



Terry Halliday Interview of John Mulholland: Truth and Text

University of Chicago

Terry

How did Truth and Text (T&T) get going?

John

It got going partly because of Redemption of Reason. Pastors at my church said, if we can do a conference, can't we get pastors to talk on campus. But they failed to realize that students weren't ready to hear a sermon in the middle of week. So I started T&T in 2006. It met 2 or 3 times, then it was cancelled. A group of us then met with a local pastor to think about what might be done. Some said the church should stick with evangelism. Others wanted the Redemption of Reason work to continue and we prevailed. So we started in winter term, 2007, with Professor Jean Ehlstain, a New Testament professor at Holy Trinity, the historian, George Marsden, and others came to lunches. Each session was an hour long. Each speaker got 20-30 minutes to talk. Then there were questions and answers.

Terry

What kinds of people came?

John

Undergrads and grad students. People came. 25-30 people came regularly. Then a University of Chicago staff person in one of the science labs learned about it so occasionally staff came.

Terry

It looks as if you organized each academic term with sessions on the same theme.

John

Yes, we did this in order to be systematic in covering different faculties of the university. I worked with a professor about picking academic domains. So we decided to sort of March through the university.

Terry

What does that mean, march through the university?

John

We wanted to make sure that we had speakers from social sciences, medicine, law, humanities, and others.

Terry

Who were speakers? How did you find them?

John

They were mostly local faculty or people from nearby. We had a number from Wheaton College, especially at the beginning. We were living under the fear that we had to stick fairly close to home, to the comfort level of evangelical students. Slowly we began to spread out a bit more, we even brought in people who were not Christians but who could speak to an issue that was very relevant to Christians.

Terry

Who is an example of a non-Christian professor you brought in?

John

We invited a professor in social work – she worked on families but when she started her graduate work she discovered that most people doing research on families were only working on dysfunctional families. She wasn't interested in those. She wanted to learn about functioning families. What made for a well-functioning family? Lo and behold, she discovered that one of the key factors was religion and spirituality.

Terry

Why did you invite her?

John

Because a guy from church had heard this lady was a really good speaker. We didn't know about the religion aspect when we invited her.

Terry

What did you ask her to do?

John

To talk about her work. We said to her that we were a religious group, so we wanted her to talk about her research, ethics of families, and in some way perhaps make a connection to people with an interest in religion.

Terry

What about the historian who had worked on World War II and the holocaust?

John

He was nominally religious. He had thought a lot about the moral implications of genocide. So we asked him to do that.

Terry

What worked well about Text and Truth?

John

It cost very little. We provided lunch. Frequency helped. It became part of people's rhythm of life.

Terry

What didn't work?

John

I was working fulltime and attendance began to drop off. The leaders, even InterVarsity leaders and the local church, said in effect, we do evangelism, not Christianity and academia, so they didn't provide support.

Terry

Well, how important was staffing and resources to the success of Truth and Text?

John

Financial resources were only important for lunches. Staffing was the real issue. A staff person with InterVarsity left and the new person didn't pick up the cause. So we had no InterVarsity support and so no pipeline from InterVarsity groups into these sessions.

Terry

So, beyond the vision you had, what is critical to make a regular event like this work?

John

There needs to be someone, a faculty person or faculty staff person perhaps, who has the courage and confidence to knock on doors, create networks, and invite professors. Maybe someone who is known to them or knows the university and is respected by them. Also, having a staff person or an administrator makes a big difference. Being able to channel people from regular Christian groups into an activity like this and being enthusiastic about supporting it with some time and organizational resources.

Terry

Many thanks, John, for your vision and frank discussion of its challenges and possibilities.

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