^90]: *The Lancet*, 6 June 1874.
[^91]: *The Times*, 23 March 1888, 5.
In a letter to the editor of The Lancet, Brooke Lambert noted that cremation was not simply a new contrivance done solely “for some whim of our own to inaugurate a new system for the disposal of the remains of our friends.”92 The author went on to claim rather that cremation in fact predated burial and that the cremationists simply wanted “a return to a practice sanctioned . . . by the authority of the ages.”93 As far as traditional interment went, the cremationist desires the “discontinuance of a system which owes its adoption to the prevalence of gross superstitions.”94 The movement was seeking legal recognition of cremation “in the interests of the living, and for greater security of life.”95

Just as those who used the violation of public sentiment and undermining of national tradition to argue against cremation from becoming public policy, perceived religious disputes were also employed, as Alfred Newman observed: “the chief objection put forward against cremation is the religious one.”96 In the aftermath of the publication of Henry Thompson’s initial article on cremation, Newman reported that many wrote to him with “bitter criticism on the ‘pagan,’ ‘anti-Christian,’ if not altogether irreligious

92 The Lancet, 25 May 1884.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
tendency of the plan.” 97 Believing British subjects, he contended, made clear that the early members of the church had preferred to bury their dead as an act of defiance under Roman rule. The fathers of the church “notably Origen, Lactantius, Augustine, and Tertullian strongly deprecate any tendency to treat with disrespect the image and workmanship of God.” 98

Christ’s own burial and subsequent resurrection was the model for dealing with corpses for centuries in Christian lands. Believers celebrated Jesus’s supposed “victory over death” and hoped that they would each have their own triumph over the grave when their bodies would be resurrected. These beliefs underscored the importance of burial, and many churchmen of the time made a close association between the importance of the corporeal body and scripture. Canon Swayne commented, “Without burial” of the deceased body, “St. Paul’s most suggestive analogy between the dead body and the sown seed would be practically effaced from the New Testament” 99 The Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, best-known as the writer of Christian hymns including “Onward, Christian Soldier,” went even further than Swayne in claiming that “in the Bible, cremation is


98 Ibid.

99 The Times, 16 September 1890, 10.
spoken of as a sharpening of the punishment of death, as something conveying disgrace with it."\textsuperscript{100}

The Bishop of Lincoln, Christopher Wordsworth, delivered a fiery public sermon against cremation in the few months following the publication of Thompson's article, directly connecting the burial of the body and religious belief. "The condition of a nation is not only influenced by regard for the burial of the dead,” Wordsworth claimed, “but it may be safely tested by it.”\textsuperscript{101} In his sermon which was subsequently published as a pamphlet for general consumption, Wordsworth added that “if the reverential care of the living for the bodies of their departed friends is impaired, its moral and social, and religious condition will decline also.”\textsuperscript{102} Perhaps more than any other figure against cremation, Wordsworth connected what he considered proper burial with the resurrection of the dead and public order. “Since public morality, and public happiness, depends on the maintenance of this doctrine of the Resurrection, great injury would thus be inflicted upon the living.”\textsuperscript{103} Flying against the hygienic and scientific spirit of the times he had no


\textsuperscript{101} Christopher Wordsworth, \textit{On Burning of the Body; and on Burial} (Lincoln, 1874), 12.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
qualms about posing the question to his audience that he believed to be most important when contemplating the disposal of dead bodies, “Which of the two processes—Burial of the dead, or Burning—is more conducive to the maintenance and promotion of Christian Faith?”

Just as Wordsworth seemed to have no problems posing the disposal of the body in purely religious terms, he also seemed to understand that to assent to cremation would be perhaps the final wedge that would finish the process of secularizing death, at least in terms of public policy. In response to letters written to The Lancet criticizing him for overly religious views, the Bishop replied that according to his reading of scripture he “could not conceive anything more barbarous and unnatural than cremation, and one of the very first fruits of its adoption would be to undermine the faith of mankind in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and so bring about a most disastrous social revolution, the end of which it is not easy to foretell.”

The Anglican Church also disapproved of the dispersal of ashes in water or air. To meet this problem head on early proponents of cremation argued that the ashes of the dead should be disposed of by interring them in the ground in order to make it more palatable to the general public. Yet this was also a source of consternation for many religious figures. Perhaps the creator could physically resurrect those who had been

104 Ibid, 10.
105 The Times, 6 July 1874.
burned, but the question remained unanswered whether or not he could reassemble bits of matter if they had spread to the four corners of the earth. The religious aspects of cremation required an acute examination on the where the limits of a supposedly all-powerful God were to be drawn.

Although the perceived problems with cremation and biblical scripture held sway for many, some who were concerned with the religious implications of cremation held that the incineration of the body did not seem to be directly contrary to scripture. While Bishop Wordsworth had energetically argued against cremation in 1874 by 1885 he seemed to be more accepting of it when he wrote that “the educated would find no theological difficulty . . . remembering as they would the deaths of the Christian martyrs by fire.” With the most apocalyptic language absent from his later writings, those who were spiritually at risk however were most likely to be the “ignorant” who “were very likely to have their faith in the resurrection of the body obscured and shaken by a practice which seemed to annihilate the body.”

