

Summary

Fiery bodies. Burning Dead in Serbia: From Pagan Ritual to Modern Cremation

This book represents cultural, historical, and anthropological analyses of modern development of cremation in the frames of Euro-Christian civilization, with special emphasis on Serbia.

Although modern cremation was promoted as a kind of more hygienic, more aesthetic and more economic form of treating mortal remains and, beside this, as completely irreligious, secular procedure, strong ideological messages and meanings were implicitly present throughout its development. In different periods and at different geographical coordinates, various political, cultural, philosophical and religious ideas were interwoven in idea and practice of cremation, so it was never just a simple form of disposing corpses. In this study I tried to show sources and outcomes of cremation idea, to analyze its social role, to show how it was variously accepted and spread in various countries, and also how it was understood and used in collective and individual identity strategies. I focused on the case of Serbia, also trying to observe this case in the frames of wider regional and European context. Cremation did not have the same meaning in the 19th century Serbia and in the communist Yugoslavia and it was so in almost every country and within every nation – interpretation and acceptance of cremation was linked to historical and folk traditions as well as to actual political and cultural ideologies.

In rich death studies bibliography it has been already elaborated that the idea and praxes of modern cremation were part of the process through which death was pushed towards the margins of social reality. I believe that my investigations bring new views on the issue, and I will try to present them briefly in this summary.

The idea of modern cremation was an expression of social and political protest, rationalism of Enlightenment, penetration of liberal and democratic ideas, but also was an echo of changes in many other spheres of thought and behavior. Above all, this idea was a gravid sign that a new era begins in which there will be an attempt to reach immortality outside of existing religious dogmas. What was initiated by Reformation, transformed and translated into culture by Enlightenment and finally embodied in Postmodernism, it was loss of faith in Resurrection (of the body) and in final deification and reunion of spirit and matter in eternity.

Laqueur writes that appearance of cremationist movement and spreading of its ideas were related to neoclassicism, socialism, spiritualism, occultism, sanitary engineering, garbage disposal, city planning, development of medicine, heterodox interpretation of Christianity, etc.

Nevertheless, cremation represented reflection of profound transformation of civilization. The moment of its appearance was the time of different revolutions and their echoes in cultures of European peoples. Bourgeois, national, scientific and technological revolutions based on different discoveries, but also on different promises – promise of equality and freedom for all and promise of victory over natural laws of matter and decay – had put wind in the sails of different cultural, intellectual, artistic, religious and social movements and changes.

Mixture of Enlightenment ideas and national Romanticism, which marked European cultural climate at the end of the 18th and during first decades of the 19th century, consisted of seemingly opposite concepts. However, they basically had same ideological direction, and they relied on distancing from institutional religion and religiosity – Enlightenment had directly preached it, while ideas of Romanticism were excellent ground for founding new type of religions, particularly *religion of nation* and its natural resources of purity of national being. Neopaganism, spiritualism and mysticism were also logical consequences of weakening of traditional religious forms, so rhetoric of cremation propaganda was very often based on mixture of these systems. Again, beyond or beside everything, the whole epoch was marked by development of science, whose particular impetus was theory of evolution. It brought one more promise – promise of firm and infinite progress on the way towards perfection of form. Fusion of the aforementioned ideas and processes indirectly influenced thorough changes in comprehension of human body.

Although these transformations inevitably had to be mirrored in the sphere of death and dying, massive acceptance of cremation happened almost 200 years after first ideas had appeared. If we accept the premise that cult is origin of culture, and that dead are in charge of creating culture – how shall we explain the fact that new relation towards dead appears as a consequence and not as a cause of global changes in culture?

Delicate line of spiritual transfiguration of Christian civilization partly discovers rules of this cause-and-effect relation. The appearance of cremation idea stands for both announcement and reflection of remaking the concept and content of faith in afterlife.

Accepting possibility to burn dead body happens only after entering new meanings and values in it, while massification of the cremation practice was possible only when faith in Resurrection had become just a rhetorical and dogmatic figure without real influence on everyday life in the Christian world.

If we use metaphors, we could conclude that the change in relation towards *dead man`s body* or *dead body of a man* (?) was placed behind last, massive and strongly secured door of cultural thesaurus, behind fortification which can be reached only after passing through labyrinth of cultural symbols and meanings. In this light, cremation appears as a new, spare mechanism of creating culture. This mechanism is radical enough to move organism thrown into crisis caused by civilization turn, but also to take this organism in completely different direction. Was the cremation step towards forgetting death? Part of civilization flow which tends to remove traces of rot and decay as fast and as smooth as possible? Or it was just a new form around which new cult had been created? One does not exclude the other. If dead really create culture, is this creative act depend on the form the dead take?

