

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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**PLAN B:**

***Further Thoughts on Faith.***

By Anne Lamott. Riverhead Books.

320 pp. \$24.95.

When Anne Lamott's previous essay collection, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, came out in 1999, a writing student of mine—a born-again Christian—praised it to the class, noting that Lamott too is born again. I echoed the kudos but added that I wouldn't use "born again" to describe the author. "Just look at the book," the student replied. "It's all there." Theologically, she's right, but I doubt that Lamott, a Bay Area leftist, would ever use the term herself. Its connotations probably give her the willies as much as George W. Bush does (more on him later).

A recovering alcoholic who got sober not long after she found God, Lamott is the parent of a teenage boy. Issues of motherhood and midlife predominate here: how to help her son nurture his spirituality while letting him grow into the (currently church-resistant) person he wants to be, and how to sustain her own faith as the losses pile up—in her body (she's 50), in her personal life (her mother has died of Alzheimer's; her long-deceased father shadows her still), and in the world (her pain over the Iraq War informs many of these essays).

Lamott's greatest strength—besides a way with words that's equal parts preacher, comic, and thought-for-the-day aphorist—is her ability to keep spirituality within a stone's throw of daily life. When her son, Sam, decides at age seven that he wants to meet his father, with whom Lamott has lost contact, she prays for success in locating him amid anxiety over letting him back into her life. Her initial efforts fail. "I decided to practice radical hope, hope in the face of not having a clue," she writes. "I decided that God was not off doing the dishes while Sam sought help: God heard his prayers, and was working on it." Sam's dad ends up returning to their lives in a limited but mostly positive way. "Things are not perfect," she writes, "because life is not TV

and we are real people with scarred, worried hearts. But it's amazing a lot of the time."

Of her difficult mother, Lamott writes, "I know forgiveness is a component of freedom, yet I couldn't, even after she died, grant her amnesty. Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back. You're done. It doesn't necessarily mean you want to have lunch with the person."

She cites non-Christian sources when appropriate: "There's a lovely Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, 'Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?' The rabbi answered, 'Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.'"

Lamott is honest about her weaknesses: anger, self-absorption, fear. At times she whines, usually with the saving grace that she knows it. Still, the worst decision she and her editor made was to start off an otherwise wonderful book with a sniffling rant against the Bush administration. The president also makes cameo appearances in several other essays.

We *know* she can hit that target. It's so much more inspiring to see her struggle to catch the feathery traces of hope floating in the light through her living-room window.

—WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

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**JEWES AND THE  
AMERICAN SOUL:  
*Human Nature in the  
Twentieth Century.***

By Andrew R. Heinze. Princeton Univ. Press. 438 pp. \$29.95

In a brief paragraph early in this study, Andrew R. Heinze disputes scholar Peter Gay's assertion that there is little connection between Sigmund Freud's Jewishness and his "thinking as a psychiatrist." While acknowledging that Gay may be correct with respect to the link between Freud's