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 lefty, 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

JEWS 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 faith and his psychoanalytic theory, Heinze says that "Gay misses the presence of Jewish moral values in the mind of this secular thinker." Because Freud was, until the recent medicalization of psychiatry, the major reference point in America's long-running romance with mental health, a Jewish connection here is critical to Heinze's overarching thesis. That thesis, which Heinze claims has never before been illuminated, can be summarized as follows. Contrary to the popular belief that the American psyche or "soul" has been shaped overwhelmingly by Protestant values, there has been a second dominant influence: the acquired Jewish "ethical gene"—the deeply inbred tradition of Jewish rational moral values, a turning inward to family as a context for emotional fulfillment and outward to community for social action and a sense of relatedness.

Heinze, a professor of American history at the University of San Francisco, where he is also director of the Judaic Studies Program, supports his argument by elaborating on the disproportionate presence of Jews as practitioners and popularizers of psychology. Citing historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's assertion that Jews who had lost their faith sought "secular Jewish surrogates" in such movements as Zionism and socialism, he proposes "psychoanalytic moralism" as an additional surrogate. The Jewish boy who might have grown up to become a rabbi became a shrink instead; the Jewish girl reared to rule her household with a mighty hand morphed, in the worst-case scenario, into Dr. Laura. Heinze traces the careers of influential Jewish "psychological evangelists" and "public moralists"—Freudians and protégés of William James such as Hugo Münsterberg, Joseph Jastrow, Boris Sidis, and Abraham Myerson in the first half of the 20th century, and, in the second half, such humanists as Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow—who, "no less than their colleagues from Protestant backgrounds, . . . wanted to introduce their values into popular thought."

Curiously, Heinze makes a great point of elevating into this pantheon two seemingly minor figures who, he argues not quite convincingly, were far more influential than heretofore recognized: Boston Reform rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, whose inspirational bestseller *Peace of Mind* (1946) endorsed self-acceptance through therapy and spirituality, and who, according to Heinze, was transformed by the media into the first postwar "iconic Jew" (the second was and remains Elie Wiesel); and *$64,000 Question* champion Dr. Joyce Brothers, who evolved into a self-help author and advice-dispensing fixture on TV for more than three decades. Perhaps even more curious, if we accept Heinze's thesis that Jewish values did indeed shape the American psyche, is his failure to take up rigorously the question of whether those values simply permeated the work of Jewish thinkers by virtue of who they were and where they came from, or whether the thinkers consciously applied a Jewish moral perspective. The evidence Heinze musters never proves that they were acting as Jews rather than as, say, humanists or liberals—even in cases when it might appear to have been in their interest to apply a Jewish perspective, as when they spoke out against mob violence and racial bias.

Heinze is especially struck by the relevance to psychology of the Jewish *musar* movement, with its emphasis on ethical conduct acquired through self-discipline and the social values of restraint (repression?) and of overcoming the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination (the id?). Those educated in the *musar* tradition will remember very well the mantra "Work on yourself." This practical approach to psychological needs had its Christian parallels, which Heinze strikingly illustrates by taking us in two directions: back to that most lovable Protestant of all, Benjamin Franklin, whose virtue-by-virtue self-improvement chart (temperance, chastity, etc.) was adapted in the early 19th century for yeshiva students in Poland by Menachem Mendel Lefin; and forward to our own time, to the Christian pragmatism of Alcoholics Anonymous's 12-step program, a strong influence on the work of contemporary Orthodox psychiatrist Abraham Twerski. Heinze usefully delineates the points at which psychological trends intersect with and resemble Jewish sensibilities, but he is less persuasive in arguing that Jewish values actually shaped either the thinking of many of the psychiatrists and psychologists he mentions or, through them, the American "soul."

—Tova Reich

INVENTING SUPERSTITION: From the Hippocratics to the Christians.

By Dale B. Martin. Harvard Univ. Press. 307 pp. $29.95

If you want to slam people's religious beliefs, call their faith a cult, its organizer a cult leader, and its buildings of worship a cult compound. The media are utterly predictable in this regard: "Members of the Idaho-based cult, whipped into a frenzy by their charismatic cult leader, have hunkered down in an isolated compound to await the end times."

The difference between a cult and a religion in the modern world is about a hundred years. The Mormons have made the transition; for decades, hardly anyone has called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints a cult. The Scientologists are about halfway there; the cult moniker is still commonly attached to them, although less often than a few years ago.

In the past, shaking off such pejoratives as *cult* and *superstition* took much longer. Critics talked for several centuries about the cult of Christianity, whose charismatic leader, Jesus of Nazareth, whipped his disciples into a frenzy. Early in the second century C.E., for example, Pliny the Younger characterized Christianity as a "contagious superstition." Christian scholars responded by dismissing Greek and Roman religions as superstitions.

Dale B. Martin, a professor of religious studies at Yale University, traces eight centuries of these bitter wars of the words, from classical Greece to the Christianized Roman Empire. "'Superstition' was a category invented by ancient intellectuals, especially those we call philosophers," he observes. "They came to believe that traditional notions about nature and divine beings could not be true, and they criticized all sorts of beliefs and practices that their contemporaries simply assumed were legitimate."

The critiques began long before Christianity. Around the fifth century B.C., Greek philosophers derided beliefs that gods are nothing more than extensions of their human charges, or that they harm people through disease and supernatural disasters—god as superhero or Dr. Evil. Whatever a god is, the ancient philosophers argued, it must be wholly different from us. But as Martin points out in this sound, skeptical debunking of the work of earlier historians, these critiques didn't stem from empiricism, rationalism, or new evidence. Rather, the philosophers "took these new notions to be true because they felt that they ought to be true."

Christianity's response to such critiques in its own time was equally nonempirical and nonrational. Among the social, economic, and political variables that contributed to the victory of Christianity over its pagan competitors in the Roman world, Martin identifies one of particular interest: daimons (demons, in modern spelling). Whereas classical philosophy maintained that "evil daimons did not exist," he says, Christianity "offered an antidote more powerful than the poison, a drug stronger than the disease: healing and exorcism in the name of Jesus. . . . In its demonology, Christianity tapped into an assumed reality and met a need in a way classical philosophy had failed to do."

Gradually, Martin writes, "'Christianity the superstition' was replaced by 'Christianity the only true philosophy.'" With the endorsement of the new religion by the Roman emperor Constantine early in the fourth century C.E., the contest was settled. It became "'superstitious' (in the increasingly dominant discourse of Christianity) to worship the 'pagan' gods."

Martin's solidly researched and clearly written history is an important contribution to our understanding of the context and meaning of superstition, particularly in its application to religious beliefs, and a useful reminder that linguistic insults between religious and philosophical camps are an ancient tradition indeed.

—Michael Shermer