

## **Liar, Lunatic, Lord: Is C.S. Lewis's Argument Accurate and Helpful for Today?**

C. S. Lewis made the trilemma (“Liar, Lunatic, Lord”) well known and popular, but it did not start with him. The trilemma has some quite interesting predecessors in history. With the rise of critical scholarship, some have argued that the trilemma is no longer valid as such. In this workshop, we trace the history of the trilemma before C. S. Lewis to the present day and assess whether it is still useful and what kind of “tweaks” might be needed for it to be still a valid apologetic tool.

Pasi Turunen, theologian (M.Th), author, blogger, and apologist, has been working as a Christian radio broadcaster for over 30 years. He studied theology at Helsinki University, where his master's thesis dealt with Jewish views on resurrection in the intertestamental Jewish literature. Turunen is a well-known Bible teacher and is often invited to speak at various apologetic seminars in Finland. He has written a number of books dealing with subjects such as cult evangelism, same-sex marriage, the inerrancy of the Bible, and apologetics. He has experience with Christian television and currently hosts a weekly radio program that analyzes current events and changing culture in light of the Christian worldview and the Scriptures. Turunen has also appeared on secular national television and radio programs in Finland defending his Christian faith and views on contemporary issues. He is the current president of the Patmos Foundation for World Missions, an evangelical missions and relief organization bringing humanitarian aid and the Gospel of Christ to over 20 nations across the world. The Patmos Foundation has an extensive media ministry in Finland and was the first Finnish Christian organization to start broadcasting Christian programs on commercial radio stations in 1985. Pasi is married to Parvin, who was born in the Middle East and in 1984 was supernaturally led to Finland to find Jesus and be saved.

### **I TRILEMMA BY C.S. LEWIS**

#### **I.1. Who is this man who speaks like this?**

“Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.” **C. S. Lewis – Mere Christianity**

#### **I.2. Trilemma in Lewis' own words:**

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and

God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” C. S. Lewis – **Mere Christianity**

### I.3. Trilemma – The argument

**Premise #1** If Jesus was not God, he was a liar or delusional

**Premise #2** Jesus was neither a liar nor delusional.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, Jesus was God.

## II TRILEMMA IN HISTORY BEYOND LEWIS

- Apostle John
- Sir Thomas More (1534)
- John Leland (1773)
- Mark Hopkins (1844)
- 'Rabbi' John Duncan (1860)
- Henry Parry Liddon (1866)
- R. A. Torrey (1918)
- W. E. Biederwolf (1867–1939)
- G. K. Chesterton (1925)
- Watchman Nee (1936)
- Christopher Hitchens (God is Not Great, 2007)
- Kari Kuula (At Home with Christianity, 2012)

## III TRILEMMA AND IT'S CRITICS

### III.1. Other reasonable options considered

- *“That’s [LLL] is a possibility. There are many reasonable alternatives.”*  
Hemant Mehta – Atheist voice (YouTube).

### III.2. The fourth option: LLL+Legend?

- 1) He spoke the truth and is therefore God.
- 2) He did not speak the truth, but sincerely believed what he said, and was delusional.
- 3) He knew he was lying and was therefore a liar. (MacDowell)
- 4) He was a literary creation and we do not know exactly what Jesus said.

## IV RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

### IV.1. Trilemma is valid providing...

- LLL is a useful and valid argument when the Gospels are presumed to be reasonably reliable sources, so that we know roughly what he thought and believed about himself, and it is believed that Jesus at least existed as a

historical person; it is necessary to believe in Jesus' deity for the trilemma to be valid.

- For example, Josh MacDowell first presents the reliability of the NT in 6 chapters and only in chapter 7 the trilemma argument.
- Mehta's dilemma: At times, when it suits him, Mehta's "other reasonable options" (What if) presupposes that NT texts can be trusted and at times his criticism is based on presumption of unreliability of the Gospels.
- "What if" -is the area on the map "where the sea monsters are located."

## V LEWIS RESPONDS TO CRITICS

### V.1. The intended scope of the Trilemma

- **"Not a stand-alone argument."** The argument as such does not exclude other possibilities. No one can seriously regard Jesus as just a great moral teacher, like say BUDDHA or GANDHI. In Lewis' own words:

"Well, that is the other side. On the one side clear, definite moral teaching. On the other, claims which, if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men. There is no halfway house and there is no parallel in other religions. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him: 'Are you the son of Brahma?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, 'Are you Heaven?' I think he would have probably replied, 'Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.' The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion, which undermines the whole mind of man. If you think you are a poached egg, when you are not looking for a piece of toast to suit you you may be sane, but if you think you are God, there is no chance for you. We may note in passing that He was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met him. He produced mainly three effects — Hatred — Terror — Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval." **C. S. Lewis: God in the Dock – What are we to make of Jesus Christ?**

### V.2. Jesus Legend? - Lewis responded to "fourth option" already.

"What are we to do about reconciling the two contradictory phenomena? One attempt consists in saying that the man did not really say these things; but that His followers exaggerated the story, and so the legend grew up that he had said them. This is difficult because His followers were all Jews; that is, they belonged to that Nation which of all others was most convinced that there was only one God — that there could not possibly be another. It is very odd that this horrible invention about a religious leader should grow up among the one people in the whole earth least likely to make such a mistake. On the contrary

we get the impression that none of His immediate followers or even of the New Testament writers embraced the doctrine at all easily.” **C. S. Lewis – God in the Dock**

“Another point is that, on that view, you would have to regard the accounts of the Man as being legends. Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that, whatever else the Gospels are, they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don’t work up to things properly. Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us, as is the life of anyone else who lived at that time, and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so. Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there is no conversation that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence. In the story of the woman taken in adultery we are told Christ bent down and scribbled in the dust with His finger. Nothing comes of this. No one has ever based any doctrine on it. And the art of inventing little irrelevant details to make an imaginary scene more convincing is a purely modern art. Surely the only explanation of this passage is that the thing really happened? The author put it in simply because he had seen it.” **C. S. Lewis: God in the Dock – What are we to make of Jesus Christ?**

- Note: Lewis refers to “*pericope adulterae*” (John 7:53-8:11) which is not found in best and earliest manuscripts, and in some manuscripts it is found in other places (after John 7:36, John 21:25, and even Luke 21:38). There is a consensus among scholars, evangelicals as well, that the pericope is not original to John’s Gospel. Question to ponder: *How might this weaken Lewis’ argument against Jesus Legend?*

## **VI NEW PREMISE - TRILEMMA WITH AN UPDATE**

**Premise #1** Historical Jesus\* made claims of being a Divine Savior.

**Premise #2** If Jesus was not God, he was a liar or delusional.

**Premise #3** Jesus was neither a liar nor delusional.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, Jesus was God.

\* Premise #1 is not (necessarily) presuming belief in the inerrant Scripture. According to reportage model (Lydia MacGrew), Gospels as Eyewitness testimony (Richard Bauckham) or by mainstream historical critical scholarship (e.g. Mark+Q-source: Son of Man -sayings; parable of the King [God] preparing wedding feast for his son [Jesus]).