

World Religions and the Noahide Prohibition of Idolatry¹

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Although the prohibition of *avodah zarah* (literally, “strange/foreign worship,” but more loosely translated as “idolatry”) is included in both the Torah’s 613 mitzvos for Jews and in the seven Noahide laws, many authorities maintain that the exact parameters of the prohibition differ when applied to Jews versus when applied to non-Jews. There is ample reason to say that the laws by which Noahides are bound are quite distinct from the laws of the Torah given at Mount Sinai, and even when the same law exists in both codes, the practical applications of that law may differ.

This essay explores the possibility that what constitutes idolatry for a Jew may not be the same as what constitutes idolatry for a non-Jew. This distinction may have wide-reaching consequences that may result from branding any world religion as idolatrous or non-idolatrous. These ramifications might include whether a Jew may donate money towards the construction of an “idolatrous” temple, repurpose a building used for “idolatry” as a synagogue, sell property in Israel to “idolaters,” make use of products used in “idolatrous” ritual offerings, permit a Jew to follow an “idolater’s” *chukos* (arational or irrational customs), and more.

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The first half of this essay explores the theoretical possible differences between a Jew's prohibition of idolatry and a non-Jew's, raising various proofs and counter-proofs to the notion that such differences even exist. The second half of this essay focuses on specific world religions and assesses whether halacha considers them idolatrous or not.

Gentiles May Worship Idols

The possible difference between Jew and gentile in regard to the prohibition of idolatry is best highlighted by a cryptic and controversial comment made by R. Bechayei ibn Chalava.² He writes that G-d allowed the nations of the world the choice of whether they will worship Him or worship idolatry, but He did not give this choice to the Jews.³

Similarly, R. Yitzchak Aramah writes that gentiles are not enjoined from worshiping idolatry. He interprets the Sinaitic Revelation as akin to a marriage ceremony between G-d and the Jewish people. This "marriage" between them creates a certain

2. *Bereishis* 1:18 and *Devarim* 4:19.

3. A similar passage in R. Bechayei's commentary seems to echo this notion. The Gemara (*Yevamos* 48b) understands that when the Torah states that the "beautiful captive woman" should "cry over her father and mother for a month's time" (*Devarim* 21:13), this does not literally mean that she should mourn her parents, but that she should mourn her newly-forsaken idolatry. The Gemara deduces this position by citing a verse in *Yirmiyahu* in which an idolater refers to his idols as his parents: "They say to a tree, 'You are my father' and to a stone, 'You gave birth to us'" (*Yirmiyahu* 2:27). Through this month-long crying, the captive woman mourns her separation from idolatry before being accepted into the Jewish community. R. Bechayei (*Devarim* 21:13) comments that this is because the Torah only prohibits a Jew from engaging in idolatry, but does not outlaw a Canaanite from worshiping idols. This passage is problematic in the same way as the above passage, because it is clear from many sources that even Canaanites — and, in fact, all people — are prohibited from worshiping idols. R. Yaakov Emden (commentary to R. Bechayei ad loc.) points out this difficulty and refers the reader to his discussion about *shituf* (see below). R. Emden's gloss was first published in M. M. Weissbaum (ed.), *Zichron Yehoshia* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Machon Sifsei Tzadikim*, 2001), p. 15.

bond that generates the “monogamous” expectation of loyalty. Accordingly, R. Aramah argues, gentiles are not enjoined from engaging in idolatry, because they are not party to such a “marriage” with G-d.

He further adduces this view from the Biblical passages (discussed below) that suggest that G-d divided control of the nations to various angelic forces. Because of this, all nations besides the Jews are not expected to worship Him, but they are seemingly free to worship idolatry.

R. Aramah also points to a specific passage in the Gemara which seems to support this notion:

R. Yosef taught: “He (G-d) stood and He measured the land, He saw and He untied (i.e. permitted) the nations.”⁴ What did He see? He saw the seven Noahide commandments that the Noahides accepted upon themselves but did not fulfill. Because they did not fulfill those commandments, He arose and permitted them (i.e. allowed them to transgress said commandments).”⁵

From this passage, R. Aramah concludes that at Sinai, G-d granted the gentiles a reprieve of sorts and no longer expected them to uphold the seven Noahide commandments. Based on this, he understood that gentiles are not prohibited from worshiping idolatry.⁶

Understanding R. Bechayei’s Position

R. Chaim Palagi takes R. Bechayei at face value, meaning that non-Jews are not prohibited from serving idols, but rather are given lateral freedom to choose whether they will worship G-d or idols. However, R. Palagi notes that this explanation is at odds with an array of sources which assume that even gentiles

4. *Chabakkuk* 3:6.

5. *Avodah Zarah* 2b and *Bava Kama* 38a.

6. *Akeidas Yitzchak* (*Sha’ar* 88).

are forbidden from engaging in idolatry — most notably the Gemara,⁷ which includes a prohibition of idolatry among the seven Noahide commandments.⁸

Moreover, the proof which R. Aramah offered from the Gemara's statement about G-d permitting the gentiles whatever the seven Noahide commandments outlawed is quite problematic, because the Gemara there continues:

Did He really trade [away those commandments]? If so, we find that a sinner [unfairly] gains, [because failing to keep the Noahide commandments caused the gentiles to be free from those very commandments]? Mar, son of Ravina, said: It means that even if they fulfill those commandments, they do not receive reward for doing so. Do they not?... Rather it means that they receive the reward of somebody who was not commanded and performs the commandment [which is a lower form of reward than reward given to somebody who is commanded and performs the commandment].⁹

In this passage, the Gemara clarifies that it never meant to say that the non-Jews were given *carte blanche* permission to violate the seven Noahide commandments. Rather, it means that they can no longer receive the reward for observing the Noahide commandments as somebody who is obligated in those commandments, but must instead suffice with receiving the reward of somebody who is not commanded to follow those commandments — even though they are commanded to do so.¹⁰

7. See *Sanhedrin* 56a-b.

8. *Einei Kol Chai* to *Sanhedrin* 56b.

9. *Avodah Zarah* 3a and *Bava Kama* 38a.

10. R. Yehoshua Heschel of Krakow (1578–1648) also writes (*Teshuvos Pnei Yehoshua* vol. 1 Y.D. 3) that at Sinai, Hashem granted the non-Jews the license to violate the Noahide commandments. Nevertheless, R. Yehoshua's assertion was questioned by another authority, who noted that the Gemara's conclusion

These sources clearly demonstrate that even non-Jews continue to be prohibited from worshipping idolatry.

In light of this, R. Yaakov Chaim Sofer concludes that we cannot take R. Bechayei's comments at face value. Instead, he proposes that R. Bechayei means something entirely different. He means that even if the Jews should decide to worship idolatry, G-d will not allow them to do so persistently; instead, He will always eventually intervene and cause them to return to Him. On the other hand, if other nations stray after idolatry, He will not do anything to force them to forsake such aberrations.¹¹ A similar approach is offered by R. Chaim b. Shlomo Cohen of Djerba¹² as a response to the difficulties raised by R. Chaim Palagi.

These reinterpretations of R. Bechayei presume that in order to ensure the Jews' loyalty and protect them from the heinous sin of idolatry, G-d took away their free will to some extent. By contrast, He left the other nations of the world with the ability

seems to back away from the understanding that post-Sinai all non-Jews are allowed to violate the Noahide commandments. R. Yehoshua of Krakow penned a response to this query, but it has only been partially published, and the rest of his answer remains a mystery; see *Teshuvos Pnei Yehoshua* vol. 2 E.H. 43). R. Moshe Sofer (*Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* C.M. 185) also notes this difficulty with R. Yehoshua of Krakow's position. See what R. Yehoshua of Krakow's grandson, R. Yaakov Yehoshua Falk (1680–1756) writes about this in *Pnei Yehoshua* (*Bava Kama* 38a). Rashi, though (*Avodah Zarah* 3a s.v. *lomar she'im mekaymin*), seems to support the *Teshuvos Pnei Yehoshua's* reading.

11. *Bris Yaakov* 26:2.

12. *Toras Chaim* (Livorno, 1894, page 4a). R. Chaim Dov Chavel, in his notes to R. Bechayei (Jerusalem: *Mossad Harav Kook*, 1966, pp. 36–37), cites this explanation and notes that it is difficult to say that G-d will never allow the Jews to replace Him with idolatry, as the Bible itself is replete with instances of Jews engaging in idolatry. Rather, he clarifies that R. Bechayei means that G-d sees to it that the Jews *as a whole* will never collectively replace Him with idolatry, while He does not do so for the other nations of the world.

In a similar vein, R. Chaim of Friedberg writes (*Sefer Hachaim*, Jerusalem, 1939, pp. 113–114) that one of the advantages of scattering the Jews across the globe in their exile is that Jews in different places will think differently, such that it will never happen that the entire Jewish people *as a whole* will resolve to violate any one specific commandment in the Torah.

to choose between the permitted and the forbidden. According to these approaches, the prohibition of idolatry for Jews and gentiles remains the same, and R. Bechayei said nothing about the difference between what is expected of a Jew and what is expected of a non-Jew.¹³ The difference between Jews and non-Jews lies in a totally different point, namely, that G-d ensures that the Jews never violate the prohibition of idolatry collectively or for an extended amount of time but does not take such precautions for other nations.

Nonetheless, others, such as R. Reuven Margolios¹⁴ and R. Eliyahu Greenzeig,¹⁵ explain that R. Bechayei's comments are indeed reflective of a difference between the expectations from a Jew and a gentile respectively. As explained below, many authorities maintain that while Jews may only worship G-d and no other force, gentiles are allowed to worship Him in tandem with other forces. This view is apparently reflected in a ruling of the Rama that gentiles are not enjoined from "partnering" (*shituf*) G-d with another deity.¹⁶ According to this understanding, when R. Bechayei writes that non-Jews have the option to choose idolatry, this does not mean they have the option to worship idolatry *as opposed to* G-d, but that they are free to worship idolatry *alongside* G-d.¹⁷

13. R. Moshe Sternbuch proves (*Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 3 Y.D. 264 and 317) that even according to the Noahide code, non-Jews are not obligated to *believe* in one G-d; they are simply expected to refrain from worshipping idolatry. As such, non-Jews have the option to voluntarily accept upon themselves the belief in one G-d and become a *ger toshav*. Perhaps this is the choice given to gentiles to which R. Bechayei refers.

14. *Margolios Hayam* (*Sanhedrin* 56b:12).

15. *Koveitz Yeshurun* vol. 14 (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 811–814.

16. O.C. 156:1. R. Shalom Messas (*Teshuvos Shemesh Umagen* 3 O.C. 30–31) notes in a responsum addressed to Dr. Marc B. Shapiro that R. Yosef Karo, author of the *Beis Yosef* and *Shulchan Aruch*, also agrees with the Rama's ruling. That responsum also appears in Shapiro's work *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* (Y.D. 37).

17. A similar suggestion is made by R. Yaakov Emden in M. M. Weissbaum (ed.), *Zichron Yehoshia* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Machon Sifsei Tzadikim*, 2001), p. 15.

Gentiles May Practice *Shituf*

The Rama's ruling is based on his reading of a passage in Tosafos. The Gemara¹⁸ understands *Shemos* 23:13 to forbid verbally saying the name of an idolatrous deity,¹⁹ and because of that prohibition concludes that it is forbidden for a Jew to enter a business partnership with an idolater, lest the idolatrous partner be required to take an oath and utter the name(s) of his god(s).

As the Rama understands it, Tosafos write that despite this ban²⁰ on partnering with an idolater, a Jew is still allowed to enter a business partnership with a Christian, because Christians do not just invoke the names of idolatrous deities in their oaths, but rather do so *in conjunction* with naming G-d. As such, Christians are not idolaters in the classical sense; they are simply pairing G-d with other "gods," something which is not forbidden for a non-Jew to do.²¹ According to many commentators, the Rama took this passage as blanket permission for non-Jews to practice *shituf*.²²

18. *Sanhedrin* 63b.

19. For more about the prohibition of uttering names of idolatrous deities, see R. C. Klein, "Uttering the Names of Idols," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* vol. 73 (Spring 2017).

20. Although the literal wording of the Talmud suggests that this ban is a full-fledged prohibition, see Ran (*Avodah Zarah* 7a in the Alfasi pagination) and Ritva (*Megillah* 28a), who suggest that it is merely an *act of piety* to refrain from such partnerships, but they are not technically forbidden.

21. Tosafos *Bechoros* 2b s.v. *shema* and *Sanhedrin* 63b s.v. *assur*. A similar reading of Tosafos is evident in the Maharsha and Maharam (*Sanhedrin* ad loc.). See A. Turin, "A Positive Light on the Nations: R. Moshe Isserles' Revisionistic Views on Christianity," *Hakirah* vol. 28 (2020), pp. 110–112 who suggests that the Rama's reading of Tosafos relied on a censored version of what they wrote and does not necessarily reflect their actual position.

22. See *Shach* (Y.D. 151:7), who takes the Rama's ruling at face value to mean that non-Jews are allowed to practice *shituf*, as do R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (*Teshuvos Chavos Yair* 185), R. Pinchas Halevi Horowitz of Frankurt (*Sefer Hamikneh Kiddushin* 31b), R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg (*Hakesav V'hakabbalah, Devarim* 4:19), and R. Yaakov Ettlinger (*Aruch Laner, Sukkah* 45b). R. Refael

This approach to the Rama's ruling is adopted by R. Shmuel ben Yosef of Krakow, who qualifies the ruling with an important caveat: belief in a sort of dualism that recognizes the existence of two *equally* potent gods is a type of idolatry that is even forbidden to non-Jews. But if one's dualism consists of one Supreme G-d and another, lower god(s) who has lesser powers and is subservient to the one Supreme G-d, then this is the type of *shituf* that the Rama allows for non-Jews.²³

In revealing the underlying basis for the Rama's ruling, the Vilna Gaon cites the Talmudic source which forbids a Jew from practicing *shituf*.²⁴

Chaim Moshe Benaim (the Moroccan-born Chief Rabbi of Gibraltar, who died about a century ago) also writes that the prohibition of *shituf* only applies to Jews; see his *Teshuvos Rachamim Peshutim* (Tunis, 1924), p. 25a (last pagination). [This last source was brought to my attention by R. Yitzchak Zimmel (host of the *Jewish Philosophy Podcast*), whose wife descends from R. Benaim.]

In fact, R. Mecklenberg (*Hakesav V'hakabbalah* to *Shemos* 32:1) justifies Aharon's role in bringing about the Golden Calf by arguing that those involved in the Golden Calf cult were the non-Jewish *erev rav*. This idea is discussed at length in R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 94–97. R. Mecklenberg further suggests that even if the Golden Calf cult was full-fledged idolatry, not just *shituf*, Aharon was still allowed to take a role in establishing that cult because during the forty years between the Sinaitic Revelation and the Deuteronomic Revelation (at the Plains of Moav), non-Jews were not enjoined from worshiping idolatry! This latter suggestion is quite daring and follows no precedent that I am aware of.

23. *Olas Tamid* (O.C. 156:3). R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin introduces another important caveat in his *Teshuvos Benei Banim* (3:36:3, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 38:3). He posits that even if a non-Jew is allowed to engage in *shituf*, this only means that he may worship G-d and an idolatrous deity *at the same time*. It does not mean that a gentile is allowed to worship G-d at one juncture and an idolatrous deity at another juncture, as the latter act would constitute actual idolatry.

