

# Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State  
through the lens of Jewish Law

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## Visiting Churches and Mosques

Tourists come from all over the world to visit the churches and mosques here in the State of Israel, admiring the history, architecture, and the artwork housed therein. This poses a dilemma for Jewish tour guides. Israelis travelling abroad too might be tempted to visit churches and mosques, taking in the sites.

But is it permissible for a Jew to enter a church or mosque?

In his Commentary to the Mishna (Avoda Zara 1), the Rambam writes that according to the letter of the law, it is prohibited to even live in a city that houses idolatry, "all the more so to enter into the house of idolatry itself!"

But is Christianity considered idolatry according to Jewish Law?

In a number of places in his oeuvre (censored out of many editions), the Rambam writes explicitly that Christianity is indeed idolatry (see, for example, Peirush HaMishna to Avoda Zara 1:3, Chullin 1:2; Hilchot Avoda Zara 9:4, 10:1; Hilchot Ma'achalot Asurot 11:7).

But some contend that according to Rabbeinu Tam, one of the major Tosafists, Christianity is not idolatry.

The Talmud teaches that one should not have a gentile business partner, lest he

require his Jewish partner to take an oath. Rashbam (Tosafot to Sanhedrin 63b, s.v. Asur) adds that all the more so, it may cause the gentile to take an oath in the name of his god. Rabbeinu Tam (ad loc.) is quoted as permitting such an oath, since Shituf, joining the Creator together with something or someone else, is not considered idolatry. Many commentaries, however, explain that according to Rabbeinu Tam, believing in the trinity might not be considered idolatry for a gentile, but certainly is considered idolatry for a Jew.

*Ed. note: From our perspective, idolatry is forbidden for Jews by the Torah and for non-Jews, by Sheva Mitzvot B'nei No'ach (the Seven Noahide Laws). The guidelines as to what constitutes Avoda Zara (idolatry) for a Jew and for a non-Jew are not necessarily the same.*

Some interpret 13th century Provencal scholar, the Meiri, as also having ruled Christianity is not idolatry.

But most authorities rule in accord with the Rambam, and consider Christianity to be idolatry.

One issue that arises is the prohibition to derive any benefit from idolatry. The Shulchan Aruch rules that it is prohibited to "look at beautiful idols, since one derives benefit from seeing them" (Yoreh Dei'a 142:15). Based on this, the Chochmat Adam and Birkei Yosef prohibit entering churches to admire their beauty.

Rav Ovadia Yosef writes that is completely forbidden to visit a church, and warns tour guides not to bring groups into churches and violate the prohibition of placing a stumbling block before the blind (Yechaveh Da'at 4:45). Asked if it is permissible for an Israeli diplomat to participate in a diplomatic

event held inside a church, where there is concern that his lack of attendance would cause harm to relations with the State of Israel, Rav Ovadia ruled that it is forbidden (Yabia Omer, YD 7:12). He cites authorities who rule that we do not allow violating a Torah prohibition, even if it will cause EIVA - hatred and persecution of the Jewish People - and adds that we are not concerned about this today.

It would appear that the only time it is permitted to enter a church is in order to save Jewish life (See Shulchan Aruch YD 157:3). But at a time when Judaism itself is under attack, even that is prohibited (Rema, ad loc., citing the Kol Bo).

If no longer in use, however, Rabbi Chaim David HaLevi rules that it is permissible to enter a church (Asei L'cha Rav 4:53).

Outside of Israel, it is not uncommon for events, business meetings, twelve-step programs, or even voting to be held inside of a church, often in a multi-purpose room within the building. Is it permissible to enter the building and use a room that is not used for worship?

One concern is Chashad. If seen entering a church building, onlookers might come to suspect one of worshipping there. The Talmud (Avoda Zara 12a) prohibits entering a city which is holding a pagan festival, lest one do something that gives the impression that he is worshipping idolatry: Bending to pull a thorn out of his foot, picking scattered coins up off of the ground, or bending down to take a drink from a fountain, may look like one is bowing down to the idol.

According to the Rashba, the courtyard of a house of idolatry is likened to the city, as there is a concern of Chashad, suspicion. There is a dispute among authorities whether it is permissible to enter the courtyard when not in use by idolaters, or whether it is always prohibited. The Rema (YD 149:2) cites both opinions. Rav Eliezer Waldenberg writes that whenever the Rema cites two opinions (yesh omrim v'yesh omrim), we follow the second opinion - in this case the stringent opinion - prohibiting entering such a courtyard at all times (Tzitz Eliezer 14:91). According to Rav Waldenberg, the contemporary church building is similar to the courtyard of the house of idolatry, and one should be stringent not to enter the building, even rooms that are not used for prayer and do not have crosses or religious iconography.

Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled that it is prohibited to enter a church building to admire its beauty, as the architecture and artwork were created to glorify their god (Igrot Moshe, YD 3:129). Rav Moshe adds that the very purpose of such beauty is in order to missionize. He also ruled that it is prohibited to participate in sports games held inside of a church building, in an auditorium not used for services (Igrot Moshe, Orech Chayim 4:40).

When asked about entering a church to vote, Rav Ovadia Hedaya was concerned with the crosses and spiritual impurity in the building (Yaskil Avdi, Vol. 8 OC 20:46). Rav Moshe Shternbuch permits entering a church building where voting will take place, so long as it is through a separate entrance, as it is clear to all that one is not coming there to worship (Teshuvot V'hanhagot 2:410). But Rav

Menashe Klein ruled that even if the voting is held in a room with no crosses or icons, it is forbidden to enter a church to vote as one is obligated to distance himself from idolatry (Mishneh Halachot 6:139).

Based on the above, one should be stringent not to enter a church building, even rooms that are not used for worship, unless there are extreme circumstances (e.g. participating in a twelve-step program, IDF soldiers protecting civilian life, etc.).

But perhaps a mosque is different.

The Rambam rules that Islam is not idolatry (Tehuvot HaRambam, 448; Hilchot Ma'achalot Asurot 11:7). The Rashba, Tur, and Rema concur with the Rambam. Rav Ovadia Yosef writes that therefore it is permissible to enter a mosque. (Yabia Omer, YD 7:12). Asked by Jewish soldiers if it is permissible to pray in a mosque, Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor ruled that they may enter a mosque and pray there (Ein Yitzchak, OC 11).

However the Ran to Sanhedrin 61b writes that since Muslims prostrate themselves before Muhammad, deifying him, Islam is indeed to be considered idolatry. The Meiri to Avoda Zara 57a mentions that the Chachmei S'farad ruled Islam is idolatry. It would appear that the Ritva and Radbaz also rule that Islam is idolatry. Rav Eliezer Waldenberg is stringent. Citing the Ran, he rules it is forbidden for a Jew to enter a mosque (Tzitz Eliezer 14:91). Citing the stringent opinions, The Klausenberger Rebbe (Divrei Yetziv, YD 40) also rules it is forbidden to enter a mosque. According to Rav Hershel Shachter, visiting a mosque - or expressing an interest in

any religion other than Judaism - violates the Torah prohibition of "Do not turn towards the idols" (Vayikra 19:4).

As portions of today's Ma'arat amachpela complex were built as a mosque - and some parts continue to function as a mosque - there is a dispute among authorities if it is permissible to enter and pray there. Those who believe Islam to be idolatry forbid praying there (see Teshuvot V'hanhagot 4:35). But Rav Ovadia Yosef rules that it is permissible, adding that he has seen many great Ge'onim and Tzadikim pray there (Yabia Omer, YD 7:12). 