

Christians
and the
Problem of Bowing
in
Martial Arts



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For many Christian Martial Artists around the world, there is a struggle with all the bowing that goes on. [They see their skills as a gift of God](#) and as such enjoy what they do.

There is a two fold problem for them however:

- 1) There are references in the bible which appear to forbid bowing to any one
- 2) Bowing is seen as an act of worship, which is forbidden.

The first point is dealt with reasonably easily as any references to the forbidding of bowing are always in the context of the worship of gods other than the one true God. I have however read articles where some have spent inordinate space agonizing over the problem based on one or two isolated verses that are, often unwittingly, taken out of the context of worship. Overcoming this difficulty then is simply a matter of pointing this out. There is nothing in the bible that forbids bowing in any other context other than worship. If this were not so then practically every character in the Old testament would be under condemnation as would be many in the new.

I considered giving a list of bible verses to justify this assertion but anyone who types in or looks up the word bow in any concordance, will be just as overwhelmed as I am by the sheer volume of references of people bowing. They bow to each other, they bow out of respect, they bow in prayer, they bow before God and they bow before idols. The only one of these that is forbidden for believers is the bow before idols.

Hence it can be seen that bowing out of respect and even to each other is perfectly right and good and no Martial Artist should think twice about doing it.

However this clearly leads into the second point. Bowing as an act of worship. There is no question that this is not only a very confusing to the non believer to see a believer do; because it is assumed they are acknowledging the truth of the non believers faith by doing so, but it is insulting to the God we worship and is dealt with very seriously in bible.

I am not sure there is any Christian that would disagree with this but the problem for Martial Artist is that there are many situations, where not to bow to the particular location in a house or Dojo (school house) would be seen as disrespectful and insulting to the club or owner of the house.

Some have solved this for themselves by saying that such images or locations are not real or at the very least not significant and so bowing to them is meaningless. Hence it is okay to bow as it doesn't mean anything.

Whilst I agree that bowing with such an attitude has its merits the problem with this approach is of course, that such an attitude is in of itself insulting. It means that a bow given under such an attitude effectively dismisses those who take it seriously and it also does nothing to waylay any confusion.

When I was a lot younger we used to swear allegiance to the flag and the Queen often by saluting or putting our hands to our hearts. This has gone nowadays but at the time no one thought that it was an act of worship. Many Dojo's have a photo of Professor Kano (the founder of Judo) or the founder of their club or organization. I have no qualms about bowing to such things because I know that, in Australian society no one associates such things with worship and even if they do it is a give that they know few others do so no explanation is entered into or needed as to whether you are or are not worshipping or not. People are expected to bow according to their own perception.

If I were living and working in another country however, Japan for example this may be different.

Although there are few countries where the people don't understand that a visitor may not have the same understanding as themselves about worship it is still worth being wary.

My attitude is this: if it would be disrespectful not to bow and there is no avoiding it, then one should bow and hope for an opportunity to explain. But if it is avoidable, don't bow.

I have thought a lot about this and if I were ever to have the opportunity to visit Japan I would love to visit the Kodakan and I would bow to the statue of Professor Kano because Judo has done so much for me. But for me it would never be an act of worship. Though I could see how this could be interpreted that way.

This is a complicated issue and as always been for believers. The story of "The Image of Gold and the Blazing Furnace" come to mind here [Daniel chapter 3]. Paul's [Saint] exhortation in his letter to the Corinthians chapter 8 of the bible also comes into play.

This issue should not be dismissed lightly if for no other reason than respect for our God. That in the end is the whole point: "Respect". We must respect each other but for believers we must God above all else.

I have no intention of being prescriptive here. I don't think we should be. But I know we should think this issue through for

ourselves, very carefully and respect God and everybody else.

Below are a couple of emails that were sent to me a long time back, when I was on an email list (social media before Facebook etc.) of Christian Martial Artist. They are from a Martial Artist who was also a Missionary in Japan. Whether or not you agree with the idea of Missionaries in Japan or anywhere, I think his incites are worth reviewing. They are, from my point of view quite helpful on the subject of Christians and bowing; even if a bit conservative.

The article was part of a very long thread so it starts with a re ponce to another person on the list:

Excellent comments on bowing, Brother Bill. As a fellow missionary in Japan, I back you up on this.

Here are two articles I have written for the [GMAU Journal](#) on the issue. I hope they are a blessing.

THE VIEW FROM MT. FUJI

The Truth About Bowing

By John R. Himes

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One of the funniest sights I've ever seen in Japan is two little old ladies saying goodbye (sayonara, actually) at a train station. They would bow low, say a few more words, back up a step, bow low, say a few more words-you get the picture! After about five times of this they turned around and walked away from each other-only to stop, turn and bow again!

To us Christians in Asia bowing is a part of our daily life, and we seldom think it strange or out of order. We bow every day to almost everyone we meet. We even bow unconsciously while talking on the telephone! It is a very ancient sign of respect and greeting, no doubt an older custom than shaking hands. So if you have any doubts about bowing to each other when training in your martial art, please put your mind at rest.

Bowing occurs all through the Bible with no rebuke as long as it is a matter of respect from person to person and not bowing to an idol. For example, we find Abraham bowing to the angels who came to his tent, though he did not know that they were anything more than mere men. (Gen. 18:2)

Many Asian martial arts use a bow at the beginning of practice, forms, etc. This is perfectly proper. There are times, however, when bowing can be inappropriate or even sinful. First of all, bowing to idols is a terrible insult to the true God.

