

I SOLD MY SOUL ON EBAY

Viewing Faith Through an Atheist's Eyes

by Hemant Mehta (Colorado: WaterBrook Press, 2007)

a book review by Jack De Vries



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About the author:

Hemant Mehta is an honors graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago. His story has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Village Voice*, National Public Radio, and FOX News Channel, among other major news outlets. Mehta has done work toward a masters degree in math education a DePaul University in Chicago

“What will strike you in the pages of this book is that Hemant isn’t angry or antagonistic. As you try to figure out what exactly his agenda is, you’ll probably arrive at the same conclusion as I did. I think he’s simply after the truth.”

- **Rob Bell**, teaching pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church

I received a copy of this book from my wife’s cousin during our annual leave this past July. They were studying this book in their home Bible study. Since their church had gone through a relocation, their home group thought this book might help them understand how to reach the lost for Christ. Were not atheist’s lost people? Perhaps a book written by an athiest would give them insight how to reach irreligious people by looking at faith from their perspective.

That is also why I was eager to read this book. The title simply intrigued me. What could an atheist tell me about the church? I wanted to know! As I began to read this book I came to the same conclusion as Rob Bell did, as he shares in the foreword to this book: “I think he’s simply after the truth.”(page xi)

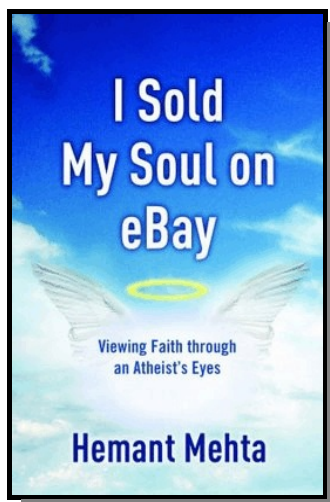
This book is unique in that I will share a perspective that many church leaders would never otherwise hear. If your church is interested in reaching out to non-Christians, you can discover workable solutions by listening closely to your target audience. (page 7)

Hemant reveals a lot of truth about how we as Christians present ourselves to non-believers. If we as Christians desire to impact our world, if we as Reformed believers make it our fundamental aim to reach the lost in Australia for Christ, then

it is essential that we first listen to them. What are irreligious people saying about us? How do they view the church? I was intrigued by these questions. Besides my intrigue, this book is a good read, regardless of where you put yourself when it comes to church, faith, Jesus, and religion.

Hemant Mehta decided to “sell his soul on eBay” after realising that, as an atheist, he had never been to church

or really been exposed to Christianity in any way. But he had an open mind and wanted to challenge his beliefs. So he held an auction on eBay, offering to visit the place, or places of worship of the winning bidder. For every \$10 bid, he would go to that church for 1 day. He then would write about his experiences. The auction was won by Jim Henderson, a former pastor from Seattle, for a bid of \$504. Jim’s proposal, which Hemant accepted, was to visit a variety of churches. So for the next year, Hemant would visit a number of different churches



and share in writing his experiences. In the first half of the book Hemant gives us as readers some insight into the life and times of an atheist. He describes growing up as a Jainist, and then as a teenager losing his religion. Along the way all kinds

Being an atheist involves more than mere denial of God's existence. An atheist's outlook impacts all aspects of life.

(page 57)

of seeds of doubt were sown – that God was a man-made idea. And then, one night he simply went to bed, and for the first time in his life did not say his prayers before going to sleep. This was his de-conversion. No bells, no ceremony, just a decision to live in a no-God world.