24. The Rambam (*Hilchos Shevuos* 11:2) codifies this Talmudic dictum as a prohibition for a Jew to “partner” the name of anything else (a deity, person, etc.) alongside G-d's name when taking an oath.

Anybody who “partners” the name of Heaven (i.e. G-d) with another thing²⁵ shall be uprooted from the world, as it says, “...only to Hashem exclusively.”^{26 27}

The Vilna Gaon notes that the verse cited applies only to Jews, thus concluding that there is no basis for applying the prohibition of *shituf* to non-Jews.²⁸ On this basis, the Rama allows non-Jews to practice *shituf*.²⁹

25. The Gemara (*Beitzah* 25b) criticizes the Jewish people in the time of the Judges for not even worshiping G-d alongside the various idolatrous deities that they served (see Klein 2018, p. 118). That source seems to suggest that while “partnering” other deities with G-d is not ideal, it is not so bad. Yet, in this passage from *Sanhedrin*, the Gemara condemns “partnering” other deities with Him in the strongest of terms. *Tosafos HaRosh* (*Sanhedrin* 63a) resolves this issue by explaining that the Gemara there did not mean to say that the Jews should have at least “partnered” G-d with the other gods that they worshiped. Rather, it meant that the Jews should have at least turned to G-d after they exhausted worshiping all the other gods that they served at that time — yet they did not even do that.

26. *Shemos* 22:19.

27. *Sanhedrin* 63a. R. Meir Halevi Abulafia (*Yad Ramah* ad loc.) derives from this source that “partnering” G-d with another god is even worse than typical idolatry. According to him, there is no standing to the argument that gentiles are only enjoined from regular idolatry but are allowed to practice *shituf*. However, see *Chiddushei Rabbeinu Yonah*, who disagrees with R. Abulafia’s premise. Interestingly, R. Yosef David Sinzheim (*Yad David*, *Sanhedrin* 63a) sees these opinions reflected in a Tannaitic dispute (*Sanhedrin* *ibid.*) between R. Meir (who maintains that *shituf* is less severe) and R. Shimon ben Yochai (who holds that *shituf* is more severe). See also *Ma’asei Rokei’ach* (*Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 2:1), who explains that the Rambam follows R. Shimon ben Yochai’s view that *shituf* is a more severe form of idolatry than the typical idolatry (see also Maharsha to *Sanhedrin* 63a).

28. R. Yehuda Gershuni (*Mishpat Hameluchah*, *Hilchos Melachim* 8:10) argues that for this reason, a *ger toshav* (a gentile who formally accepts upon himself the prohibition of idolatry) must undergo a sort of *geirus*, because previously, the prohibition of idolatry applied to him as to any Noahide and excludes a ban on *shituf*, but when he becomes a *ger toshav*, even *shituf* becomes forbidden to him. For a more in-depth treatment of the topic of *shituf* and whether the prohibition of *shituf* applies to a *ger toshav*, see R. Yaakov Chaim Charlap’s article “*Avodah Zarah B’shituf Eitzel Bnei Noach*,” *Techumim* vol. 19 (1999), pp. 148–160.

29. *Bei’ur HaGra* (O.C. 156:6).

Moreover, R. Aryeh Leib Teomim finds Scriptural precedent for the notion that non-Jews are allowed to worship idolatry — which he understands must refer to *shituf*:

And lest you raise your eyes to the heaven and see the sun, the moon, and the stars — the entire legion of the heaven — and be drawn astray and bow to them and worship them, which Hashem, your G-d, has apportioned to all the people under the entire heaven.³⁰

In this passage, the Torah seemingly concedes that G-d “apportioned” the nations of the world to different astrological forces. This implies³¹ that those nations are somewhat justified in worshipping those forces — albeit they must also recognize Hashem.³²

30. *Devarim* 4:19.

31. The Gemara (*Megillah* 9a-9b) relates that the rabbis involved in translating the Torah into Greek made some slight editorial modifications to this verse so that the Greeks would not misread this passage as giving them permission to worship the stars. The rabbinic translators rendered the verse “... has apportioned to all the people under the entire heaven to provide light for them.” See *Teshuvos Minchas Elazar* (1:53:2:1), who understands that the mistaken reading would have led the Greeks to worshipping *shituf*, but not actual idolatry. He adduces the fact that the rabbis sought to obviate that reading as evidence of the notion that even non-Jews are enjoined from engaging in *shituf* (see below). The same understanding is proffered by R. Moshe Aryeh Leib Litch-Rosenbaum (*Imros Hashem to Devarim* 4:19), who applies it to the Rama’s ruling.

32. *Ya’alas Chein* (Zholkva, 1802), p. 181b. R. Moshe Zacuto (*Peirush Haremez L’zohar Hakadosh, Devarim* (*Moshav Bitchah: Machon Kol Bitchah*, 2005), p. 217 takes this a step further, writing that because G-d apportioned the nations of the world to their heavenly ministers, they are *allowed* to humble themselves before these forces. R. Shalom Buzaglo (*Mikdash Melech Hashaleim* vol. 5, Jerusalem: *Machon Bnei Yisaschar*, 2000, p. 107) and R. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (*Derech Mitzvosecha*, New York, 1970, pp. 59b-61a) cite and discuss R. Zacuto’s position.

A similar position is found in *Teshuvos HaRashba* (8:368 in the *Machon Yerushalyim* edition), who writes, “Whoever worships the astral force that rules over that place is not like one who worships *avodah zarah* — as long as

In light of the Rama's position, R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson explains the significance of the Gemara's assertion that the Jewish people heard the first two of the Ten Commandments — "I am Hashem, your G-d..."³³ and "There shall not be for you other gods"³⁴ — directly from G-d, while they heard the other 611 commandments of the Torah (including those that deal with idolatry) through Moshe.³⁵ R. Nathanson explains that even before the Jews accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai, they were bound by the Noahide Code, which already forbade them from worshipping idolatry. As the Rama puts it, that prohibition does not forbid Noahides from engaging in *shituf*. Because of this, at Sinai, G-d wished to make it extra clear to the Jews that from now on, their version of the prohibition on idolatry *does* include outlawing *shituf*. Hence, He made sure that they heard these

he knows and recognizes that this astral force only has dominion because G-d made it the ruler of that land." This does not unequivocally mean that non-Jews are permitted to worship their governing angels, only that somehow it "is not like one who worships *avodah zarah*." I will also point out that there is no clear evidence that this responsum was actually penned by the Rashba. In both the *Mossad Harav Kook* and *Machon Yerushalayim* editions of the Rashba's responsa (and in *Koveitz Sinai* vol. 100), this particular responsum appears with a note that it was originally published before WWII by R. Joseph Perles, a Hungarian *maskil*, from a manuscript that has since "disappeared." Moreover, the Rashba discusses the concept of gentile nations being governed by astral forces in multiple places but never insinuates that it is permitted for them to worship these forces. Either way, building on this lone piece of evidence, A. Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (Palgrave, 2016, p. 68) claims that the Rashba's teacher the Ramban (who also mentions the gentiles being governed by angelic/astral forces, but never explicitly says that worshipping them is permitted) also agrees with the Rashba's position. Goshen-Gottstein ignores the fact that the Rashba himself (*Avodah Zarah* 51a) forbids benefitting from Christian ritual wafers, candles, and the like — even though according to his assessment, the Rashba allows non-Jews to worship other forces as long as they also recognize G-d.

33. *Shemos* 20:2.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Makkos* 23b–24a and *Horiyos* 8a.

two commandments *directly from Him* so that there would be no room for any misunderstanding.³⁶

Similarly, R. Ovadiah Yosef writes that based on this, we can shed new light on an otherwise problematic passage in the Gemara. The Gemara³⁷ relates that when Naomi tried to dissuade Rus from converting to Judaism, she told Rus that Jews are enjoined from engaging in idolatry. This argument is somewhat difficult to understand, because non-Jews are also forbidden from engaging in idolatry by dint of the Noahide Code.³⁸ With the Rama's position in hand, R. Yosef resolves this difficulty. Although non-Jews are enjoined from engaging in idolatry, the parameters of their prohibition do not totally match the parameters of a Jew's prohibition, because a non-Jew is allowed to engage in *shituf*. Based on this, Naomi argued to Rus that it is not worthwhile for her to convert to Judaism, as that would prohibit her from engaging in *shituf*, which had previously been permitted to her as a non-Jew.³⁹

Greater Expectations

We have so far demonstrated that according to many authorities, gentiles are allowed to practice *shituf*, while Jews are not. Why should there be a difference between the prohibition of idolatry as it applies to non-Jews and the prohibition as it applies to Jews?

We already alluded to this concept earlier, but R. Aryeh Leib Teomim clarifies that while all other nations of the world are under the dominion of their national heavenly ruler (i.e. their astrological guardian angel), the Jewish people are placed directly under G-d's control. For this reason, other nations can

36. *Teshuvos Sho'el Umeishiv* (2nd edition, 1:51).

37. *Yevamos* 47b.

38. See Maharsha ad loc.

39. *Teshuvos Yechaveh Da'as* (4:45) and *Chazon Ovadiah (Yom Tov, Imah Shel Malchus to Rus 1:16)*.

appeal to their direct angelic overlord *or* to G-d, while the Jewish people can *only* appeal to G-d.⁴⁰

This idea is further developed by R. Binyamin Wolf Boskowitz, who explains that only Jews — by virtue of their special relationship with G-d (due to Him saving them from bondage in Egypt) — are expected to worship Him and only Him. Gentiles, on the other hand, do not have such a close relationship with Him and are therefore not forbidden from worshipping other deities alongside Him.⁴¹

Nobody May Practice *Shituf*

Truth be told, though, not all authorities agree that the Rama's intent was to permit non-Jews to practice *shituf*. R. Efraim Katz

40. R. Mecklenberg (*Hakesav V'hakabbalah* to *Shemos* 13:14; see also his comments to *Shemos* 20:2) explains that because G-d only deals with the nations of the world through natural means (i.e. because He established heavenly ministers and other forms of *mazalos* through which He channels His influx towards them), He has lower expectations of them and only expects them to follow the seven Noahide laws ("natural law"). On the other hand, since He deals with the Jewish people directly on a supernatural level, He has higher expectations of them and therefore expects them to follow a more supernal set of laws ("revealed law"). As a direct result of this, the Torah's laws are more numerous and complex than the seven Noahide laws.

41. *Seder Mishnah* (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 1:7) and *Shoshan Eidos* (Pacs, 1803), pp. 188–189. See G. Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), pp. 109–113 who explains that the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn argues that although *shituf* may technically be permitted for non-Jews, it nonetheless remains a dangerous venture on account of the fact that *shituf* can more easily lead to actual polytheistic idolatry than pure monotheism can. Thus, explains Mendelssohn, Jews were forbidden from practicing *shituf* so that they can stand as a safeguard and bulwark for all other nations to prevent them from slipping into full-fledged polytheism by constantly reminding them how pure monotheism ought to be practiced. Once such a safeguard is already in place, it is less problematic for other nations to engage in *shituf*, because the existence of the Jews will always remind them about G-d.

of Vilna,⁴² R. Yonah Landsofer of Prague,⁴³ R. Refael Hakohen Hamburger,⁴⁴ R. Akiva Eiger,⁴⁵ R. Efraim Zalman Margoliyos,⁴⁶ R. Yitzchak Minkowski,⁴⁷ R. Chaim Elazar Shapiro,⁴⁸ and R. Yechiel Michel Halevi Epstein⁴⁹ all maintain that the Rama never allowed for non-Jews to practice *shituf*.

As R. Yosef Teomim and many of the above *poskim* explain it, the Rama's ruling only applies to a Jew's prohibition of causing somebody to swear in the name of idolatry. Regarding that prohibition alone we say that a Jew may cause a gentile to utter the names of his idolatrous gods because, in doing so, said gentile merely "partners" G-d with those other deities. However, neither the Rama nor the Tosafos that he cites permit a non-Jew to *worship* other gods in conjunction with worshipping G-d.^{50 51}

42. *Teshuvos Sha'arei Efraim* 24.

43. *Teshuvos Me'il Tzedakah* 22. In a recently published responsum found in a manuscript of R. Landsofer's works, R. Landsofer reiterated his objection to the notion that non-Jews are allowed to engage in *shituf*. He adds that many sources point to the idea that belief in a First Cause (i.e. G-d) does not automatically clear a person from idolatry, as most idolaters anyways believed in a First Cause and still continued to worship other gods and were thus still considered idolaters. This responsum was first published in *Koveitz Moriah* vol. 262 (Jerusalem: *Machon Yerushalayim*, 1999), pp. 33–41, and even more recently appeared in the *Zichron Aharon* edition of *Teshuvos Me'il Tzedakah* (71).

44. *Teshuvos V'shav Hakohen* 38.

45. Z. Y. Leitner (ed.), *Teshuvos Chadashos L'Rabbeinu Akiva Eiger* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 164–166.

46. *Yad Efraim* (Y.D. 147:3).

47. *Keren Orah* (*Nedarim* 62b).

48. *Teshuvos Minchas Elazar* (1:53:2).

49. *Aruch Hashulchan* (O.C. 156:4).

50. *Pri Megadim* (Y.D. *Sifsei Da'as* 65:11 and O.C. *Eishel Avraham* 156:2). This approach also seems to be the one endorsed by R. Yosef Babad (*Minchas Chinuch* 26:19 and 86:2).

51. This reading of Tosafos is also the preferred one in academic circles. Dr. Jacob Katz in *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in the Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 34–36; 163 likewise understands the original ruling of Tosafos to only allow causing a

R. Shmuel Landau quite unequivocally declares that there is no source which suggests that non-Jews are allowed to practice *shituf* by “partnering” G-d with other gods. His strongest proof is the Gemara⁵² that says, “Regarding idolatry, anything that a Jewish court executes [a Jew] over, a Noahide is warned against committing.”⁵³ Certainly, a Jew must not worship other deities

non-Jew to swear in the name of G-d and other gods. The way he explains it, this ruling later expanded into an overall new evaluation of Christianity as a non-idolatrous religion (as reflected in the Rama’s ruling) that was not intended by the original ruling. Katz claims that this later expansion was partially caused by semantic developments in the meaning of the term *shituf*, which, under Arabic influence, came to have a theological connotation that refers to a non-strictly monotheistic conception of the Divine. For example, see *Teshuvos Tashbeitz* (1:139), who uses the term *shituf* to describe somebody who totally believes in G-d yet still commits idolatry. In this usage, the term *shituf* does not imply a theological conception that somehow “partners” G-d with another deity.

Similarly, R. Dr. David Berger in “How, When, and To What Degree was the Jewish-Christian Debate Transformed in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries?” in E. Baumgarten and J. D. Galinsky (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France* (New York, 2015), p. 135 writes about the earlier-cited understanding that Tosafos permits gentiles to engage in *shituf*, “It is unlikely that this understanding is correct,” noting that in other passages in other places (e.g. *Avodah Zarah* 14b and 50a), Tosafos seem to presume that Christianity is considered idolatrous, even though it seems to be the quintessential example of *shituf*.

