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To Dust You Shall Return: A Theological Argument for the Human Compost Movement

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To Dust You Shall Return:
A Theological Argument for the Human Compost Movement

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty and the Honors Program
Of the University of San Diego

By
Sydney N. Ederer
Theology and Religious Studies
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Introduction

I feel grateful to say that growing up, I did not have to face death the way that some of my friends did. I cannot remember a time when a family member or close friend passed away during my childhood. The closest experience I had to death was that of many pet goldfish or hamsters. Upon arriving to college, I grew very close to a friend who faced multiple deaths in her family throughout our time together at the University of San Diego. I was unsure of how to support her emotionally, because I had never experienced the pain she was experiencing. However, this was the first time my eyes were truly opened to the reality that death can come at anytime, anywhere, to any of us.

Then, almost a year ago, I got a call that my aunt was hospitalized for organ failure. A week later, on January 9, 2018, she passed away. It was difficult to process this, especially because I was away from home and could not grieve with the rest of my family. One thing that really helped me throughout this experience was receiving constant updates from my family about the process they were going through after my aunt's death. They informed me that she would be cremated and kept me updated as they waited to receive her ashes and eventually brought them home. Because she left behind no preferences about how she would like her body to be handled after death, my family had to decide on their own what they thought was the best way to handle her body, and thus chose cremation. My religious faith also helped me cope with this situation because it kept me grounded, gave me something to hope in, and provided me with a way to explain the unexplainable reality of death.

Overall, this experience made me realize that after-death practices are an integral part of the coping process for family members and friends. It also reminded me that death is inescapable. Because all of us will die, some kind of decision must be made as to how our bodies

will be handled after death. Sometimes, a person will make a decision in advance about how they would like their own body to be disposed of after death. Other times, depending on the time and/or cause of death, family members or other loved ones may have to make the decision instead. Regardless of who makes the decision or when the decision is made, it is inevitable that at some point each person's body will need to be disposed of in some way or another after their death. The two most common methods of body disposal are burial and cremation. However, in this analysis I would like to consider a different option for body disposal after death - human composting. Human composting will be defined in further detail in the following section.

Purpose. This research paper analyzes Catholic, Daoist, and Jewish beliefs on death, the body, the soul, afterlife, and after death rituals in order to build a connection between these beliefs and human composting practices. It uses these three religious traditions to find support for and recognize potential opposition against the human compost movement. These conclusions are in turn used to make a claim for human composting. Thorough research and a careful analysis of religious beliefs and traditions surrounding death and the body provides theological support for human composting as a recommended method for body disposal after death. Therefore, this research is incredibly important to the rapidly modernizing world because it provides some of the very first religious arguments ever made for the human compost movement, kickstarting this kind of support for all kinds of religious traditions. It is becoming more common to make environmentally friendly choices in one's daily practices, but it is much less common to do so with one's death practices often due to one's religious beliefs. This research expands the field of theology by uniting the secular topic of human composting to the theological interpretation of death.

Methodology

The primary research was conducted through a literature review using scholarly articles found on University of San Diego Copley Library's online databases. The research also included credible studies, statistics, and extensive pieces of literature written by reliable scholars of theology and experts on after-death rituals. In order to form a comparison between theological beliefs and secular practices, research was gathered separately from Catholic, Daoist, and Jewish resources as well as from information about human composting.

Defining the Human Compost Movement

The human compost movement is a fairly new movement that began in Switzerland in 1996 with a company called Promessa, founded by Susanne Wiigh-Masak. The goal of Promessa was to replace cremation with a technological version of organic composting because, just like compost itself, bodies are organic.¹ Human composting seeks to break bodies all the way down to their organic material. This process follows a specific set of steps to break down the body into compost material. First, liquid nitrogen is used to freeze the body. Because the human body is made up of about 70% water, it freezes easily and then, like ice, is very fragile. After the body is frozen, vibrations break up the body into the smallest pieces possible. These pieces are then freeze-dried and at this point are ready to be used for compost.

Once the compost is created, it can be used for planting a tree or other plant that will take up the dead's molecules left over in the compost to create a "living memorial." It is important to note that human composting deals only with one's body and has no connection with the possible existence of one's soul. This movement places an emphasis on retaining the beauty and dignity of each person's body in an effort to memorialize his or her life. Human composting is

¹ "Ecological Burial," Promessa, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://www.promessa.se/>.

recognized by some as the closest science will ever get to reincarnation because of its potential to create new life in the form of a plant that is grown in the human composted material.²

Human Composting in the United States. The human compost movement has only recently reached the United States through a company called Recompose, founded in 2012 by Katrina Spade. Although Recompose is a fully established company, it is still making the necessary preparations to kick start human composting in the United States and therefore no human body has undergone this composting process in the United States thus far. Their website comments, “At the heart of our model is a system that will gently return us to the earth after we die. Our modular system uses nature’s principles to return us to the earth, sequestering carbon and improving soil health. Recomposition allows us to give back to the earth that supports us all our lives.” Recompose describes its recomposition process as a gentle conversion of human remains into soil with the intention of nourishing new life after death.³

Recompose will eventually open their first facility in Seattle with plans to expand from there. Soon, they will offer the option to sign-up for this service in advance, even before the first facility has opened. At the beginning of 2019, Katrina Spade’s goal is to bring this company to Washington State Legislature to begin the process of legalizing recomposition as an option for body disposal after death. She intends to extend this company far beyond Washington as this movement becomes more widely known and accepted in the years to come.⁴

² Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003), 265.

