



The Separationist



What are “Stem Cells” and why are they so controversial? a talk by Rick Visconti 4PM November 18th at Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street



Stem cell research is either a terrible or a wonderful thing, depending on who you ask. On the one hand, there are those who argue that it has the potential to cure or at least alleviate some of humanity's worst diseases. On the other, there are those who view it as

reflecting a serious devaluation of human life, tantamount to murder.

To form an opinion and intelligently discuss any controversial topic, it is first necessary to learn the facts. Fortunately, at our November meeting we will learn about the basics of stem cell research and the sources of this controversy from a scientist who is doing it right here in Charleston.

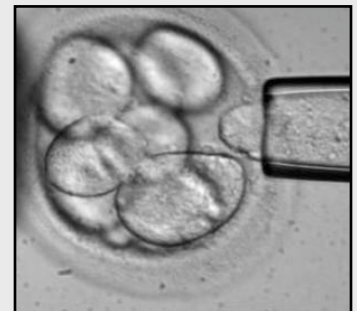
Richard P. Visconti, Assistant Professor of cell Biology and Anatomy at MUSC, received his BS in Biology from Ursinus College in 1988, and a Master's and Ph.D. in Developmental Biology from Temple University in 1992 and 1995 respectively. After a postdoctoral position at the University of

Texas Medical Center at Dallas, Dr. Visconti joined the laboratory of Dr. Christopher Drake at MUSC.

In March 2006 Visconti and Drake published a stem cell breakthrough in the journal *Circulation Research*. For the first time, using an animal model, the researchers demonstrated that adult stem cells purified from bone marrow and injected into the blood stream can repair damaged heart valves.

The study's co-author, MUSC Cardiovascular Developmental Biology Center director Roger Markwald, said “South Carolina stem cell specialists are becoming nationally recognized and can successfully compete on any level. However, the most important news for us is that the discovery of stem cell contribution to heart valvulogenesis opens a new perspective and opportunity for using a person's own adult stem cells for treatment in patients with severe heart valve disease.”

Bring your questions and learn more about this cutting edge area of medical research.



Free childcare will be available during the November monthly meeting in the annex behind Gage Hall. For more information, please write to shl@lowcountry.humanists.net

Charity of the Quarter

Lowcountry Orphan Relief

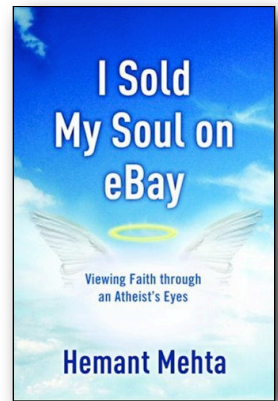
The SHL Charity for the November-December period is Lowcountry Orphan Relief, a non-profit founded in 2005 by Lynn Young. The mission of LOR is to provide services and aid to abandoned, abused, and neglected children in the Charleston area where government aid ends. Specifically they aim to ensure that abused, abandoned or neglected children coming into the Department of Social Services system within 48 hours will have in their possession clothes, toiletries, and school supplies.

According to LOR, 1,500 children in the greater Charleston area are abandoned or abused every year, and 30 children a month are placed in foster homes. Many of these children come into the system barefoot, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. LOR provides them with new underwear and socks, properly fitting clothes and an overcoat, shoes and a backpack with toiletries and school supplies. They also assist emergency shelters for abandoned and abused children by providing clothing and supplies, as well as libraries of children's books.

Make a donation at our monthly meetings in November or December or send your check to the SHL c/o our treasurer, Frances Hay, P.O. Box 32256, Charleston, SC 29417. In the new year, we will pool all the money collected and present it as one gift to Low Country Orphan Relief. Thank you!

Humanist Book Group

This month's meeting will take place on Sunday, November 25, in the Barnes and Noble bookstore at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd., 4:00-5:30 p.m. Larry Carter Center will facilitate a discussion of the book "I Sold My Soul on eBay" by the self-styled "friendly atheist" Hemant Mehta (interviewed below).



The book describes the author's experiences attending numerous churches—the agreed-upon consequence of auctioning off his "soul" (for \$504!)—as a way to explore what Christianity "is all about." Having grown up as a Jain and become an atheist at age 14, he is uniquely qualified as a candid observer of American Christianity as it appears to outsiders.

The West Ashley Barnes and Noble has a number of copies available for sale; you can easily find the book in a tabletop display located in the front corner of the store to the left of the cash registers, where we meet. Please feel free to join us, even if you haven't had a chance to read the book.

