

# Unitarian Universalist Discussion Questions for Hemant' Mehta's *I Sold My Soul on eBay*

I just finished reading Hemant Mehta's *I Sold My Soul on eBay: Viewing Faith through an Atheist's Eyes*. Hemant is also the author of the Friendly Atheist blog.

Writing as an atheist who was raised as a Jain in an Indian-American household, Hemant's observations in his book allow us to ask what our congregations look like to newcomers.

At the end of the book, Ron Lee has provided discussion questions for individual reflection and small group discussion of the issues raised in the book.

The discussion questions provided by Ron Lee assume a more traditional Christian point of view and are not applicable for most Unitarian Universalists. Many of these discussion questions are not applicable for Unitarian Universalist Christians as well.

What follows is my attempt to re-frame these discussion questions for use in Unitarian Universalist faith communities.

## **Introduction: The Question of Faith**

(1) One of the premises of this book is that Christians who want to communicate the gospel effectively need to listen to the target audience. After reading about Hemant's church visits, what did you find most surprising? Most helpful? Least helpful? For Unitarian Universalists, who is (are?) our target audience(s)?

(2) Hemant recalls a story his mother had told him, which introduced him to the idea that there are people who believed a different faith from his family and the author concluded that "anyone who believed in a faith different from that of my family was wrong." Think about the stories that we tell in our congregations to ourselves and our children. How do these stories portray those who are not Unitarian Universalist?

(3) Hemant describes skeptics as those who don't place confidence in "fables that are meant only to inspire." Are fables that are not literally and factually true useful for us as Unitarian Universalists? Where do we experience difficulties with fables in Unitarian Universalist congregations?

(4) As a child, did you accept the literal truthfulness of any fables (e.g. Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, etc)? How did you feel when you realized that these fables were not literally and factually true?

(5) The author asks, "Why are people unwilling to examine and question their beliefs?" How would you answer his question?

(6) Let's say that a visitor showed up at your congregation on Sunday morning and said that she had questions about faith, an openness to evidence that might contradict her current beliefs, and a curiosity about Unitarian Universalism and its message. How would you react to this? Do you think this person would be truly open to becoming a Unitarian Universalist?

(7) The author states that one of the purposes of this book is to "help improve the way churches present the Christian message." Do you think that an atheist's observations and questions can also help Unitarian Universalists present their message more effectively as well? Why or why not?

(8) As an atheist, Hemant immersed himself in Christian culture (visiting churches, reading Christian books, talking with Christians, etc). As a Unitarian Universalist, do you read books by authors with whom you disagree? If you have read such books, what have you learned about your own beliefs by reading the ideas of those you disagree with?

(9) The author describes stereotypes that are used to categorize atheists. What groups have you heard being stereotyped in Unitarian Universalist congregations? What stereotypes have others applied to you because you are a Unitarian Universalist?

### **Chapter 1: Selling My Soul on eBay**

(1) The author explains that after he became an atheist he continued to practice the core teachings of Jainism, his childhood religion. Would you expect an atheist to maintain any religious practices? Why or why not? Many Unitarian Universalists are adult converts coming from other faith traditions. Would you expect these folks coming to Unitarian Universalism from another tradition to maintain religious practices from their earlier faith traditions? Why or why not?

(2) Hemant writes, "I have noticed that as people grow older, they become much more reluctant to change ... Overall it seems that people fail to question beliefs that have become safe and comfortable." What impact does this tendency have on Unitarian Universalist faith communities?

(3) Hemant reports that Christian friends had cautioned him regarding prominent Christians who are often quoted in the news. His friends maintain that those spokespersons don't necessarily represent the views of most Christians. If you wanted to learn more about Christianity or another faith tradition, how would you find a reliable spokesperson for that tradition? What characteristics would you look for in this spokesperson? For folks exploring Unitarian Universalism, who would you recommend as a reliable spokesperson? Why would you make this recommendation?

(4) Hemant's first church experience was attending Mass at a historic Catholic church in Chicago. After observing the rituals, he was "convinced some of [the worshippers] had repeated the same motions their entire lives without really thinking about what they were doing." Do you feel that Hemant was assuming too much about the worshipers? Have you ever questioned the value of rituals or the genuineness of people as they are repeating worship rituals week after week? Why or why not? How do you think Unitarian Universalist rituals used in your faith community look and feel to newcomers?