Most Japanese martial arts schools have a "god shelf" in the corner, and they bow to the idol as part of their opening ceremonies. I know a Japanese pastor who started a church by renting a Karate dojo, and he always covered the idol with a sheet for his services. We are told in the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them." (Ex. 20:5)

Secondly, bowing to a photograph or statue (of the style's founder, for example) is usually a form of ancestor worship, and thus is wrong. For example, Japanese bow and pray to a photo of the deceased at a funeral, but faithful Japanese pastors forbid this. Down at the Kodokan (headquarters for world Judo) in Tokyo I saw an old man bow and pray to a statue of Jigaro Kano, Judo's founder. This is idolatry, and an abomination to the one true God.

Thirdly, in my opinion the "zareai" (literally, "seated bow") to a standing person (for example, the instructor) should be avoided, though seated bows to one another are common over here if both are seated on a "tatami" mat and are not thought to be worship of any kind. However, once I was on visitation on the island of Shikoku with another missionary and as we left, the "grandma" of the house did a zareai bow to us and said, "You are like gods!" Shades of the Bible! (Acts 14:8-18) We immediately tried to stop her, saying as Paul did that we are not gods but only sinful men. You can see why a seated bow to a standing person would probably not be wise.

Surprisingly, on our recent trip to Hong Kong, we found that the Hong Kong Chinese seldom bow to each other. We often found ourselves bowing somewhat one-sidedly to our Chinese friends while they wanted to shake hands! However, bowing is not unknown in Hong Kong.

I was surprised to find little interest in my Kung Fu or Karate abilities in Hong Kong. Instead, there was great interest in my Ishi-Ryoku Jutsu black belt, and the word most said was "Aikido!" Jujutsu and Aikido are virtually unknown in Hong Kong, but there is an Aikido school. Jeff Tam, the founder and president of the Hong Kong Gospel Martial Arts Ministry, shared with me that he had tried to take lessons but could not. Why? They had asked him to bow to the ancestor (no doubt Morihei Ueshiba, the founder), and he could not do that as a Christian.

Let's follow Jeff's wonderful example and take a strong stand on this matter. I urge you never to bow in worship to anyone but our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Though we may have master instructors who teach us the martial arts, as Christian martial artists we should have no Lord and Master over our lives but Jesus Christ.

THE VIEW FROM MT. FUJI

Bowing to God

By John R. Himes

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Recently I did my evangelism in a very old section of our town of Asahikawa in Japan. The area is called East Asahikawa, but it was the earliest settled area and dates back to the Meiji Era. This meant to me that probably I would have little response from my tracts and witness, since people in such an area are apt to be traditionalists, and in general that was so here.

However, I happened on a very poor area of the city in a public housing project, and it is my experience that poor people often listen gladly to the good news of Jesus Christ. As expected, one Buddhist lady totally rejected my message, but another lady talked some to me and even told me, "Ganbatte" (do your best) when she found out I wasn't after money!

As I pressed on, I was fascinated to find the dojo of the "East Asahikawa Judo Lovers Club!" It was nothing but a simple but old prefab building, so I was able to peek in the windows and see what it was like. This is a very traditional dojo, with wooden name tags hanging on a rack, and with only the old-style "tatami" grass mats to fall on. None of this newfangled soft foamy stuff for these guys!

I was saddened, though, to see another remnant of traditional Japan. Up on the back wall was their "kamidana" (god shelf), where stood an idol to which no doubt they bowed before every practice. I could not tell, but the idol may have been of the Shinto deity Atago, which figured in the founding of the seminal Takenouchi Ryu Jujutsu style in the 16th century. (See *Classical Fighting Arts of Japan*, by Serge Mol. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001, p. 100.) However, I have heard of an elephant idol in a Kendo school, which suggests Hinduism.

Unfortunately, such idolatry is very common in Japanese budo dojos, whether they are judo, karatedo or kendo. Even worse, bujutsu styles are often practiced at Shinto shrines. However, these practices are gradually passing away with the advent of modern full-contact and "no-holds-barred" styles. Because of this trend, many ancient customs and martial styles are in disrepair and even fading away. Many Japanese masters will now accept foreign practitioners as "uchi deshi" (inner disciples) so that their art may be preserved.

Past the judo dojo I saw a small woods with several signs in sight, so I pressed on with my small adventure. As I walked into the woods, the first sign I saw said, "This is the abode of a god, so bow as you pass by." I had happened onto the Asahikawa Shrine, probably the oldest Shinto shrine in the city. It was built in the Meiji Era more than one hundred years ago, and looked suitably ancient.

I was amazed by the sign, since I have never seen a similar one at any Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple. Here were idolaters who thought enough of their false god to try to make sure it was worshipped by simple passers by. I was immediately reminded of when Moses encountered the true God of all the universe as He revealed Himself in a burning bush. God said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." (Ex. 3:5)

I wonder, how much do we think of our God as we practice and teach our martial arts. We assume in a church-based school that prayer will be said before every class, but if you have a commercial school, do you have the courage to do so and possibly lose students? Do you forbid taking the true God's name in vain? Do you forbid dirty stories and words? If such things are not part of your martial discipline, then many Japanese martial artists may have more spiritual courage than you do.

I am delighted to report that two days after my little adventure, a postcard came to the church from Mr. Mitsuru Habazaki saying simply, "I wish to join your teaching." I visited him the next Monday, and within rock-throwing distance of an ancient Shinto shrine, Mr. Habazaki bowed his head and prayed to the only true God, trusting Christ as his Savior. He has since come to church for the very first time ever. God is good!