52. *Sanhedrin* 56b.

53. This ruling is also codified by the Rambam (*Hilchos Melachim* 9:2). Nonetheless, a full reading of the passage in question (*Sanhedrin* 56b) reveals that the Gemara actually concludes that this teaching was said specifically about the quality of one’s act of idolatrous worship but has nothing to do with the theological conceptions behind one’s act of idolatrous worship. In other words, the Gemara explains that the point of this teaching was simply to say that because if a Jew hugged or kissed an idol (whose normal mode of worship does not involve hugging or kissing), he is not liable for the death penalty, then a non-Jew is not enjoined from doing that act *a priori*. This conclusion is also proffered by the Radvaz and *Kesef Mishneh* when elucidating the Rambam’s codification of the Talmudic teaching in question. Accordingly, one cannot infer from this passage that because a Jew would be put to death for engaging in *shituf*, a non-Jew would likewise be forbidden from doing so. A similar

in “partnership” with G-d and would be liable for the death penalty for doing so. Therefore, a non-Jew is likewise warned against such expressions of worship.

Moreover, R. Landau notes that if there was a difference between the prohibition of idolatry as it pertains to Jews vs. non-Jews regarding the issue of *shituf*, then we should expect the Rambam — the great codifier of halacha — to mention this point. To R. Landau, the Rambam’s silence on the entire issue of *shituf* suggests that he understood there to be no difference between Jews and non-Jews in this regard.⁵⁴

With these two arguments in hand, R. Landau concludes that those who understood *shituf* to be permitted to non-Jews base themselves on what he calls a “misunderstanding” of Tosafos and the Rama.⁵⁵

Similarly, R. Moshe Shapiro strongly asserts that the Rama never meant to allow a non-Jew to worship another deity alongside G-d. Rather, the Rama’s ruling merely serves to allow a non-Jew to *believe* in the existence of another god (or multiple gods) in addition to G-d. In other words, the Rama’s relatively permissive ruling does not just allow a Jew to cause non-Jews to verbally group together G-d with other gods, but also allows non-Jews to believe in such partnerships. Nonetheless, R. Shapiro contends that this ruling does not give non-Jews permission to *act* on those idolatrous beliefs.⁵⁶

point is made by R. Mordechai Marcus Horowitz in *Teshuvos Mateh Levi* (2 Y.D. 28), who elaborates on this understanding.

54. R. Mordechai Marcus Horowitz (*Teshuvos Mateh Levi ibid.*) does not find this argument from the Rambam’s silence particularly compelling because, as he notes, there are many laws that are unanimously codified by later authorities that the Rambam simply does not address.

55. *Teshuvos Noda B’yehudah* (2nd edition, Y.D. 148).

56. M. Schlanger, *Re’ei Emunah — Shiurei Hagaon Rabbi Moshe Shapiro* (Jerusalem, 2015), p. 56. Similarly, R. Aryeh Kaplan (*Handbook of Jewish Thought*, New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990, p. 4) writes that Noahides are allowed to believe in *shituf* but not to worship *shituf* (however, none of the sources that he cites there actually make this assertion).

Moreover, R. Shmuel Kellin limits the Rama's ruling to the case of (Catholic) Christianity. He understands the ruling to mean that a Jew is permitted to form a business partnership with a Christian because even if said Christian will later be required to take an oath, he does not mention the names of any idolatrous gods, but rather the names of so-called "saints." Such "saints" and other martyrs are not revered by Christians as gods, *per se*. Consequently, if a Jew causes a Christian to swear in their name, he has not caused the name of an idolatrous deity to be uttered.⁵⁷ Only because of this did the Rama allow forming a business partnership with a Christian. According to R. Kellin, this ruling should not be understood as allowing a non-Jew to practice *shituf* in the more general sense of partnering alternate deities with G-d.⁵⁸

R. Tzvi Binyamin Auerbach offers the following proof to the notion that gentiles may not practice *shituf*: The Gemara⁵⁹ entertains the possibility that a Noahide must allow himself to be martyred for G-d's sake rather than worship idolatry. If a non-Jew is allowed to worship other deities alongside G-d, then why would the non-Jew be required to give up his life to avoid committing idolatry? If simply believing in G-d is already good enough, the non-Jew in question should technically be allowed to worship the idol because he is doing so *alongside* G-d. This suggests that a non-Jew is even forbidden from practicing *shituf*, not just classical idolatry.⁶⁰

57. By contrast, a Jew may not swear jointly in the name of G-d along with any other entity, because doing so equates said entity with G-d, which is forbidden (see Rambam *Hilchos Shevuos* 11:2). This particular prohibition does not apply to a gentile.

58. *Machatzis Hashekel* (O.C. 156:2). Interestingly, R. Kellin was the father of the above-mentioned R. Binyamin Wolf Boskowitz, who understood that the Rama does in fact allow gentiles to practice *shituf*.

59. *Sanhedrin* 74b.

60. T. B. Auerbach (ed.), *Sefer Ha'eshkol* vol. 3 (Halberstadt, 1868), p. 119. This proof is also offered by R. Yosef Shaul Nathansohn in *Teshuvos Sho'el Umeishiv*

In short, all these authorities understand that there is no difference between the prohibition of idolatry as it applies to Jews and as it applies to gentiles; rather, *shituf* remains forbidden for Jews and non-Jews alike.⁶¹

Nevertheless, R. Moshe Shick points to a significant problem with the argument that gentiles are enjoined from *shituf*. When the Torah presents the uniqueness/oneness of G-d as something to which the Jews should listen, it says: "Hear, Israel, Hashem, our G-d — Hashem is one."⁶² If Jews and non-Jews alike are forbidden from practicing *shituf*, then this declaration of G-d's oneness should be addressed to all of mankind, not just to the

(2nd edition, 1:51), even though he ultimately does not adopt the view that gentiles are enjoined from engaging in *shituf*.

61. According to those who understand that gentiles are allowed to practice *shituf*, the degree of loyalty G-d demands of non-Jews differs from that which He demands from Jews, because the Jewish people are expected to have a closer relationship with Him. However, according to the view that gentiles and Jews alike are forbidden from practicing *shituf*, it is more difficult to understand from a theological perspective why the same expectations ought to be applied to both. In other words, if non-Jews clearly have a more distant relationship with Him, then why does He demand no less from them than He demands from the Jews?

As far as I know, this question is not explicitly addressed in rabbinic literature, but there are several cogent answers that can be proffered. I hope to explore these different possibilities at greater length in an upcoming follow-up volume to my book *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018): 1) Due to the severity of idolatry, whatever minimal relationship non-Jews have with G-d is enough to justify prohibiting even *shituf*. 2) The prohibition of idolatry is not rooted in a monogamous-type relationship, but rather in a requirement that man have gratitude to the Creator, and G-d's role as Creator (and Administrator) of all existence relates equally to Jews and non-Jews. 3) The prohibition of idolatry is not rooted in a monogamous-type relationship, but rather flows from the falsity of polytheism and idol worship. Accordingly, that falsity relates to Jews and non-Jews equally. 4) The prohibition of idolatry is not rooted in a monogamous-type relationship, but rather in a fear that idolatry leads to a corrupt society or forgetting about G-d. According to this, both idolatry proper and *shituf* might lead to those horrid circumstances and, therefore, both are forbidden across the board.

62. *Devarim* 6:4.

Jewish people. It should be a universal value, because *nobody* is allowed to worship anything other than G-d — even alongside Him. The mere fact that this line was directed specifically to the Jewish people, not to the entire world, implies that for non-Jews, there is no expectation to refrain from *shituf*.⁶³

Maimonides' Position on *Shituf*

Until now, we have seen that various halachic authorities disagree over Tosafos's position concerning a non-Jew's permission to engage in *shituf*. But what do other authorities maintain?

As noted, R. Shmuel Landau pointed to the Rambam's apparent silence on this issue to support his position that *shituf* is prohibited for Jews and non-Jews alike.⁶⁴ Similarly, R. Yonah Landsofer of Prague argues that the Rambam's position is less equivocal than that of Tosafos, as the Rambam is more explicit in writing that a non-Jew is forbidden from engaging in all sorts of idolatry.⁶⁵

In the opening chapter of *Hilchos Avodah Zarah*,⁶⁶ the Rambam offers a historical account of the origins of idolatry. He begins by explaining that in Enosh's generation, people started to think that G-d wanted them to serve the celestial beings as a way of honoring Him, so they began to build temples, offer sacrifices, and otherwise worship those celestial bodies. The Rambam writes that this is the *ikkar* (crux) of idolatry. He then continues to explain that with the advent of false prophets and priests, these idolatrous cults became more enshrined until idolaters eventually forgot about G-d altogether.

63. *Sefer Maharam Shick Al Taryag Mitzvos*, Vol. 2, *Mitzvah* 418. See there for possible resolutions to this question.

64. *Teshuvos Noda B'yehudah* (2nd edition, Y.D. 148).

65. *Teshuvos Me'il Tzedakah* 22.

66. *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:1-2.

In the next chapter,⁶⁷ the Rambam reiterates that the *ikkar* of idolatry entails worshiping any created entity (be it an angel, astral force, or natural element), even if one still believes in G-d.

As R. Landsofer sees it, the Rambam understands that *shituf* is prohibited to Noahides, and this was precisely the sort of prohibited idolatry that was introduced in Enosh's time that the Rambam brands the *ikkar* of idolatry.⁶⁸

Despite this inference, other authorities understand that the Rambam adopts the view that non-Jews are permitted to engage in *shituf*. They note that if one reads the Rambam's account very closely, one will notice that it is only at the last stage in the historical development of idolatry that the Rambam says that the early idolaters forgot about G-d. Beforehand, in Enosh's time, they worshiped the celestial intermediaries as a means of worshiping Him — which essentially constitutes a form of *shituf*. This suggests that the Rambam agrees that only the last stage he describes in this narrative is actually considered idolatry and thus forbidden for Noahides; the earlier stages of idolatry are only problematic in the sense that they lead down a slippery slope towards actual idolatry, but are not technically included in the Noahide prohibition against idolatry.

In this spirit, R. Mordechai Marcus Horowitz writes that when the Rambam brands what is essentially *shituf* “the *ikkar* of idolatry,” the word *ikkar* in this context does not mean “crux,” but rather “root/source,” because it is the ideological forebearer of idolatry, even if it is technically permitted.⁶⁹

67. *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 2:1.

68. R. Tam ibn Yachya (*Ohalei Tam, Tumas Yesharim*, Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1999, pp. 99–100) also concludes from this passage that for the Rambam, the Noahide prohibition of idolatry includes *shituf*. R. Gershon Shaul Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (*Pilpula Charifta* on the Rosh *Sanhedrin* 7:3:5) likewise concludes that according to the Rambam, non-Jews are forbidden from engaging in *shituf*.

69. *Teshuvos Mateh Levi* (vol. 2 Y.D. 28).

Indeed, R. Wolf Boskowitz infers from the *Sefer Hamitzvos*⁷⁰ that the Rambam agrees with the Rama's position that non-Jews are permitted to engage in *shituf*, because the Rambam ties the commandment of believing in the unitarianism of G-d to the fact that G-d took the Jews out of Egypt, implying that those nations who did not experience the exodus from Egypt are not required to believe in one G-d, even though they are otherwise clearly prohibited from engaging in idolatry.⁷¹

Other notable authorities, such as R. Moshe Sofer of Frankfurt⁷² and R. Yaakov Emden,⁷³ contradict themselves on this issue,

70. *Sefer Hamitzvos* (Aseih 2).

71. *Seder Mishnah* (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 1:7) and *Shoshan Eidos* (Pacs, 1803, pp. 188–189).

72. In *Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* (O.C. 1:84 and *Koveitz Teshuvos* 67), *Hagahos Chasam Sofer* (O.C. 156), *Chiddushei Chasam Sofer* (*Avodah Zarah* 53b), and *Derashos Chasam Sofer* (vol. 1 178b), R. Sofer maintains that Noahides and Jews are both forbidden from engaging in *shituf*. However, elsewhere, R. Sofer adopts the position that only Jews are forbidden from engaging in *shituf*, while gentiles are allowed to engage in *shituf* (see *Chiddushei Chasam Sofer Gittin* 57b and *Sanhedrin* 59a; *Chasam Sofer al Hatorah Shemos* 8:21, *Haftaras Bechukosai* to *Yirmiyahu* 17:2, and *Devarim* 4:19; and *Toras Moshe Bereishis* 34:27, *Shemos* 34:1, and *Vayikra* 8:2).

73. In *Teshuvos She'eilas Ya'avetz* (1:41) and *Mor Uketziah* (O.C. 224), he understands that non-Jews are allowed to practice *shituf*. Nonetheless, in his glosses to R. Yaakov Sasportas's *Kitzur Tzitzas 'Novel' Tzvi* (Odessa, 1867, p. 28b), R. Emden agrees with R. Sasportas's assertion that even gentiles are forbidden from engaging in *shituf*. In fact, elsewhere, R. Emden derives this ruling from the extra word *es* in *Devarim* 7:16 and references his gloss to *Kitzur Tzitzas 'Novel' Tzvi*; see E. Zweibel (ed.), *Eim Labinah* (Jerusalem, 2020, p. 516). R. Emden himself in *Teshuvos She'eilas Ya'avetz* (2:133) addresses this contradiction in his own thought and explains that in his "childhood," he thought that *shituf* was permitted for non-Jews, but he later retracted that position.

Seemingly unaware of this last source, R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes (*Kol Kisvei Maharatz Chayes* vol. 1, Tel Aviv, 1944, p. 490) resolves the contradiction in R. Emden's stance by explaining that he meant that a non-Jew is only forbidden from practicing *shituf* if he lives in Israel (which cannot tolerate such abominations), but a non-Jew who lives elsewhere is allowed to worship G-d in partnership with other gods. For other possible resolutions to this

sometimes siding with those who understand that non-Jews are allowed to engage in *shituf* and sometimes with those who understand that non-Jews are forbidden from engaging in *shituf*.⁷⁴

Swearing and Worshiping

According to the second way of reading Tosafos, non-Jews are not allowed to worship their gods alongside G-d, but a Jew is allowed to cause a non-Jew to swear in the name of his gods alongside G-d. What is the difference between the prohibition of worshiping idols and uttering the names of idols? Why should *shituf* be allowed in the latter but not the former?

R. Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz explains that Tosafos mean that there is no prohibition for a Jew to cause a Christian to swear in the name of “G-d” — even though the Christian conflates G-d with Jesus — because in the actual phraseology that the Christian uses when taking his oath, he does not mention the specific name of his deity (“Jesus”) as something separate from “G-d.” According to this, a Christian may not be allowed to *worship* Jesus, but it is still permitted for a Jew to cause a Christian to mention Jesus when taking an oath, because the Christian does not explicitly invoke the name of his man-god,

contradiction, see A. Y. Bombach (ed.), *Sefer Mor Uketziah* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1996), p. 267 and *Koveitz Yeshurun* vol. 14 (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 813–814. R. Chajes himself (in his glosses to *Horiyos* 8b) seems to maintain that non-Jews are allowed to engage in *shituf* in all places.