(5) Think about a time when you were a newcomer in a social setting, a religious setting, or a cross-cultural setting. Describe some of the rituals that were unfamiliar to you. How did you feel in these settings?

(6) What are the rituals and traditions in your Unitarian Universalist community that could

be confusing to a visitor? How would you explain the meaning behind these practices to a newcomer?

(7) When word of his eBay auction got out, Hemant was invited to be a guest on Kirk Cameron's radio program (Cameron is a TV actor who is now a Christian evangelist). Before the show was over, Hemant concluded that Cameron simply wanted to use his story to criticize nonbelievers. Why would a person use an antagonistic approach when talking with a person who holds different beliefs? Have you ever personally received this antagonism as a Unitarian Universalist? Have you ever seen Unitarian Universalists express this antagonism towards others?

## **Chapter 2: The Reasons I Lost My Religion**

(1) "When I chose to reject the idea of God," Hemant writes, "I was motivated in part by facets of my religion that didn't ring true." Have you identified any religious beliefs you have been taught that no longer ring true? If so, what do you do with those teachings? With Unitarian Universalism's non-creedal history, what options are available for Unitarian Universalists?

(2) In mentioning that he continues to honor many of the principles of Jainism, the author draws a distinction between religious values and religious beliefs. He supports the values while rejecting the beliefs. Do you agree that the values of a religion can legitimately be separated from that religion's belief system? Is this question different for non-creedal covenantal faith communities like Unitarian Universalism?

(3) When Hemant decided to become an atheist, he risked losing his family's support and his friendship within this larger religious community. For many Unitarian Universalists who leave their childhood faiths to join us, do they have similar risks? Are there lifespan differences when the decision to join us is made? Is it different for a teen? Young adult? Older adult? Are the risks associated with joining Unitarian Universalism influenced by the surrounding community's prevailing culture?

(4) After his family moved to Tennessee, Hemant found himself a religious minority in a new school. He states, "Trying to explain my beliefs was a futile, often embarrassing exercise, so I kept my religion to myself." Have you ever felt this way as a Unitarian Universalist? If so, do you feel comfortable sharing with others about it?

(5) The author describes his parents' decision to move back to the Chicago area. The resulting disappointment led Hemant to question God, and he eventually became an atheist. Have you ever found yourself questioning deeply held religious beliefs like this? What were the outcomes of this questioning? Did Unitarian Universalism play a part in this questioning?

(6) Hemant's advice to Christian parents who are concerned that their children might abandon their childhood faith is to make sure they know the deeper reasons behind Christian beliefs. He writes, "Don't rely on reasons such as 'This is what Catholics have always done' or 'The Bible says we should do this.'" How do you feel about his advice? Do you think that Unitarian Universalist parents would have similar concerns about their children? Why or why not? What concerns do you think that Unitarian Universalist parents do have about their children and their future religious path?

(7) The author found that "all religions were trying to answer questions they didn't have the

answers to. What was so wrong with not knowing?" How do you feel about this concern as a Unitarian Universalist?

(8) Hemant suggests that belief in God is learned and not innate. He writes, "I think we're born without any knowledge of God and we are taught by our parents or other influential people that God exists." What do you think about this suggestion? Do you believe humans have an innate sense of the divine? Are there ways to find answers to these questions using cross-cultural comparisons or sharing personal histories?

### **Chapter 3: Getting to Know an Atheist**

(1) When you were reading this book, did you consider skipping over chapter 3? If so, did you feel you already know what atheists think? If you did read chapter 3, were you surprised by any of Hemant's descriptions of atheists and other nonbelievers? What surprised you? Do you know any atheists or other nonbelievers in your Unitarian Universalist congregation? If you do, did you see any differences between your experiences and Hemant's descriptions?

(2) One of the author's goals is to help Christians develop a more accurate understanding of atheists and other nonbelievers. Do you think that Unitarian Universalists could be influenced by stereotypes about atheists and other nonbelievers? Have you witnessed any examples of this in Unitarian Universalist settings?

