

BOOK REVIEW

'Redeemed' by Heather King

A spiritual journey: from alcoholism to Catholicism

By Darcey Steinke, Special to The Los Angeles Times

Redeemed

A Spiritual Misfit Stumbles Toward God, Marginal Sanity, and the Peace That Passes All Understanding

Heather King

Viking: 238 pp., \$24.95

In 1842, the Rev. William Ellery Channing lay dying of typhoid fever in Old Bennington, Vt. Channing, who was a mentor to the transcendentalists, believed that there was more divinity in humankind's interior nature than in any force that impels the outward universe. He encouraged his followers never to despise their own humanity even in its most forbidden forms. On his deathbed, he was flooded with ecstatic visions, but Channing asked his family to help him focus on ordinary things: the faces of his children, the lamp and books beside his bed. For him, it was the only way to "feel the REALITY of the spiritual life."

Heather King's "Redeemed: A Spiritual Misfit Stumbles Toward God, Marginal Sanity, and the Peace That Passes All Understanding" is in this tradition of real-life spirituality. Rather than offering easy epiphanies and candy-coated narratives, King's book is as honest and raw as the model of the spiritual memoir, the "Confessions" of St. Augustine.

King, a hard-drinking alcoholic for 20 years, blacked out and slept around. At 35, the Los Angeles resident went to law school and after passing the bar, found a steady job. Eventually, she grew disgusted with the profession. "I thought I'd been cynical in my former life, squandering my talents," she writes. "[B]ut being a lawyer in L.A.: this shook me to my core."

Thus begins what King calls her "vaguely defined spiritual journey." She visits different churches, coming away mostly disappointed. The Protestant churches seem like "glorified social clubs," while the Unitarian minister can't even bring himself to say "Jesus." (Instead, he refers to him as "the J word.")

It isn't until she attends a noonday Mass at the Catholic church St. Basil's that King is finally stopped cold. "[L]ight shone like honey on the teakwood pews," she remembers, and as she gazes up at Christ, everything in her wants to move toward him. "I saw that like us, he was in pain and he wasn't sure why, whether it would ever end, or what it was for. I saw he'd come to address the deepest mystery of humankind -- the mystery of suffering."

King begins RCIA classes (Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults), and becomes an enthusiastic Catholic. She takes even the most conservative doctrines seriously; she does not use birth control, is no longer profligate and feels guilty about her three abortions.

To witness someone of such emotional dexterity and moral depth struggle is moving and instructive. King is inspired by the Catholic clergy, who have made the ultimate sacrifice -- celibacy. While she remains open-minded about the growth that may be possible in Catholic obedience, she's also honest that the church has "issues" surrounding sex. And yet, she never does explain how, if God is in everything, if divinity flows through the world as evenly as she seems to believe, she can admire the Catholic men and women -- divorced, single, married, gay -- who "if they are indulging, they're refraining from taking the Eucharist."

Most of the chapters in "Redeemed" read like highly engaged sermons chock-full of good theology. King is nonjudgmental, generous and insightful about the spiritual journey, though at times her enthusiasm for Jesus is reminiscent of a groupie's fervent ravings over a rock star. Christ is the "core" of her being, Christ is the "ground of all existence"; if anyone can heal her, it's "the mystical body of Christ." On the outside, her life doesn't look very different from anyone else's, but on the inside, King's flesh "faints" for Christ."

The problem with a Christ-centered faith, however, is that no matter how theologically sound, it's both hard to communicate and, to be frank, a little dull. Christ's perfection flattens him as a literary character and, although it may sound sacrilegious, renders his image almost like that of Marilyn Monroe or Superman: a worn-out cultural icon, empty from overuse. "Whoever should preach Christ," Emerson declared, "must say nothing about him!"

Still, King's conversion is believable and, like all conversions, leads to a reexamination of the past. "Redeemed" is most successful when she writes about her brush with breast cancer, her divorce and her father's death. Just before he dies, King takes an early morning walk near her childhood home along the New Hampshire shoreline. Grief deepens perceptions unburdened by liturgical rhetoric. "Brown seaweed spreads itself out like hair over the barnacled rocks; gulls send up plaintive cries," she writes. "Waves lap in with a tongue of foam and recede, the smooth weathered rocks clattering like bones."

In the end, the reality of the spiritual life that Channing spoke of in the 1840s resides for King in the mystery of language. In one passage, she describes struggling to shape a sentence, and we can feel her joy as the words eventually order themselves. "As sound as a good roof," she describes her spirituality. "As impregnable as a notarized deed. As precious as a kingdom that's been paid for in blood -- and that I own now: free and clear."

All the theological talk in the world is less powerful than the sacred image of King sitting at her desk trying to make meaning, to show the armature of her reality, to

explain for us her own particular way of being alive.

Darcey Steinke's memoir, "Easter Everywhere," is newly out in paperback.

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