Total SHL donation to the Susan Komen Foundation was

\$585

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The Friendly Atheist

by Deb Segel

reprinted from "The Humanist Monthly" Newsletter of the Capitol District Humanist Society

At the end of July, I drove into Albany to attend a book signing event at The Book House. My curiosity had really gotten the best of me, and I wanted to meet the atheist author Hemant Mehta, whose book, I sold my Soul on eBay, had been published by a Christian book publisher and was being very well received by Christian clergy. What I discovered was an extraordinary outgoing, intelligent and communicative young man who, even after all the speaking and touring he has done, may himself be somewhat astonished at the effect his book has been having. I have since read his very interesting and autobiographical and investigative book, and learned about his experiences visiting many churches as a complete outsider, and his reactions to what he saw and heard. His easygoing narrative is humorous, thought provoking and at times disturbing. I felt inspired to follow up with an interview where I might learn how his experiences have affected him. The following is my conversation with Hemant, conducted via email.

Deb: I am specifically curious about what changes have come about in your life since your book was published, since it is a very personal account. Do people (friends, family, strangers) see you in a different light?

Hemant: In a minor way, yes. I can now talk about atheism with my family. I don't have to hide it around them...In fact, at a recent family gathering, one of my aunts came up to me and asked if I had spoken to someone way across the room. I told her I hadn't. She said I needed to because "He doesn't believe in God, either!" I loved it -- it was as if everyone in my family was keeping their eyes open for anything atheist-related so they could tell me about it!...

Deb: Has the book led to any interesting and unexpected opportunities?

Hemant: Definitely. The most interesting are the opportunities to speak at a couple church gatherings, including one at Willow Creek, the most influential church in the country. How amazing that some pastors would allow an atheist speak to their congregations in an open and honest way! They did it because they know I could talk about atheism in a way that didn't upset Christians, and I could teach them how many of their actions were hurting other people.

Deb: Do you find many regular church-going Christians reading your book?

Hemant: There are many Christians reading the book. I know this because I get positive emails from a large number of

them. There are also church groups reading the book for small group discussions. They tell me that the book helped them understand atheists and the way Christians are perceived by outsiders. There are some Christians who send the typical "I must convert you" emails, but it's not a large percentage of my emails. Christians have been pretty good to me :) I think that has to do with the tone and style of the book.

Deb: I have to say that I think what you are doing, in the way of honestly showing the concerns and ways of think of the "average atheist next door", that you are really helping to show atheism as the positive and healthy life-stance that it is. This is a friendly and appealing contrast to the hard-hitting and zealous approach that someone like Dawkins takes for consciousness

arising. I like how you feel that the moral teachings of your Jain background can still have relevance and I see a similar thing for myself regarding the core ethical teachings of Judaism, which in its way is comparable. do you get met with surprise that an atheist has such a strong ethical and moral sense?

Hemant: All the time. At least, I get asked that question a lot. No matter what answer I give, though, it's never enough for some people.

Deb: In your travels and when you do your talks, do people sometimes come to you expressing doubts in their faith and find encouragement to pursue their own path through your example?

Hemant: Yes. It's a thrill knowing people are ok with having doubts about their faith, only because they were always told doubt was bad. Most of these people, I assume, are not going to become atheists. I don't mind that. They're coming from an uber-Christian background, and it's a very tough leap to become an atheist from there. However, the fact that they are looking up information on their own, reading what "the other side" has to say, and not simply accepting what they are told in church is a giant leap forward. I wish more religious people would explore their faith's beliefs that seriously!

Deb: As my article is for the Capital District Humanist Society humanist newsletter, my final question is this. Do you consider yourself to be a secular humanist? Or had you never thought about it?

Hemant: Sure, I would consider myself a Secular Humanist. I would also consider myself a Bright, a Freethinker, a "regular" Humanist, etc. I grew attached to the word "atheist" when I first found out what I was, though. So if someone asks me what I am, I normally respond with "atheist" instead of anything else.



Book Review by Alex Kasman

"A Certain Ambiguity: A Mathematical Novel" by Gaurav Suri and Hartosh Singh Bal Princeton University Press 2007

In this novel, a young Indian named Ravi attends Stanford to fulfill his parents' dream of his future successful career in finance, but instead is tempted to become a mathematician like his beloved, deceased grandfather.

In the preface, the authors say "Our principle purpose in writing *A Certain Ambiguity* is to show the reader that mathematics is beautiful." They really do a marvelous job of it. The story is carefully constructed to keep the reader interested in the mathematical developments and emotionally involved in the math as well.