For an analysis of R. Yaakov Emden’s positive remarks concerning Christianity and how his view of Christianity may have influenced his assessment of Sabbatianism, see J. J. Schacter, “Rabbi Jacob Emden, Sabbatianism, and Frankism: Attitudes toward Christianity in the Eighteenth Century” in E. Carlebach & J. J. Schacter (eds.), *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations* (Brill, 2012), pp. 359–396.

74. See also R. Yehoshua Baumel’s *Teshuvos Eimek Halacha* (2:12) and R. Yehuda Gershuni’s *Mishpat Hameluchah* (*Hilchos Melachim* 8:10), who trace the dispute over whether non-Jews are enjoined from *shituf* to an Amoraic dispute over the source of the Noahide prohibition of idolatry (see *Sanhedrin* 56b).

but instead uses the vague term “god,” which is not literally a violation of causing the name of another deity to be uttered.⁷⁵

R. Yitzchak Hutner presents a different, but similar resolution. He explains that the prohibition of causing another to swear in the name of idolatry is tantamount to blasphemy because of the very nature of mentioning gods in that context. When one invokes the name of his god while taking an oath, one seeks to affirm the veracity of his statement or agreement by linking it to the veracity of his god. He essentially declares, “Just as such-and-such god truly exists, so do I affirm that... is true.”⁷⁶ This means that when one swears in the name of a god, he effectively also affirms the independent existence of said god. When a Jew causes another to take an oath in the name of his god, the Jew is effectively complicit in a blasphemous declaration of that god’s independent reality.

Those idolaters who recognize G-d but worship other deities as well recognize that G-d is the source of everything and is the only entity whose existence does not depend on anything else. They nonetheless worship other forces — which they admit were

75. *Chazon Ish* (Y.D. 62:19). A similar reading of Tosafos is assumed by D. Berger, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts,” in M. D. Stern (ed.), *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 91.

76. R. Elazar Landau of Prague (*Yad Hamelech* to *Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 1:4) writes that when a Jew legitimately swears in G-d’s name, he is not basing the veracity of his oath on the existence of G-d. This is because, as the Rambam (there) writes, nothing in reality is “true” in the same sense that the existence of G-d is “true,” because His existence is a reality which is not dependent on any other cause, while every other reality which is “true” is contingent on something else making it true. Thus, if someone were to make an oath asserting that his claim is true just like the existence of G-d is true, he would be invoking G-d’s name in vain, because the analogy cannot possibly be totally accurate. Instead, a Jew swears in G-d’s *name* as opposed to by the truth of His existence. This explanation notwithstanding, it seems that G-d Himself does sometimes take oaths by pegging that which He swears to do to His reality (see Rashi and *Seforno* to *Bamidbar* 14:20) and that this is even the meaning of human oaths taken in His name (see Rambam’s *Sefer Hamitzvos*, *Aseih* 7).

created by G-d — because they think that G-d wants those forces to be honored/worshiped (as the people in Enosh's generation thought⁷⁷). When this type of idolater takes an oath in the name of G-d and other deities, invoking the names of other gods does not express his belief in their independent existence, because he anyway acknowledges that G-d created them. For this reason, a Jew is allowed to partner with such a gentile, even though the latter might inevitably take an oath in the name of his gods.⁷⁸

Ramifications of a Gentile's *Shituf* for a Jew

In 1858, R. Yaakov Ettlinger was asked by a Jewish congregation in New York if they were allowed to purchase a building previously used by a church to repurpose as a synagogue. R. Ettlinger replied that in dire circumstances, it may be permitted, but optimally, it should not be done. He reasoned that even though the Christian community that had previously worshiped at the site were engaged in *shituf* — which is permitted for non-Jews — since from a Jew's perspective such worship constitutes idolatry (because a Jew is forbidden to engage in *shituf*), it is better for Jews to avoid using that building.⁷⁹

A generation later, R. David Zvi Hoffmann used similar reasoning in issuing three different rulings. In all three of these cases, he admits that while non-Jews are not forbidden from engaging in *shituf*, from a Jew's perspective, whatever such non-Jews do is still considered full-fledged idolatry. He applies this

77. See *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:1–3.

78. *Sefer Hazikaron L'maran Ba'al Pachad Yitzchak* (Brooklyn: Gur Aryeh Institute, 2008), pp. 269–271. This understanding should limit the Rama's leniency to situations in which the gentile might invoke his god(s) to bolster truth-claims in a deposition or document. However, in many contexts, the names of various deities may be invoked as a deterrent for punishment, not to bolster truth-claims. In other words, the gods are mentioned as if to say, "If I am not saying the truth, then may such-and-such god strike me down..." In such instances, R. Hutner's logic does not apply. R. Dr. Yitzchak Breitowitz agreed with this analysis.

79. *Teshuvos Binyan Tzion* (1:63).

reasoning consistently, whether it means issuing a stringent or lenient ruling in the particular cases discussed:

- R. Hoffmann rules that even though a gentile is not enjoined from engaging in *shituf*, it is still forbidden for a Jew to mimic the *chukim* (non-logical “customs” or “rules”) of such idolatrous cults under the prohibition of *chukos akum*.⁸⁰
- R. Hoffmann rules that it is forbidden for a Jew to donate funds towards the construction of a church building, because even though for the non-Jews who worship there, that sort of worship is considered *shituf* and is therefore permitted, for a Jew, such worship is considered idolatry, and a Jew is not allowed to support the establishment of idolatry.⁸¹
- According to halacha, once an item has been used by a non-Jew as an idol, it becomes forbidden for a Jew to use unless a non-Jewish idolater nullifies that idol’s status by physically repudiating its divinity. R. Hoffmann rules that even though it takes an idolater to nullify the idolatrous status of such an item, a non-Jew who engages in *shituf* is considered enough of an idolater to carry out such nullification, because vis-à-vis a Jew (for whom *shituf* is forbidden), such a non-Jew is still considered an idolater.⁸²

A similar discussion appears in the halachic literature concerning the products offered as ritual sacrifices by idolaters (*tikroves*). R. Alexander Sender Schor writes that according to the opinions that a non-Jew is allowed to engage in *shituf*, even when a gentile practices *shituf*, the resultant sacrifices are considered idolatrous sacrifices from which Jews are not

80. *Teshuvos Melamed L’Ho’il* (1:16).

81. *Ibid.* (2:148).

82. *Ibid.* (2:55).

allowed to derive any benefit.⁸³ This ruling seems to have been accepted by all authorities and was left undisputed until R. Binyomin Zeilberger independently argued that that since the prohibition of *shituf* is a “new prohibition” that is technically unrelated to the regular prohibition of *avodah zarah*, there is no *tikroves* that results from ritual idol worship performed under the rubric of *shituf*.⁸⁴ This minority opinion has not received much acceptance and is essentially rejected.⁸⁵

World Religions

In the following sections, we will explore various world religions and how halachic authorities have assessed those religions in terms of whether or not they are considered *avodah zarah*. We begin with a discussion of Christianity, whose status is subject to dispute, followed by discussions of Islam (which the consensus sees as non-idolatrous) and Hinduism (which the consensus sees as idolatrous). We will conclude with snippets of discussions about other religions.⁸⁶

Before commencing the actual discussion, two short points are in order:

- R. Yonah Landsofer writes that when a putative idolater performs acts that seem to be a ritual act of worship before an object (e.g. he bows or prays 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 responsum

83. *Tevuos Shor* (Y.D. 4:1).

84. *Kuntress Toras Chesed* (pp. 449–450), appended to *Teshuvos V'Shav Hakohen* (Bnei Barak, 1988).

85. See M. E. Indik, *Kuntress Pe'as Keidmah* vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2019), p. 31.

86. Despite striving to be as thorough as possible, there may be additional viewpoints and nuances that are not reflected in this essay. The author takes no responsibility for such omissions but still encourages the reader to contact him directly to help fill in the blanks.

dealing with Christian adoration for crosses.⁸⁷ It brings to light an important point because it explains why halachic deciders 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 contraband, we do not take into account the supposed intricacies of the idolater's theology, but instead take an idolater's act of devotion at face value.⁸⁸

- In the last century and a quarter, it has become commonplace for some *poskim* to cite what appears to be the Me'iri's especially tolerant position. The Me'iri seems to have maintained that any society which is sufficiently "civilized" or "moral" is excluded from the halachic category of "idolatry," regardless of whatever sorts of rituals or theologies its citizens follow. This has led to calls for labeling various religions or sects as non-idolatrous despite clear halachic precedent for understanding them to be idolatrous. For the sake of brevity, this essay purposely does not engage with the Me'iri's position, instead leaving questions like the provenance of the Me'iri's view, what exactly he means, and if/how his position can be applied to a future treatment of the topic.

Christianity Is Idolatrous

The Rambam consistently writes in several of his works that Christians are considered idolaters. For example, when

87. Koveitz *Moriah* vol. 262 (Jerusalem: *Machon Yerushalayim*, 1999), p. 36.

88. By this logic, neo-Pagan cults like Wicca and the newly reintroduced Baal/Asherah cults are considered *avodah zarah*, even though their largely godless and secular adherents do not typically believe in the theologies that they pretend to act on. As argued in R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 268–269, it is quite possible that prophetic predictions about the annihilation of idolatry in the lead-up to the Messianic Era actually refer to the future substitute 'destruction' of neo-Paganism.

discussing the laws of *stam yeinam* (wine owned by a non-Jew that was not known to have been used in idolatrous rites), he asserts that a Jew is not allowed to drink the wine of non-idolatrous gentiles, but may derive other forms of benefit from such wines. But when it comes to idolatrous gentiles, not only may a Jew not drink such wine, but he is also enjoined from deriving any other benefit from such wine. In laying out these two categories, the Rambam explicitly mentions Muslims as an example of non-idolatrous gentiles and Christians as idolatrous gentiles.⁸⁹

As R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin explains it,⁹⁰ the Rambam's source for this understanding is the uncensored version of a passage in the Gemara⁹¹ that explicitly brands "*Notzrim*" as idolaters. That passage centers on R. Yishmael's opinion in the Mishnah⁹² that one may not conduct business dealings with idolaters for three days before and three days after a pagan holiday. The Gemara raises the possibility that according to R. Yishmael's opinion, a Jew ought to be forbidden from ever engaging in business dealings with *Notzrim*, who revered Sundays as a holy day. The working assumption is that the term *Notzrim* refers to Christians⁹³ (as it does in later rabbinic literature and in modern Hebrew), and thus the Rambam derived from this passage

89. *Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros* (11:7). (In older printed versions of the Rambam, this passage was often censored.) The Rambam reiterates his position that Christianity is considered idolatrous in his Commentary to the Mishnah (*Avodah Zarah* 1:3) and in *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* (9:4).

90. *Teshuvos Bnei Banim* (3:36:1, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 38:1).

91. *Avodah Zarah* 7b.

92. *Avodah Zarah* 1:2.

93. As mentioned in R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 340–341, some explain that the term "*Notzrim*" refers to a Mandaic cult related to Nebuchadnezzar.

that the Gemara itself already maintains that Christians are considered idolaters.⁹⁴

R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad writes that gentiles who are accustomed to wearing a cross on their clothing and have a cross in their churches (to which they bow down) render our wines forbidden for all forms of benefit (not just to drink from) upon contact, because they do not believe in the unity of G-d, and they partner with Him other deities (i.e. they are not true monotheists).⁹⁵ He then cites a responsum penned by R. Yaakov Sasson, who likewise ruled that while Muslims are not considered idolaters, Christians are.⁹⁶

Conventional wisdom holds that Christianity ought to be considered idolatry because of its worship/veneration of icons and images (especially those of Jesus, Mary, and/or the cross) or because of its theologically-warped conception of Jesus as a

94. Elsewhere, The Rambam (Commentary to the Mishnah *Chullin* 1:1) differentiates between the pagan elite (who claim to know how to manipulate idolatrous forces for their own needs) and the pagan masses (who are ignorant of the implications of the rituals in which they engage), arguing that only the former are truly considered idolaters, and one may not derive benefit only from sacrifices of such people. However, the Rambam may have retracted this stance in his later works, as R. Yosef Karo (*Beis Yosef*, Y.D. 123) notes that when discussing wine, the Rambam offers a blanket ruling that Christians are considered full-fledged idolaters. By ruling without exception that Christians are considered idolaters and, ergo, their sacrifices are forbidden from benefit, the Rambam seems to eschew the distinction he himself drew in his Commentary to the Mishnah. Nonetheless, R. Menasheh Klein argues (*Koveitz Ohr Yisroel* vol. 37 (5765) pp. 37–38) that the Rambam's distinction still applies, and he only meant that *knowledgeable* Christians (who are fully aware of what they are doing) are considered idolaters, but *ignorant* ones who simply follow the religion of their upbringing are not (see there pp. 38–43 for numerous examples of halachic authorities who invoke the notion that contemporary idol worshippers are simply following time-honored traditions and should not be considered full-fledged idolaters).

95. *Ben Ish Chai* (Year 2, *Balak* 1).

96. *Benei Yaakov* (Constantinople, 1714), p. 190. The same assumption is implied by R. Eliyahu Mizrahi in his responsa (56).

sort of man-god and the belief in his Trinitarian association with G-d.⁹⁷

However, R. Dr. Jose Faur⁹⁸ disputes this narrative. He contends that the Gemara did not brand Christianity a form of idolatry on strictly theological grounds, because the Christian adoption of icons in its ritual liturgy had not yet become widespread in Talmudic times and because these problematic elements are not inherent to Christianity (as they are not ubiquitous to all sects thereof).

Instead, Faur offers two different explanations as to why the Gemara considered Christianity a form of idolatry. The first approach is based on the Christian theo-political idea of dual governance, whereby the human political leadership is said to be on par with G-d's religious leadership. This ideology is considered idolatrous because it leads to the inevitable deification of the king/political sovereign. This dual governance model — which is branded idolatrous — stands in stark contrast to the Jewish model that views the political realm as subservient to G-d.⁹⁹

Alternatively, Faur interprets the term *avodah zarah* literally to mean “strange/foreign worship.” He thus defines idolatry

97. Although Christians aver to be monotheistic, R. Meir Lerner of Altona (*Teshuvos Hadar Hacarmel* Y.D. 44:1) compares the Christian belief in the Trinity to the mistake of Enosh's generation, arguing that like the people of that generation, Christians mistakenly think they are doing what G-d wants of them.

98. R. Dr. Faur is a somewhat controversial figure in Orthodox circles. Growing up, his family was part of the Syrian community in Argentina. He originally studied in Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, NJ under R. Aharon Kotler, but subsequently left the yeshiva to become the first Jew admitted to the University of Barcelona since 1492, where he received his degrees. After that, he served as a rabbi and *dayan* (judge) in the Syrian community in New York, but also taught for a time at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theology Seminary.