(3) The author shares a parable involving the Wind and the Sun which makes the point gentle persuasion has more power than coercion. Can you think of situations in which someone tried to pressure you to change your mind, adopt a new belief, or agree with his/her position? How did that approach make you feel? At the time that it happened, did you give in to the pressure? What does this suggest to us about how we should do Unitarian Universalist outreach?

(4) Hemant reports that when he was a student at a state university, "it seemed that most religious organizations on campus were out to convert me by coercion. When you were in high school or college, were you ever approached by Christians whose evangelism tactics offended you? If so, what was it about their approach that was offensive? What does this suggest to you about how we should do Unitarian Universalist youth, campus ministry, and young adult outreach?

### **Chapter 4: What the Nonreligious Believe**

(1) The author identifies the deciding factor in his de-conversion: "I could no longer follow the logic in [Jainism's] most fundamental claims ... But when I reexamined life using the reasoning of atheists, everything started to fall into place." Does atheism have more authenticity than a belief in God? Why or why not? If you are using this discussion guide with a group, please have people share their responses. Would an atheist raised in a Unitarian Universalist congregation have this de-conversion experience?

(2) Hemant writes, "I appreciate the honesty of an answer that admits 'We don't know for certain.'" He seems to feel that atheists, more than Christians, are willing to admit that they don't have all the answers. Do you feel that most people come to Christianity hoping to get all their questions answered? Do you feel that most people coming to Unitarian Universalism are also looking for answers? If so, what do you think those answers are?

(3) Here is the author's definition of doubt: "Doubt for me had to do with giving serious

consideration to certain religious beliefs and teachings and finding heightened confusion rather than explaining life as I knew it." What do you feel about the suggestion that religion may create confusion? In what ways does Unitarian Universalism heighten confusion? In what ways does Unitarian Universalism reduce confusion?

(4) Here is one example of a traditional Christian teaching that Hemant cannot accept: "There is the belief that murderers who 'accept Jesus' will go to heaven when they die but someone like Mahatma Gandhi, who used nonviolence to combat India's caste system and to fight for the country's independence, went to hell because he was a Hindu and not a Christian ... How could someone who took another human's life reap greater eternal rewards than a person who dedicated his life to helping others?" How would you personally answer Hemant's question? Do you feel that an early Universalist theology of universal salvation (e.g. a loving God would not condemn anyone to eternal punishment) would provide a different Christian answer for Hemant's concerns? Do you feel that a later Universalist theology (e.g. there is no hell -- heavens or hells are situations we create through human agency in this life) would provide a different Christian answer for Hemant's concerns?

(5) Hemant points out that atheist parents show their children how to "think critically about what society tells them," so they can avoid being deceived by the messages of the culture. Have you ever considered that atheist parents would be concerned about how the culture might corrupt their children? If you are a Unitarian Universalist parent, have you taught your children how to think critically about popular culture? Do you think atheist parents would approve of the messages we teach in our Unitarian Universalist religious education programs? Why or why not?

(6) The author states that when atheists support efforts to remove the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance or to remove a nativity scene from public property, they are not motivated by a hatred of religion. "Our real motivation is to respect constitutional guarantees against governmental establishment of a particular religion," he writes. "If atheists truly sought to remove religion from public life, I would imagine we would fight to change the line in the Pledge of Allegiance to 'One nation, under no God, indivisible.'" What do you feel about this statement?

(7) Hemant refers to "the most fundamental question there is: what is the meaning of life?" Does it surprise you that an atheist thinks this? Hemant says that an atheist answer to this question is "all people choose the meaning in their lives." What do you feel about this view? Do you think it's true for Unitarian Universalists as well? Why or why not?

(8) Hemant reports that in every church service he attended, he asked himself, Does Christian faith answer the big questions of life in a more satisfactory way than nonsupernatural explanations do? As a Unitarian Universalist, how would you respond to this concern? Do you think that we provide answers that are compatible with nonsupernatural explanations? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 5: The View From a Smaller Pew**

(1) As you read Hemant's critiques in Chapter 5, were you tempted to think that if he only understood what churches are trying to do, he'd be far less critical? If so, do you feel that's a valid objection to some of his critiques? In light of the fact that many Unitarian Universalist congregations are also smaller congregations, do you think that any of the small church

observations would apply to Unitarian Universalist congregations? Why or why not?