For many Bible believing and church going folk, just reading this first half of the book would be a revelation. How better to know the mind of an unbeliever than letting him open his mind to you. Hemant goes beyond all the stereotypes and, among other things, he discloses what he believes about prayer, suffering in the world, raising children, traditions, death, and the meaning of life. For example, atheists do not approach life without a purpose. They are purpose driven. In fact, “atheists are highly motivated to achieve more in the present life because we believe this is the only life we have.” (page 63)

The second half of the book is devoted to Hemant's visits to the fifteen different churches in the USA. He visit large and smaller churches, Roman Catholic and protestant, in urban areas, suburbs, and small towns. These churches represented

different denominations, with different approaches to worship, preaching, and ministry. As Hemant points out, “the purpose of my church visits was not to look only for things I agreed with or that impressed me positively. I was looking for both sides of the equation – the good and the bad. And sometimes, the indifferent.” (page 66) Each visit is dealt with at length, and in case you are wondering, at the end of his church hopping, Hemant did not become a Christian. But he does admit, “if any church had a chance of making me come back for more, it was Willow Creek¹.” (page 135) This assessment is a positive testimony to Willow's commitment, according to its website, to be a church “where our doors are open to people from all backgrounds, regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey.”

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(page 140)

My favourite chapter in *I Sold My Soul on eBay* is chapter 9, where Hemant offers suggestions to help church reach out to non-Christians. Hemant admits that “the churches in America [and Australia] have tremendous potential to do good and to reach out to nonreligious people in ways that could have an amazing impact.” (page 140) This is quite an admission to make. If we truly want to reach irreligious people then we do well to listen. Hemant notices things that we as believers can so easily

¹ Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, a growing church in the Chicago area, pioneered by Pastor Bill Hybels

overlook. For example, he mentions how consistently a lot of people show up late for church. (page 138) Why is that? What does this communicate to the unchurched? Is worship that unimportant? Do the worshipers dislike the singing? The unchurched are watching and wondering!

Hemant goes on to explain both what churches are doing right and where they are missing the mark. One area he identifies that churches are doing right is **the quality and effectiveness of the speakers**. Some preachers are especially gifted. If you are a preacher, and you are unsure whether or not you are effective as a communicator, Hemant suggests turning the video camera on your audience. Are people attentive? Are they taking notes? Are they smiling?(pages 140-1) Or staring off? Or sleeping?

Another positive assessment is **community outreach**. Hemant provides a litany of examples of churches which serving the real needs of the people around them. Other things churches are doing right include **high energy level and passion, encouraging dialogue on opposing viewpoints, and relevant sermons**. It is when there is a buzz of excitement in a church or when pastors give interesting examples of how Biblical passages relate to every day life, this is what encourages irreligious people to take note. As Hemant confesses, "This is the type of preaching that could get through to someone like me." (page 147)

Hemant also identifies a number of areas

where, according to him, churches are missing the mark. I suggest you pick up a copy of the book, study this chapter, and reflect on the barriers which we as churches and Christians put up against atheists. By way of a summary list, without going into detail, these are the areas Hemant identifies where churches are missing the mark:

- A lack of sensitivity to nonreligious people
- Too much time devoted to singing
- Not paying attention in church
- Distracting behavior during worship
- Lack of opportunities to ask questions
- Religious extremism
- Confusing rituals and traditions
- Intrusive projection screens

If you want to get through to nonreligious people, you need to first understand where they are coming from. Simply reading a book by former atheist Lee Strobel, such as The Case for Christ or The Case for Faith, won't cut it...I encourage you to seek out atheists.
(page 149)

An excellent feature of *Sold my Soul on eBay* is the extensive study guide prepared by Ron R. Lee, written as an appendix to this book. Christians are able to discuss this book in small groups or reflect on it alone. The questions really will

force one to confront the issues Hemant raises.

I recommend this book to pastors and church leaders for at least a couple of reasons. While you might disagree with certain conclusions Hemant makes, the exercise of reflection alone will help you understand where unbelievers are coming from. If we are really wanting to reach nonreligious people, then we need to first listen to them so we will not put up any barriers to the gospel. In the words of the

apostle Paul, “ I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22)

Not only will this book help you understand the world from an atheist’s point of view, it will also encourage you to raise the bar in your ability to reach unbelievers. This might mean, if you are a preacher, discovering how you can become more effective as a communicator, delivering relevant sermons. As church, you might discuss how you can engage in needs orientated evangelism. The next time you do a series of sermons on a particular topic, you will invite those who have different viewpoints and engage in a dialogue. In any event, just asking some of these questions will help you as church leaders think about how church can be a place where doors are open to people from all backgrounds, regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey. It might even encourage you to show up to church more consistently on time.