



Is it forbidden for Jews to enter a church?

By *Anonymous*
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Rabbi, I have a problem

QUESTION: My rabbi says it is forbidden for Jews to enter a church. But if we can't participate in interfaith visits, how can we promote understanding between different faiths?



Rabbi Naftali Brawer

Naftali Brawer is rabbi at Borehamwood and Elstree United Synagogue.

Your rabbi is correct. The rabbinic consensus, based on the Talmud (Avodah Zara 17a,) is that it is forbidden to enter a church, even if just to admire the architecture or artwork. This body of opinion spans the generations and comprises leading medieval Sephardic and Ashkenazi rabbis such as Maimonides, Rashba (Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet), Ritba (Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Asevilli) and Rosh (Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel), as well as contemporary halachists including Rabbis Moshe Feinstein, Ovadia Yosef and Eliezer Waldenberg.

While at first glance this approach appears disrespectful to and even disdainful of other faiths, I believe it reflects just the opposite. Judaism sees faith, any faith, as something very powerful. A Christian house of worship in Jewish eyes is more than just a building. It is a place where Christianity is palpable. It pervades the very walls and space of the church and gives it its unique character. This is no different to how Judaism sees its own faith manifested in the very space of a synagogue.

To a person of faith, this has serious ramifications. One cannot simply enter a church without some aspect of the church entering you. To put it another way: by entering a church, one enters into a Christian religious experience. No matter how subliminal this

experience is, it is inconsistent with Jewish faith and practice.

Those who argue that a church is nothing more than a building underestimate the potent atmosphere of a house of worship and, in so doing, they trivialise it.

As to your point about interfaith understanding, there are many other ways for this to be achieved. I have never knowingly set foot in a church and yet I work hard at broadening my knowledge of other faiths. Dialogue and friendship are the way to break down negative stereotypes and this can be achieved in neutral settings.

A crucial element in successful interfaith work is a respect for boundaries. One must be firm in their beliefs and confident enough to delineate their religious boundaries. When this is the case the ensuing dialogue can lead to greater respect and understanding. Ironically people of other faiths seem instinctively to understand this.

It is often members of our own faith, who in their bid to appear enlightened and respectful of others, end up overcompensating by blurring their own religious boundaries and making unacceptable and, crucially, unnecessary compromises.



Rabbi Jonathan Romain

Jonathan Romain is rabbi at Maidenhead (Reform) Synagogue.

Good point - and that just goes to prove that not all rabbis are right all of the time. To be fair, he was probably quoting someone else's opinion, and over the centuries there have been so many rulings on every possible subject that you will always find some rabbis in favour of the topic under discussion and other rabbis arguing against it.

Ultimately it is not so much a matter of "what do the rabbis say?" but "which rabbi do I follow?" Rabbis are teachers, not gurus, so they always prefer informed choice over blind obedience.

As for this case, there have been periods of intense animosity between Jews and Christians in the past - think of the Crusades or blood libels- and various medieval rabbis did forbid entering a place so associated with persecution. Some modern authorities have maintained the ban for a different reason - fearful that it might lead to conversion.

A key question is: why are you going into a church? Entering does not mean worshipping. It could be for a variety of other valid reasons: to admire the architecture, to attend the funeral of a non-Jewish friend or to learn about Christianity for the sake of dialogue.

There is a small possibility that a Jew may be so impressed by what he finds that he decides to convert - but such instances are extraordinarily rare. It also displays an insecurity about Jewish loyalties that is very unattractive. Why are we so afraid?

Moreover, you are absolutely right about interfaith understanding, which can grow only on the basis on knowledge of each other's traditions. This includes experiencing each other's places of worship. It is ignorance which is the real danger.

You could meet in a neutral venue, such as a town hall, but that would be a very poor substitute for being in a church and seeing at first hand not only the differences but also similarities, such as common usage of the Psalms, or both the altar and the ark facing east.

It is also important to remember that a condition of dialogue is that neither party seeks to convert the other and respects each other's religious integrity.

Fear of entering a church may have been relevant in certain countries in earlier periods, but does not apply today. It smacks either of religious cowardice or of time-warp mentality.

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