

Churches

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

My Uncle Henry introduced me to Verdi's *Requiem* as a teenager, and I have been hooked on church music ever since. Sure, I ignore the theology. I can repeat the Latin text, but the words have no more significance for me than birdsong. This time of the year I remember when, some 50 years ago, friends took me to a church in Jerusalem to hear a midnight mass (where most of the those present were Israelis and like me, standing at the back as observers). As a student in Cambridge I enjoyed evensong at King's College Chapel. Was I wrong? Should I do penance?

Throughout the Bible and the Talmud there is a very clear line that one ought to avoid having any contact with pagan worship or idolatry. Even to the point of crossing the road to walk as far away as possible from any contact with the forbidden. Yet Jews always mixed with pagans to do business and for the sake of good relations with their neighbors. This was particularly so as Jews spread across the Greek, Persian, and Roman empires and often lived under pagan rule. There is an opinion in the Talmud (Gittin 13b) that "true" idolatry does not exist beyond the borders of the Land of Israel. Beyond it, idolatry is no more than "following the customs of their forefathers".

But Christianity presented a major problem for Jews who saw churches full of images and sculptures that to them seemed like idols. Indeed, within Christianity many groups emerged, especially under the Protestant Reformation, who objected to such effigies and representations, themselves. There was also the issue of the Trinity. It seemed to many Jews that Christianity believed in three gods. We need not go into the theology of the Trinity here. Enough to say that the term *Shituf*, partnership, came to define Christianity, as in opposition the Oneness of the God of the Bible.

Islam did not present such a problem. There were no representations in Islam. However much Muslims revered Mohammad, he was not God. Maimonides accepted an oath by Allah as being valid for Jews. The issues with them were not their concept of God, but rather the integrity of the text and authorship of the Bible. Entering a Muslim house of prayer was not considered an issue. Recent political developments have raised questions about the political appropriateness of entering Muslim houses of prayer where sermons antagonistic to Jews may be preached, but that is not a religious matter.

The medieval Tosafists who lived in France and the Rhineland, traded, particularly wine, with Christian neighbors. On the first page of the Talmud *Avodah Zara*, they marshal a range of arguments for being lenient in their dealings with the Christian neighbors on matters forbidden under the rubric of idolatry. Although that did not mean they approved of entering churches if they did not have to. But they laid the ground for a reevaluation of attitudes towards the Christian world.

This is not intended to be an academic or exhaustive article in the subject.

I am not going to quote all the sources in support of my position. (Anyone interested can consult [a thorough article by Rabbi J.D. Bleich in Tradition 44:2](#).) Nevertheless, there are certain emblematic opinions on this issue that are important to highlight.

Rabbi Menachem Ben Shlomo, known as the Meiri (1249-1306), lived in Perpignan in France. Commenting on the Talmud (Bava Kama 113b), he says, "One is forbidden to steal even from idolaters who have no moral discipline. In general, a person who has a moral, religious code of behavior and worships a Divinity in whatever way, even if their beliefs are different to ours, they are like Jews in all matters pertaining to civil laws." And he goes on to reiterate the often repeated principle the Jews are not allowed to take advantage or mislead anyone who has a moral code. Anything that is mentioned in our holy books that relates to or is derogatory could not and must not be applied to anyone Christian, Muslim, whatever other religion, or indeed moral code alive today. Such a position is reiterated by one of the greatest rabbis of the eighteenth century Yechezkel Landau (1713 – 1793) in the introduction to his volumes of responsa *Nodah BiYehudah*.

Nevertheless, one can find sources within the traditional and Haredi world today who use such ancient laws against both Christians and Muslims (and incidentally against secular Jews). Their objections are that Christianity was responsible for the Holocaust. And the rest of the free world stood by and did nothing to help us, and therefore they have betrayed their moral status. Islam nowadays overwhelmingly seeks the destruction of the Jewish state and likewise has lost its moral position. I reject such a position without reserve. After all, there are plenty of Jews, even outwardly Orthodox ones, who have betrayed the values of Torah. Besides the dangers to Judaism nowadays are more political than religious or moral.

There is also a tradition of not discussing theological issues with non-Jews because of their desire for evangelism and their belief that only they have a true faith. Yet the very authorities who supported that position, such as Rav J.B. Soloveitchik in his 1964 statement, all agreed that one could and should get together to discuss political and social issues of common concern. This attitude was also a response to Christian evangelism and the long painful history of Christian public Disputations designed to convert the Jews. That is largely in the past, except for a handful of missionaries.

Because there is a lot of bad blood and a horrific history of persecution, murder, and kidnapping associated with churches, many movements within Orthodoxy, particularly outreach ones, are still making too much of an issue of visiting churches. In practice, there are many authorities, going back hundreds of years, who have allowed going into churches for all sorts of reasons, including to retrieve debts or, indeed, to pay respects to rulers and leaders. On this basis, Chief Rabbis in the UK have often gone to Westminster Abbey for political occasions and even for royal weddings. And Chief Rabbis of Israel have been to the Vatican.

There have always been religious scholars who have permitted and, indeed, themselves visited Christian churches in Europe to listen to music or to view the architecture and art, as art alone. The great Sephardi halakhist Rabbi

Ovadia Yosef in his responsa brings a long list of great rabbis, opinions, and anecdotes of some who went to churches to listen to music (*Yabia Omer* 2, YD 11), even though he concludes against publicizing this as a halachic opinion. On the other hand, his great contemporary Rabbi Hayim David HaLevy is quite explicit that it is acceptable (*Aseh Lecha Rav* 4.53) and so is Rabbi Yosef Messas (*Mayim Hayim* 2, YD 108). And I will not mention the names of important rabbonim from the Haredi world whom I have accompanied to churches in Europe to look at the architecture and art. So clearly there are sufficient grounds for permitting it.

However, I want to go further because times have changed dramatically over the past fifty years in so many areas. First of all, the Catholic Church since Pope John XXIII has progressively condemned anti-Semitism unequivocally. It has removed anti-Jewish theologies and attitudes that used to be the norm. The Catholic Church no longer seeks to convert Jews in order to "save" them. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate has established warm relations with the Vatican and the present pope, as were three of his predecessors, a good friend of the Jews. So are most Southern Baptists and Mormons.

Nowadays in Europe the Church is on the retreat. Many churches have become museums, concert halls, and tourist attractions, more than houses of worship. A lot of them no longer have religious services altogether. The fear that by going there we may be acknowledging an alien deity no longer makes sense. Neither does the fear that our children might be kidnapped, forcibly converted, or corrupted. I can no more think that going to visit a church is any worse than visiting a castle once occupied by a rabidly anti-Semitic ruler or regime. Just as touring ancient pagan sites as archaeological artifacts is now considered normal, and plenty of Haredi tourists visit them without qualm. We have more to fear physically and morally on the streets of any major city than inside a church.

As for music, there is a long tradition that music "cannot be contaminated". All Jewish music has been influenced by external cultures, and many of our most popular tunes were originally non-Jewish. I have no problem reading literature even of those who themselves were anti-Semitic. I'm sure many read Roald Dahl's children's books without being aware of how anti-Semitic he was. On the lowest level we need, as the Mishnah says, to "know what to answer epicureans". On a higher level, appreciating the gifts of God and what we find beautiful in this world, even if the human sources may be defective, is also an act of worship.