(2) Did the author point out anything about these churches that surprised you, concerned you, or challenged you? If so, which observations elicited such a response -- and why?

(3) Is there anything in these church critiques that gave you insight or a new perspective on how Christianity comes across to nonbelievers? If so, what were those insights? Do you think that any of these insights are also applicable to Unitarian Universalism?

(4) Did you feel that any of his criticisms were unwarranted? If so, which ones and why?

(5) Do you feel that any of his comments need to be given careful consideration by the leadership of your church? If so, which comments and why?

(6) Commenting on a pastor in Chicago, Hemant writes, "Pastor Laura made sure we knew there was a tie between what we heard in church and what we would be challenged by in the coming week outside of church." His implication is that other sermons he heard did not make this connection. Do you agree that such a connection is essential? Why or why not?

(7) Pastor Laura asked people in her congregation to write on one side of a piece of paper "what they felt before they were rescued by Christ, and on the other, what they felt like afterwards ... I had to wonder: was being down, lonely, or desperate a prerequisite to finding God?" How would you answer Hemant's question? Is being down, lonely, or desperate a prerequisite for wanting to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(8) In DeKalb, Illinois, Hemant visited an Evangelical Free Church. He had some fun with the name of the church: "Maybe it's free of evangelicals? Or does it mean that no one has to give an offering?" Have you ever thought that some you have taken for granted -- even something as basic as the name of a church -- can be confusing to an outsider? What do you think would be confusing to a newcomer in your Unitarian Universalist congregation? Would the long multi-syllable "Unitarian Universalist" label that is grounded in our theological heritage be confusing? Would the term "church" (used by many Unitarian Universalist congregations) and the Christian associations that some non-Christians have with this term be confusing?

(9) "I noticed something I hadn't expected at a church in a smaller community," Hemant writes. "Most of the families chose to sit by themselves with empty seats surrounding them ... I didn't notice a special bond connecting these families." What would you say to explain the seating choices made by these families? Have you observed this pattern in churches you have attended? Have you observed this pattern in your Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(10) At another church, the author notes, "It seemed as if the entire room was full ... except for a ten-seat perimeter around where I was sitting. I didn't know if it was because I was sitting with a notebook, writing, or because I was an unfamiliar brown person in a sea of whiteness, but only when the other areas became crowded did anyone choose a seat closer to me." What's your theory to explain why the regularly attending persons left a buffer of empty seats around this first-time visitor? What do you think of Hemant's suggested theories? What do you think would be Hemant's experience if he visited your Unitarian Universalist congregation on a Sunday morning?

(11) At a Presbyterian church, Hemant questions the purpose behind what he calls scripted readings (liturgy). "If it was meant to energize us about God, you never would have guessed from the dull responses given by the congregation. If it was meant to be a prayer, it gave no evidence of being heartfelt." Does it surprise you that an atheist is troubled by what appears to be a lack of fervor and sincerity in church? How would you respond to the author's observations and questions? What do you think Hemant would think about the liturgy choices and implementation of them in your Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(12) Hemant sums up his criticism of the use of written prayers: "If I wanted to feel close to God, the prayers would have to come from within, tailored to my own struggles, hopes, and gratitude. A scripted prayer took away from all that." How would you respond to his critique? What do you think would be his response to liturgy in your Unitarian Universalist congregation?

### **Chapter 6: The View From a Midsized Pew**

(1) Did the author point out anything about these churches that surprised you, concerned you, or challenged you? If so, which observations elicited such a response -- and why? The churches described in this chapter are comparable with the largest churches in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

(2) Is there anything in these church critiques that gave you insight or a new perspective in how your Unitarian Universalist congregation might come across to newcomers and visitors? If so, what were those insights?

(3) Did you feel any of his criticisms were unwarranted? If so, which ones and why?

(4) "It seems that pastors in general just assume that everyone in the audience agrees with them," Hemant writes. "They don't often provide reasons or explanations to back up what they say." Do you agree that pastors should do more to give a larger context and to explain the reasons behind their assertions for the benefit of those visiting the worship service. Why or why not?