³ “Recompose,” Recompose, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.recompose.life/>.

⁴ “Recompose.”

Catholic Beliefs

Catholics have very specific rituals they follow following the death of a loved one. They believe that a person should be accompanied throughout the entire process of death – death, funeral, burial – especially through prayer. Death has such a deep meaning for Catholics because of the belief in the resurrection of the dead. This belief in the resurrection makes death and funeral rituals more bearable for those left behind. It is believed that the dead have the opportunity to share in Christ's resurrection and this belief is what motivates the majority of Catholic after-death rituals. For Catholics, death is not a definite end but rather a transition to a new life with Christ.⁵ Catholicism teaches that without the resurrection, faith is useless. This faith in the resurrection not only consoles the dying, but also helps those who remain behind to know "God's work of love does not cease when a person dies but continues throughout eternity."⁶

Funeral rituals in the Catholic Church have developed over time to include the family in these practices, allowing the funeral liturgy to have a more personal aspect. As the world modernizes, so does the funeral liturgy; however, some view this modernization as a discredit to traditional funeral practices. Regardless, the main focus of the funeral liturgy is to pass the dead over into the hands of God.⁷ It is important for Catholics that they treat the dead with the same

⁵ Louis van Tongeren, "Individualizing Ritual: The Personal Dimension in Funeral Liturgy," *Worship* 78, no. 2 (March 2004): 118.

⁶ Chris Aridas, *The Catholic Funeral: The Church's Ministry of Hope* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 1998), 23.

⁷ Tongeren, "Individualizing Ritual," 128.

intrinsic dignity they should have been treated with in life.⁸ One very important aspect of the Catholic funeral liturgy is the third funeral rite of transferring the body to its burial place.⁹

Cremation. Teachings about cremation have sparked much debate and change within the Catholic Church in the past two centuries. Today the Church allows cremation as long as it is not used as a means to deny Catholic teaching, especially teaching about the resurrection.¹⁰

However, this was not always the case. Cremation originally was understood to be a “radical departure” from Catholic death customs, primarily because it was a threat to the belief in bodily resurrection at the end of time. In 1886, the Vatican formally declared cremation “incompatible” with Church teaching, making traditional earthly burial the only acceptable means of body disposal after death. At this time, the Church even went so far as to forbid priests from administering any funeral rites to someone who had been cremated.¹¹

In the 1900s, cremation slowly became less and less problematic for Catholics. Catholics became more aware of the dangers posed by bodily burial, such as the loss of land and the dangerous vapors released from burial grounds as a result of decomposition. In the meantime, the secular world also was beginning to change its opinions about cremation which led to the 1902 Cremation Act. This act fully recognized the legality of cremation, starting in Britain. This legal decision inspired even greater the dialogue within the Catholic Church to consider cremation as an allowable option for body disposal after death. Additionally, the unfortunate abundance of violent deaths in WWI pushed to the limit the belief that bodily resurrection required all pieces

⁸ Daniel P. Sulmasy, “Death and Dignity in Catholic Christian Thought,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (December 2017): 542.

⁹ Aridas, *The Catholic Funeral*, 26.

¹⁰ Aridas, 124.

¹¹ Frances Knight, “Cremation and Christianity: English Anglican and Roman Catholic Attitudes to Cremation since 1885,” *Mortality* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2018), 311.

of the body to be intact. Similarly, the argument was made that if cremation was said to lower someone's chance of bodily resurrection, then how much less of a chance would early Christian martyrs have of reunion with Christ through resurrection if they were burned at the stake as a result of their intimate relationship with Christ?¹² With the decline of Catholic objections to cremation came the rise of acceptability for this body disposal practice.

In line with these beliefs about WWI victims and martyrs, Catholics argued that resurrection of the body referred more to one's spiritual body than the totality of one's physical body. This argument was backed up by an excerpt from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in which Paul calls anyone who believes in physical resurrection a fool. He says,

“So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.” 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 (RSV)

With these verses, Paul is ultimately saying there is no such thing as physical resurrection, but resurrection still will occur in a spiritual form.

