

VISITING A CHURCH OR A MOSQUE

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Question: Is it permitted to visit or tour a church or a mosque?

Discussion: It is clearly prohibited to enter a house of avodah zarah. The Mishnah[1] prohibits one from even entering a city in which avodah zarah is present. Since it is impossible for us, who live in exile, to adhere to this prohibition, we are considered anusim—under duress—in this regard. Entering an actual house of avodah zarah, however, is clearly prohibited[2].

What remains to be clarified, however, is whether or not a church or a mosque is a house of avodah zarah. The poskim are not uniform in their classification of Christians as idol-worshippers. Although the Rambam rules unequivocally that Christians are idol-worshippers[3], other Rishonim[4] are more tentative. Their view is based on the assumption that non-Jews are considered idol-worshippers only if they totally reject the existence of G-d. Christianity, however, combines the belief in G-d with other idolatrous and alien beliefs. Such a theology is called avodah zarah b'shituf (in combination). Some poskim rule that avodah zarah b'shituf is not considered full-fledged avodah zarah[5], while others maintain that it is[6].

Moreover, there is a view[7] that gentiles nowadays cannot be considered idol-worshippers since they are merely following in the tradition of their parents (without actually worshipping idols).

Practically speaking, however, the vast majority of the poskim agree that Christianity is considered avodah zarah and a Jew is forbidden to enter a church[8]. The following reasons are offered:

- Most poskim consider Christianity to be avodah zarah[9].
- Even if avodah zarah b'shituf is permitted, it is only permitted for a non-Jew. For a Jew, however, there is no difference between avodah zarah and avodah zarah b'shituf[10]. For him, therefore, a church is considered a house of avodah zarah.
- The view of the Ran (Sanhedrin 61b) is that the belief in any religion except Judaism constitutes avodah zarah. He says the following: "...even the Christian saints, and even the...leader of the Ishmaelites, even though their followers do not consider them gods, nevertheless, since they bow to them to acknowledge that they are human incarnation of their divinities, they all have the halachic status of avodah zarah..."
- Even if present-day gentiles do not worship idols, nevertheless their churches are considered houses of idol worship, since all the services conducted therein are performed in the name of avodah zarah[11].

Regarding Islam, however, most poskim follow the opinion of the Rambam^[12] that it is not considered avodah zarah^[13]. Hence they do not expressly forbid entering a mosque^[14]. Other poskim forbid entering a mosque as well^[15]. All agree that unless there is a compelling reason to do so, mosques are off limits for any G-d-fearing Jew.

It goes without saying that the houses of worship of all other heathen religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. are considered avodah zarah and are off-limits at all times.

Question: Is one allowed to cut through the parking lot of a church?

Discussion: While church services are being held, it is clearly forbidden to enter the church's parking lot because it may seem to a bystander that one is entering the parking lot in order to enter the church.

When church services are not being held, it is permitted to cut through the church's parking lot. Although the poskim refer to a middas chasidus (an act of piety) not to enter a courtyard of a church, nevertheless, if the shortest route available is through the church's parking lot, it is permitted and the middas chasidus does not apply^[16].

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1. Avodah Zarah 11b.
 2. Rambam, Peirush ha-Mishnayos, Avodah Zarah 1:3. Shach, Y.D. 149:1. See also Y.D. 150:1.
 3. Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros 11:7. The line in the Rambam referring to Christians was censored. It appears in its entirety, however, in the Frankel edition of the Rambam. See also Rambam Hilchos Avodah Zarah 9:4, and Hilchos Teshuvah 3:8 for a similar ruling.
 4. Tosafos, Sanhedrin 63b in the name of Rabbeinu Tam; Meiri, Avodah Zarah 2a and 6b.
 5. Rama, O.C. 156 according to Pischei Teshuvah, Y.D. 147:2; Mor u'Ketziyah 224; Sho'el u'Meishiv, Tanina 1:51; Seder Mishnah, Yesodei ha-Torah 1:7.
 6. Noda b'Yehudah, Tanina, Y.D. 148; Sha'ar Efrayim 24, quoting the Chelkas Mechokek; Peri Megadim, Y.D. 65:45; Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, O.C. 84. See Mishnah Berurah 304:4.
 7. See Shulchan Aruch, Y.D. 148:12 and Teshuvos Yehudah Ya'aleh, Y.D. 170.
 8. Teshuvos Peri ha-Sadeh 2:4; Igros Moshe, Y.D. 3:129-6.
 9. Minchas Elazar 1:53-3; Yechaveh Da'as 4:45. See entire list in Yayin Malchus, pgs. 234-237
 10. Binyan Tziyon 1:63.
 11. Darchei Teshuvah 150:2; Tzitz Eliezer 14:91, quoting Rav C. Palagi.
 12. Hilchos Ma'achalos Assuros 11:7.

13. Y.D. 124:6 and Taz 4 and Shach 12. See Ben Ish Chai, Parashas Balak.
14. See Avnei Yashfei 1:153 who quotes Rav Y.S. Elyashiv as ruling that it is not prohibited to enter a mosque.
15. Tzitz Eliezer 14:91; 18:47, based on the previously-mentioned view of the Ran. See also Meiri, Avodah Zarah 57a who quotes Chachmei Sefarad as ruling that Islam is avodah zarah.
16. Entire paragraph based on Rama, Y.D. 149:2. See also Igros Moshe, Y.D. 3:129-6.

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