99. J. Faur, *The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism* vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010), pp. 159–166.

as engaging in any sort of ritualistic cult that is not stipulated by the Torah. The Torah's conception of monotheistic worship demands that a Jew remain loyal to Him and to His covenant, precluding the engagement in any other sort of ritual or religion. According to Faur, the prohibition of idolatry applies mainly to Jews and is theoretically irrelevant for non-Jews, who are not subject to Sinaitic covenant. The way he sees it, the Noahide prohibition against idolatry only applies to gentiles residing in the Holy Land, because "an alien residing in Israel must respect Jewish standards and regulations as it would be expected from every alien to respect the laws and regulations of the host country."¹⁰⁰ This entirely novel approach to understanding the Noahide prohibition of idolatry has no precedent in earlier sources. Nonetheless, as a consequence of this thinking, Faur maintains that although Christianity is always considered idolatrous, it is only problematic for non-Jews in the Holy Land (and, obviously, for Jews everywhere in the world).¹⁰¹

Christianity Is Not Idolatrous

The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that if bandits broke into one's wine cellar and opened barrels of wine, then if most of the city's bandits are gentiles, then we may assume that they performed some sort of idolatrous rites with that wine, and a Jew is forbidden to derive any benefit from that wine. He adds the caveat that if a majority of the bandits were Muslims, then the wine only becomes forbidden to be drunk, but one may derive other forms of benefit from it.¹⁰² In this context, the *Shach* comments that not only does this exception apply to Muslims, it also applies

100. J. Faur, *The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism* vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010), p. 33.

101. *Ibid.* pp. 32–33 and J. Faur, *Homo Mysticus* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), pp. 10–11. For more on Faur's position on Christianity and how he understands why the Rambam branded it idolatrous, see Faur's *Iyunim B'Mishneh Torah L'HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1978), pp. 230–238.

102. Y.D. 129:11.

to “all other gentiles in our days.”¹⁰³ This seemingly means that the *Shach* maintains that Christians are not considered idolaters, just like Muslims are not considered idolaters. Indeed, R. Mordechai Marcus Horowitz understands that the *Shach* rules that Christians are not considered idolaters because non-Jews are not enjoined from engaging in *shituf*.¹⁰⁴

R. Ovadiah Yosef invokes the discussion surrounding *shituf* in his ruling that a convert to Judaism is allowed to pray for his gentile (Christian) parents’ health and even to say *kaddish* for them upon their demise, basing himself on the notion that Christians are not considered idolaters because non-Jews are allowed to practice *shituf*.¹⁰⁵

Nonetheless, as we have seen above, the contention that non-Jews are allowed to engage in *shituf* is subject to dispute. Thus, it would seem that one of the ramifications of that dispute would relate to whether Christianity ought to be viewed as idolatrous or not.

There are, in fact, earlier authorities who also seem to have understood Christianity as non-idolatrous. For example, R. David Kimchi comments that by his time, the worship of idols and false deities had already stopped, and “Most of the world believes in the Torah of Moshe and its stories; they only disagree with us about the commandments, for they say that they (i.e. the commandments) were said as a parable...”¹⁰⁶ In that context, R. Kimchi clearly seems to be referring to Christianity, yet his wording suggests that he views Christianity as non-idolatrous.

R. Moshe Rivkes takes this a step further, writing that because Christians believe in the creation of the world and in the story

103. *Shach* Y.D. 129:25.

104. *Teshuvos Mateh Levi* (2 Y.D. 28). This is a somewhat novel reading of the *Shach*, because on the surface, his intent is really to say that Christians do not typically libate wine as ritual sacrifices, so one need not suspect that they did so, but not that Christianity in general is not considered idolatrous.

105. *Teshuvos Yechaveh Da’as* (6:60).

106. Radak *Bereishis* 22:1.

of the Exodus, we not only view them as non-idolatrous, but we are even obligated to pray for their wellbeing when we live among them.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, R. Chaim Galipapa¹⁰⁸ writes that the Christians in his time were not considered idolaters, because although they believed in the Trinity, this is not considered idolatry *per se*, but is simply a confused way of understanding G-d.¹⁰⁹

In more recent times, R. Yehudah Assad allowed Jews to light candles to honor an Easter procession in part because the practitioners are not considered idolaters and their deity is not considered *avodah zarah*.¹¹⁰

One of R. Assad's proofs is the fact that R. Moshe Sofer took a stricter stance on the same question when asked about lighting candles in honor of an idolatrous deity by Jews in India. In that case, R. Sofer ruled that one ought to give up one's life in order

107. *Be'eir Hagolah* (C.M. 425, *os shin*).

108. *Koveitz Ohr Yisroel* vol. 56 (Monsey, 2009), pp. 12–13. [Incidentally, R. Gottheil & M. Kayserling, "Galipapa, Hayyim." in *Jewish Encyclopedia* vol. 5 (1906), p. 555 write, "Galipapa belonged to the liberal school, setting aside the strictly orthodox rabbinical authorities, and following even in advanced years those that inclined to a more lax discipline... Because of his reforms, R. Hasdai ben Solomon of Tudela made a complaint against him to Isaac ben Sheshet [*Rivash*], whereupon the latter seriously but gently reproved him, urging him to avoid henceforth all cause for offense and to preserve peace..." The more recent J. S. Levinger, "Galipapa, Hayyim ben Abraham." in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol. 7 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), p. 349 tones down this description and simply writes: "There is also extant a letter by Isaac b. Sheshet to Galipapa from which the latter's views on *halakhah* can be seen."]

109. See also R. Shlomo Verga in E. Cohen (ed.), *Sheivet Yehudah* (Jerusalem, 2007), p. 18 who writes that a Trinitarian conception of G-d is not tantamount to denying Him. For the possibility that the Rashba also felt that the concept of Trinity could be related to a legitimate Kabbalistic perspective, see J. Faur, *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 14–15.

110. *Teshuvos Yehudah Ya'aleh* (Y.D. 170).

to avoid doing so.¹¹¹ Oddly enough, R. Assad reasons that R. Sofer was only strict because the question came from India, where the local gentiles are what he takes to be true idolaters, but had the question come from somewhere in Europe, where the local gentiles were Christians, R. Sofer would have been more lenient. R. Assad takes this inference as license to be lenient about candles in honor of the Christian deity.¹¹²

Nonetheless, R. Chaim Elazar Shapiro¹¹³ and R. Yissachar Dov Goldstein¹¹⁴ note that this question likely came from somewhere closer to R. Sofer's home in Hungary, but the locale in question was purposely obfuscated in order to avoid censorship.¹¹⁵

In our times, R. Dr. Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch was sympathetic to the position that even without the *shituf* element, Christianity should no longer be considered idolatrous because of advances in their official theology that bring them within the camp of moral monotheists and weaned them away from problematic doctrines (like the Trinity).¹¹⁶ In various ways, R. Rabinovitch's student R. Dr. Jonathan Sacks openly advocated for this sort of approach throughout his numerous writings.¹¹⁷

111. *Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* (Y.D. 133). R. Moshe Sofer's son, R. Avraham Binyamin Shmuel Sofer, also discusses this question in *Teshuvos Kesav Sofer* (Y.D. 84) and offers a slightly different ruling from his father's.

112. R. Akiva Sofer (*Teshuvos Da'as Sofer* Y.D. 59) cites R. Assad's responsum but tactfully omits any mention of a difference between Christians and what are taken as "real idolaters" (i.e. those in India).

113. *Teshuvos Minchas Elazar* 1:53:3.

114. *Likkutei He'aros al Sifrei Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* Y.D. 133:12.

115. For other examples in which R. Sofer obscured the destination of his responsa by writing as though he were addressing interlocutors in India or the Ottoman Empire, see R. Baruch Oberlander's essay in *Alei Zikaron* vol. 25 (2016), pp. 2-5.

116. See N. E. Rabinovitch, *Mesilos Bilvavam* (Maaleh Adumim: Maaliyot Publications, 2015), pp. 471-499.

117. For example, see his books *The Dignity of Difference* (Continuum, 2002) and *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2015). In his review of the former of those books, Dr. Marc B. Shapiro in "Of Books and Bans," *The Edah Journal* vol. 3:2 (2003), pp. 8-16 criticizes R. Sack's

Different Strokes of Christianity

The term "Christian" applies to many different sects or denominations of that religion. There is a widespread impression that Christianity consists of approximately 33,000 different denominational variants, each with its own slightly different nuance in theology and liturgical worship.¹¹⁸ Over a millennium ago, R. Sa'adyah Gaon already identified at least four different Christian conceptions of Jesus and his alleged divinity: That his body and soul were divine (Jacobite Church); that his body was human, but his soul was divine (Nestorian Church); that his body and soul were both human, but he had an extra divine soul (Melkite Church); and that he was totally human, but simply served as a prophet (Neo-Ebionite Church).¹¹⁹

Based on this multiplicity of Christian conceptions, some have argued that the Rambam's stance is limited to Catholicism, with their "strange" beliefs about the Messiah and the Trinity and their "strange" ways of worship. Perhaps the Rambam would not consider other sects of Christianity, like the various Orthodox Christian churches (which were outside of the Rambam's orbit) and the various forms of Protestantism (which did not yet exist in his time), to be idolatry.¹²⁰ Indeed, R. Eliyahu Ben-Chaim writes that unlike Muslims (who are all considered

approach for purporting to be accepting of all world religions, yet presumably continuing to discount the legitimacy of polytheism. In fact, the very halachic category of *avodah zarah* seems to disprove the sort of ecumenical tolerance that R. Sacks preaches.

118. Cf. S. E. Alt, "We Need to Stop Saying That There Are 33,000 Protestant Denominations," *National Catholic Register Blog* (Feb. 9, 2016) [Available Online at: <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/we-need-to-stop-saying-that-there-are-33-000-protestant-denominations>].

119. Y. Kapach (ed.), *Ha'emunos V'dei'os* (Jerusalem: Sura Institute for Research and Publication, 1970), pp. 94–95, as explained by E. Schlossberg, "Pulmuso Shel Rav Sa'adyah Gaon Negged Hanatzrut" in Y. Blau & D. Doron (eds.), *Mesoret V'shinui* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 246–248.

120. D. Fixler and G. Nadel, "Ha'im HaNotzrim B'yameinu Ovdei Avodah Zarah Heim" *Techumim* vol. 22 (2002), pp. 68–78.

non-idolaters), when it comes to Christians, in some places the Christians are idolaters, and in some places, they are not.¹²¹

As mentioned above, some authorities working with the assumption that a non-Jew is allowed to engage in *shituf* have taken to assessing some Christian sects to be non-idolatrous. For example, R. Yosef Shaul Nathansohn allowed Jews in New York to reappropriate a building that housed a Welsh-Scottish Methodist Church for use as a synagogue. In his treatment of the question, he noted that Methodists (a subset of Protestantism) do not use idolatrous icons or crosses in their worship.¹²²

Similar reasoning can be traced back to R. Yitzchak Hakohen Rappaport, who wrote that while Catholics revere the cross as something venerable per se, and can thus be said to “worship” it, the Lutherans (i.e. Protestants) tend to view the cross as simply a way of remembering Jesus, but not as an object of worship in its own right.¹²³

Likewise, R. Yosef Messas records that he spoke to a Christian priest, who claimed that his church only worships the one G-d. Interestingly, that priest also claimed that all the icons and images used in their houses of worship are only to remind them about how much Jesus loves them, but they do not actually worship Jesus himself. The priest also claimed that when they say that Jesus was “a son of G-d (*Elohim*),” the word *Elohim*

121. *Teshuvos HaRa'anach* (112).

122. *Teshuvos Sho'el Umeishiv* (1st edition, 3:72–74). A similar ruling was issued by R. David Tzvi Hoffmann (*Teshuvos Melamed L'ho'il* 1:20) regarding repurposing a Protestant church (that had in the interim served other functions) as a synagogue.

123. *Teshuvos Batei Kehunah* (1:13 s.v. *v'od ani modia*). Ultimately, though, he does not use this logic to rule leniently about the halachic status of crosses that come from a Lutheran milieu. See also the Rama (Y.D. 141:1 and 3), who differentiates between crosses that were actually used for ritual worship (which are considered idols) and crosses that were simply worn (which are not).

actually means “angel,” not “G-d.” Accordingly, this particular sect believed that Jesus was a son of an angel, not a son of G-d.¹²⁴

Another relevant factor is the opinion of R. Yochanan, who said, “Gentiles outside of the Land [of Israel] are not idolaters; rather, the customs of their forefathers are in their hands.”¹²⁵ This means that most gentiles outside of the Holy Land are insincere (or at least not as devout) in their idol worship, and thus their actions should not be assumed by default to be idolatrous. Tosafos¹²⁶ add that even though R. Yochanan said this about gentiles outside of the Holy Land, those within the Holy Land are likewise insincere. This position is not typically cited in the halachic literature, but it does appear in a responsum of R. Gershom Me’or Hagolah of Mainz, who marshaled R. Yochanan’s statement in support of ruling that a Jew may do business with Christians on their holidays, even though otherwise conducting business with idolaters on their holidays is forbidden.¹²⁷

A similar discussion is found in a responsum ascribed to Rashi, which states that if a non-Jew (i.e. Christian) touched Jewish

124. *Teshuvos Mayim Chaim* (2 Y.D. 108:2). (After consulting the *Christianity Stack Exchange* forum, I was unable to confirm that there is any sect within Christianity that believes that Jesus was the son of an angel rather than son of G-d); see <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/71187/is-there-a-denomination-sect-of-christianity-that-believes-that-jesus-was-the-so>]. It appears, though that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (J- Witnesses) believe Jesus is the Archangel Michael/Michoel. Although the Witnesses substitute 'are' . banned today in Morocco, they seem to have had a substantial presence there in the past, where R. Messas may well have encountered them.

125. *Chullin* 13b.

126. *Ibid.* s.v. *nochrin* . See also *Shitah Mekubetztes* (*ibid.*).

127. S. Edelberg (ed.), *Teshuvos Rabbeinu Gershom Me’or Hagolah* (New York: Bilshan, 1956), pp. 76–77. In the end of that responsum, R. Gershom bases his permissive ruling on the concept, “It is better that they sin inadvertently than wantonly,” which suggests that he does not truly agree that it should be permitted. A similar ruling is found in T. B. Auerbach (ed.), *Sefer Ha’eshkol* vol. 3 (Halberstadt, 1868), p. 116 (although the provenance of this work has often been called into question).

wine, the wine is not rendered *yayin nesech* because “Gentiles in these days are not experts in the nature of idol worship.”¹²⁸ These sources plainly see Christianity as idolatrous but nonetheless found room to be lenient when it came to auxiliary prohibitions.¹²⁹

The Ra’avan invokes this sort of reasoning when attempting to justify why a Jew may be allowed to rent out a house to a gentile, even though doing so essentially enables the gentile to bring his idols into a Jewish-owned home. The Ra’avan offers two justifications for this practice: firstly, because Jews do not actually own houses, but rather pay tribute to their feudal lord who technically owns the property, if a Jew rents the house to a gentile, it is not considered a Jew’s such that he is responsible for any idolatry committed therein. Secondly, the Ra’avan argues that gentiles are not devoted enough to their idolatry that one should suspect they will bring idols into their home (because they only worship at church). In his conclusion, the Ra’avan writes that the practice in question is even permitted in

128. Y. S. Elfenbein (ed.), *Teshuvos Rashi* (New York, 1953), p. 327. Elsewhere, however, Rashi is cited as explaining that a gentile’s touch does not forbid Jewish wine nowadays because the gentiles no longer libate wines in honor of their deities; see Elfenbein *ibid.* p. 56 and S. Buber (ed.), *Sefer Ha’orah* vol. 1 (Lvov, 1905), p. 148. The latter reasoning is also cited in Tosafos (*Avodah Zarah* 57b s.v. *la’afukei*). The Rama (*Teshuvos HaRama* 124) cites both of these mitigating reasons to excuse the practice of Moravian Jews, who were accustomed to drinking gentile wine. See also the Rama (Y.D. 128:1), *Teshuvos HaBach* (*Chadashos* 29), *Teshuvos Mahari Mibruna* (273), and *Darkei Teshuvah* (Y.D. 132:9). A responsum from R. Yehudai Gaon published in C. Albek (ed.), *Sefer Ha’eshkol* vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 74 maintains that Christians are considered idolatrous and that in his time, they were still suspected of ritually libating wine.

