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# REFORM IN BURIAL RITES.

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## LETTER

BY

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY, B.A.,

IN THE "INDEX," APRIL 12, 1873.

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TO THE EDITOR OF THE INDEX,

SIR,—Without waiting to know the effect upon your readers of my last letter about *Euthanasia*, I proceed to give them another violent shock.

From my past experience of human kind, I feel convinced that it is much more difficult to effect a change in their social customs than in their ethics. In every country the births, marriages, and deaths are attended by certain social rites which are more imperious than any demands of conscience, and it would be easier far to relax or to tighten the restraints of morality than to alter one of the social ceremonies. I half expect then that, for every one whom I may have startled by my last letter, there will be a score to be horrified by what I am going to say in this.

I wish to revolutionize our funeral rites. I want to abolish the burial of the dead, and the wearing of "mourning."

If the reader should lose his breath here, let me pause for a moment and tell him that my object originates in pure pity. I desire to relieve mankind of a great and needless burden; to remove some of the greatest aggravations to which we have foolishly submitted in times of our deepest grief; and to institute customs which will be an unspeakable relief to the poor. My objections to the present system of interment, with its distressing paraphernalia of *Undertakerism*, are as follows:—

The first and least important objection is that it is needlessly expensive and an undoubted hardship on the poor. Second, that it is sooner or later a source of great injury to the public health. Third, that our cemeteries occupy a vast amount of space which could be more profitably filled. Fourth,—and this I reckon to be the chief of all objections,—it is a needless and cruel aggravation of our physical and mental pain in bereavement, to witness the process of interment.

There may be some persons whose feelings are *not* harrowed by this sight; but I can speak for myself and for thousands of persons of equally sensitive nerves and strong imagination, that it is positive torture to witness the burial of the body of a very near and dear relative. The outward form which we have loved and caressed we place in a coffin, close fitting to the outline of a human body (a coffin is in itself a melancholy object, quite apart from its associations); and this gloomy case, containing our beloved dead, we follow to the dark vault or deep grave, into which it is lowered amid choking sobs and a dead weight at our hearts. We leave the loved object at the bottom of a cold, dark pit, in which we picture to ourselves, for months and years afterwards, all the foul and revolting processes of chemical decay, our thoughts being positively scourged by this haunting picture. It is bad enough to lose our friends and to miss them day by day; but it is a monstrous aggravation of our physical pain in losing them, to be tortured by such visions, such memories.

Now what I would propose is this. As soon as death is perfectly assured,—after such an interval as would render it impossible for a medical man to doubt that death had ensued,—the body should be *chemically destroyed*. It should be placed in some receptacle containing those powerful agents known to chemical science, which would simply annihilate the outward form and practically destroy it. There would necessarily be some deposit, which one might call the “ashes” of the dead; and these might be reverently gathered and placed in a beautiful urn or vase, to be disposed of according to the wishes of the survivors. They might easily be deposited in consecrated places, in niches in the walls of churches, or in mortuary chapels designed for their reception. This, too, might be accompanied by a religious service; so that the religious element is left untouched by my revolutionary proposal.

The advantage of all this to people of highly-wrought feelings would be immense. I can imagine the peaceful calm which would steal over the mind when one could take reverently into

one's hands the sacred urn and say, "This holds all that remains of my beloved." No horror of dark vaults and damp graves, with their seething corruption. No precious body being eaten piecemeal by worms of the earth, or melting away in a loathsome stream. The form is changed; the substance really remaining after chemical burning is not in the least degree suggestive of the past or the future. The body is saved thereby from every possible dishonour, purified from every decay. No words can describe the relief which such a process would bring to many and many an afflicted soul.

On the ground of health to the community, it would also be most salutary. We little know, in England at least, what mischief is brewing for us in our seething cemeteries. They are getting fuller and fuller, at the rate of I know not how many hundreds of corpses a day, the later ones being nearer and nearer the surface. Many are within four feet of the turf, and that is not enough to prevent the escape of the most foul and pestilential gases. I know of one old cemetery which is now occupied by a cooperage, and which is constantly wet with stagnant water. All around it typhus fever is perpetually raging. The danger would not be so great if the bodies were buried without a coffin. The earth would sooner disinfect them; but as it is, the mischief is nursed and multiplied a hundred-fold by the process of decay being delayed.

It is quite possible that an outcry might be made on the plea of my scheme being impracticable. I can only say that our Undertakers might take this subject into their consideration, and see whether they could not furnish all that was necessary, and conduct the business of destroying the body with decency and skill. Science will not fail to furnish the best chemical agents for performing this service speedily and inoffensively.

I should not have touched on the question of economy but for my sad experience amongst the poor. The most ordinary burial costs them five pounds; that is a fearful sum for a really poor family to contribute, and that often after heavy medical expenses. Whereas my plan ought to be quite within the cost of a fifth of that sum, let it be done in the best manner possible.

As for the rites of burial in themselves, no wise man would care what became of his own dead body, so long as it was not left to be an injury to the living. I should not mind being sent to the dissecting room, or to the kennels. But the rites of burial assume a very important aspect in the interests of the surviving relatives and friends. And for *their* sakes I plead

that those rites may be made as little harrowing as possible; may conduce as much as possible to console and cheer them, and leave no artificially cruel memories and associations behind them. It is on this ground that I object to the barbarous practice of "Christian" burial and would do my utmost to revolutionize our customs in this matter, and introduce a refined method of burning instead. Christianity is deeply to blame for aggravating our fear of death, and for aggravating our grief when death visits our homes. It is time that we turned such a religion out of doors; not only expelling it from our hearts and minds, but driving out its offensive and oppressive customs,—thus claiming the privileges of consolation under bereavement, which are ours by nature.

In another letter I must write a word or two on the subject of wearing "mourning."

I am very sincerely yours,

CHARLES VOYSEY.

CAMDEN HOUSE,  
DULWICH, S.E., March 14, 1873.

P. S. I have mentioned the subject to some of my most admired and cultivated friends, and I never met yet with a discouraging remark from them. All we want is for some brave family to set the example.

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