Some of the more recent Vatican teachings about cremation state that if Catholics choose cremation for any reason, be it economic, ecological, or personal reasons, they must follow Catholic guidelines for conserving cremated remains. These guidelines say that ashes “cannot be scattered, divvied up, or kept at home but must be stored in a sacred, church-approved place.”¹³ This guideline is in place in order to preserve the sacredness of the body as well as keep the remains of the physical body all together, just in case physical resurrection could still occur.

¹² Knight, "Cremation and Christianity," 306.

¹³ Michele Munz, “Vatican: No More Scattering of Cremated Remains, Keeping Them at Home,” Article (St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO), October 27, 2016).

Whether placed in a casket or an urn, a body is sacred nonetheless and this sacredness motivates the Vatican's inability to condone the scattering of ashes for any reason.¹⁴

Corporal Work of Mercy: Bury the Dead. As cremation became more accepted among the Catholic Church, full body burial remained the preferred method of disposal after death.¹⁵ The Catholic Church outlines some of its teachings in seven corporal works of mercy which are an attempt to respond to Christ's mercy in action as a result of choosing to follow him. One of these corporal works is to bury the dead, a ritual that reflects the goodness of creation, redemption in Christ, and especially resurrection of the body.¹⁶ Catholics ask themselves, what better sign of belief in bodily resurrection is there than preparing the physical body through full-body burial to meet the Lord at the end of time?¹⁷ The emphasis of body burial is rooted in the respect that all Catholics should have for the human body created by God. Plus, the body can be a reminder of the continued presence of a lost loved one.

Laudato Si. *Laudato Si* is Pope Francis' encyclical about how Catholics should care for the environment. It is the most recent official Catholic document regarding environmental concerns. In this encyclical, Pope Francis states that "our common home is like a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us," yet she is crying out to us due to the harm we have inflicted upon her.¹⁸ Francis highlights the sincerity of his argument by reminding Catholics that

¹⁴ Chris Haire and Roxana Kopetman, "Catholic Church Clarifies Cremation Rules, Says Ashes Shouldn't Be Scattered," Article (Orange County Register, The (Santa Ana, CA), October 26, 2016).

¹⁵ Munz, "Vatican."

¹⁶ James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*, 2nd ed., [New ed.] (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 39.

¹⁷ Diane Andrews Henningfield, ed., *Disposal of the Dead*, At Issue (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2009), 25.

¹⁸Pope Francis, "*Laudato Si* of the Holy Father Francis On the Care for Our Common Home," The Holy See, May 24, 2015, #1-2.

God entrusts humans to care for all of His creation. Therefore, destruction of the human environment is incredibly serious and irresponsible because of humanity's God-given duty to protect the earth.¹⁹ *Laudato Si* is relevant to Catholic death practices because of the way environmental concerns have contributed to the growing support for cremation as an attempt to be more sustainable.

Catholicism and Human Composting

There are a vast number of arguments that can be made from the Catholic perspective both for and against human composting as an option for body disposal after death. First of all, in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis argues that one of the main reasons Catholics should take care of their surrounding environment is because human bodies are made up of the exact same elements as the earth itself.²⁰ This argument is one that is made in support of human composting from those who are developing the movement itself. Thus, Pope Francis' comment aligns precisely with that of the human compost movement in totality. Francis also claims, "It is Christian conviction that the divine and human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet."²¹ Returning one's body to the earth after death through human composting is a great opportunity to unite with the divine in the smallest specks of His creation.

A Catholic argument in support of the human compost movement may follow a pattern similar to the arguments that developed over time in support of cremation in the Catholic Church. A major logistical concern of cremation was where the ashes would be preserved. The Church came to the conclusion that as long as the ashes were buried on "consecrated ground"

¹⁹ Francis, "*Laudato Si*," #5.

²⁰ Francis, #2.

²¹ Francis, #9.

then cremation could be supported.²² The Vatican announced that ashes belong in sacred space alone.²³ As long as Catholics follow these appropriate guidelines for conserving ashes then the Church sees no issue with cremation.²⁴ These exact same arguments can be made in support of human composting. There is no reason why composted remains could not be placed in a sacred space. In fact, the compost could be utilized on church grounds and other consecrated grounds to nourish the soil, provide garden space, and overall be simultaneously sustainable in practice and reverent in manner toward lost loved ones. A sacred space made up of composted human remains could be labeled on Catholic grounds in such a way that memorializes the bodies being remembered in the area and identifies the respect that is owed to this sacred ground. Another motivator that led to increased Catholic support for cremation was its environmental benefits.²⁵ Simply by the nature of its definition, compost is much more ecologically minded than cremation.

One Catholic scholar specifically acknowledges the divinely-inspired relationship between humans and the environment. He says, “human beings are morally obliged to use and modify the natural environment and their own bodies in accordance with their intrinsic teleology.” His use of the word “teleology” here refers to his understanding of the relationship between the earthly environment and human nature to be an explanation of humanity’s purpose to be simultaneously a part of creation and a mindful user of it.²⁶ In addition to the environmental

²² Knight, “Cremation and Christianity,” 309.