But, there is another side to this story that is not hinted at in the title or the summary I have given so far. Another major theme of the book is the conflict between atheist and theistic worldviews. Early on in the novel, Ravi learns that his grandfather had been arrested and imprisoned in New Jersey in 1919 on charges of blasphemy. For the remainder of the book, Ravi uses newspapers and official transcripts to better understand what happened to his grandfather, and it is the parallels between those historical events and the math that he is learning at Stanford which are the primary source of tension.

The authors assure us that the blasphemy law that Sahni, the grandfather, has been accused of violating is an actual part of the New Jersey constitution. Sahni is jailed for violating the law when he insults Christianity and all religions. Later, the judge whose job it is to decide whether to proceed with a trial visits him in his cell and learns that Sahni considers himself to be an atheist. He tells the judge one interesting story from his childhood in which he "debunks" an apparent miracle that occurred in his neighborhood. However, since the fraud involved notions of multiple gods and a girl's head atop a snake's body, the judge viewed this as mere superstition and not a "real religion" like his own Christian faith. As they discuss further, however, it becomes clear that mathematics is an important component of Sahni's non-religiousness.

Sahni apparently is completely certain in his conviction that mathematics holds the only key to complete truth: rigorous proof and the axiomatic method. He demonstrates this for the judge using Euclid's axiomatic geometry: five basic and

"unquestionable" initial assumptions from which all of the other facts of (Euclidean) geometry can be derived. This, he suggests, should be the method used in all human thought.

Together, they try to see what the implications are for religion. However, Sahni and the judge have trouble agreeing upon what is and what is not a reasonable axiom to begin with in the realm of religion. In particular, although the judge believes "Anything that exists must have had a creator" to be a reasonable axiom, Sahni disagrees.

What happens next should not be a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of mathematics: the judge confronts Sahni with the idea of non-Euclidean geometries, those geometries that begin with different initial axioms and derive different conclusions than Euclid's original five. For instance, unlike Euclidean triangles, triangles in other sorts of spaces need not have angles adding up to 180 degrees. Not only are such strange geometries possible in mathematics, but experiments conducted at about the time that Sahni was jailed confirmed Albert Einstein's predictions that the universe we live in is non-Euclidean.

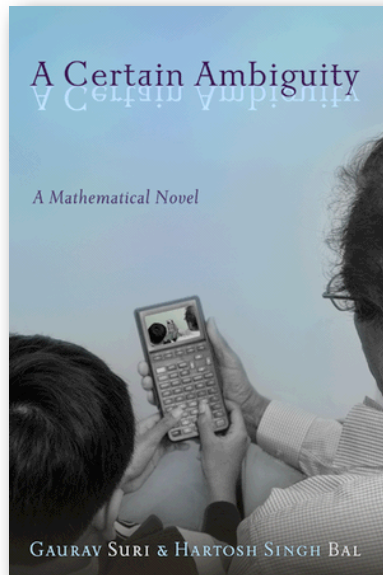
This comes as a tremendous shock to Sahni, whose "faith" in the certainty of mathematics is shaken. It also causes the judge to question his own "axioms":

"That night, I let myself see the world as an atheist must: a desolate planet occupied by people who had abandoned themselves to amoral meaninglessness."

In the end, the judge and the mathematician each seem to reach the same conclusion, that one cannot be certain of anything.

In some ways, this book may help some previously unsympathetic readers to understand atheism. For instance, the character of Sahni is quite likable and intelligent. Moreover, some Christian readers may find it easier to read about a Hindu becoming an atheist because they will not feel as defensive.

On the other hand, I would hate for anyone to believe that the judge's description of a "desolate planet" is what it feels like to be an atheist. More importantly, I disagree with the book's apparent suggestion that axioms have to be taken on faith and are therefore each as good as any other. The Euclidean/non-Euclidean example that it discusses in such depth seems to disagree with this moral since Eddington's experiments provide an empirical guide forcing us to select the latter over the former in describing the real world. In other words, I think the moral ought to be that we should always question our axioms and compare them with the world we see around us. It was exactly such a process that led me to become an atheist!



Event Calls for A Day without God

Excerpted from an article by RUTH N. GELLER HumanistNetworkNews.org Oct. 17, 2007

While The End of Faith author Sam Harris may eschew the word "atheist," at least recently, there are just as many individuals who are rushing to claim that identification. Not just claim it, but to announce it to their families, friends, coworkers and the world. Some will even go so far to wear a scarlet "A" on their shirts. Or one that says "God-free" and "God-less."

