

MARC DE KESEL

A DROP OF WATER IN THE SEA

Reflections on Michel de Certeau's 'Christian' Everyday Life Spirituality¹

SUMMARY

Does spirituality replace the bygone divine foundation of life and reality? Does it provide sense in a world where sense has lost its self-evidence? This is a very broad definition of spirituality and it applies to many of its manifestations. Yet, what if it is just the other way round? What if spirituality is not an attempt to found a new kind of sense in our modern, inherently senseless world, but is, on the contrary, an acknowledgment of that loss of sense, as well as a way to lose oneself in the world become senseless? What if this is the real meaning of what a long Christian tradition defines as becoming 'a drop of water in the ocean'? And what if Christianity as such, in order to be faithful to its own mission, has to disappear 'as a drop of water in the sea'?

This is the basic question underlying Michel de Certeau reflection on Christianity. It is as if Christianity, to remain faithful to its 'spirituality', has to disappear into a kind of 'everyday life spirituality', in which the references to its Christian origin are imperceptible. This article examines in detail one of Certeau's important texts on Christianity and concludes that the question remains unresolved. To save the 'drop of water' from disappearing in the 'sea', to prevent the 'sea' from becoming a devouring monster, a reference to the Christian inheritance will be indispensable for any of our modern forms of spirituality. Thus the thesis defended in this essay. That thesis has important repercussions on how to define the nature of modern 'spirituality'.

¹ A part of this article goes back to a lecture given at the conference, 'Ästhetik des Körpers oder Taktiken des Alltäglichen: Kulturphilosophie und Diskursanalyse bei Michel Foucault und Michel de Certeau', Universität Hildesheim 29-30 April 2011.

1. SPIRITUALITY AS A MODERN SYMPTOM

With a clear religious connotation but exceeding all real forms of religion, spirituality is a vague and often somewhat confusing term. Yet, especially in its broadness and vagueness, spirituality is a typically modern phenomenon, if not to say one of modernity's symptoms. Before modernity, any reference to 'spirit' was understood within the borderlines of religion and, more precisely, Christian religion. Was God not three persons in one, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? And was a reference to that Spirit not principally the same as a reference to the other divine persons? The Spirit was the 'social' reality of God's incarnation in His Son. According to the story in the Acts, it was the Spirit who founded the community of the faithful and made the life shared among Christians to be the real '*topos*' of God's incarnation. That Spirit not only made people share their life, it made them feel part of the entire created universe.

So, medieval man felt *his* spirit to be an incarnation of *the* Spirit, i.e. of the mutual relationality that holds both the Trinitarian God and his Creation together. His relation to the world was part of that very same world, because his human spirit shared the Holy Spirit that holds the world together and maintains contact with its origin: the creative God and his incarnated Son. One knew himself to be a drop of water in the sea of Creation. Yet, that sea made him not disappear. On the contrary, that sea was the Spirit, allowing the individual to have a relation with both the sea and all of the human drops gathered in it.

That Spirit broke as modernity came into being. What is generally called 'the death of God' is not so much his dying (immortals do not die that fast), but his withdrawal from the natural world, and once the threefold God was locked up in heaven, the Spirit got out of work (became unemployed). Man no longer supposed himself to be supported by a divine Spirit that he shared with everyone else and with the entire universe. Concerning his relation to reality, man became his own support, his own 'subject'. This is, in a nutshell, the Cartesian moment that founds modernity.

Spirituality is a modern term naming a variety of things, but among them, it definitely names also the nostalgia as well as the survival of the Holy Spirit. In spirituality, modern man is looking for a 'support' or 'subjectum' that is broader than the Cartesian one he is supposed to have. He suspects both the pretension and the narrowness of that Cartesian support. He feels that the support of his life does not coincide with the narrowness of an all too self-assured 'self': that is why he looks for experiences that bring him out of his 'self', or at least deconstruct his ego in order to feel again what it is to share life with life *as such*, to feel the primacy of life or of that 'other' that both transcends and holds him at the same time. In medieval times, 'spirituality' did the same, but it was not called by that name. It was simply named 'religion'. 'Spirituality' became a proper concept only after the 'death of the Spirit'.