²³ Elisabetta Povoledo, Gaia Pianigiani, and Sewell Chan, “Vatican Clarifies Cremation Rules: Bury, Don’t Scatter,” *New York Times* 166, no. 57397 (October 26, 2016).

²⁴ Munz, “Vatican.”

²⁵ Haire and Kopetman, “Catholic Church Clarifies Cremation.”

²⁶ Kevin Wm Wildes, Francesc Abel, and John Collins Harvey, eds., *Birth, Suffering, and Death: Catholic Perspectives at the Edges of Life*, Philosophy and Medicine 41 (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 92.

arguments posed for cremation, the Church also supports it as an affordable alternative to traditional full-body burial. A monastery in Georgia has seventy acres of land reserved for conservation and natural cemeteries, including spots for cremated remains. Not only is their goal to preserve the hundreds of plant species and wildlife present on the land, but they also invite Catholics into an option for green burial, a simpler, more affordable option than standard Catholic burial grounds.²⁷ Human compost could contribute to the environmental conservation and restoration occurring at this monastery, not to mention it would fit right in with both the economic and ecological goals of this monastery's burial grounds.

Despite all of these arguments that can inevitably be posed in support of the human compost movement, there is one incredibly significant argument that does not align with human compost – bodily resurrection. Referenced in the previous section, Catholic funeral liturgy invites the dead to “share in Christ's resurrection.”²⁸ In the early 1900s, a Catholic Bishop by the name of Wordsworth spoke harshly against any form of body disposal after death that threatened the belief in bodily resurrection. Similarly, in the mid 1900s the Vatican stated that cremation created a tension in the belief of future bodily resurrection.²⁹ Cremation was the only other commonly practiced option for body disposal after death at the time which is why it is the practice specifically referenced by the Catholic Church to be in opposition with a fundamental aspect of their faith tradition. Bodily resurrection assumes a requirement that the whole body be buried intact in order to be raised by Christ. For this reason alone, the Church would be extremely hesitant to support the human compost movement because its end product looks and

²⁷ “Conservation Burial Ground | Monastery of the Holy Spirit,” accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www.trappist.net/abbey-trades/conservation-burial-ground>.

²⁸ Tongeren, “Individualizing Ritual,” 119.

²⁹ Knight, “Cremation and Christianity,” 301.

feels like soil and thus is a far stretch from an intact human body. However, the Catholic Church's official silence thus far on body disposal options other than body burial and cremation indicate the possibility of openness and future support for options such as human composting.

In addition, the Vatican has been historically reluctant to support any form of bodily decomposition that is hastened by mechanical means.³⁰ The current methods of human composting do utilize mechanical means. However, this detail was seemingly overlooked when cremation finally became supported by the Church, so it is likely that it could be overlooked in human composting as well. Unfortunately, the funeral rite mentioned in the previous section that involves transferring the physical body to the place of burial would be absent from composting practices, unless of course loved ones participate in the transference of composted remains to the land these remains will be planted in.

An educated, traditional Catholic may be able to find additional minor rejections for human composting as a result of Catholic doctrine. For example, one could argue that if the body of an influential Catholic who could potentially become a saint were to be composted, there would not be an opportunity to see if his or her body was incorruptible. It is believed that if a body does not disintegrate after burial, it is possible that this person is incorruptible and could be canonized as a saint. It is apparent that any rejection leads back to the overarching tension between human composting and bodily resurrection in Christ. Because the body is sacred and deserves preservation, the Church assumes a "lack of faith in physical resurrection of the body" for anyone who destroys their body after death.³¹ However, the excerpt from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians refutes this assumption. If the Catholic Church was able to approve of cremation

³⁰ Knight, 311.

³¹ Henningfield, *Disposal of the Dead*, 23-24.

practices after a significant amount of time and modernization, then they are much more likely to approve of human composting if by definition alone it possesses the same, if not more beneficial, qualities as cremation.

Daoist Beliefs

Daoist tradition believes that life should be all together nourishing, prolonging, protecting, and cultivating of the body. They believe the soul plays a big role in these acts of cultivating and renewing life. Daoist tradition says that a person's soul after death is transformed to create renewed life.³² Therefore, the soul must be separated from one's body after death because the soul will create this renewed life in a different being or body than previously dwelled in. When this separation occurs, the soul takes on "superhuman powers."³³ This newly transformed, superhuman soul lives on near the dead body until the body fully disintegrates. For this reason, Daoists believe they must wait for the soul to stop coming back to the body before they can proceed with burial.³⁴

In addition to these many beliefs about the soul, Daoism also has specific beliefs about how to properly care for one's body after death. Daoists believe that the body itself is nothing more than dust and dirt because of their perceived connection between body and earth. Nonetheless, a proper burial is the most highly regarded method of body disposal after death because it ensures the soul can be at peace away from the body once the natural process of disintegration is completed. Cremation is supported among Daoists mainly for the purpose of

³² Cecilia L. W. Chan and Amy Yin Man Chow, eds., *Death, Dying and Bereavement: A Hong Kong Chinese Experience* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 91.

