

Was Jesus Jewish?

A Christian friend posed this question to a liberal rabbi. It unexpectedly hit a nerve, which in turn caused confusion and bewilderment. No insult had been intended – what was behind the reaction?

The rabbi explained how he saw dialogue crossing over between what was different sects until Emperor Theodosius (Constantine introduced religious tolerance) made Christianity a defined religion in 380 CE. Until this time Judaism and Christianity had not really been defined and the two faith groups learnt and developed alongside and with each other.

For Christians, Jesus was Jewish, born to Jewish parents and brought up in the Jewish traditions of the day. He was in adult life a rabbi or teacher, preaching in the synagogue and challenging the religious leaders and scholars of the day.

Yet, for friends of the Jewish faith, Jesus as Christians know him did not exist. Jesus was not the Messiah, nor the son of God. Neither was he a prophet, something the Muslims believe he was. If anything, Jesus was a rebel, a person of the time who challenged authority and whose message resonated for a group who became his disciples – dare one say the equivalent of a political party of the day? The rabbi equated their view of Jesus as more akin to the character in the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*.

If this is the case:

- how do we as Christians reconcile our beliefs with that of the tradition ours is based on if the central figure doesn't feature in the pre-Christian narrative? (This [essay](#) provides some interesting thoughts on Judaism and its relation to Jesus.)
- what does it mean for interfaith cultural discussion?
- does it matter if there is no evidence to suggest Jesus did not exist? What does his non-existence mean for our creed, the statement of our faith?



At heart, asking whether Jesus was Jewish seems to be a matter of identity. If so, how do we account for Jesus the Hebrew, Galilean, Nazarene, living under Roman law? Does it matter?

It all comes down to a matter of faith, while on a practical level rebels such as Jesus, Mohamed, Martin Luther, the [Second Vatican Council](#) help us get back to basics and to reassess God's purpose, [mitzvah](#) or [sharia](#) (eg). They all challenged the status quo and respected teachings of the day – for the right reasons.