129. Although this point is obvious, it was stated explicitly by the *Piskei Rid* (*Chullin* 13b), R. Moshe Sofer (*Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* Y.D. 131 and *Chasam Sofer to Gittin* 10b), and R. Ovadiah Yosef (*Teshuvos Yabia Omer* 2:11:4), and it is also implied throughout R. Henkin’s *Teshuvos Benei Banim* (3:36:2, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 38:2).

Russia and Greece, where the gentiles are known to be especially attached to their idols.¹³⁰

As R. Henkin explains this ruling, the Ra'avan notes that even in places where the Christians are members of the Russian Orthodox or Greek Orthodox church (who are more devoted to icons than Catholics are), the prevailing custom in those lands was still that Jews may rent to non-Jews. This implies that the Eastern Christian churches are to be considered even more idolatrous than the Western Catholic church,¹³¹ yet there are some auxiliary issues in which one can even be lenient regarding worshippers of the Eastern rites.¹³²

R. Yitzchak Isaac Herzog also deals with the halachic status of Christians. He notes that although they self-identify as monotheists, we do not quite understand how to reconcile this with their belief in the Trinity. Ultimately, he argues that Christianity's status hinges on the issue of *shituf*, and he adopts

130. D. Devlitzky (ed.), *Sefer Ra'avan* vol. 2 (Bnei Brak, 2017), p. 187. See *Bach* (Y.D. 151), who understands Ra'avan's final point as evidence that he felt that the first justification is the main one, because the second point only applies to gentiles who are not as devoted to their idols, which was apparently not the case in Greece and Russia.

131. Interestingly, R. Yeshayah of Trani writes (*Tosafos Rid, Avodah Zarah* 57a s.v. *tinok*) that although R. Tzemach Gaon forbids a Jew from drinking Jewish wine that a Muslim touched, he disagrees with that position and maintains that a Jew is allowed to drink such wine. When it comes to Jewish wine that a Christian touched, he seems inclined to be lenient as well, but he does not render a final ruling. When asked about his view on wine that was touched by a gentile, he wrote in his *Teshuvos HaRid* (120) that he would prefer to discuss the matter with his interlocutor in person and not issue a ruling in writing. Perhaps this alludes to a complexity by which not all Christians ought to be painted with a single brush, so R. Yeshayah preferred to speak to his interlocutor in person where he would be more able to clearly convey the relevant nuances.

132. *Teshuvos Benei Banim* (3:36:2, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 38:2). This reading is somewhat problematic, because ultimately, the Ra'avan resorts to a technicality (that Jews do not completely own their property) to allow this practice rather than an argument about the status of the gentiles in question (see footnote 130 above).

R. Wolf Boskowitz's position (mentioned above) that non-Jews are not enjoined from worshipping *shituf*, thus concluding that Christians are not considered idolaters.¹³³ In this discussion, R. Herzog explicitly stipulates that his lenient ruling applies to both Catholics and Protestants. He too repeats the claim that the cross is merely a symbol of remembering, not an object of veneration or adoration.¹³⁴

Taking this a step further, some authorities have even allowed Jews to contribute money towards building a Christian church.¹³⁵

133. R. Herzog duly notes that *shituf* is still a forbidden form of worship for a Jew, but he is unsure whether a Jew who worships *shituf* has violated the strictest level of *avodah zarah* to be liable for the death penalty. R. Herzog notes that even though the Torah warns against allowing idolaters to live in the Holy Land "lest they cause you to sin against Me when they worship their gods, for that shall be for you an ensnarement (*Shemos* 23:33), it is possible that this prohibition only applies to those who worship idolatry of the highest caliber. Idolaters who practice a form of idolatry which they are permitted to practice, like *shituf*, on the other hand, are allowed to stay in the Holy Land (even if their mode of worship is forbidden for Jews).

R. Herzog offers two explanations for this. Firstly, he argues that if a Jew is not liable for the penalty for engaging in *shituf*, then perhaps we can say that the Torah was only concerned with idolaters influencing the Jews to commit the most severe types of idolatry, not *shituf*. Alternatively, he suggests that the requirement to rid the land of idolaters only applies to full-fledged idolaters who are also party to other sins (like murder, sexual immorality, witchcraft, etc.), not to idolaters who are otherwise civil. (This is possibly another way of understanding the Me'iri's position.)

134. *Zechuyos Hami'utim L'fi Hahalacha* in *Techumim* vol. 2 (1982), pp. 174–175, also published in A. Pichnik (ed.), *Shanah B'shanah: Yearbook for 5786* (Jerusalem: Heichal Shlomo, 1985), p. 137–138.

135. R. Yitzchak Unna offered such a ruling (*Teshuvos Sho'alin V'dorshin* 35), as did R. Shalom Messas (*Teshuvos Shemesh Umagen* 3 O.C. 30–31, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 37). R. Mordechai Marcus Horowitz (*Teshuvos Mateh Levi* 2 Y.D. 28) even specified that Jews may contribute toward building a Catholic Church. All of these rulings also took into account the fact that if the Jews refuse to contribute, it may lead to some degree of enmity with their Christian neighbors and the possible desecration of G-d's Name.

Interestingly, R. Eliezer Yitzchak Fried (*Teshuvos Chut Hameshulash* 28) allows Jewish workers to aid in the construction of a mosque. It is quite likely that his responsum actually referred to building a church, but because of

For example, when asked about whether Jews may be allowed to financially contribute to the construction of a church, R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin offers two bases for ruling that it is allowed. Firstly, he argues that if the church is of a Protestant denomination, Jewish financial aid is permitted, because such churches do not use icons/images in their liturgy. Secondly, he argues that even if it is a Catholic church, Jewish financial aid is permitted if the church could have been built anyway without the contribution of Jewish money.¹³⁶

R. Shmuel Fuerst publicly reports that he heard from R. Moshe Yehuda Blau in the name of R. Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Chafetz Chaim) that Christianity is considered *avodah zarah*, not *shituf*.¹³⁷ Similarly, as a student and protégé of R. Dr. Faur, R. Dr. Alan Yuter sees no reason to differentiate between Catholicism and

censoring, all references to Christianity were disguised as references to Islam. Nonetheless, R. Yisrael Pesach Feinhandler (*Teshuvos Avnei Yashfeih* 1 Y.D. 153:1) takes R. Freid's responsum at face value as referring to a mosque, not a church. [Parenthetically, R. Feinhandler wrote (in an unpublished responsum addressed to my cousin, I. Berkovits) that a Jew is allowed to develop a website for a church, even though this promotes their religion and the Jew will necessarily deal with pictures of their idolatrous paraphernalia.]

R. Moshe Sternbuch writes (*Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 1:466) that a Jewish architect may not design the sanctum of a Christian church but may work on the outside courtyard. He clarifies that even if Christians are considered non-idolatrous because they only engage in *shituf*, not actual idolatry, this only allows a Jew to enter a business partnership with a Christian or otherwise do business with a Christian near his holidays, but it is not a blanket rule that Christians are not considered idolaters for all purposes. For more about under what circumstances a Jewish contractor is allowed to build a church (even if the actual construction workers are not Jewish), see *Teshuvos Maharam Shick* (Y.D. 153), *Darkei Teshuvah* (Y.D. 143:5).

136. *Teshuvos Benei Banim* (3:36:6, also printed in *Igros Malchei Rabbanan* Y.D. 38:6), and R. Moshe Walter's essay "Entering a Church - Halachic parameters in *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* vol. 77, especially pp. 107-108.

137. A recording of R. Fuerst's discussion of this topic can be accessed at: <https://www.torahanytime.com/#/lectures?v=179827> (~ 51:00 minutes into the recording).

Protestantism, instead preferring to view both offshoots of Christianity as equally idolatrous because they reflect a religion not stipulated by the Torah's covenant.¹³⁸

Islam Is Not Idolatrous

As mentioned above, when it comes to Islam, the consensus among later halachic authorities is that its practitioners are not considered idolaters. This view is explicitly stated by the Rambam¹³⁹ and is repeated by the Rama.¹⁴⁰ In fact, this position even predates the Rambam, as it is already recorded in a Geonic responsum that Muslims are not considered idolaters because they do not worship idols.¹⁴¹ R. Shimon ben Tzemach Duran adds that the Muslim conception of G-d is the same as the Jewish conception (sans all the deeper Kabbalistic secrets), such that they too are thoroughly monotheistic (although some

138. Y. Y. Yuter, "Iyun B'Hilchos Avodah Zarah B'yameinu," *Hadarom* vol. 63 (1993), p. 43.

139. *Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros* (11:7) and *Teshuvos HaRambam* (149 in the *Machon Yerushalayim* edition).

The Rambam's son R. Avraham also follows this approach and permits deriving benefit from their wine; see A. H. Freimann (ed.), *Abraham Maimuni: Responsa* (Jerusalem: *Mekizei Nirdamim*, 1937), p. 56. For a discussion of whether the Rambam's father R. Maimon also agreed with this assessment, see E. Schlossberg, "The Attitude of R. Maimon, the Father of Maimonides, to Islam and Muslim Persecutions," *Sefunot: Studies and Sources on the History of the Jewish Communities in the East* vol. 5 (1991), pp. 95-107. Regarding R. Yosef ibn Migash's stance on this, see below.

140. Y.D. 146:5.

141. See M. Weisz (ed.), *Geniza-Fragmente der bibliothek David Kaufmann S. A.* (Budapest, 1924), p. 95. Various suggestions have been offered as to which particular Gaon from Sura penned this responsum, including R. Kohen Tzedek Gaon, his successor R. Sar-Shalom Gaon, or his successor R. Natronai Gaon; see E. Schlossberg, "R. Saadia Gaon's Attitude Towards Islam," *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* vol. 25 (1990), p. 34.

elements of Islam believe in corporealism) and are therefore not considered idolaters.¹⁴²

A Jewish proselyte named R. Ovadiah (who converted from Islam¹⁴³) asked the Rambam about his stance on Islam vis-à-vis its status as idolatry. R. Ovadiah wrote that his own teacher taught him that Muslims are considered idolaters because they are understood to throw rocks at the Markulis/Mercury idol (a reference to the Muslim custom of throwing rocks at the Kaaba upon the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca).

The Rambam responded to this inquiry by reiterating his position that Muslims are not considered idolaters.¹⁴⁴ He then clarifies that even though Arabs were once pagans, they have since ceased to be pagan and instead worship the one G-d of monotheism. The Rambam does concede that the shrine at Mecca was once a place of actual idol worship and even houses an idol (the Kaaba), but he still asserts that nowadays, when Muslims pilgrimage to the site, they do not bow down to the idol, but rather to G-d.

The Rambam also notes that although Muslims continue to follow some of the rites performed by their pre-Islamic pagan

142. *Magein Avos* (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 2007), pp. 234–237. In his *Teshuvos Tashbeitz* (3:133), R. Duran repeats the Rambam's position that Islam is not considered idolatry but still rules that a Jew may not slaughter a sheep or otherwise partake in the Islamic "Paschal Offering" (i.e. Eid al-Adha). This position is also implicit elsewhere in *Teshuvos Tashbeitz* (2:48). For a full discussion of R. Duran's stance, see *Yarchon Ha'otzar* vol. 16 (2018), pp. 275, 277, which discusses seven different places in which R. Duran addresses Islam's status.

143. See L. Zamick, "Which Ovadiah the Ger?" *Kotzk Blog* (Aug 21, 2022). Available online at: <https://www.kotzkblog.com/2022/08/396-which-ovadiah-ger.html>.

144. In his glosses to the Rambam's epistle, R. Yaakov Emden questions the assertion that Muslims are not considered idolaters. See A. Bick, "*He'aros Ya'avetz L'igros HaRambam*," *Koveitz Sinai* vol. 85 (1979), p. 54. Bick points out that in his glosses to the *Zohar*, R. Emden writes about Muslims that they "are certainly close to the Jews in actual monotheism;" see A. Bick, *Zaharei Ya'avetz* (Jerusalem: Daas Torah Publications, 1976), p. 3.

ancestors, those vestigial rituals have been reinterpreted by Islam to be non-idolatrous. For example, originally, the Roman god Mercury was worshiped by throwing a rock towards a herm of rocks. Although Muslims continue the practice of throwing rocks at the Kaaba, they reinterpret it as attempting to stone the Satan or to destroy idols. Similarly, whereas in previous times, worshipers of the Moabite deity Chemosh might cut their hair as a sacrifice,¹⁴⁵ Muslims grow their hair as a way of humbling themselves before G-d.¹⁴⁶

R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad affirms the Rambam's ruling that Muslims are not considered idolaters, and thus wine that Muslims touch only becomes forbidden to drink but not forbidden for other benefits.¹⁴⁷

R. Yitzchak Elchanan Spector even invokes the Rambam's stance to allow Jewish soldiers in the Russian army to use a former mosque as a makeshift synagogue and study hall.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, R. Yitzchak Isaac Herzog accepts the Rambam's view and even concludes that from a halachic standpoint, their religious worship can be officially tolerated, and it is permitted to sell them land in Israel.¹⁴⁹

Islam Is Idolatrous

Although the notion that Islam is not considered idolatrous remains the consensus among the rabbinic authorities throughout the ages, ever since the Geonic period, there have been some rabbinic voices that viewed Islam as idolatrous. While we mentioned earlier that some *Geonim* maintained that

145. See R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), p. 313.

146. *Teshuvos HaRambam* (269 in the Machon Yerushalayim edition).

147. *Ben Ish Chai* (Year 2, Balak 1).

148. *Teshuvos Ein Yitzchak* (1 O.C. 11).

149. *Zechuyos Hami'utim L'fi Hahalacha* in *Techumim* vol. 2 (1982), pp. 171, 174, also published in A. Pichnik (ed.), *Shanah B'shanah: Yearbook for 5786* (Jerusalem: Heichal Shlomo, 1985), pp. 136–137.

Muslims are not considered idolaters, that point is actually subject to dispute.¹⁵⁰

In discussing the halachic status of wine that was detained by gentiles, R. Avraham Av Beis Din of Narbonne (known as Ra'avad II) cites a responsum from R. Hai Gaon, who wrote that since Muslims are forbidden by their religion to drink wine, one need not suspect that they used the wine for rituals.¹⁵¹ He then cites the position of R. Yehudai Gaon, who argued that in his time, many Muslims still had Zoroastrian leanings (even though some had already converted to Islam several generations prior)¹⁵²

150. In light of the Geonic controversy over whether Islam is considered idolatrous, E. Schlossberg ("R. Saadia Gaon's Attitude Towards Islam," *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* vol. 25 (1990), p. 34) finds R. Sa'adyah Gaon's omission of any discussion (throughout his vast oeuvre, which includes many polemics) about this issue to be quite curious.