³³ Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon, eds., *Death and Philosophy* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 61.

³⁴ Angela Sumegi, *Understanding Death: An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 237.

freeing up land. Daoists' belief in burial as the best means to dispose of a dead body is supported by their teaching that "all the living must die, and dying, return to the ground." As the body is returned to the ground, its bones and flesh become "earth of the fields."³⁵

According to Daoist tradition, "caring for the dead is similar to caring for the living." Daoists stress the importance of making peace with the dead and continuing one's relationship with their dead loved one long after his or her death.³⁶ Daoists are careful to continue fostering their relationships with the dead because they believe death is only final when one is forgotten entirely. For Daoists, death is understood as a transformation in which one has the opportunity to take on many new forms.³⁷ A key characterization of death from a Daoist perspective is that death plays a role in a person's inevitable return to nature.³⁸

Daoism and Human Composting

Daoist beliefs easily could be viewed in support of composting as a reliable option for body disposal after death. For instance, Daoists view life and death as a constant process of renewal. For this reason, they ask themselves, "How do we properly dispose ourselves so that we can continue to flourish within this process of transformation?"³⁹ Compost, or even a tree planted in human compost material, could become the new form one would take up after his or her death which would contribute to the process of renewal and transformation. This contribution would occur because compost by nature allows for the cultivation of new life (i.e., plant life) because of its rich nutrients. Allowing one's body to be turned into compost after death creates an opportunity for Daoists to participate in a tangible nourishing of the earth. Additionally, human

³⁵ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 235.

³⁶ Chan and Chow, *Death, Dying and Bereavement*, 92.

³⁷ Malpas and Solomon, *Death and Philosophy*, 67.

³⁸ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 245.

³⁹ Malpas and Solomon, *Death and Philosophy*, 68.

compost provides a space for mourners to return to because loved ones could use the human compost material to create living memorials to visit and remember their lost family and friends. The ability to return to a sight that stands in remembrance of a dead loved one is important for Daoists because it helps ensure that the dead are never forgotten.

Daoism emphasizes that a body should be returned to nature after death. Human composting aligns with this element of Daoist tradition because compost creates new earth that contributes to and promotes the growth of nature. Daoists believe that the body is equivalent to dirt, and compost itself is dirt. As stated in the previous section, the only support that Daoists give for choosing cremation over burial is the fact that cremation allows for land to be freed up for purposes other than body disposal. Composting, however, not only frees up land but creates brand new land by providing nourishment for land that may be lacking in nutrients or a strong balance of organic material. Compost adds to the land rather than taking away from it, which is more than can be said for cremation.

In addition, human composting was described as being as close as science will get to reincarnation. Composting promotes new life. Anything that is planted in human compost material will grow directly out of the organic molecules that once made up that person's body. This phenomenon can be understood as its own form of reincarnation because the organic breakdown of the physical body fosters new life to be born out of the human compost material. Reincarnation is also a very important aspect of Daoist belief about what happens to the soul after death. Therefore, the parallel images of scientific reincarnation and Daoist reincarnation can be put in dialogue with one another to determine the relationship between these two perspectives of reincarnation.

Composting is also favorable when it comes to beliefs about the soul, especially because Daoism believes the soul does not depart from the body until the body has fully disintegrated. It is incredibly important for Daoists to ensure the soul of their loved one is at peace and for this reason they must wait for it to permanently depart from the body. The soul would be able to depart much faster if the body underwent the process of human composting because this process uses technology to expedite the body's disintegration. Other Daoist views about the soul, however, stand in opposition to the process of human composting. Burial is so important in Daoism because it ensures that the soul has an intact body to return to if it so chooses. Cremation, composting, or any other disposal option that violates the intact physical body in any way would make it more difficult for the soul to be called back to its previous body. For this reason, the soul would not be at peace without a proper burial.

Jewish Beliefs

Jewish tradition welcomes death as a liberation of the soul from its "bodily prison."⁴⁰ Jews encourage a positive acceptance of death, believing that death is ultimately built into God's original plan for humanity. Death is understood as a process of consciously giving oneself away, back to God, the creator of all life.⁴¹ For Jews, death offers renewed life in the presence of God because of their belief that God has the ability to return life back to the dead. Jews believe in the possibility of an eventual resurrection of the dead which will be orchestrated by God at an unknown time.⁴² Through this resurrection, it is believed that God will restore the soul to one's body at the moment of His choosing. In a traditional prayer from the *Siddur*, a Jewish prayer

⁴⁰ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 91.

