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Mark Taylor
Taylor University

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FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM
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A Look at the Lewis Trilemma

Mark Taylor
Taylor University

Student paper award winner

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Introduction

The Lewis Trilemma is considered one of C.S. Lewis's great contributions to the field of Christian apologetics, and is an argument taught to many young Christians seeking to defend Jesus of Nazareth from being whitewashed as merely a "great moral teacher." The Trilemma, as presented by Lewis, states that it is impossible to reject the claim of Jesus' divinity while simultaneously considering him a great moral prophet. Since he claimed to be God, he must either be a liar, insane, or honestly declaring his divinity. He could neither be lying nor insane, and therefore is actually God.

Modern scholarship has not been kind to the Trilemma; the argument does not seem to have held up under the scrutinizing eyes of Christians and non-Christians alike. The main objections raised are to the reliability of the gospels as historical witnesses, Jesus' inability to be mistaken or insane, and to the interpretation of Jesus' claim to divinity. Because of these perceived weaknesses, the argument to many is only the antiquated apologetic tool of a bygone Christian thinker.

These objections, however, miss Lewis's point. The Trilemma, as he presented it, was never meant to be a proof for the deity of Christ. Many have mistaken it for such, resulting in a profusion of arguments against a claim he never made. How his opponents have gone wrong here will be the primary concern of this paper; Lewis should not be

blamed as owner of the straw man others are rigorously burning. Lewis's argument has not failed; on the contrary, the Trilemma, when properly purposed, remains a powerful Christian apologetic tool.

Lewis's Claim

As an example of a critic of the Trilemma, take the claim of William Lane Craig, a well-known Christian philosopher, who wrote that the Trilemma fails because it is guilty of committing the fallacy of False Dilemma: it is untrue that only the options presented by Lewis are available to us. Craig suggests that "there are other unmentioned alternatives, for example, that Jesus as described in the gospels is a legend."¹ On the other hand, theologian John Hick has argued against the Trilemma by stating that the scholarly consensus has found that the historical Jesus did not claim divinity in the first place, which effectively "rules out the once popular form of apologetic which argues that someone claiming to be God must be either mad, or bad, or God."² Professor Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* offers a scathing critique of the Trilemma with basic concerns similar to Hick and Craig:

¹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1994, (Wheaton: Crossway Books), 39.

² John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 1993, (London: SCM Press) 29.

A common argument, attributed among others to C.S. Lewis (who should have known better), states that, since Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he must have been either right, insane, or a liar... The historical evidence that Jesus claimed any sort of divine status is minimal. But even if that evidence were good, the Trilemma on offer would be ludicrously inadequate.³

Other critiques include the assertion that Jesus could merely be a hypocrite or somewhat insane. But again, none of these objections are actually addressing Lewis's point.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis presents the Trilemma in this way:

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 a 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 being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁴

At the argument's start we find what has been consistently overlooked by critics. It is here that Lewis states the type of person he is addressing with his reasoning: the person who says, "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher." Anyone who makes such a statement fills in the missing premises so that criticisms such as Craig's, Hick's, or Dawkins's are refuted.

If someone believes that Jesus was a great moral teacher, two beliefs follow as implicit. First, one must believe Jesus actually existed. For if Jesus did not actually exist then he would be a mere myth; but a character in a story cannot be called literally virtuous. Thus, Jesus could not be considered a legend by anyone calling him a great moral teacher. The reason mythology and moral greatness are mutually exclusive is that humans require an example after which to follow. The fictional offers no true moral models to men and women because what the fictional does is not difficult. Right action for a character in a book is not a deep struggle of the will to live honorably – it is an effortless construct done at the stroke of a pen. It is easy to invent good moral teachings and easier still to invent a fiction wherein that morality is followed to the letter by some virtuous person. But a fictional character should no more be praised for his or her morality than a rock should be praised for being dense. They both have an equal choice in the matter.

On the other hand, if there were a man who lived, who was born like the rest of us, who fought hypocrisy and the religious corruption of his day, who cherished even those considered the filth of society, who taught others to love all people and died by the hands of those who lived otherwise – if such a man lived, *he* would be truly worthy to be called a great moral teacher. As great as Jesus was, he was still a human like the rest of us – he was someone who lived and can be followed. Anyone who is called a "great moral teacher" must at very least be like Jesus and have lived a real moral life. This is a rule humanity has lived by: men and women have honored and revered great people like Martin

³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006, (London: Bantam Press), 92.

⁴ C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 55.

Luther King Jr., Florence Nightingale, or Mother Teresa, not merely because their stories were pleasantly moral, but because they were real. These men and women persevered and showed moral greatness despite the hardships of life, just as we seek to do. Moral teachers *must* be real. If anyone is going to say Jesus was a great moral teacher, they must also hold that he and his actions are not merely legends.

