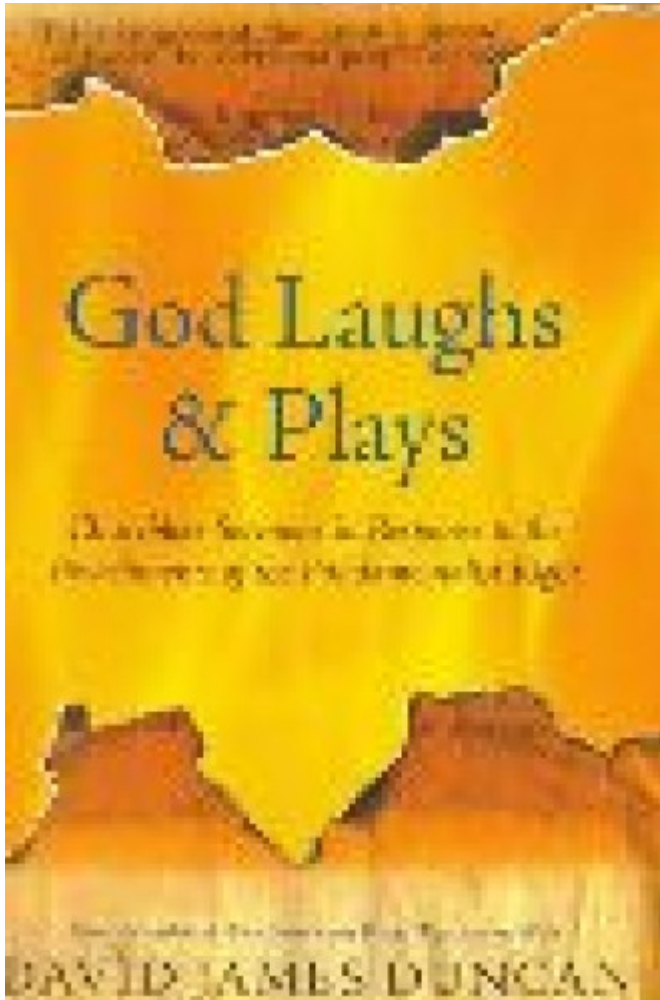


American mystic

By [Brian Doyle](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

In Review



God Laughs and Plays: Churchless Sermons in Response to the Preachments of the Fundamentalist Right

David James Duncan
Triad

Let's cut to the chase here. David Duncan, who is best known for his exuberant novels *The River Why* and *The Brothers K*, is one of the finest writers of spiritually minded essays in these United States. He is a writer of verve and pop and prayer and fury and wit and heart and rage and depth in the class of Cynthia Ozick, Frederick Buechner, Mary Gordon and Annie Dillard. He is hilarious. He is enraged. He is articulate and eloquent and passionate in ways that will make you gape.

He is so deeply absorbed and amazed by the wriggling genius of the Christ that every piece he writes these days is soaked with hope for joy; and he is so angry at the way so very many of us claim the high ground of Christianity, claim to know the mind and workings of God, claim to be the lords and stewards of the gaunt Jew's message and so miss and twist and abuse the crucial message itself that he has committed an entire book's worth of astounding prose adventures on holy creatures, grace under duress, laughter as prayer, the silliness of the word *God* ("worst nickname ever"), the howling lies and sneering cruelties of politicians, and much else to "churchless sermons," as he puts it, "said in boundless, though closeted (Matthew 6:6!), admiration of a Jesus whose life moves me to repudiate much of the preaching being done in his name today."

This is a basic text for anyone who has the slightest interest in the revolutionary and paradoxical words and acts of Yeshua ben Joseph, whose entire message can be distilled to the words *love*, *mercy* and *hope*. Christians of every stripe—and there are some 2 billion of us—should pause from their daily prayers, stop worrying for a moment about the war the murderer Osama bin Laden so wants to foment between Christian West and Islamic East, and poke into Duncan's book, for he is a startling and refreshing voice beyond orthodoxy and religious politics.

In a sense he is more fundamental than any fundamentalist, for *God Laughs and Plays* is relentlessly about the ocean of holiness in which we swim, our suicidal idiocy in fouling that ocean, and the delicious chance, still possible, for us to actually do what we say we wish to do as Christians: celebrate life, feed the hungry, salve the ill, give hope to those in despair, fill our mouths with only truth.

Is the book political? Absolutely, and readers who are comfortable with the rhetorical Christianizing of American politics, the arrogance and bluster (and lies—in recent years there is more war and hunger and poverty, and notably less meekness and humility and apologia, than there has been in this country in many years), should

beware; Duncan is furious at what he views as the cynical use of Christian words and ideas to cover utterly unchristian acts like the fouling of air and water and the starvation of children.

Nor does he have much good to say of organized religion in its more officious phases. Duncan is after the bone of Christianity, in much the same way as other great mystics in our tradition, the angry and prickly, the thorny and eloquent, those who would prick us with sharp words so as to strip away blather and slice away thickets of lies: Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhart, Karl Rahner, Bede Griffiths, William Blake, John of the Cross, Martin Buber, Teresa of Calcutta, Teresa of Ávila, Francis of Assisi, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whoever wrote *The Song of Songs*.

Duncan writes:

I believe that the Cross is inescapable whether you're ensconced in a "fold" or not, and that Norman Maclean was a better theologian than Billy Graham, and that . . . diehard baseball fans are wiser about the object of their adoration than the average diehard bishop is of his. . . . I distrust and reject Christian fundamentalism and televangelism, not because they're all wrong, but because they seem to me to do more harm than good. The chief problem is the arrogance of folks who think that in possessing a book, a dogma, the letter of the Law, they possess the Truth. For me, love is the truth and the expression of love, in any form, is allegiance to Christ. . . . I keep watching, day and night. And listening to, and for, His notes. . . . I believe—based on phallic clouds giving birth to stars, spring stormclouds to snow, summer snowbanks to rivers, and orange orbs to trout; I believe based on punctiform dots melting into vastest spheres, spheres dividing their way back into dots, lives collapsing into ashes and dust, and dust bursting back to life; I believe based on spheric shapes singing, dividing, creating cells, plants, creatures, creating my children, sunflowers, sun, self, universe, by constantly sacrificing all that they are in order to be reconfigured and reborn forever and ever—that when we feel Love's density, see its colors, feel its pulse, it's time to quit reasoning and cry: *My God! Thanks!*

To which any reader interested in the miracle of the moment, the way every speck of this existence is pregnant with holiness, the way we at our best surge and strive

toward peace and mercy and truth rather than cash and cruelty and power, can only say Amen.

Trust me. This is a book that matters. And it will, I bet, lead you toward Duncan's other startling books, and then perhaps headlong into the many voices who feed this most interesting American mystic; and if a few thousand more of us read Meister Eckhart and Desmond Tutu and Annie Dillard and Karl Rahner and Tukaram and John of the Cross, well, maybe the universe lurches forward two inches. Which is the point of us.