



An Interview with John Mulholland Redemption of Reason Conferences

University of Chicago

Terry Halliday

John, what inspired you to start the Redemption of Reason conferences?

John Mulholland

I heard a recording of a talk by Christian philosopher Dallas Willard on redemption of reason. I listened to it and I was very impressed. After listening to it a couple of times, I transcribed it. In his lecture Willard referred to an 18th century scholar who said there is no reason why Christians cannot be committed to science and academia. Willard agreed.

Terry

What was your next step?

John

I then shared it with InterVarsity staff at the University of Chicago and a professor who attended my church. Both read the essay. Both were impressed. So we decided to ask Willard to come. I contacted him and he said, ok. It is now spring 2003, but I can come in 2005. I got together a group of graduate students, and we met once a month for 2 years, reading and discussing his paper and related readings. Then we decided, well, we should also invite Christian scholars who were also doing engagement work. Nine scholars responded. We got some funding from a small family foundation.

Terry

What did you ask the faculty you invited to speak about?

John

We asked them to give a talk about their work and how they fit their faith with their work. That was all. It was very open. And we quickly got responses from scholars in astrophysics, history, political science, philosophy and other disciplines. That surprised us.

Terry

How did the first conference unfold? What form did it take?

John

It was a 3 day event. Willard gave an introductory talk and a general discussion followed. Then there were several sessions – 2 in the morning, 2 in the afternoon, on a Thursday and Friday. The audience was entirely faculty and graduate students. Actually, several advanced graduate students were interested in the idea of the conference so we asked them to give short papers. The student sessions were dedicated just for students but conference faculty also attended.

Terry

What takeaways did you have from this first conference?

John

I recognized that resources in Chicago as a metropolis are really rich. Several of the speakers came from the Chicago area. I only had to fly in a couple of people. Others drove from other places in the Midwest. Second, I was astonished at how easy it was to get people to speak. I simply asked, would you be interested? They said, sure. Third, we paid each speaker an honorarium of \$500. We also paid accommodations and travel. This might be a stretch for others. Fourth, amazingly, and another example of the unique resource opportunities in Chicago, an InterVarsity staff guy working in Grand Rapids, relatively nearby and home to Baker, Eerdmans, and Zondervan publishers, was willing to come to Chicago like he had done for many other IV staff conferences to set up a book table. People attending could purchase books at a discount. Unfortunately, not many books were purchased, and still worse we had not thought ahead to identify several key books which could then have become the resources for some discussion groups after the conference.

Once we'd done that conference, we asked why we weren't doing it all the time. Scholars were ready and able to talk about their faith and academic work. There were plenty of people nearby, we had a chap to help with books. And the total conference was relatively inexpensive.

Terry

Where did you go from there?

John

Enthusiastic from the success of the first conference, as soon as the first conference was over we said, so what is next? Ultimately, we found that organizing a conference was easy in Chicago. However, keeping the idea of Christian academic engagement alive, and helping people do it themselves became the big challenge.

John

A grad student who had given a paper was very interested in putting his faith together with his walk, he was so enthusiastic. He said I know a scientist whom I am sure would come and speak. The first conference was scattershot. So this time we decided to focus a topical conference on science. Yet again we had 10 scientists ready to go at the drop of a hat.

Terry

Was that an apologetic approach?

John

Some might have called it that. Our request was for them to talk about their scientific work in the context of their faith.

Terry

So did you get into a rhythm?

John

Yes, we decided we should do this once a year. I thought we needed a conference on bible, theology and philosophy. But that conference didn't work.

Terry

Why not?

John

Very few attended, although we had really good speakers. In the previous conferences the meeting room was full. This time it was only about half full. I came to think that evangelicals were not so ready to engage those outside the typical evangelical community, even though most of the scholars were evangelicals. It seemed many possible attendees were reluctant to hear even from evangelical academics about thinking in broader terms about more difficult issues than they were used to encountering.

Terry

Where did you hold the conferences? Inside the university?

John

Yes. At the Divinity School in the heart of the quadrangles.

Terry

How long did the Redemption of Reason conferences continue?

John

We had another conference in 2008, focused on social justice. We flew someone in from Kenya who was working for the UN. Woltersdorff was the keynote speaker. It went well. Less people attended but still a good sized crowd. One of the speakers discovered that her great-grandfather was one of the leading slave traders in the US. She studied the family history, traveled to some plantations in the south and Jamaica. The conference began with a video about what she found.

Terry

Why did you stop?

John

Money. A small family foundation had helped us earlier but it could no longer support us.

Terry

What advice would you give people who wanted to try something like this?

John

I organized these conferences while I had a fulltime job. I could organize the event but I didn't have enough time to meet with InterVarsity staff and students, regularly enough to encourage them to come, to apply the ideas to their own lives, to continue. So, these ended up being one-off events – I thought they would magically spark interest and innovation but it didn't happen.

Terry

For those sparks to catch fire, what would it need?

John

A small group of people in Christian groups on campus would need to meet regularly, e.g., every two weeks, for a discussion, e.g., a book they were reading on faith and academia – so staff are needed to maintain the momentum.

Terry

Thank you, John.

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