â□□Blue like Jazzâ□□ buzz continues

October 13, 2006
Posted: 10/13/06

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Associated Baptist Press

DALLAS (ABP)—Reactions among evangelical Christians to Donald Miller's best-selling book *Blue Like Jazz* are about as diverse as reactions to the idea of postmodern Christianity itself.

Although the book debuted three years ago, its steadily growing popularity has made it a bona fide phenomenon in evangelical circles and spurred debates about the direction of Christianity as a whole.

Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality, Miller's second book, uses the medium of a spiritual memoir to deconstruct and analyze much of what many evangelicals take for granted about the Christian lifestyle.

Miller—who grew up as a Southern Baptist in Texas—uses the book to chart his own spiritual journey alongside Texas Baptists, Oregon hippies, atheists, folk singers, liberal college students and even penguins.

According to Scott Wenig, a Denver pastor, author and seminary professor, it's Miller's honesty about his sometimes-awkward growth toward spiritual

maturity that attracts readers. The "experiential" approach Miller uses resonates with people who need exposure to faith not defined by analytical study or obscure points of theology, he said.

"Academics have the tendency to live out of their heads," Wenig said. The average person, we live out of our hearts. That doesn't mean we're not using our heads, (but when we) happen to experience someone writing (from the heart), what happens is they're touching something in people that most academics don't touch."

For instance, Miller recounts in the book how he often felt he couldn't interact with God—or God's people—freely. Then he read Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*, and his perspective changed.

"When I started writing, I just wanted to end up with something like Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*, because in *Traveling Mercies* it felt like she was free, free to be herself, to tell her story, to just vent, to rant, to speak as if she were talking to a friend," Miller wrote.

That honesty is what has endeared *Blue Like Jazz* to its fans—an antidote to the syrupy facade many people associate with the Christian subculture.

Since the book's release in 2003, it has sold more than 550,000 copies worldwide. Christian groups have tried to tap into that appeal, using the book in outreach efforts like Campus Crusade kits for college students. Wenig often reads from it during his sermons at Aspen Grove Community Church, located in suburban Denver. And seminary students nationwide are devouring Miller's writing.

Some critics, however, wonder whether this literary marriage between a memoir and theology is ideal. Douglas Groothuis, a well-known Christian blogger and professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, wrote in a Feb. 26 blog post that Miller's habit of addressing "titanic issues" with little more than "a smirk and a shrug and a pose" belies the need for solid intellectual

analysis when it comes to practicing Christianity.

“He finds no need to be serious intellectually or to pursue subtleties,” Groothuis wrote on theconstructivecurmudgeon.blogspot.com, adding that Miller’s desire to tell his personal story trumped all else in the book.

“Miller is cavalier and glib about the rational foundations for Christian faith,” Groothuis said in an interview. “This is ironic, given the tremendous renewal of Christian philosophy and apologetics in our day. True spirituality is a rational and biblical faith that tenaciously defends the objective, absolute, and universal truths of Christianity.”

In fact, Groothuis said, it’s important to analyze books like *Blue Like Jazz* not because of what they say, but because of what they indicate about the world. Unfortunately, he said, pop culture is dominated by image, style and glamour rather than character and truth.

“We must ‘attune’ our communication of Christian truth to diverse people but never compromise the truth and virtue of the faith by dumbing it down or making it flippant, as does Miller, to my mind,” he said. “People can handle far more biblical meat than they are given credit for.”

Nonetheless, conservative leaders have publicly deplored Miller’s social activism, occasional use of profanity and alternative style. Miller, who worked in campus ministry at liberal Reed College in Portland, posts links to groups like Greenpeace and the American Civil Liberties Union on the website www.bluelikejazz.com.

Other leaders simply can’t agree with his theology, especially the individualist approach iconoclastic authors like Miller and Lamott take to Christianity. For Groothuis, that doesn’t add up to biblical theology.

“It is all too easy to lob criticisms of the church when you are not part of it, not part of making the church better,” he said. “One must be a critic from

within the church if one is to be a Christian."

But Wenig countered that such fears are what cause "a lot of academics to really struggle" with authors like Miller and Lamott—because academics are paid to deal with the question of truth. Some Christians think that if people begin to "go off the road doctrinally," they'll become heretical and "go to hell," he said.

"Sometimes we're driven by fear because we're afraid that certain things will send people off the deep end," he said. Fortunately, though, Christianity has a "built-in self-correction mechanism" through the dual roles of the Bible and God's grace, Wenig added.

"Eventually, I think most groups in Christianity self-correct," he said. In fact, although Wenig himself disagrees with some parts of *Blue Like Jazz*, he said Miller is orthodox in much of his theology and would put him "clearly within the historic Christian camp."

Miller, for his part, said in a *Relevant* magazine interview that he has not flourished in churches with "consumer-oriented Christianity" and "self-help, formulaic kind of stuff—the moralist and political angles on our faith tradition." Yet he said he loves his Portland, Ore., church, Imago Dei, and believes the worldwide church reflects God's presence.

That dichotomy—between the church universal and local churches—is how Miller differentiates between Christianity and spirituality. According to Wenig, Miller uses the word "Christianity" to mean the combination of Christian thinking with the practice of the church, culture and subculture over the centuries. When Miller talks about spirituality, Wenig said, he means the way of life that Jesus came to teach.

"See, the pressure to be a certain kind of person in the context of the church culture I was living in was intense," Miller said in *Relevant*. "When the pressure was taken off, and I was surrounded by people who would

describe themselves as pagans, there was suddenly no pressure for me to perform or be like anything. They didn't care, and that allowed my faith to grow for real."

That attitude is reflected in Miller's book, which says institutionalized religion can inhibit true spirituality.

Wenig agrees, for the most part. "I wouldn't say it's primarily that, but sometimes (religion) … does get in the way of experiencing what we might call genuine spirituality," he said. "Sometimes structures or institutional aspects … get in the way of really connecting with Jesus. Sometimes even Christian religion is the enemy of the gospel."

Like him nor not, Miller's work continues to attract many evangelical readers—even if they disagree with some of his doctrinal or political stances.

Michael Spencer, campus minister at Oneida Baptist Institute in Oneida, Ky., wrote on his blog, internetmonk.com, that Miller's honesty about "depravity, evangelical nonsense, Christian excuse-making and the truth of the words of Jesus" challenges him.

"I don't know what I was doing reading these books," he wrote. "There were moments in *Blue Like Jazz* that … I would feel like anyone who knew I was reading such a book would laugh at me, like finding out that your pastor reads middle-school romance novels. And then I would come across one of those 'wow' paragraphs. Whatever the price to get to those paragraphs, they are worth the trouble."

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