(5) Hemant objects to using the word "lost" to describe those outside the kingdom of God. "I don't feel lost," he writes. "In fact I've felt found ever since I've become an atheist. So I'd like to hear a pastor tell me why he's convinced I am lost." Why do you think such terminology feels problematic to non-believers? Unitarian Universalists probably wouldn't call someone "lost"; however, what words do you think we use that our newcomers and visitors would find problematic?

(6) At a church in Chicago, the pastor admitted "that even he had doubts about God sometimes," Hemant reports. "It was humbling and important to hear that." It's clear that Hemant was impressed by Pastor Clarence's honesty and transparency. Do you hear this candor and transparency in your Unitarian Universalist congregation? Why or why not? Do you think that doubt is an important part of one's faith journey?

(7) Pastor Clarence tells the story of Doubting Thomas from John 20. Here is how Hemant reflects on this story: "Thomas said he wouldn't believe in the resurrection of Christ unless he saw and touched Jesus' hands where the nails had been driven in at the crucifixion ... He was asking for the same thing I was looking for: evidence ... Why are atheists so despised for

thinking like Thomas did?" Do you understand Hemant's desire for tangible proof in a religious search? Do you think that Unitarian Universalism offers enough "tangible proof" for any claims that it makes? Why or why not?

(8) At a church in Houston, an announcement was made that a member of the congregation had died. Hemant comments "The people had prayed that he would get better ... How was it possible to keep praying for other things when it was clear in this instance prayer wasn't working?" What do you think is the place for prayer in Unitarian Universalism?

(9) Hemant was frustrated when he heard a speaker say homosexuality was a problem. He continues, "In my view, you are born either heterosexual or homosexual, so why consider an innate predisposition to be a problem?" Do you think that Hemant would be troubled by Unitarian Universalist views on homosexuality that he would hear in most pulpits? Why or why not?

(10) Hemant reports, "The speaker [at a church] asked us to recite the following words to begin the process of forgiveness ... 'God, I love you more than my car, my home, my family ... ' I couldn't imagine a person prioritizing God before his wife or their children or their parents ... Faith might be important, but is it so important that if we had to choose between family and faith, someone would tell her family they came in second place?" How would you respond to the author's questions? Do you think that there are Unitarian Universalists who value their religious faith over their families? If so, how do they show this? Do you think this is a positive, negative, or neutral thing?

### **Chapter 7: The View From a Larger Pew**

(1) Is there anything in these critiques that gave you insight or a new perspective on how Christianity comes across to non-believers? If so, what were those insights? How do you think your Unitarian Universalist congregation comes across to newcomers?

(2) Did you think any of the author's criticisms were unwarranted? If so, which ones and why?

(3) Hemant noticed that on Sundays, Second Baptist Church in Houston has as a service geared to young adults geared to young adults and it begins "precisely at 11:11 AM, a time that holds a superstitious significance for some young people." Were you aware of this superstition? How do you feel about a church starting a service at a time that has a superstitious meaning? Do you think a superstition would work with Unitarian Universalist young adults? Why or why not?

(4) Hemant was curious about one church's twenty-four-hour prayer hotline, so he called the number late at night and got an answering machine. He wasn't experiencing a crisis and he doesn't believe in prayer, but still he was concerned about getting an answering machine and not a human being. How do you feel about a hotline that is manned by a machine? Do you think that Hemant was taking this too seriously? Why or why not? Do you think that your Unitarian Universalist congregation should have a prayer or crisis hotline? Why or why not?

(5) When Hemant took note of the worship team at a church in Houston, he realized that "it was apparent that the younger, more attractive singers stood front and center. This was a technique more appropriate for an advertising campaign than a place of worship." How would you respond to the author's observation? Are marketing concerns compatible with faith? Why

or why not? What would you think if your Unitarian Universalist congregation did this?

(6) Hemant read on a church web site that "' ... after meeting at Rolling Meadows High School for seven years, God supernaturally provided our current church home ... in Rolling Meadows.' Unless the building suddenly appeared out of nowhere, I figured there had to be a better word to describe how the congregation came to occupy its current building." How do you feel about the word choice on the church web site? Does the word supernaturally throw you? Have you seen similar examples in Unitarian Universalist congregations ("Miracle Sunday" fundraisers, etc)? Can you see how it might confuse someone who is not familiar with church jargon?

