

## ENTRY INTO A CHURCH

### RAMIFICATIONS OF OTHER RELIGIONS FOR A JEW

We have previously discussed whether the Christian religion is classified as *avodah zarah* in *halachah* and the various views can be summarized into three categories. Gentiles must follow the seven basic *mitzvos* of Benei Noach which includes *avodah zarah*, the mitzvah forbidding worshiping idols or subscribing to a set of pagan beliefs and rituals. Rambam held that the Christian religion is *avodah zarah* even for gentiles. Others maintain that so long as a religion does not exclude belief in Hashem, it is permissible for gentiles. *Shituf*, partnership, where other gods or deities “share” the title, is an additional prohibition for Jews only. Some maintain that actual *shituf* is not permitted for gentiles. The context in which the dispensation appears refers causing a gentile to swear, though he will use his god’s name. Many do not consider gentiles practicing these religions nowadays as idol-worshipers. They are not devout or are devoid of spirituality; their practices are *minhag avoseihen*, traditions in memory of ancient gods. However, what is the status, in relation to Jews, of artifacts or buildings used by gentiles for *shituf* worship, according to the views that *shituf* is permitted to them?

### CONVERTING A CHURCH INTO A SHUL

*Shulchan Aruch* rules that it was forbidden to light wax candles that had been partially used in a church in a shul (*Orach Chaim* 154:11). The Magen Avraham states that it is permitted to *daven* in a building which was previously permanently used as a church, because the actual building was not worshiped. The candles have a different *halachah* because the candles themselves were used in the service. The Elyah Rabbah and others disagree and argue that it is forbidden to convert it into a permanent shul. The Shoel U’ Meshiv had a question regarding a Protestant church which was purchased by Jews to be used as a *shul*, and he ruled leniently in accordance with the Magen Avraham. However, in 1858, Rav Yakov Ettlinger was asked by a community in New York if they were allowed to convert a building, previously used as a church, into a *shul*. His response was to permit it only in extreme emergency, but *le’chatchilah* it should not be done. He argued that even though the building had been used for *shituf* services without artifacts which may be permitted to non-Jews, from a Jew’s perspective such worship constitutes idolatry, and the building is forbidden for Jews (*Teshuvos Binyan Tzion* 1:63). Rav David Zvi Hoffman ruled similarly that a Jew is forbidden to donate towards the construction of a church building because while non-Jews may be permitted to engage in *shituf*, from a Jew’s perspective that is considered full-fledged idolatry (*Teshuvos Melamed Le’Ho’il* 2:148). Likewise, any resultant sacrifices are considered idolatrous sacrifices from which Jews are not allowed to derive any benefit (*Tevuos Shor, Yoreh De’ah* 4:1).

### ENTERING A PLACE OF IDOL WORSHIP

*Avodah Zarah* 17a tells that a number of Amora'im avoided passing in front of a place of idol worship and Tosafos (17b s.v. *neizel*) deduces from that narrative that one should distance oneself “wherever possible” from the place of idolatry, as reflected in the *pasuk*: and do not come close to the door of her house (*Mishlei* 5:8). The Gemara interprets that *pasuk* as a reference to idolatry. Rambam writes in his Commentary on the Mishnah: “...every city which has a place of worship that is a house of idolatry, it is forbidden to traverse that city and certainly to dwell therein. ...And if this is the law pertaining to a city, how much more so it is the law regarding the house of worship itself, which it is almost forbidden even to see and certainly to enter.” Rambam’s view is endorsed by the Shach (*Yoreh De’ah* 149:1).



King Charles thanks U.K. Chief Rabbi Mirvis for attendance at his Coronation as he exits Westminster Abbey. Standing in the entrance with other faiths, Rabbi Mirvis did not enter the edifice.

(Photo credit: The Telegraph)

### EIVAH – PROVOCATION OF ENMITY

Rav Ovadiah Yosef reports that in 1949 while serving as a young *dayan* in Cairo, he was requested by the chief rabbi to represent him at the funeral of a consul to be held in a church. Despite the assurances of the chief rabbi that such had been the established practice of previous *rabbanim*, Rav Yosef did his own research and concluded that it was forbidden. His conclusions are published in *Yabia Omer* (2:11), and summarized in *Yechaveh Daas* (4:45) which draws on an earlier *teshuvah* of Rav Chaim Palaggi (*Teshuvos Chaim be’Yad*, no. 26) who forbade entry into a church to honor a consul. Rav Yosef rejects the applicability of the principle of *eivah*, stirring up hatred, to these situations.

