



“...his stories are permeated with gritty authenticity and humor. Miller's words will resonate with any believer who has ever grappled with the paradoxes of faith.”

–Christianity Today

“Miller is enjoyably clever, and his story is telling and beautiful, even poignant.”

–Publishers Weekly

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Blue Like Jazz:
Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality
by Donald Miller
Thomas Nelson Publishers
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Not Enough Christian Spirituality in Today's Christianity, Says New Book

Like many of his peers, author Donald Miller, 31, finds the message of Jesus personally and culturally relevant, but is troubled by the way Christianity is practiced today. Finding no freedom or joy in institutional, politicized religion, Miller tells in his new book,

Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality (Thomas Nelson, \$13.99, July 2003), how he came to “throw out Christianity and embrace Christian spirituality.” Miller was disillusioned by his encounters with churches in which love and community were given conditionally. His search for the essence of Christian spirituality is informed by his life in the highly secular community of Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Working with a small campus ministry at Reed—once ranked the school where “students are most likely to ignore God” by the Princeton Review—Miller learns that authentic Christian practice does not mean the proselytizing he finds distasteful. Rather, it means “loving people just to love them, not to get them to come to church.”

Miller's “nonreligious thoughts” grow out of his own grappling with questions of life and faith; his intellectual curiosity and skepticism; art, literature, film and pop culture. He explores sin, guilt, doubt, loneliness, romantic relationships, and the importance of community. Cartoons featuring “Sexy Carrots” and “Don the Astronaut” illustrate his reflections on redemption and isolation. He also looks at:

- how to go to church without getting angry;
- how he resigned himself to the fact that God doesn't make sense;
- the narcotic power of the self and the desire for possessions;
- the tyranny of “cool” and the problem of Christian belief being unfashionable;
- how the gospel fulfills the human yearning for the elements of story:

setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.

Much of what Miller concludes about his faith is thanks to his unconventional friends, such as a group of hippies he lived with in the woods one summer and from whom he learned about community; “Tony the Beat Poet” who he confers with at the Horse Brass Pub; “Andrew the Protester,” a “flaming liberal” who teaches him about what it means to live your beliefs; Laura, a brilliant atheist who feels pursued by God; and Penny, who helps him see that Christian spirituality is both revolutionary and a livable proposition.

Blue Like Jazz is an extended, improvisational riff on life, faith and meaning. Jazz is an apt metaphor for Christian spirituality, Miller finds. “I used to not like jazz music because jazz music doesn’t resolve....I used to not like God because God didn’t resolve,” he says. The jazz metaphor reveals how artistically the precepts of the gospel enrich and explain the human struggle: “The first generation out of slavery invented jazz music. It is a music birthed out of freedom. And that is the closest thing I know to Christian spirituality. A music birthed out of freedom. Everybody sings their song the way they feel it, everybody closes their eyes and lifts up their hands.”

About the Author

Don Miller, 31, is a writer, campus ministry leader and speaker. He is the author of Prayer and the Art of Volkswagen Maintenance, a road-trip narrative about a spiritual quest. He has written for several magazines including New Man, Youthwalk, and Faith M.D. He lives in Portland, OR.

Visit www.bluelikejazz.com

Donald Miller Riffs on Christian Spirituality adapted from Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality (Thomas Nelson, \$13.99, July 2003)

Quotes from the book:

The goofy thing about Christian faith...is that you believe it and don’t believe at the same time. It isn’t unlike having an imaginary friend. I believe in Jesus; I believe he is the Son of God, but every time I sit down to explain this to somebody I feel like a palm reader, like somebody who works at a circus or a kid who is always making things up or somebody at a Star Trek convention who hasn’t figured out the show isn’t real. Until one of my friend becomes a Christian, which happens about every ten years because I am such a sheep about sharing my faith, the experience is euphoric. I see in their eyes the trueness of the story.”

The greatest trick of the devil...is not to get us into some sort of evil but rather have us wasting time. This is why the devil tries so hard to get Christians to be religious. If he can sink a man's mind into habit, he will prevent his heart from engaging God."

Politicizing the Gospel...