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106 The Catholic Church remained opposed to cremation until Vatican II in 1963. However in 1886 with the debate on cremation in full swing, the church made public its objections to cremation, and, according to *The Times*, the church “has sanctioned a decree forbidding in the strongest terms Catholics to join cremation societies, or promote in any way associations which have their object the ‘detestable practice of burning human bodies.”

107 *The Times*, 7 October 1885, 4.

108 Ibid.
method of disposal would so unsettle the faith of the uneducated that it would be “unwise and cruel to introduce it.”\textsuperscript{109} Yet by the 1890s public opinion had altered dramatically, even in religious circles, and when Spencer Wells addressed the clergy at Sion College in 1891 he reported “that a resolution in favour of cremation was carried with only two dissentients.”\textsuperscript{110}

Two years prior, Reverend F. Lawrence, at that time Secretary of the Church of England Burial, Funeral, and Mourning Reform Association, wrote that although the church would not, in the short term at least, energetically support the “Cremation Movement,” the problem of what to do with the dead was one of the most important political issues that faced the church and indeed the nation.\textsuperscript{111} His association did however criticize elements of the contemporary burial movement, which had inculcated a “desire . . . to preserve the dead body” well beyond in a temporal sense what was considered healthy. Under the “desire to preserve the dead body” as long as possible in what was an unnatural, unadulterated form following the cessation of life, some were

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} The Times, 21 August 1891, 1.

\textsuperscript{111} By December of 1888 Reverend Lawrence’s association had passed a resolution that cremation in favor of cremation as an option for church members, and that the Anglican clergy could provide funeral services to those who were yet to be cremated. Up until that resolution the clergy could only provide funeral services in the aftermath of a cremation.
employing “durable coffins, imperishable coffins, triple coffins; hence also bricked
graves and underground.” According to Reverend Lawrence, “the only satisfactory
solution of the difficulties which beset the disposal of the dead lies in the inculcation of
the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection . . . It is sown a natural body, it is raised a
spiritual body.”

Other supporters of cremation pointed to the omnipotent power of the Christian
God and claimed that surely no process devised by mortals could efface the ability of the
almighty to resurrect deceased members of his flock. When told of the religious
arguments against cremation, Lord Shaftsbury reportedly remarked “What an audacious
limitation of the power of the Almighty!” Surely, he reasoned, a certain number of
believers’ bodies had been lost at sea in the centuries since the founding of the church,
and their lost corpses would not stand in the way of God’s ability to resurrect them on the
Day of Judgment. In fact, if the destruction of the body by fire made the possibility of
resurrection outside the jurisdiction of the “almighty, what then has become of the
blessed martyrs who were burnt at the stake?”

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112 The Times, 27 April 1889, 15.
113 Ibid.
114 The Times, 5 October 1885, 8.
115 Ibid.
Manchester remained skeptical of the burning of the dead, although he remarked to his congregation in October of 1885 that whether rotting underground or reduced to ash “the omnipotence of God is not limited.”\textsuperscript{116} Yet as uncomfortable with it as he was, the Bishop thought it important to address the issue of cremation because “he wished his hearers to disassociate the resurrection from physical conditions.”\textsuperscript{117}

Almost two decades after Thompson’s first article appeared in \textit{Contemporary Review}, John Henry Newman wrote in support (although seemingly luke-warm) of cremation. Being careful not to align too closely with what were viewed by some clergy members as radical apostates, he was enough of a utilitarian to realize the importance to public hygiene in answering the question, “What are we to do with our dead?”\textsuperscript{118} Although Newman left space for “statesmen” and “political economics” to solve the burial problem, he clearly understood that English cemeteries were “more densely populated year by year [as] everybody will acknowledge.”\textsuperscript{119} While he did not passionately throw his backing behind the Cremation Society of Great Britain and its supporters, he did claim that cremation “has at any rate furnished one answer, albeit an

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{The Times}, 25 March 1874, 12.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Alfred Newman, “Cremation” \textit{The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature} July 1893, 130.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
imperfect one, to that difficult and pressing question,” the question of final disposition that numerous Englishmen of the well-educated elite were attempting to solve. By the last decade of the nineteenth century the cremationists realized that they were now winning the debate. In 1887, an anonymous author pointed out that “signs are not wanting that public sentiment is revolting against the modern slow process of putrefactive corruption.” Since 1874 the editorial board of The Lancet had positioned itself as a neutral figure in the cremation debate now threw its full weight behind the movement in 1890 and wrote that “cremation as a sanitary measure must, on the whole, claim precedence over the older method.” Yet the elements of British society that seemed most persuaded by the benefits of cremation and most horrified by the decaying corpses all around them were the highly educated, reform-minded medico-scientific experts who held an inordinate amount of influence and power.