He cites *Ikkarei HaDas* (19:6), who quotes earlier authorities who permitted seeking refuge in a church to avoid apprehension by creditors. Nevertheless, in light of the fact that *Shulchan Aruch*, as well as other authorities quoted by *Darkei Teshuvah* (157:67), permit such conduct only in the face of acute danger, Rav Yosef refuses to sanction entry into a church even to obviate *eivah*. He cites *Shevilei David* (*siman* 154) who argues that the prohibition to enter a church is biblical in nature, and only rabbinical prohibitions may be suspended in the face of *eivah*. He also argues that declining to enter a church is clearly rooted in religious conviction and such conduct cannot be perceived as a personal insult. Furthermore, he identifies that the true motivation of those asking permission to attend such ceremonies is a desire to ingratiate themselves in the eyes of non-Jewish officials whereas, on the contrary, non-attendance on grounds of religious conscience will only garner respect. That respect was evident when King Charles stopped to acknowledge the dignitaries standing inside the entrance of Westminster Abbey and did not enter the edifice. I recall something similar when my father *z”l* was invited to attend the wedding of a close non-Jewish business colleague being held in St Paul’s Cathedral. As a Kohen, he had the additional problem that the crypt of the Cathedral served as the burial place of several famous individuals. He stood on the steps leading up to the Cathedral and congratulated the couple as they arrived. His colleague appreciated the effort he made to come despite his religious convictions. Dayan Weiss was reluctant to give a *heter* when he was asked about attending the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 (*Minchas Yitzchak, Likutei Teshuvos* 71). He adds another concern – that of giving honor to *avodah zarah* by removing one’s head covering and acting with dignity by standing up as befits a church service. Similar concerns would apply to tourists who marvel at the beauty of the artistic masterpieces displayed in churches and any indication of appreciation would be forbidden even where there is no service in progress.

## PRAYER SERVICES

Rav Asher Weiss was asked about an American Rav who had been invited to participate in a church service in front of the US President and delivered a public prayer there. Rav Weiss disagreed with Rav Ovadia Yosef and argued the prohibition was only rabbinical, where one must be sensitive to the principles of *eivah* and the public benefit which may be applicable in this situation. However, he argued that even if that would permit entry into the church, it is certainly forbidden to *daven* to HaShem in a house of idol-worship and one cannot say a chapter of *Tehillim* or offer a Jewish prayer there, and therefore the said Rav’s recital was forbidden. He adds that he is often asked whether tourists are allowed to view the artistic splendor of church buildings or to attend concerts in their buildings where there are no icons or prayer involved, but he could see no *heter* for that and we should distance ourselves from such buildings (*Minchas Asher, Parshas Va’era* 2:20). Rav J. David Bleich reports a ruling of Rav J.B. Soloveitchik issued in the wake of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Rav Soloveitchik announced that it was forbidden to view a televised funeral mass even in the privacy of one’s own home because “just as it is prohibited for a Jew to enter a church, so too is it prohibited to bring the church into his home” (Contemporary Halachic Problems, vol.7 p.190).

## IS A CROSS WORSHIPED AS AN IDOL?

Rav Yonah Landsofer writes that when a member of another religion performs acts that seem to be a ritual act of worship before an artifact, such as bowing or praying in front of it, that object assumes the status of an idol, regardless of whether the person in question believes that the object has certain powers or not. This was written in a *teshuva* dealing with the issue of a Jew selling diamonds to be set in a cross and also the Christian adoration for crosses (*Teshuvah* 39, missing from his *sefer Me'il Tzedakah*, printed in *Moriah*, vol. 262). This explains why *poskim* often assume the cross to be an idol without even attempting to delve into the complexities of its theological meaning. The reason for this is that when it comes to the laws of idolatrous prohibitions, we do not consider the supposed intricacies of the idolator’s theology but instead take an idolator’s act of devotion at face value (Rav Reuven Chaim Klein, Journal of Halacha, 2022 p.134).