151. R. Ishtori Haparchi similarly writes in A. Y. Chavatzet (ed.), *Kaftor Vaferach* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: *Beis Midrash L'halacha B'hisvashvus*, 2004), p. 79 that even though Muslims may be considered idolaters because of their rituals at the Kaaba, their wine is not *yayin nesech* because for them all wine is forbidden, so they do not use wine whatsoever for ritual purposes.

152. For an analysis of pre-Islam Arabic religion, see G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). That work considers whether the pre-Islam Arabs to whom the Quran preached were truly polytheistic pagans; were more inclined towards monotheism, albeit with the worship of lesser gods alongside One Supreme G-d (akin to *shituf*); or were something in between.

The Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 11b) mentions Nishra (Nasra) as the name of an idolatrous temple in Arabia (see *Aruch Hashaleim*, s.v. *neshet* 2). The Nasra deity also appears in the Quran (71:23) as a pre-Islamic Arabic god that existed in the time of Noach, which other Islamic scholars explain refers to an idol shaped like an eagle (i.e. *neshet* in Hebrew). See Hawting (*ibid.* pp. 114–116) for a discussion of this particular deity. The name Nasra also bears somewhat of a resemblance to the Assyrian god Nisroch, which was likewise associated with Noach; see R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 348–350.

All of this jibes with an early Jewish tradition (dating from the Geonic period) that links the Kaaba stone at Mecca (revered by Muslims) with the worship of the ancient Moabite god Chemosh (see Klein, p. 314). Nonetheless, E. Schlossberg, "R. Saadia Gaon's Attitude Towards Islam," *Daat: A Journal of*

and thus could still be suspected of using wine for ritual purposes.¹⁵³

Later on, Raavad II cites R. Nachshon Gaon, who wrote that although Muslims do not ritually libate wine and do not even realize that they worship idolatry, they are nonetheless considered idolaters. He connects Islam to one of the eleven “permanent places of idolatry” mentioned in the Gemara.¹⁵⁴ Since one of those listed is located in Arabia, he reasons that this refers to Muslims.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, the Me’iri writes that the Sages of Spain — an epithet which Me’iri typically uses for R. Yosef ibn Migash — also maintain that Muslims are considered idolaters as per the said Talmudic passage.¹⁵⁶

The view that Islam is considered idolatrous continued to gain currency in subsequent generations as well. For example, R. Nissim of Gerona writes that Islam is considered *avodah zarah* because even though Muslims do not consider Mohammed a god, they bow in front of him as if he were a god,¹⁵⁷ and this

Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah vol. 25 (1990), p. 31 asserts that R. Sa’adyah Gaon himself rejected any connection between Nasra and the Islamic Kaaba.

153. C. Albek (ed.), *Sefer Ha’eshkol* vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 74.

154. *Avodah Zarah* 11b.

155. C. Albek (ed.), *Sefer Ha’eshkol* vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 77–78. R. Nachshon Gaon’s responsum is also cited in S. Chasidah (ed.), *Shibbolei Haleket* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Machon Yerushalayim*, 1988), p. 20.

156. *Beis Habechirah* to *Avodah Zarah* 57a.

157. R. Yaakov Ariel of Ramat Gan *Teshuvos B’ohalah Shel Torah* vol. 5 (Kfar Daron/Asheklon: *Machon Hatorah V’ha’aretz*, 2009), p. 21 points out that there is no evidence of Muslims considering Mohammed a god. He does, however, concede that R. Nissim may have been referring to some primitive Muslims who venerate the Kaaba at Mecca as a sort of god, as the worship there is a vestigial remnant of pre-Islamic Arab paganism. Nevertheless, this is clearly not what R. Nissim meant, because he explicitly references them bowing down to Mohammed. Rather, it seems, R. Nissim’s position is based on the notion that we mentioned earlier that halacha does not reckon with idolaters’ exact theology, so if on the surface a given ritual looks like idolatry, it is considered idolatrous, even if the theological idea behind it is not as problematic.

act itself constitutes idolatry.¹⁵⁸ R. Yom Tov b. Avraham of Seville similarly writes that even though Islam is thoroughly monotheistic, it is still considered full-fledged *avodah zarah*, and a Jew ought to give up his life rather than to apostatize by converting to Islam.¹⁵⁹

R. Ovadiah Yosef attempts to reconcile all of these positions by positing that all the sources that assert that “Ishmaelites” are considered idolaters were not talking about Muslim Arabs, but rather pagan Arabs.¹⁶⁰ This understanding may be inferred from the Rambam who, when noting that Muslims are not idolaters, stresses: “Such have all the *Geonim* ruled,”¹⁶¹ even though there were clearly *Geonim* who wrote that Ishmaelites are considered idolaters. However, this position is difficult to maintain, because some of the sources above clearly refer to elements of Islam that they consider to be idolatrous. While it is quite possible that the *Geonim* who stated the Ishmaelites are idolaters were actually discussing pre-Islam Arabs who were indeed pagan,¹⁶² the later

158. *Chiddushei HaRan Sanhedrin* 61b.

159. *Chiddushei HaRitva Pesachim* 25b, also cited by *Teshuvos HaRadvaz* (4:92). Even though the Ritva (*Avodah Zarah* 57b) writes that Muslims are not considered idolaters, this simply means their wine is not considered *yayin nesech* because Muslims do not use wine in their rituals; see *Yarchon Ha'otzar* vol. 16 (2018), p. 276. The same logic can be used to reconcile the *Teshuvos HaRan* (5), wherein R. Nissim writes that Muslims are not idolaters and their wine is permitted, with R. Nissim's aforementioned position that Islam is considered idolatrous (although this is somewhat more difficult to say, because in this responsum, R. Nissim invokes the Rambam's ruling that Islam is not considered idolatry whatsoever).

160. *Teshuvos Yabia Omer* (7 Y.D. 12:2; see also 10 O.C. 16 and Y.D. 13).

161. *Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros* 11:7.

162. David P. Goldman in *How Civilizations Die and Why Islam is Dying Too* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2011), pp. 74–78; 125–126 [e-book edition] sees the Islamic family model of a husband serving as a miniature king within the domestic realm (including the right/duty of beating his wife) as a vestige of the ancient pagan world. He also discusses how Islam's theological conception of G-d as “absolutely transcendent, and unconditionally omnipotent” as essentially pagan, because such a wholly transcendental approach precludes the possibility of G-d limiting Himself and becoming

sources like R. Nissim were certainly dealing with Arabs who had already fully embraced Islam and its tenets.

In one instance, R. Chaim ibn Attar follows the Rambam in writing that Muslims are staunch monotheists and totally reject idolatry. He notes that they try to declare the unity of G-d as much as they understand it, and they execute anyone who partners G-d with something else.¹⁶³ Yet in another instance, R. ibn Attar seems unwilling to rely on the Rambam's position in practice, suggesting that even if Muslim theology may technically be monotheistic, perhaps their conception of Mohammed as an especially important prophet constitutes some form of *shituf*,¹⁶⁴ which would render them at least somewhat idolatrous.¹⁶⁵

immanent by entering a covenant with man — an idea so central to Jewish (and even Christian) thought. When translated into practice as Islamic political theory, this theology yields the notion of an uncompromising sovereign who — like the Islamic god — is not limited by any sort of law or constitution (see there, p. 78). Goldman repeats this critique of Islam (in the name of Franz Rosenzweig) in his work *It's Not the End of the World, It's Just the End of You: The Great Extinction of the Nations* (New York: RVP Publishers, 2011), 264–265; 268. For a useful summary of the criticism and defense of Rosenzweig's approach to Islam, see W. Cristaudo, *Religion, Redemption and Revolution: The New Speech-Thinking of Franz Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 552–554.

163. *Pri Toar* (Y.D. 4:11).

164. See R. Yaakov Malka's *Teshuvos Ner Ma'aravi* (143), which publishes a lengthy responsum (from a contemporary of his named R. Yehuda Halevi) that seems to label Islam an idolatrous religion. He reasons that because Muslims believe that G-d granted Mohammed the power to bring people into *Gan Eden* and take them out, this makes him responsible for meting out Divine reward and punishment, and thus he is essentially viewed as a sort of intermediary between G-d and man — essentially a form of *shituf*. A similar understanding of Islam has been reported by R. Shneur Potash in the name of R. Chaim Zimmerman. Nevertheless, R. Yosef Kapach disagrees with this assessment, asserting that for the Rambam, Islam was not even considered *shituf*; see Y. Tobi & U. Melammed (eds.), *Harav Yosef Kapach — Ketavim* vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 1413.

165. *Pri Toar* (Y.D. 19:10).

Indeed, R. Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam of Sanz-Klausenberg concludes that Muslims are considered idolaters and even writes that a mosque is considered an idolatrous temple where it is forbidden for a Jew to pray — even if the mosque is located at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron!¹⁶⁶

Hinduism

R. Adin Steinsaltz suggests that perhaps in light of the difference in expectations between a Jew and a non-Jew concerning their adherence to pure monotheism (as elaborated upon earlier in this essay), Hinduism and Buddhism may be sufficiently monotheistic to not be considered idolatry for a non-Jew.¹⁶⁷ R. Steinsaltz seems to relate to Hinduism as *shituf*.¹⁶⁸

166. *Teshuvos Divrei Yatziv* (1 O.C. 90 and 3 Y.D. 40). See also *Teshuvos Tzitz Eliezer* (14:91 and 18:47:3), who discusses whether a mosque is viewed as a place of idolatry. R. Ovadiah Yosef (*Teshuvos Yabia Omer* 10 O.C. 16) concludes that a Jew is permitted to pray in a mosque, especially the mosque built at the Cave of the Patriarchs, because Islam is not considered idolatry.

R. Yaakov Ariel in *Teshuvos B'ohalah Shel Torah* vol. 5 (Kfar Darom/Asheklon: *Machon Hatorah V'ha'aretz*, 2009), pp. 21–25 considers that a mosque may even be due some of the “holiness” or “honor” given to a synagogue on account of being used to worship G-d. As precedent for this, he refers to the case of private altars, which were not destroyed throughout much of the First Temple period, even though they were no longer allowed to be used in worship; see *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018) throughout, esp. pp. 28–32.

Fascinatingly, R. Benzion Guttfarb reports in the name of his father (*Koveitz Torah Vada'as* vol. 125) that R. Yehoshua Leib Diskin would not walk within four *amos* of a Muslim engaged in prayer (as we find regarding a Jew saying *shemoneh esrei*). See also <http://forum.otzar.org/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=18659> for further discussion.

167. See A. Steinsaltz, “Peace without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of ‘Toleration’ in Judaism,” *Common Knowledge* vol. 11:1 (2005), pp. 41–47.

168. This is also the approach favored by M. B. Shapiro, “Confronting the Challenge of Idolatry: Response to Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Same God, Other god,” *Contemporary Jewry* vol. 41 (2021), pp. 631–637. Shapiro and Goshen-Gottstein use this reasoning to permit wigs made from hair sacrificed in Hindu temples. However, their understanding is mistaken, because even if Hinduism

Nevertheless, even if we were to somehow determine that Hinduism has the halachic status of *shituf*,¹⁶⁹ this does not completely close the debate, because we have already seen that the leniency of *shituf* itself is not unanimously accepted. Moreover, the very same Tosafos who suggest that *shituf* is not problematic for non-Jews also maintain that Christian ritual paraphernalia are considered idolatrous sacrifices (*tikroves*),¹⁷⁰ thus showing that whatever *shituf* allows for does not apply to the realm of ritual sacrifices.

In the introduction to his discussion of Hinduism, Alon Goshen-Gottstein claims, “There is almost no meaningful rabbinic, halachic discussion of Hinduism’s status until the twenty-first century. In this state of affairs, we lack one of the fundamental tools for holding a rabbinic discussion — precedent.”¹⁷¹ While there is admittedly a relative dearth of rabbinic sources that explicitly weigh in on Hinduism, the sources that do exist tend to monolithically view Hinduism as idolatrous and polytheistic — even as the quintessential form of polytheism.¹⁷²

Case in point: As an attempt to explain the possible belief system espoused by at least some of the Jews who worshiped the Golden Calf, R. Sa’adyah Gaon writes:

could be positively characterized as *shituf*, and even if *shituf* is permitted for non-Jews, the results of ritual sacrifices offered by non-Jews engaged in *shituf* are still likely considered *tikroves*, as we noted above and will reiterate shortly.

169. See A. Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (Palgrave, 2016), pp. 81–106.

170. See Tosafos *Avodah Zarah* 50b s.v. *bittul*.

171. A. Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (Palgrave, 2016), p. 6.

172. Interestingly, this understanding is also present in classical Islamic sources; nonetheless, even within Islam, there are some sources which view Hinduism in a more positive light. See Y. Friedmann, “Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* vol. 95:2 (1975), pp. 214–221.

It has been established as true for me that the Indians — and other idolaters besides them — say that they do not worship the stone or tree itself, but rather the Creator of the Heaven and Earth. According to them, the image is only a symbol that when they see it, they clarify to themselves His power, His greatness, and His strength, and they worship Him. According to them, the Creator rests Himself upon that image, which they have found fitting for this purpose, and through it, He performs for them miracles and wonders...¹⁷³

In these lines, R. Sa'adyah Gaon clearly lays out the view that Hinduism ought to be considered idolatrous, even if its practitioners claim to be monotheists. The same is implied by R. Yehuda Halevi.¹⁷⁴

In a discussion of the connection between homicide and idolatry, R. Avraham ibn Daud (known as Ra'avad I) mentions that some idolaters in India perform their rites in a way that they end up killing themselves.¹⁷⁵ From the context in which this factoid appears, it seems fairly clear that Ra'avad I understood those worshippers in India — presumably Hindus — to be idolaters.

The Rambam writes that due to Avraham's efforts in spreading monotheism, the reality nowadays is that most of civilization recognizes G-d, save for notable exceptions "like the wild Turks in the northern edge and the Indians in the south, for these are the remnants of the Sabeans — a nation that once filled the

173. Y. Ratzabi (ed.), *Peirushei R. Sa'adyah Gaon L'sefer Shemos* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998), p. 192. This passage is partially cited by the Ibn Ezra (short commentary to *Shemos* 32:1).

174. See *Kuzari* (1:60), where he mentions the Indians as idolaters and questions the provenance of the Vedas.

175. A. Wolfson, A. Sheinfeld, Y. Kahn, & A. Stern (eds.), *Ha'emunah Haramah* (Israel, 2019), p. 398.

earth.”¹⁷⁶ In a subsequent discussion, the Rambam notes that most idolaters object to killing cattle and adduces the fact that the “Indians” to this day do not slaughter cows.¹⁷⁷ This again shows that the Rambam associated the Indians with idolatry.