⁴¹ Howard M. Spiro et al., eds., *Facing Death: Where Culture, Religion, and Medicine Meet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 134.

⁴² Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 89-90.

book, Jews pray regularly in expectancy for this resurrection in which souls will be returned to the bodies they once dwelled in.⁴³

The body is an integral part of Jewish tradition surrounding death. Judaism teaches that at the start of life, God's breath animated the body from dust. Consequently, at the time of one's death the body should be returned to the dust from which it was originally formed.⁴⁴ This argument is often used in support of body burial, and it aligns closely with the motivations behind the human compost movement. This belief has influenced Jewish understandings of the body as a "holy vessel" that belongs to God. Because this vessel comes from God and will return to Him, it retains its holiness even after death.⁴⁵ Therefore, Judaism teaches that the best way to honor the body with dignity after death is to perform a very quick, full body burial. Burial is important to Jews because it is motivated by the goal to honor one's God-given body by returning it to Him in its complete manner.⁴⁶ Likewise, because death is understood as a process of decay, Judaism believes that this decay can be most efficiently carried out through natural burial alone.⁴⁷

Burial is one of the most important aspects of Jewish death rituals, and therefore there are many actions that must accompany body burial in the Jewish tradition. According to official Jewish teaching, after one's death a person's body should immediately be placed on the floor to symbolize a returning to the earth, the dust that they came from. Another ritual aspect within Jewish burial practice is placing soil under the deceased's head in the coffin, yet another way to

⁴³ Benjamin W. Mintz, "Religious Approaches to Death and Dying: The Jewish Approach," *CUA Law Scholarship Repository*, 1999, 161.

⁴⁴ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 78.

⁴⁵ Lucy Bregman, ed., *Religion, Death, and Dying*, Praeger Perspectives (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger Publishers, 2010), 31.

⁴⁶ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 98.

⁴⁷ Bregman, *Religion, Death, and Dying*, 34-35.

symbolize one's return to the earth after death.⁴⁸ Also, because Jews have an extensive list of after-death mourning rituals, it is important that the dead are buried with a proper tombstone to allow those who are mourning to visit the loved ones over whom they are mourning.

Accompanying someone from death to the grave is an obligation for Jews, and in doing so they are performing the highest deed, referred to as *chesed shel emet*.⁴⁹ *Chesed shel emet* is otherwise known as "disinterested kindness."⁵⁰ In other words, the Jewish act of accompanying the dead to the grave is understood to be one of the greatest acts of kindness one could perform.

Many of these Jewish beliefs and practices surrounding the soul, body, and death are biblically based. For example, Genesis 3:19 says, "From dust you come, and to dust you shall return." Similarly, Psalm 90:3 states, "You return man to dust." Genesis 2:7 says, "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground." Interestingly, the Hebrew word used for "man" in this verse is *adam* is closely related to the Hebrew word *adamah*, meaning ground. The original Hebrew translation of the words in these verses demonstrates the biblical correlation between man and dust. Each of these verses from the Hebrew Scriptures that connect Jewish death practices with ancient biblical beliefs highlight the origin of mankind as coming from the dust of the earth.

Judaism and Human Composting

There are a handful of connections between Jewish beliefs about death and the human composting process. First of all, the biblically based belief that the body comes from dust and therefore should be returned to dust at the end of life is consistent with human composting when

⁴⁸ William G. Hoy, *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 39.

⁴⁹ Bregman, *Religion, Death, and Dying*, 34.

⁵⁰ Mintz, "Religious Approaches," 169.

considering compost to be dust itself. The Bible verses stated in the previous section support human composting in the Jewish context as a positive option for body burial after death when one understands that the process of human composting returns the body to its original dust form. If Jews are seeking an efficient way to return bodies to the dust through decomposition, then they will find that compost is inevitably the most efficient option.

Another comparison between Jewish teaching and human composting arises when acknowledging Judaism's one reason to be in favor of cremation. Although burial is much more widely accepted and practiced in Jewish tradition than cremation, Jews do believe that cremation is a smart option ecologically. Composting is an even better ecological option than cremation, so it is possible that the human compost movement could eventually be supported by Jews for the same reason as cremation is currently accepted. However, many of the Jewish traditions centered around death directly contrast the human composting process. For instance, although the connection was made in the previous paragraph between dust and compost, compost actually produces very fertile soil which is much further away in composition from the characteristics of dust than even cremated remains. In other words, cremated remains more closely resemble dust than composted material. However, the Hebrew translation of "dust" in Genesis 3:19 showed that the word originally used for dust was ground. Compost is precisely the same material as the natural ground.