So, does spirituality replace the bygone divine foundation of life and reality? Does it provide sense in a world where sense has lost its self-evidence? This is a

wide-spread (very broad) definition of spirituality and it goes for (applies to) many of its manifestations. Yet, what if it is just the other way round? What if spirituality is not an attempt to found a new kind of sense in our modern, inherently senseless world, but on the contrary an acknowledgment of that loss of sense, as well as a way to lose oneself in the world become senseless? What if this is the real meaning of what a long Christian tradition defines as becoming ‘a drop of water in the ocean’? And what if Christianity as such, in order to be faithful to its own mission, has to disappear ‘like a drop of water in the sea’?

This is the basic question underlying Michel de Certeau’s reflection on Christianity. As if Christianity, to remain faithful to its ‘spirituality’, has to disappear in a kind of ‘everyday life spirituality’ (spirituality of everyday life), in which the references to the Christian origin are imperceptible. In what follows, I examine Certeau’s reflection in detail (2-3) to arrive at the conclusion that the question remains unresolved (4-5). To save the ‘drop of water’ from disappearing in the ‘sea’, to prevent the ‘sea’ from becoming a devouring monster, a reference to the Christian inheritance will be indispensable for any of our modern forms of spirituality. This, at least, is the thesis I try to defend (6). A last section draws some conclusions concerning the nature of modern ‘spirituality’ (7).

2. MICHEL DE CERTEAU ON CHRISTIANITY

On May 22, 1973, a radio discussion was broadcasted between Michel de Certeau, known then as a Jesuit authority in the field of Christian mystics and Jean-Marie Domenach, the editor of the French journal *Esprit*. ‘Christianity, a new mythology?’: thus the title of the radio program.² Yet, none of the speakers really answered the question. Instead, they could not stop evoking the crisis Christianity was in, not so much in order to find a way out, as to look, in this very crisis, for Christianity’s essence. This certainly goes for Certeau’s contribution. It is in the ‘éclatement’ – in the breaking, the disintegration – of the Christian religion that Certeau tries to discover the ‘éclat’ – the brilliance – of its very core. That core is not to be found in its doctrinal discourse nor in that of its ‘mythology’. It is to be found in the moments its discourses break, where they lose control or get interrupted or haunted by something which is not discursive at all; which, with regard to discourse, is marked by radical alterity or difference.

If, in what follows, I focus on Michel de Certeau’s theory of religion – or, more exactly, of Christianity – as elaborated in his essay accompanying the publication of this radio discussion, it is first of all to sketch the dependence of that theory on the reigning discourse theories of that time in Paris, Michel Foucault’s among others. Yet to grasp the specific problem of Certeau’s religion theory, a reference to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the subject will be as enlightening as unavoidable. All this will

² ‘Le Christianisme, une nouvelle mythologie?’, Michel de Certeau & Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le christianisme éclaté*, Paris: Seuil, 1974, 7. Page numbers in the text all refer to this edition.

raise the question whether Certeau's theory of religion is not dependent on the discourse theories of his time, to such an extent that Christianity *as such* is confused with this theory. If Christianity is about the experience of alterity as implied by modern discourse theories, if it is in the modern discourse 'as a drop of water in the sea', how then can Christianity keep a proper identity? If Christianity is not the 'new mythology' but something undistinguishably disappearing in modernity's new mythologies, does this, too, not imply a proper mythology? Otherwise, how could it do what it has to do?

To the written report of the 1973 radio discussion with Domenach, Michel de Certeau adds an essay entitled: 'Comme une goutte d'eau dans la mer' ('Like a Drop in the Ocean').³ This dense and at times somewhat abstruse and cryptic essay – which I will subject to a kind of 'close-reading' – does not summarize the points made in the radio program, neither does it elaborate any of the issues raised. In a way, here, Certeau's sole concern is the act itself of writing down the discussion in a proper essay or, more generally put, it is the passage from the oral discussion to the written report. The only thing he wants to make clear is that, by reaching for his pen, writing down what is said and adding to it a proper essay, he has no desire to deny, repress or change what occurred in the oral happening.