Likewise, the Rambam’s son R. Avraham understands the Indians to be idolatrous, as he writes that amongst the various groups of idolaters, it is often true that a select caste of worshippers are expected to act with piety and asceticism, while the masses at large continue to act with debauchery. In making this point, he explicitly mentions “Christians” (whom his father expressly understood to be idolaters) alongside “the men of India.”¹⁷⁸

In one of his responsa, R. Yechezkel Landau considers the halachic status of a *shofar* that was bought with money that one gained by selling an idol. In introducing the question, he refers to “someone in the Indian country who sold an idol and with the money bought a *shofar*.”¹⁷⁹ The underlying assumption of both the question and answer is that this idol from India was indeed considered *avodah zarah*.

In a sweeping paragraph that succinctly summarizes much of what has already been discussed in this essay, R. Pinchas Eliyahu Horowitz divides the world into three groups: monotheists, like Jews and Muslims; those who engage in *shituf*, like Christians (although he does not explicitly give this example); and those

176. *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:29.

177. *Ibid.* 3:46. See also Ibn Ezra (*Bereishis* 46:34; *Shemos* 8:22 and 19:9) and R. Bechayei (*Devarim* 1:9). Ibn Ezra (*Shemos* 16:1) also characterized the Indians as people who “do not agree to the Genesis narrative” and who commence their week on Wednesday for astrological reasons.

178. *Peirush Rabbeinu Avraham Ben HaRambam* (*Shemos* 19:6).

179. *Teshuvos Noda B'yehudah* (*Tinyana*, O.C. 111). This version of R. Landau’s responsum appears in the Vilna (1828) and Bloom (Jerusalem, 1998) editions of his work. However, in the first edition (Prague, 1811) and in the *Machon Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem, 1994) editions of this work, R. Landau’s responsum reads “Africa” instead of “India.” I do not know which version is more accurate or why either of those places’ names would have bothered Christian censors.

who are true idol worshipers that serve the celestial bodies (e.g. the sun, moon, and stars) or elements of nature (fire, water, etc.), like the Indians and Chinese (whom he explicitly names).¹⁸⁰

In more contemporary times, R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad writes that in the cities of India, there are idolaters nowadays who worship idols of stone and wood, and any Jew who comes across such idols is obligated to destroy them.¹⁸¹

In 1968, the question arose whether a Jewish woman may wear a wig made from human hair that comes from Hindu temples in India. R. Dr. Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch (who, as previously mentioned, is sympathetic to the position that Christianity is not considered idolatry) penned a responsum forbidding such wigs, with the understanding that these hairs are considered *tikroves avodah zarah*, because the hairs were collected by the temples from worshipers who came for ritual tonsuring (that is, ritual haircutting/shaving).¹⁸² The question came up again in 2004, and the leading *poskim* of the time — including R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv¹⁸³ and R. Moshe Sternbuch¹⁸⁴ — ruled that

180. *Sefer Habris* (Part I, 19:7). A similar taxonomy is presented by the Malbim (*Yechezkeil* 47:3), who also explicitly identifies the Chinese, Japanese, and Indians as idolaters. In the Malbim's taxonomy, there are two subcategories within the monotheist category: those who accept the Torah (i.e. Jews) and those who do not (i.e. Muslims). Elsewhere, the Malbim (*Zecharyah* 13:2) interprets *Zecharyah's* prophecy concerning G-d ridding the world of idols to refer to the idolatry of "India, China, and Japan, who still worship idols."

181. *Ben Ish Chai* (Year 2, *Masei* 5).

182. This responsum was originally published in *Kol Torah* vol. 22:7-8 (Nissan-Iyar 1968), pp. 5–10, and was subsequently reproduced word-for-word in R. Rabinovitch's *Teshuvos Siach Nachum* (Y.D. 51), published by Maaliyot Publications (Maaleh Adumim, 2008), pp. 172–179. The fact that this responsum was reproduced without any indication that R. Rabinovitch retracted his position implies that R. Rabinovitch continued to stand by his original ruling even decades later.

183. See *Koveitz Teshuvos* (1:77 and 3:118).

184. *Teshuvos V'hanhagos* (2:414 and 5:260–261).

such wigs are forbidden. All of these authorities assumed that Hinduism is indeed considered *avodah zarah*.¹⁸⁵

On the other hand, some contemporary Jewish theologians audaciously ignore these sources and insist that Hindu claims to be a monotheistic religion should be taken seriously and that Jews should not be too quick to simply dismiss Hinduism as outright idolatry.¹⁸⁶

Other Religions

What follows is a short excursus that contains some general remarks about several religions and whether they ought to be considered idolatrous or not:

- **Samaritanism** – This religion worships an idol in the form of a dove on Mount Gerizim. According to the

185. The same assumption is made by R. Yonah Metzger in “*Pei’os Nochriyos - Madua Avodah Zarah?*” *Seridim* vol. 22 (Jerusalem: Conference of European Rabbis, 2004), pp. 238-253, who offers a lengthy discussion of whether human hair from the temples in India is considered *tikroves avodah zarah* but never once entertains the possibility that Hindu worship is merely considered *shituf* and thus possibly permitted for gentiles.

R. Gidon Rothstein suggests that even within Buddhism, there may be differences between different strands of the religion, writing: “...whether Buddhism counts as *avodah zarah*, probably depends on which version one adopts; the more traditional Eastern versions likely are *avodah zarah*, where [sic] the versions peddled to Americans often have the *avodah zarah* scrubbed out.” See his article published at <https://www.torahmusings.com/2022/10/yeyn-nesech-wine-libated-to-a-power-other-than-god/>.

186. For example, see A. Brill, “God in Vaishnavism from a Jewish perspective,” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: notes on Jewish theology and spirituality* (May 31, 2022). [Available online at: <https://kavvanah.blog/2022/05/31/god-in-vaishnavism-from-a-jewish-perspective/>]. Elsewhere, I have criticized Dr. Brill’s discussions of Hinduism for ignoring the halachic process and relegating the discussion to the realm of sociology, see <https://rachack.blogspot.com/2019/08/same-god-other-god-judaism-hinduism-and.html>.

Gemara,¹⁸⁷ when this practice was discovered,¹⁸⁸ there was a rabbinic declaration branding them indisputably as idolaters.¹⁸⁹

- **Druzism** – This religion, which seems to have broken off from Shiite Islam,¹⁹⁰ believes in the existence of one G-d and that Yisro (Moshe's father-in-law) was His prophet. R. Ovadiah Yosef¹⁹¹ and R. David Teherani¹⁹² write that because the Druze believe in one G-d, they are not at all considered idolaters. On the other hand, R. Shmuel Heller stresses that the Druze are said to revere various icons and images,¹⁹³ which presumably renders their religion idolatrous.¹⁹⁴ Despite this contradiction, we are in no position to offer a final assessment of the Druze religion, because "Their religious system is kept secret not only from outsiders but in part even from their own

187. *Chullin* 6a.

188. See R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 69; 187–190.

189. As an aside, R. Ishtori Haparchi writes in A. Y. Chavatzet (ed.), *Kaftor Vaferach* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: *Beis Midrash L'halacha B'hisyaashovus*, 2004), p. 72 that even if a Samaritan converts to Islam, his wine is still considered *yayin nesech*.

190. See M. M. Bar-Asher, "The Druze Religion" in M. M. Bar Asher & M. Hatina (eds.), *Islam: History, Religion, Culture* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017), pp. 384–392.

191. *Teshuvos Yabia Omer* (10 Y.D. 55) and *Chazon Ovadiah* (*Aveilus* vol. 3 p. 238).

192. *Teshuvos Divrei David* (1:14). In a different responsum (4:39), R. Teherani again repeats this assertion, writing that even though Muslims and Druze are not considered idolaters like Christians are, it is still forbidden for a Jew to participate in their holiday feasts.

193. Some have adduced Talmudic support for this from an anecdote in which R. Yochanan tells "Bar Drusai" (who is ostensibly an idolater) to smash various idols in a bathhouse (*Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah* 4:4), explaining that "Bar Drusai" refers to a Druze person. See Y. Goldhar, *Admas Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1913), fol. 31a and Y. Tamar, *Alei Tamar – Nashim* (Givataim: Atir Committee for the Publication of Alei Tamar, 1981), p. 450.

194. *Taharas Hakodesh* (Safed, 1864), fol. 11b and *Teshuvos Sheim Mishmuel* (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 26.

number; only an elite of initiates...participate fully in the services and have access to the secret teachings..."¹⁹⁵

- **Freemasonry** – Although some have implied that there is no problem with Freemasonry,¹⁹⁶ in one of his epistles, R. Menchem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch discouraged his recipient from joining the Freemasons because many of their beliefs clash with Judaism.¹⁹⁷ Other rabbis wrote even more harshly, condemning Freemasons as idolaters.¹⁹⁸ In a more recent assessment, R. Ovadiah Yosef writes that because of the secretive nature of the

195. "Druze." in *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006), p. 304.

196. R. J. D. Eisenstein (1854–1956) in J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Zikhronothai: Autobiography and Memoirs* (New York, N.Y., 1929), p. 55 reports that he joined the Freemasons in March 1886 at the Shakespeare Lodge No. 750 in New York, but after three months resigned his position there because it took up too much of his time.

197. *Igros Kodesh* vol. 28 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Kehot Publication Society, 1973), p. 159.

198. R. Yitzchak Acrish (1818–1888) writes in *Kiryas Arba (Teshuvos 14)* that Freemasonry is literally considered idolatry. This ruling was also cited by R. Yaakov Shaul Dwek in *She'eiris Yaakov* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2000), p. 30.

A. Freimann (ed.), *Ma'agal Tov Hashaleim* (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1934), p. 64 reports that the Chida was asked about whether one is permitted to kill a Freemason, and he replied that he sees no problem with being a Freemason. However, other sources relate that the Chida considered Freemasons "wicked," but not necessarily idolatrous; see M. Benayahu, *R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1959), p. 561. R. Hirsch Lehren, a Dutch Jew who corresponded with R. Moshe Sofer, wrote in a private letter that he has a tradition that the Chida maintained that Freemasonry is considered idolatry; see M. A. Z. Kinstlicher, *HaChasam Sofer Uvnei Doro: Ishim B'Tshuvos Chasam Sofer* (Bnei Barak, 1993), p. 354.

Interestingly, R. David Luria in his comments to *Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer* (ch. 24:54, additions 17) and R. Nosson Sternhartz of Bratslov in *Likkutei Halachos* (O.C. vol. 1, *Hilchos Beis Hakenesses* 6:9) compare the Freemasons to those who built the Tower of Bavel. As discussed in R. C. Klein, *God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 50–52 many of those who built the Tower of Bavel did so with idolatrous intentions.

Freemason cult, it is difficult to determine whether or not they are truly idolaters.¹⁹⁹

- **Native American Shamanism** – Some have argued that the Native American belief in “The Great Spirit” or “Father in Heaven” may render those belief systems sufficiently monotheistic for non-Jews (especially if *shituf* is permitted) or – with some slight changes to their theology – at least compatible with the sort of ethical monotheism expected of Noahides.²⁰⁰ Others have understood these sorts of religions to be forms of actual idolatry (because their totem poles serve as idols of sorts) or at least demon-worship, which is also considered *avodah zarah*.
- **Alawism** – This syncretic religion blends together elements of Islam and Christianity with vestiges of various ancient pagan beliefs.²⁰¹ It seems to be a form of *avodah zarah*.
- **Yazidi** – This self-professed monotheistic religion believes in One Supreme G-d who relinquished control of the universe to seven angels.²⁰² The chief angel is called Malak Ta’us (lit. “Peacock Angel”) and is worshiped in the form of a peacock.²⁰³ That association with peacocks is reminiscent of the Sepharvaic gods Adrammelech

199. *Teshuvos Yechaveh Da’as* (7:9). Because of this, R. Ovadiah Yosef rules that it is forbidden to purposely embarrass a Jew who joined the Freemasons by not counting him in a *minyán* or not giving him an *aliyah*, but one should as much as possible continue to be suspicious of such Jews without embarrassing them.

200. J. B. Ullman, “Native American Revival,” *Ohrnet* vol. 25:38 (2018), p. 11. [Available online at: https://ohr.edu/this_week/ohrnet/7931.]

201. For further analysis of this religion, see M. M. Bar-Asher & A. Kofsky, *The Nusayri-Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Brill, 2002).

202. J. I. Kizilhan, “The Yazidi — Religion, Culture and Trauma,” *Advances in Anthropology* vol. 7 (2017), pp. 333–339.

203. See “Yazīdī.” in *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006) pp. 1154-1155.

and Anammelech, whose idols were said to have been peacock-shaped.²⁰⁴

- **Sikhism** – This religion seems to be genuinely monotheistic and non-idolatrous but still somehow believes in the Vedas (which expressly recognize the major Hindu gods as such), which is so central to Hinduism.

Conclusion

At the yearly Pesach Seder, Jews around the world customarily open the door to their home and pray to G-d by reciting the following passage:

Pour Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You and upon the kingdoms that do not call out in Your name, for they have devoured Jacob and destroyed their abode (i.e. Temple). Pour upon them Your fury, and Your anger shall reach them. May You pursue [them] with anger and destroy them from beneath the Heavens of G-d.²⁰⁵

As R. Eliezer Ashkenazi clarifies, this curse is not aimed at the gracious gentile nations who have offered the Jews refuge over the various generations. Rather, he explains that this formula is intended to serve as an introduction to the thanksgiving *Hallel* prayer, which is recited immediately afterwards.

In *Hallel*, we thank G-d for redeeming us from Egypt and miraculously bringing about our salvation. Those wondrous feats were partially intended to further the work of our forefather Avraham, who sought to spread the message of monotheism to all people. In our introduction to *Hallel*, we recognize the fact that among those nations who refused this message were the Jews' mortal enemies — the pagan Babylonians and Romans,

204. See R. C. Klein, *God Versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry* (Mosaica Press, 2018), pp. 285–287.

205. *Tehillim* 89:6-7, 69:25; *Eichah* 3:66.

i.e. the idolatrous people who destroyed the First and Second Temples, respectively.

The way R. Ashkenazi explains it, the fact that we stress that G-d punish those “that do not know You... do not call out in Your name” obviates the explanation that we are praying for anything horrid to befall the Christian or Muslim nations under whose dominions many Jews continue to peacefully live. Rather, the objects of our Seder curse are the godless and destructive pagans who refuse to recognize G-d after all the great miracles He has performed and instead try to destroy anything that represents Him.²⁰⁶

By offering this explanation, R. Ashkenazi was not attempting to decide the halacha as to whether Christianity and/or Islam ought to be considered a form of *avodah zarah*. Rather, he was expressing his gratitude to members of those religions for aiding and assisting Jews in various times and places. In doing so, R. Ashkenazi sought to contrast the kind gentiles who are friendly to Judaism with the anti-Semitic ones who seek their destruction.

Moreover, R. Ashkenazi’s positive comments about Christianity and Islam find precedent in a passage written by the Rambam that has often been censored. In the midst of describing the messianic era, the Rambam writes that the teachings of Jesus and Mohammed will play/are playing an integral role in bringing the nations of the world closer to monotheism. They essentially serve to pave the way for the future universal embrace of monotheism that will be accepted by the entire world with the coming of the Messiah.²⁰⁷ May it come speedily and in our days, *amen*.

206. Y. Y. Goldberg (ed.), *Haggadah Shel Pesach: Ma’aseh Hashem Hechadash* (Jerusalem, 2016), pp. 203-205).

207. *Hilchos Melachim* 11:4.