The second implicit belief in claiming Jesus to be a “great moral teacher” is that the story of the gospel must be largely accurate. Though Jesus is mentioned in various other writings, the New Testament offers the only comprehensive account of his life. The Bible is the only source of information available to show Jesus was a “great moral teacher.” If the gospel narratives are fabricated or inaccurate, on what other basis could one claim Jesus as good? A claim to the morality of Jesus must be an affirmation of the validity of the gospel accounts as historical.

There does remain one alternative to someone wishing to adhere to belief in Jesus’ greatness as a moral teacher while rejecting as historical his claim to divinity. A person might say, “I’m willing to accept the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, but I simply reject all the bits about his claiming to be God as the mere embellishment of legend.” This is a viable option, but seems remarkably *ad hoc*. Isn’t it a case of special pleading – and curiously convenient – to reject only those parts of the gospel narratives which are inconsistent with one’s own position? Perhaps such a move would be sensible if good reasons existed for specifically doubting only these portions, but it seems odd that someone would largely embrace the historicity of the accounts while specifically excluding these problematic passages.

Was Jesus Insane?

The Lewis Trilemma is only aimed at those who admit to the moral greatness of Jesus, and that admission assumes the historical reality of Christ and the accuracy of the gospels which tell his story. Since this is the case, the Trilemma can now work itself

out: if Jesus claimed to be God, was he insane, evil, or honest? Obviously Jesus could not be evil, as he would not be moral at all if he were – let alone a ‘great’ moral teacher. No, if we admit that Jesus was the peak of virtue, it is not an option to believe he knowingly lied about his divinity. But what if he unknowingly lied? What if, as the Trilemma questions, Jesus of Nazareth was insane? On closer inspection we will find that this is really not an option either.

Theologian Peter Kreeft has pointed out that the disparity between a claim about reality and the truth about reality is the measure of insanity.⁵ If I were to believe my name was Abraham Lincoln, people might be concerned but would probably not doubt my overall sanity. If I thought I were Abraham Lincoln himself, people would really question whether or not I was a sane human being. If I believed I were a penny with Abraham’s Lincoln’s face on it, people would know without a doubt that I was insane. *Insanity is not just about having incorrect beliefs about reality; it is about how big the gap is between those beliefs and the real world.* As the gap widens, we are more and more certain of a person’s derangement. The difficulty with the claim to divinity is that – assuming it is a mistaken belief – there is an infinite gap between that claim and reality, because it is a claim by a finite being to be an infinite one. We cannot get away with saying Jesus was mistaken in this claim to divinity – he would have to have totally lost his sanity in a serious way. As Lewis put it, he would be a lunatic “on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg.”⁶ In other words, if someone asserts, in any sense, that Jesus was sincerely ‘mistaken’ about his divine identity, that is tantamount to calling him absolutely and utterly insane. Of course, the problem with such an assertion is that it is impossible. Jesus doesn’t fit the profile.

⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 43.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 55.

The mentally unstable do not act as Jesus did. Throughout his story, Christ was cool, calm, and collected; indeed, his combined serenity and sagacity in the midst of a hostile environment have been a quality for which he has been admired. As a youth he astounded the scholars of his day; as an adult he ably and agilely succeeded against the rhetorical traps set against him by the intellectual elite. Such a man could hardly be considered mentally unstable. But more importantly, even if he doesn't seem insane to us, what did his contemporaries believe about him?

The conversation between the people of Jesus' day went very much as it does in our own. It is recorded in John 10:

Many of them were saying, "He is possessed by a demon and has lost his mind! Why do you listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the words of someone possessed by a demon."

Like today, one side accused him of being insane for his shocking theological statements, but the other side, as now, responded by saying something to the effect of, "He doesn't *sound* insane." Furthermore, this is one of only two⁷ instances where someone insults Jesus' sanity (the second reference, as with this one, seems to be more of an insult than a real charge of insanity). If the insult in John 10 were a serious analysis of his mental state, one would think it would be brought up again and again by his enemies to undermine his credibility and reputation. But what we actually see is the opposite: the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders consider Jesus to be fully responsible for his actions and teachings – they believe he is truly blaspheming by claiming to be God – and they do not just dismiss him as insane. Surely if there were even a hint of instability they would have pounced on it and kept it constantly before the public eye. A lack of such a defamation campaign suggests that not

⁷ John 7:20

even his enemies seriously considered that Jesus might have been insane.

That the Jews never seriously questioned his sanity is telling, but it is even more significant that a (mostly) independent observer also did not assess Jesus' mental state as unstable. Pontius Pilate, the Roman judge who presided over Christ's case, made several attempts to dismiss Jesus and clearly thought him innocent. If there had been even a shred of evidence that Christ was mad, surely Pilate would have dismissed him on those grounds. That he did not do so is evidence that he apparently didn't believe that option was open to him. And to be sure, dismissal on the grounds of insanity *was* an option to a Roman official. In the history *Wars of the Jews*, Flavius Josephus recounts the story of a man who – like Jesus – prophesied against Jerusalem and the temple, drawing the ire of the elite Jewish class.⁸ As with Jesus, they took him to the Roman ruler (the procurator Albinus) who in turn had him severely whipped. But after the whipping, Albinus inspected the man and, deciding he was insane, released him. Again, this was not the response of Pontius Pilate. Upon inspecting Jesus, the Roman governor did not release him on the grounds of insanity, nor did he calm the crowd by saying that they shouldn't take a madman seriously. Rather, the whole scene seems to take for granted that Jesus is quite sane – that he could and should be tried for statements he has made while being sound of mind. From his consistent character as a wise and brilliant teacher, and from his treatment by his contemporaries, it is clear Jesus could not have been the entirely insane man he would have been if his claim to divinity was in error.