In passing from the spoken to the written word, I am not tempting to 'reinforce' the place which I was speaking from, amass proofs, or block up the openings which an evening's talk may have left here. I would not want the written version to call to order – or forget – the 'slips' which arise in discussion, all that escapes one's control in spoken language, as though it were necessary to subject the chance advent of desire, which has its source in the other, to the legality of writing.⁴

Writing is able to wipe out – to forget or to repress – the hesitations, misunderstandings, slips of the tongue or whatever escapes the conscious intentions of the speaking subject. It fixes both the uttered meanings and the place from where they are uttered; what one is saying and the locus from where this is said. This is why writing rather blocks the truth than giving access to it, thus one of Certeau's main intuitions. According to him, truth is to be expected from what, in the very act

³ This is, more precisely, the title of the version that appeared in *Le christianisme éclaté*. Thanks to Luce Giard, we have access to the original, much longer version, which she included in the posthumous collection from 1987, *La faiblesse de croire*, under the title: 'Du corps à l'écriture: Un transit chrétien'; see Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Ed. Luce Giard), Paris: Seuil, 1987, 267-305; the English translation (by Saskia Brown) – with the title 'The Weakness of Believing. From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit' – appeared in: Graham Ward (ed.), *The Certeau Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 214-243. For the publication of the radio discussion, Certeau was asked to shorten this, in order to keep the balance with Domenach's essay. Since it develops systematically (although sometimes cryptically as well) the main points of Certeau's theory on Christianity, I focus in my comment on this 'official' version. For a 'first' comment on this text as well as for its biographical context, see François Dosse, *Le marcheur blessé*, Paris: Les Éditions de la Découverte, 203-206.

⁴ Ward, *The Certeau Reader*, 214; Certeau & Domenach, *Le christianisme éclaté*, 79; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 267.

of saying, escapes what is said and resists becoming a written report; not from what is held together by the discourse of an assured subject, but from what, in the very act of speaking, escapes the grip of the subject and the lines of his discourse. Truth is a matter of allowing a “desire whose principle is the other” to break into a settled discourse.⁵ Truth is ‘other’, ‘different’, which is why writing *as such* represses or denies it. Fixing the unfixable, it reduces the ungraspable and unknowable to the firm grip of knowledge.⁶

However, the remedy against writing’s faults is in its own hands. Writing itself is able to give the ‘desire of the other’ a certain voice. It can *convert* itself and allow – instead of hiding – otherness and (thus) truth. This is the explicit intention of Certeau’s essay. In his act of writing, he wants to give room to the hesitations, misunderstandings, slips of the tongue and other deficiencies of the broadcasted *oral* discussion. These deficiencies should be both the starting point and the main concern of his written essay.

On the contrary, these glimpses allow writing to restart again. A certain work therefore introduces into established systems the mobility which the spoken world already betrays. It traces on our maps the longer voyages generated by the momentary ‘sallies’ of conversations. Instead of moving from the written to the spoken, from an orthodoxy to its verbal illustration (...) the process starts from the mobility of speech, porous and tendered, more easily altered than writing by what is still only half expressed within it, and proceeds to produce a language which is reorganized by these first avowals, thus producing a shift in the ranks of knowledge and reason⁷

Reintroducing in writing the slippery movements that are inherent to oral speaking: this is what Certeau intends to offer in his essay accompanying the discussion report. He gives a followed path deliberately every chance to deviate, as is the case in so many 16th and 17th century travel stories in which the presence and ‘desire of the other’ still visibly disorients the point from where the traveler/author writes his report.⁸ In his comments on the oral radio discussion about Christianity, Certeau

⁵ In a later essay he writes about this desire of the other and describing the mentality of 16th and 17th century mysticism: ‘Comment le désir en quête d’un *tu* traversera-t-il un langage qui le trompe en apportant au destinataire un autre message ou en substituant l’énoncé d’une idée à l’énonciation même d’un *je*’ (Michel de Certeau, ‘L’énonciation mystique’, in : *Recherches des Sciences Religieuses* 64 (1976) no.2, pp. 183-215, p. 196-197.

⁶ For Certeau’s concept of ‘writing’ (‘écriture’), see for instance: Philippe Carrard, ‘History as a kind of writing: Michel de Certeau and the poetics of historiography’, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (2001) no.2, 465-482; Ben Highmore, *Michel de Certeau: Analyzing culture*, London-New York: Continuum, 2006 (especially chapter 2).

⁷ *The Certeau Reader*, 214; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 79-80; *La faiblesse de croire*, 267.

⁸ See for instance Certeau’s essay on Jean de Léry’s 1578 book *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil* (‘Ethno-graphie: L’oralité, ou l’espace de l’autre’, in: *L’écriture de l’histoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, 215-248) or his essay on Jean-François Lafitau, *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* from 1724 (‘Histoire et anthropologie chez Lafitau’, in: *Le lieu de l’autre: Histoire religieuse et mystique* (ed. Luce Giard), Paris: Gallimard & Seuil, 2005, 89-111).

opts for this kind of disorientation and therefore follows the unusual way. Instead of going from Christianity's written doctrine to its oral illustration, he turns the doctrine back to its oral origin – 'oral' in the sense of a non-fixed, or not fully known realm of potentialities, filled with 'half-words' still able to tell things that are different to what was said in the doctrine appropriating that origin, 'half-words' which therefore are able to modify, change or alter the discourse of the reigning doctrine, to bring about 'displacements' in its knowledge and its reason.