In the summer of 1891 Henry Thompson reported that he had recently attended a “very large meeting” of medical specialists where “embracing as it did professors of medical jurisprudence, officers of health, and other specially competent” individuals of British society, and his resolution on the need to expand the use of cremation and the

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120 Ibid.

121 The Times, 31 October 1887, 8.

122 The Lancet, Dec 13, 1890.
need to have the Home Office regulate it passed by “an overwhelming majority.””¹²³

When it came to cremation’s perceived ability to prevent the spread of “fatal infectious
diseases,” only “four hands . . . were raised in opposition.””¹²⁴ That same summer Spencer
Wells took Thompson’s resolution to a Congress of the Bacteriological Section where he
gave “the most convincing demonstration of the number, the varieties, the easy
cultivation, and the wonderfully rapid growth and diffusion of the germs or seeds of
infectious diseases.”¹²⁵ Wells brought the resolution on cremation up for a vote in the
Public Health Section, and it was approved “without one dissentient vote.””¹²⁶

Following the passage of the Cremation Act of 1902 a host of institutions and
individuals applauded its enactment. In March of 1903 the editorial board of *The Lancet*
wrote that the incineration of the corpse is likely “to supplant . . . the ordinary custom of
burial.”¹²⁷ And while acknowledging that public opposition was still widespread, the
medical community should embrace cremation for the positive impact that it will have in

¹²³ *The Times*, 17 August 1891, 10.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *The Times*, 21 August 1891, 14.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ *The Lancet*, 7 March 1903.
“relation to the public health.”\textsuperscript{128} The editorial added “if we regard it from this point of view . . . it will generally be admitted that the practice has very much to commend it.”\textsuperscript{129}

Advertising in \textit{The Times} the newly formed London Cremation Company announced that compared to the modern “scientific” and “hygienic” method of disposing of the body, traditional burial was not a “satisfactory system of disposing of the dead”.\textsuperscript{130} The advertisement’s author claimed that burial should now be considered the “slowest and most horrible manner” in which to dispose of the dead body.\textsuperscript{131} Instead, enlightened readers of \textit{The Times} should opt for cremation at the newly constructed Golder’s Green Crematorium, which stood in drastic juxtaposition to interment in the ground within the increasingly crowded cemeteries due to cremation’s overall “sanitary and refined conditions.”\textsuperscript{132} “Cremation,” the advertisement went on to claim, “is the only method which will rapidly dissolve the body into its harmless elements by a process which cannot offend the living and which shall render the remains of the dead innocuous.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{The Times}, 3 June 1905, 5.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
These remarks on the hygienic efficacy of cremation by *The Lancet* and the London Cremation Company came at the end of what had been a vigorous, and at times rancorous, debate over the need for the British Home Office to provide regulation and therefore official sanction of cremation. In welcoming the passing of the Cremation Act of 1902 and arguing for its increasing implementation these three figures applauded the victory of scientific progress and proper concerns on hygiene over religious superstition and parochialism.

It would take decades before the majority of English citizens would choose cremation over traditional burial, and in 2003 seventy-one percent of English subjects choose cremation over traditional burial. Yet this statistic obscures the difficulty that advocates of cremation faced in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The arguments used for its implementation were powerful enough that even many who chose traditional burial were often public supporters of the burning of the dead. In fact, it should come as no surprise that such a radical change in final disposition, which cremation certainly was, would take generations to become the preferred method of disposing of the dead body. In 1885, a mere three recorded cremations took place, and despite the very public debate, six years later the number had risen to only ninety-nine. However, these relatively

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134 These statistics are taken from Douglas Davies and Lewis Mates in *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Burlington, 2005), 433-453.

135 According to Davies and Mates the first year in which the majority of British citizens choose cremation over burial was 1968.
small numbers of individuals opting to be cremated make its acceptance all the more striking. When cremation was introduced in the public sphere as an alternative to traditional interment, many, both in the medical field and outside of it, quickly recognized the perceived benefits to public hygiene which cremation offered and campaigned for its adoption. Many British citizens railed against cremation primarily in religious and “sentimental” terms but in the end were unable to dissuade parliament from passing the Cremation Act of 1902. The epistemological importance of public hygiene coupled with the increasing medicalization of the body gave an edge to supporters of cremation, as these arguments most favorably aligned with the increasing secularization of death. Although this discourse on death predated the debate on cremation, it seemed to come to maturation during the debate as it leapt onto the pages of periodicals consumed by the well-educated British at the end of the nineteenth century.

The burning of the dead stood in direct violation of centuries of accepted Christian doctrine. While the cremationists were relatively careful in the manner in which they presented their arguments so as to make the burning of the dead more palatable to their fellow citizens, the importance that death and the afterlife has had for Christianity meant that the acceptance of cremation was an important moment in the process of secularization. While some believers were able to accept the burning of the dead, with religion could not in the end stop parliament from officially sanctioning a method for
disposing of the dead that had previously been used only as a weapon against those typically viewed as the most abject violators of public decency, whether criminals or heretics.
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