How do we Know Jesus Claimed to be God?

Given the premise that Jesus lived and that the gospels are largely accurate, and that

⁸ Flavius Josephus, "The Wars of the Jews," *BibleStudyTools.com*, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/flavius-josephus/war-of-the-jews/book-6/chapter-5.html>.

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Jesus was not insane or lying, what else remains to be proved? It still needs to be shown from the gospel account that Jesus claimed divinity. Everything breaks down if Jesus did not actually make such an assertion. On this matter the Bible speaks through two testimonies: the testimony of Jesus himself and the testimony of his disciples.

The testimony of Jesus concerning his divinity is fairly plentiful, as he made strong statements about the subject on several occasions. The most blatant declaration comes from the gospel of John, where the following story is recounted:

“I and the Father are one.” The Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?” The Jews answered Him, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God.”⁹

This story is especially important, because it ensures that modern readers are not misunderstanding Jesus’ claim out of context; those who heard the words of Christ were of his time and culture, and they explicitly understood him to be claiming divinity (and attempted to stone him for it). Not only did Jesus claim to be God, but elsewhere in John he also refers to himself as the Son of God. Even the opponents of Christ thought he was claiming godhood. Of course, it might be argued that these opponents of Christ were his enemies, and so they should not be trusted to properly understand his teachings. But what is important here is not that they believed Christ to be making a claim to divinity, but that Christ does not deny it. Surely this would have been the easiest way to counter the charge of blasphemy. Furthermore, of even greater weight than that of his opponents, there is the testimony of the disciples which is the same as that of

⁹ John 10:30-33, NIV.

Christ and the Jews who rejected him. These disciples certainly were qualified to interpret the teachings of Jesus, as they spent years in his company. These same disciples believed Jesus was God, and portrayed him as such in their writings. Furthermore, their martyrdom discredits the assertion that the portrayal of his divinity was intentionally fabricated by those same disciples: who would be martyred for their own con? The three most relevant of the disciples for this discussion are John, Peter, and Thomas.

The ‘beloved’ disciple, John was one of the three disciples closest to Jesus. He wrote:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, *and the Word was God...* and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.¹⁰

John clearly claims that God became incarnate in human flesh, and that incarnation was Jesus Christ.

In the same way, Peter, the designated head of the Church, also upheld Christ’s divinity. He confessed Christ to be “the Son of the living God”¹¹; significantly, Jesus directly affirms this profession. Peter further affirmed that not only he, but the other disciples believed in Christ’s deity:

Simon Peter answered [Jesus], “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God!”¹²

Afterward, Peter would go so far as to link the identity of Christians to Christ’s deity by addressing his letter “to those... of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹³

¹⁰ John 1:1, 14; emphasis mine.

¹¹ Matthew 16:16.

¹² John 6:68-69.

¹³ 2 Peter 1:1.

The third disciple, Thomas, was a zealous follower willing to die for Christ, and who made perhaps the most explicit claim to belief in his divinity, calling him “My Lord and my God!”¹⁴ It is telling that Jesus directly affirmed his statement by saying in response that those who believe this truth by faith will be blessed.

From the account of Jesus himself and his disciples, it can hardly be doubted that the Bible depicts Christ as having claimed divinity. Not only did he make such an assertion, but he did so blatantly, drawing the hatred of the Jews because of the perceived radical blasphemy of such a claim.

Conclusion

C.S. Lewis’s Trilemma is impotent only insofar as it is misunderstood or misused. It is not a proof for the divinity of Christ and using it as such is like using a curling iron for baking. The Trilemma cannot speak to those who never viewed Jesus as morally great in the first place, and was never meant to. But for those who do believe in Jesus as one of the greatest moral teachers of all time, the implications of such a belief are inescapable. A claim to the virtuousness of Christ is a claim to the accuracy of the accounts which describe that virtue. A belief in the accuracy of those accounts is also a belief in the accuracy of their depictions of Jesus’ claim to divinity. Thus, if one claims that Jesus was morally great, it must be accepted that he truly claimed to be God. As has been shown, it is not possible for him to be lying about that claim, and there is no evidence that his sharp mind was plagued by the deep mental illness that would accompany his being mistaken about godhood, and therefore he must have been honest and correct in his assertion of divinity.

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¹⁴ John 20:28.