Jewish tradition states, "Resurrection of the body inspires us to consider the body as sacred, as God's creation, neither to be disparaged nor abandoned."⁵¹ Therefore, resurrection of the body cannot occur if the body is not intact. Similarly, the soul cannot be restored to the body if it does not remain perfectly intact. Jews most often refer to their eventual returning to the earth

⁵¹ Sumegi, *Understanding Death*, 96.

through death in a manner that emphasizes a return of the body to the earth in its most complete form. A composted body is no longer intact or complete. According to Judaism, an incomplete and/or disparaged body implies a destruction of its holiness. Although death is understood as a process of decay in the Jewish tradition, it must decay naturally through burial alone.

Lastly, Judaism believes “ensuring that the dead have a proper resting place is as important as caring for those members of the community who are living.”⁵² For Jews, following death rituals correctly is more important than the accuracy of their beliefs. Many of their practices date all the way back to Abraham mourning over his wife’s death, as depicted in the first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 23.⁵³ Pre-burial, funeral, burial, and mourning rituals are all highly regarded in the Jewish tradition. These rituals only can be accurately followed if one’s body undergoes a full, proper burial very shortly after the death occurs.

Secular Arguments

Although the primary goal of this paper is to create a theological argument in support of the human compost movement, there are many credible arguments made for human composting that help one gain a greater understanding of the benefits of this body disposal process which then can be put in dialogue with theological beliefs. First of all, composting is economically and environmentally friendly. Cremation was originally the most environmentally friendly option for body disposal after death, but research is beginning to show that this is no longer the case. “Cremains make lousy fertilizer,” yet compost itself is fertilizer.⁵⁴ Intact corpses are hazardous pollutants. Therefore, the more traditional method of body disposal, full body burial, is also very detrimental to the environment because corpses rot and become hosts for micro-organisms and

⁵² Bregman, *Religion, Death, and Dying*, 30.

⁵³ Mintz, “Religious Approaches,” 173.

⁵⁴ Roach, *Stiff*, 260.

insects.⁵⁵ It would be better for the environment if these micro-organisms were hosted by nutrient-rich compost.

In the late 1800s, some chose to pulverize dead bodies rather than cremate them to ensure the body would “return to the elements as soon as possible” in the form of fertilizer that would contribute to the earth. This shift in preference supports the more recent discovery that humans and compost require the same basic elements – water and oxygen – and have the same basic needs such as nutrients, energy, oxygen, and a stable, temperate environment. Some understand the human compost movement to simply liken humans to an animal rotting in the woods or reduce human bodies to the same level as garden waste.⁵⁶ Others consider the dead body to be an empty shell, a nuisance that should be discarded.⁵⁷ In contrast, the founder of Promessa prefers to recognize the dignity of each human body and therefore views the composting movement as a process that elevates garden waste to the level of humans.⁵⁸

Green Burial Council. The United States Green Burial Council has developed a vision to foster legitimate environmental aims by creating a new ethic for the funeral service and connecting human death to the promotion of all life on earth. The council promotes more sustainable, environmentally friendly burial options. Some of the improvements they have made include using formaldehyde-free chemicals and eco-friendly embalming fluid in preparation for one’s burial, as well as developing biodegradable caskets made of vegetable materials. There are many reasons motivating these improvements. First of all, embalming fluid uses chemicals that pollute the earth and the surrounding environment. Also, it is unproductive and detrimental to the

⁵⁵ Hoy, *Do Funerals Matter?*, 110.

⁵⁶ Roach, *Stiff*, 263.

⁵⁷ Hoy, *Do Funerals Matter?*, 109.

⁵⁸ Roach, *Stiff*, 274.

earth to bury concrete, metal, or wooden caskets. Plus, far too many trees are being chopped down for the sole purpose of building caskets.⁵⁹ Instead of tolerating the unnecessary wear and tear on the environment that proves to be a result of traditional burial practices, the United States Green Burial Council has been designed to promote and implement sustainable methods for disposing of one's body after death. In conjunction with the up-and-coming company mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Recompose, the Green Burial Council could help promote human composting throughout the United States.

Conclusion

Despite the abundance of arguments that can be made in support of human composting from a theological perspective, it would be foolish to deny that some counterarguments also could be raised suggesting that Catholic, Daoist, and/or Jewish tradition does not align with the intentions and implications behind the human compost movement. For Catholics, the counterargument about bodily resurrection can be balanced by St. Paul's belief about spiritual resurrection. Another counterargument would recall the attention both Daoism and Judaism give to rituals that recognize the continued presence of a soul after one's death. Because Daoists believe the soul cannot truly be at rest after death until the body undergoes a proper full-body burial, they may not support the human composting process, as this process requires that the physical body be destroyed. Jews believe in an eventual resurrection of the body in which the soul will be restored back to the body in its original form. For this reason, Jews may not support human composting, because if the body were to be composted it would no longer remain intact, leaving no physical body for the soul to return to during resurrection.

⁵⁹ Hoy, *Do Funerals Matter?*, 129.