(7) "One of the main problems I had with larger churches is the lack of intimacy between the pastor and ... what's the word ... pastees?" Hemant writes. "Here, though, that problem was eliminated by the pastor approaching us, being one of us." The author is referring to pastor James MacDonald, who walked down among the people in the congregation as he was preaching. Does it surprise you that the connection made by a pastor's simple act was so impressive to a newcomer? What does this say about the need for congregations to do more to establish a connection and to create a sense of intimacy during worship services? Would this simple act happen in your Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(8) At a church in the Chicago suburbs, Hemant was distracted by frequent quotes from the Bible. "It was as if the pastor felt we wouldn't believe forgiveness was mentioned in the Bible unless we heard it repeated, verbatim, from the Bible." How would you respond to that observation? Have you ever experienced anything similar in your Unitarian Universalist congregation with the Bible or other references cited in the pulpit?

(9) To some Christians, Hemant observes, "Preachers such as Joel Osteen may appear 'watered down' due to the fact that he doesn't mention Bible verses as frequently as other pastors." This criticism would rarely be directed at most Unitarian Universalist ministers. Are there religious writings that Unitarian Universalist ministers "over-quote" or "under-quote"?

(10) Hemant refers to an anecdote one pastor told and claimed was true. Later, the author was unable to find the story on the internet, but he located a similar story which was said to be a legend. Hemant comments, "I would expect a pastor to do more thorough research ... His claim that the story was true without giving reference caused this pastor to lose credibility in my eyes." Would such an incident cause a pastor to lose credibility in your eyes? Why or why not? Given the ready availability of internet fact-checking sources like snopes.com and even the possibility that a congregant might even research this in mid-worship with a PDA or iPhone, should a pastor carefully research any "urban legends" mentioned in a sermon?

(11) During a service at a Colorado church, Hemant comments, "For several minutes at a time it was hard to see past the man in front of me whose arm was raised in praise and blocking my line of vision." Have you ever been distracted in church by the worship habits of others? If so, what was distracting about the situation? What would you recommend as a solution to such distractions?

(12) The author was impressed by the ethnic diversity of the group that attended a Sunday-night service at The Moody Church in Chicago. Segregation is common in many churches. Have you ever thought that segregation a damaging testimony to those outside the church.

Does your Unitarian Universalist congregation have de-facto segregation in worship and other activities?

### **Chapter 8: Churches That Deserve Special Mention**

(1) Did the author point out anything about these megachurches that surprised you, challenged you, or raised concerns? If so, which observations elicited such a response -- and why? Can you imagine seeing these things in a Unitarian Universalist megachurch or a smaller Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(2) Is there anything in these critiques that gave you a new perspective on how your congregation and Unitarian Universalism comes across to newcomers? If so, what were those insights?

(3) At Mars Hill Bible Church, one of the pastors pointed out that the local newspaper had reported that the population of those living in poverty in Grand Rapids numbers one in five. "However," Hemant says, "he didn't say anything at that time about actions the church would take to help remedy the situation, which was disappointing." Do you understand the author's disappointment? Why do you think Hemant keeps returning to the idea that churches should do more to meet the physical needs of people in the community? Does your Unitarian Universalist congregation do anything to meet the physical needs of others in the community?

(4) As Pastor Rob Bell read from John 20, the author reports that Rob "reminded us as we read that we must constantly ask: can we see ourselves in these stories?" Do you think this method for examining the Bible would be useful for non-Christian and non-Jewish Unitarian Universalists in engaging the Jewish and Christian Bible heritage that gave rise to modern-day Unitarian Universalism?

(5) Hemant comments, "[Rob Bell's] quirks make him a compelling person to watch. It's the way he talks to everyone as if he were face to face with you in a coffee shop, not as if he's delivering a lecture." This is the second time the author has commented favorably on a pastor who speaks to a huge congregation as if he's carrying on a personal conversation. Why do you feel this stood out to Hemant? How else can speakers convey this sense of intimacy? Have you ever experienced this intimacy in Unitarian Universalist worship?