I felt so far from my upbringing, from my narrow former self, the me who was taught the Republicans give a crap about the cause of Christ. I felt a long way from the pre-me, the pawn-Christian who was a Republican because my family was Republican, not because I had prayed and asked God to enlighten me about issues concerning the entire world, not just America.... I didn't think that Jesus agreed with a lot of the policies of the Republican Party, or for that matter, the Democratic party. Jesus was a religious figure, not a political figure.

Everybody wants to be fancy and new. Nobody wants to be themselves. I mean, maybe people want to be themselves, but they want to be different, with different clothes or shorter hair or less fat. If there was a guy who just liked being himself and didn't want to be anybody else, that guy would be the most different guy in the world and everybody would want to be him."

The magical proposition of the gospel...

once free from the clasps of fairy tale, was very adult to me, very gritty like something from Hemingway or Steinbeck, like something with copious amounts of sex and blood. Christian spirituality was not a children's story. It wasn't cute or neat. It was mystical and odd and clean, and it was reaching into dirty. There was wonder in it and enchantment.

There is this undercurrent in society that says some people are cool... and some people aren't. And it is very, very important that we are cool. So, when we find somebody who is cool on TV or radio, we associate ourselves with this person to feel valid ourselves. And the problem I have with this is that we rarely know what the person believes whom we are associating ourselves with. There is less value in what people believe, what they stand for—it only matters that they are cool.

"God bless you" — what does that mean? I've been saying that stuff all my life, but what does that mean? I started thinking about all the crap I say. All the cliches, all the parroted slogans. I have become an infomercial for God.

The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is that life is a story about me. Living in community made me realize I was addicted to myself. All I thought about was myself. The only thing I really cared about was myself. I had very little concept of love, altruism, sacrifice. I discovered that my mind is like a radio that picks up only one station, the one that plays me: K-DON, all Don, all the time.

Too much of our time is spent trying to chart God on a grid...

and too little is spent allowing our hearts to feel awe. By reducing Christian spirituality to formula, we deprive our hearts of wonder. When I think about the complexity of the trinity, the three in one God, my mind cannot understand, but my heart feels wonder in abundant satisfaction. It is as though my heart, in the midst of euphoria, is saying to my mind, "There are things you cannot understand, and you must learn to live with this. Not only must you learn to live with this, you must learn to enjoy this."

Every year or so I start pondering at how silly the whole God thing is. Every Christian knows they will deal with doubt. But when it comes, it seems so very real and frightening. I felt as if believing in God was no more rational than believing in an imaginary friend.

I had to tell my heart to love the people at the churches I used to go to, the people who were different from me. This was entirely freeing because when I told my heart to do this, my heart did it, and now I think very fondly of those wacko Republican fundamentalists, and I know that they love me too, and I know that we will all eat together, we will break bread together, and we will love each other so purely it will hurt because we are a family in Christ.

**Suggested Questions for Donald Miller
author of *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian
Spirituality***

(Thomas Nelson Publishers)

1. What does jazz have to do with Christian spirituality?
2. Why do you differentiate between Christianity and Christian spirituality?
3. You are involved in campus ministry on one of the most secular college campuses in the country. What has it taught you about Christian faith?
4. How can religion prevent us from truly experiencing God?
5. What did you learn about yourself, and your faith, by living in a house with four other guys?
6. Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat? Or is he a member of the Green Party, like you?
7. You write candidly about your own self-absorption. How can Christian spirituality help people get past their naturally narcissistic tendencies?
8. How did penguins help you understand how faith works?

9. For many new Christians, the struggle with doubt, sin and guilt after the exuberance of the early "honeymoon phase" wears off is difficult. How did you cope with it?
10. Why do human hearts and minds respond to the specific formula of story, and how does that reflect the gospel story?
11. What did you learn from the hippies you've known?
12. How is believing in God like falling in love?
13. Why do so many Americans, especially young adults, put so much stock in pop icons?
14. Why is it so difficult to believe in something, and to live by that belief?
15. When were you finally able to begin sharing your faith with others?
16. Why do you think so many people find it hard to accept the gift of God's grace?
17. What is the most important prayer you pray for all your friends?

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