Richard Dawkins, celebrated atheist spokesperson and author, created the OUT campaign, which urges atheists to joyfully fling open the doors of their philosophical closets and "come out." One way he suggests to do this is to wear T-shirts with the A. Rainbow flags and bumper stickers signify gay pride and let the heterosexual majority know that gays are "everywhere." Similarly, wearing an atheistic "brand" signifies pride in identity and will raise consciousness among the larger theist community that non-theists are, in fact, everywhere, according to Dawkins' reasoning.

Along the same vein, Prof. Lydia Hartunian has created "The Great American God-Out," which will be celebrated for the first time on Nov. 15, the same day as "The Great American Smokeout", an annual event in which people are encouraged to quit smoking, even if just for one day. "People want to see this movement as fun," said Hartunian, a professor of humanities and philosophy at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and the author of *Godless: A Female Face for Atheism*. She sees the day as a 24-hour respite from religion; however, most people that will choose to participate in such an event will have atheist beliefs that are much more long-lasting. The purpose of the event is to live as if there is no God, at least for one day. It seeks to raise awareness of non-theism and acknowledge that morality, ethics and goodness can exist outside of a religious framework. Another goal is to draw attention to and advocate for a clear separation of church and state. Hartunian wants to bring a "new face" to atheism. And part of her humanistic philosophy is to advocate joy and fun.

The OUT Campaign

"...a major part of our consciousness-raising effort should be aimed, not at converting the religious but at encouraging the non-religious to admit it – to themselves, to their families, and to the world."

-Richard Dawkins

For more information see <http://outcampaign.org/>

But behind the call to change our name is always the desire for respectability by the Atheists. Atheists want the approval of others and so they try to hide who they are and the face they present to the world is one of shame and fear. When you act like you are ashamed of who you are, people will treat you like you should be. It is not the answer.

Ellen Johnson
President, American Atheists

For more of this response to Sam Harris's AAI speech see <http://humaniststudies.org/>

Hartunian's students mostly come from rural, close knit Christian communities. She delights in exposing them to new ideas, including the concept that morality and religion are independent of each other. She sees more students who are questioning religion these days. Some are afraid, she says, about the possible consequences of questioning the existence of God. According to Hartunian, some wonder how their life would have any meaning without a higher power. "A link on her website brings visitors to a "thought game" that asks players to pretend that there is no God for one day. It then asks players to examine whether their lives would be different in any way. Hartunian has used the game with some of her classes.

She has recently formed Iowa Atheists Alliance, a nonprofit, which is sponsoring a launch party for "The Great American God-Out" at the Metro, a New York City club/restaurant. Prof. Michael Shermer, founding publisher of the *Skeptic Magazine*, will speak as the guest of honor. Shermer told Humanist Network News that he agreed to speak at the launch party for "The Great American God-out" because it was a "fun idea." His topic: "On Science and Religion and Atheism". He thinks that the consciousness-raising factor inherent in the event will help make it "OK for non-theists "to stand up and believe," so to speak. So far, about 120 tickets for the "God-Out" party in NYC have been purchased. According to Hartunian, there is room for up to 400 party-goers. To make a reservation, visit her website at: "The Great American God-Out,"

Ruth N. Geller is the editor of Humanist Network News, the weekly e-zine of the Institute for Humanist Studies.

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SHL Calendar

SHL Movie Club

Contact Sue Edward bflosue@earthlink.net to join SHL members at a movie and discussion over dinner, first weekend of the month.

SHL Monthly Meeting:

November 18, 2007 / 4:00 PM Gage Hall
Rick Visconti speaking on stem cell research.

SHL Book Discussion Group

November 25, 2007 4:00 PM West Ashley
Barnes and Noble. *I Sold My Soul on EBay*
(facilitated by Larry Carter Center)

Join the SHL:

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of free-thinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the Charleston, SC area. The SHL is affiliated with American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Atheist Alliance International, Council for Secular Humanism, and the SC Progressive Network.

Annual tax-exempt membership fees are \$24 (individual) or \$36 (couple or family); additional donations are always welcome. Members receive this newsletter and can participate in activities planned for the Lowcountry. For more information consult our Webpage at:

<http://lowcountry.humanists.net>

Contribute

Please contact the editors with any questions or comments about this publication. Contributions of short articles, news items, letters-to-the-editor or other information of interest to SHL members are always appreciated. Write to us at newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.