(6) Hemant acknowledges that his favorite preacher is Joel Osteen. "I can't recall hearing any other pastor talk so much about his or her private life," Hemant writes, "As Joel spoke in front of an arena full of people, I felt like I knew him, at least a little bit." Does it surprise you that a speaker's vulnerability stands out so powerfully? Why or why not? Do you think a Unitarian Universalist congregation could model this type of ministry? Why or why not?

(7) Hemant says he left Lakewood Church in Houston knowing that "thousands of people were going to have a better day, and maybe even a better life, after hearing [Osteen] speak ... Everyone is looking for a better life, whether they believe in God or not." The author says addressing this felt need could be a key to attracting nonbelievers to the church. How do you respond to his observation? Do you think Unitarian Universalist congregations could adapt this suggestion?

(8) Hemant suggests that churches would provide a tremendous public service if they hosted debates between a Christian spokesperson and a recognized spokesperson presenting a

secular view on the same topic. If churches sponsored such debates, what might they gain and what might they stand to lose? What sorts of debates should Unitarian Universalist congregations host? What would Unitarian Universalist congregations gain or lose from these debates?

(9) The author concludes, "If any church were to convert me, I felt it would be a place such as Willow Creek [Community Church]. It wasn't a fire-and-brimstone service. It wasn't a worship-God-out-of-fear-of-hell service. It was a place where I could think about the message after I left." What do you think of his assessment? What can Unitarian Universalist congregations do to give our potential members something to think about after they leave the service?

(10) What do you think of the idea of Unitarian Universalist megachurches? What are the pluses and minuses of megachurches for Unitarian Universalists?

### **Chapter 9: What Works on Sunday Morning and What Doesn't**

(1) Is there anything in the author's overview that gave new insight or a new perspective on how your Unitarian Universalist congregation comes across to newcomers? If so, what were the insights?

(2) Does the author include any critiques of the churches in this chapter that you feel are unfair or clearly based on a misunderstanding? How would you clarify those issues for the author? Do you think some aspects of your Unitarian Universalist congregation might lead to similar criticisms? If so, would these criticisms be unfair or based on a misunderstanding? Why or why not?

(3) The author is pointed in his criticism of boring preachers, pointing out that regular church attendees seemed to be as bored as he was. Then he praises skilled speakers: "Imagine the best and worst teachers you had in college. The best ones made you want to listen ... They ignited a passion inside you. The best teachers (and the best preachers) connect with something inside you that makes you not just listen, but moves you to act." Are you surprised that an atheist who repeatedly appeals to reason and logic is so attracted to communicators who generate passion? How can Unitarian Universalist ministers and speakers -- in personal interactions and in group settings -- communicate the way he is describing?

(4) Hemant recommends that pastors videotape their sermons, but to turn the cameras toward the congregation to record audience's response and level of engagement. Is this a good idea? Do you think this would be useful in your Unitarian Universalist congregation?

(5) In suggesting that churches sponsor debates between Christians and nonbelievers, Hemant argues that it would show outsiders "that Christians are confident in their beliefs, so much so that they're willing to present their teachings in a setting where the other side of the argument is also presented." Do you think this suggestion could be applied to Unitarian Universalist congregations as well? Why or why not?

(6) The author is sensitive to the frequently expressed attitude among Christians that nonbelievers are "them" and not "us." He writes, "I found that because I was an atheist, I was seen as the enemy." Are there ways that Unitarian Universalists also divide into "us" and "them" groups? Is this done intentionally or unintentionally? Is this done as an adversarial act

or as an establishment of theological boundaries for the congregation?

(7) The author recommends that churches provide regular opportunities for people to ask questions of the pastor. "Wouldn't it be great if immediately after the sermon there was a room I could go to where I could have my questions answered?" he proposes. In his church research, he found only one church that schedules regular question-and-answer sessions (this was Ted Haggard's church). Why do you think more congregations don't provide regular opportunities like this interaction for visitors, seekers, and long-term members where they can raise questions? In Unitarian Universalist settings, this often referred to as "talkback." Many Unitarian Universalist growth consultants advise against "talkback" after the worship service. Why do think they do this? What do you feel about this recommendation?