Considering collective identity strategies, we have shown that form of mortal remains influences both post mortem ritual and memory techniques. Regardless to dominant political ideologies and their propaganda, symbols of national specifics were, in many cases shown in this book, related to traditional funeral praxes. Celebrity funerals also undermined presence of dead body around which funeral spectacle was organized. On the other side, we have shown that certain form of funeral ritual is part of personal identity much more than it used to be in previous historical periods. Thus, death appears to be spring of collective, but outcome of individual.

Modern cremation becomes real alternative to classic inhumation in the moment when ideological implications of cremation disappear. Whether it was about anticlericalism, socialism, atheism, liberalism, egalitarianism, ideological pressure very often appeared as a measure of conserving traditional funeral forms. When the pressure of different political and cultural ideologies decreases (which is caused by invasive domination of basically non-specific global market ideology), real state of Christian civilization appears – its secularity and fragmentation.

Situation in Serbia was quite similar to those in some other European countries, particularly those with strong influence of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Christianity. Modern cremation idea was promoted by individuals – members of middle and higher bourgeois class, educated men – physicians, scientists, artists, architects, people dedicated to sanitary reforms,

and engineers. Soon after first impulses cremation societies were founded, whose aim was to promote cremation as alternative to classic inhumation and to initiate building of crematoria. In most cases, societies acted as politically neutral, but their members were, by the rule, anticlerical-oriented. Such ideological orientation, as well as the fact that cremation idea attracted socialists, atheists, free thinkers and members of Masonic organizations, brought the whole issue in opposition with official church authorities. Some associations published newspapers in which readers were informed about advantages of cremation and spreading the movement in other countries. Here, burning mortal remains was presented as economically, ecologically and aesthetically more acceptable form of disposing corpses, comparing to classic inhumation. Frequent were articles in which physicians, chemists and biologists described “horrors” of decay that happens to body in the ground and dangers from contaminations and diseases that could be caused by these processes. Also, papers quite often contained historical reviews about cremation in pre-Christian and non-Christian epochs and communities.

The Pioneer of modern cremation idea in Serbia was physician and poet Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, who, at the very end of the 19th century wrote poetic manifest of cremation. But, the *fieriest* proponent of cremation was physician Vojislav Kujundžić, who in 1904 established cremation society “Oganj” and in 1934 started to publish newspapers with the same title. The strongest opponent of cremation in Serbia was Serbian Orthodox Church, but also strong traditionalism which undermined quite developed popular cult of dead.

Till the Second World War, the idea of cremation in Serbia was kind of social mark, sign of progressiveness and modernity that belonged to narrow social circles. The First and till 2004 only crematorium was built in 1964. In following period, cremation was considered as choice of atheists, but also of artists and liberally oriented individuals and families. Celebrity funerals were never organized around the ashes, though there were two exceptions which are described in the book: funeral of Ivo Andrić, Yugoslav writer, and Nobel Prize winner, and memorization of Nikola Tesla, famous Yugoslav and Serbian scientist. Massification of cremation happened only after 90ties of the 20th century. From that time onwards strong rules about who chooses cremation disappeared. It became just one of possibilities, but one which is still exclusively urban phenomenon related primarily to Belgrade, Novi Sad and their surroundings.

History of idea and praxes in Serbia, its characteristics in specific cultural, social, religious and political context, funeral ritual, grief and remembering, attitudes and behavior related to cremation, are just some of the topics analyzed in this book.

Some of ideological implications of modern cremation are in accordance with contemporary medical classifications: death is final stop of vital corporal functions. It is natural and not cultural fact. In this context, at manifest level, cremation appears as an attempt to increase the speed of returning dead body to nature. At latent level, cremation becomes the way of establishing strong social control over transfer of the body from culture to nature. Moreover, modern burning of dead is part of tendency to create culture without cult. It is part of civilization motion towards point of final connection or final separation of ambivalences on which the substance of mankind and humanity is based. That is the point at which man leaves body of a dead friend, passes by and does not notice it. He does not make difference between the corps and the rest of the nature, between dead man and himself... However, at the end of this story we will face inevitable question: who is really dead?