Nonetheless, based on the extensive research done, it is clear that these counterarguments are not barriers to the overarching argument that human composting is a strong, legitimate option for body disposal after death. Composting can aid one's acceptance about the death of a family member or friend because it provides loved ones with the opportunity to create a living memorial in honor of the deceased. A living memorial can take many forms. Most often, a tree is planted in human compost material to stand in remembrance of a dead loved one for hundreds of years to come, receiving its nutrients directly from the organic material that once made up the loved one's physical body. This living memorial contributes to God's beautiful act of creation while simultaneously giving back to the earth.

Research about Catholic, Daoist, and Jewish death practices demonstrates parallels between religious doctrines and the motivations behind human composting. Because composting deals with care for the body alone, and not the soul, this disposal option still allows for all religious beliefs about the soul to remain present. Therefore, Catholics, Daoists, Jews, or members of any other faith tradition do not have to choose between the soul and the body. Through human composting, they can still honor their beliefs and practices regarding the soul after death, while handling the body in a sustainable way. In other words, composting creates a legitimate method of care for the body, while leaving plenty of room to practice traditions regarding the soul. For example, Daoists can still allow time for the soul to depart from the body before composting the body, creating the best of both worlds.

In recent years, official Catholic teaching has expanded to include a greater care for the environment. Catholicism has also developed its understanding of bodily resurrection, which led Catholics to support cremation despite a historically rigid belief system. Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* could lead to additional developments that support human composting because it

simultaneously cares for the environment and humanity. These developments, along with the opportunity for openness to more developments, makes future Catholic support for the human compost movement likely.

Daoism places an emphasis on the importance of nourishing life through every aspect of life, death, and the renewal of life after death. Therefore, composting one's body would not only be a good option for body disposal, but it would help contribute to and build support for Daoist rituals that demonstrate the importance of prospering all life forms. Also, Daoists are careful to ensure that their after-death rituals include an act of returning the dead to the earth. Without this focus, Daoist death rituals would lose much of their symbolic significance. If Daoists were informed on the practices and purposes of the human compost movement, they may support this movement for the sole reason of its ability to transform a body into the basic elements of the earth and then return these elements back to the earth itself.

Jews also stress the importance of returning a body back to its original source, but in their case they consider this transfer to be one that gives the dead back to the Creator of the world, the one who built them up out of dust. Jews believe the God of all living things deserves His people to be returned directly to Him and His creation at the point of their death. Because God is not only the original Creator of this world, but also the constant Creator of all new and living things, it would serve an even greater purpose to return His people back to Him in a manner that positively contributes to His ever-evolving acts of creation. Therefore, if Jews were introduced to the creational relevance of the human compost movement, they too may support this option of body disposal after death. Jews would be giving more back to their Creator in the form of compost that will continue to serve a purpose for all of creation than if they simply return a fully intact body to the Creator.

Overall, it is evident that Catholic, Daoist, and Jewish death practices establish theological support for human composting, igniting the expansion of this brand new movement. Whether we want to admit it or not, religion is often what people use to cope with death and explain the unknown realities of death. Even someone who does not identify themselves as religious often will use spiritual terminology to understand death, such as the commonly heard phrase, “He/she is in a better place now.” It is my hope that with the growth of this movement and a more widespread understanding of the intentions and implications behind the movement, a surplus of theological support for the movement will arise from all kinds of religious traditions. For now, I will keep sharing the knowledge I have gained, and I may sign myself up to be on the list for Recompose one day!

Recommendations for Further Research. This research has shown that human composting is a great option for body disposal after death. Not only is it supported by environmental claims, but more importantly this research has created theological support for the human compost movement by drawing on Catholic, Daoist, and Jewish doctrine. Further research can be done as a result of these conclusions drawn from the research. One recommendation would be to create a larger joint research project that combines scientific study with theological analysis, drawing on experts from both fields to strengthen the arguments for human composting. Another suggestion would be to analyze doctrines and rituals of additional religious perspectives to build more claims either for or against human composting from the traditions of other religions. One could work to build support for this movement from all the major world religions and then move on to include indigenous beliefs and other lesser-known religious traditions across countries and even continents.

Further research from additional theological perspectives would require strong questions to be asked that would direct the research toward the possibility of establishing a support for or opposition against human composting. For example, from an Islamic perspective, questions could be asked such as, what does Islam believe in regards to death, the body, the soul, afterlife, and after death rituals? How do these beliefs compare to the intentions and implications behind the human compost movement? Based on the research done on both Islam and human composting, what kind of conclusions could be reached to bridge the gap between the two? Would Islam support human composting as a legitimate option for body disposal after death? Why, or why not? These questions could be asked of any religious tradition. It is recommended that one dive deeper into the theological grounds of their own belief system in order to come to a conclusion as to whether or not their belief system would support human composting.

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