3. CHRISTIANITY'S 'RUPTURE INSTAURATRICE'

What, however, do these remarks about the relation between writing and speaking, between the written and the spoken, say about Christianity? Certeau's answer is uncannily simple. What is said in these remarks *is* the core of Christianity. Although dense, the passage that follows the one just quoted cannot be misunderstood:

Here, this process bears on Christianity: in fact, on the relation between a question of truth and my own position. Any analysis of this problem consequently puts in question the place from which I discuss it. There can be no textual work [travail de texte] until the postulates of the remarks I make on Christianity are unearthed from their silent opacity. It is the relation between these remarks and their site of production which is the real subject here.⁹

The procedure of returning fixed writing back upon unfixed speaking expresses the core of 16th and 17th century Christian mysticism. Certeau had elaborated this insight in the lion's share of his publications during the two decades preceding the radio discussion with Domenach.¹⁰ Already in pre- and early modernity, God's voice was no longer heard as speaking through his Creature, so Certeau had made clear. Not without adding, however, that in the mystical writings of that time, this kind of voice was still present, albeit in a mute way. As if in those texts, God's silence itself was given voice. And as if, for God, a speaking silence was a more adequate way to express himself than all that was written down in the doctrine of his religion and his theology.¹¹

Here, in his essay commenting on the radio talk he had with Domenach, he makes use of this thesis, but not to typify early modern mysticism but Christianity as such. The essence of Christian religion, so Certeau argues, is not to be found in what can be said *about* it ('*on* Christianity', '*sur* le christianisme'), but in the *way* this is

⁹ *The Certeau Reader*, 214-215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80; *La faiblesse de croire*, 267-268.

¹⁰ See, among other publications, Jean-Joseph Surin, *Guide spirituel* (ed. Michel de Certeau), Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1963; Jean-Joseph Surin, *Correspondance* (ed. Michel de Certeau ; introd. Julien Green), Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1966; several 'early' essays in the posthumous Michel de Certeau, *Le lieu de l'autre: Histoire religieuse et mystique*.

¹¹ For a more general explanation of Certeau's concept of the 'voice', see for instance Highmore, *Analyzing culture*, 74ff.

said or, more precisely, in the way it relates to the oral act of its saying.¹² It is to be found in the primacy of the saying over the said. It is not a matter of evoking what is in the doctrine's texts, but of letting these texts work ('*un travail du texte*'). It is a matter of digging out the text's concealed postulates, i.e. to re-find the level of its *production*, of the way an unfixed stream of thoughts has been set down in a fixed, *written* discourse. It is about finding, in the text, traces of how the unstable act of enunciation (*énonciation*) has been stabilized in an established 'enunciated' (*énoncé*) word.

And, Certeau adds, this transition from the unfixed to the fixed – this 'writing' in the *active* sense of the word – must be seen in relation to the way someone is connected to the produced text. For, as Certeau writes, the 'site of production' ('*lieu de production*') is finally 'my own position' ('*ma propre place*'). What is revealed by exhuming the postulates of written discourses or doctrines, is the way I am their 'subject'. This is to say that I am at the same time both *product* and *producer* of the text. I am made possible by the text, I only exist thanks to the fact that the text is readable as if it tells about me as its subject/object. But at the same time, I am its subject in the sense that I actively intervene in it: independently, as its 'agency'.¹³ All this is possible because my 'proper' place in the text is precisely there where that text is not fixed, where it still lacks balance and coherence. On the locus of that lack, this balance and coherence are *made*. They are made by 'me'. The lack on which the text is based allows me to fill it in as the text's subject, in both senses of the term: as the subject he talks about and as the subject acting in, with and through the text.

Here, at the locus of that lack, in the place of the subject, truth is to be found. The 'question of truth' is a matter of how I occupy 'my proper place' in that discourse, how I am its subject, its bearer or support. It is a matter of acknowledging that this position, although founding my identity, at the same time opens it to a radical difference, an uncanny otherness whose voice I can allow to be heard in the text I 'write'. This is why I have to return what I *say* my identity is, to the *saying* as such. The *enunciated object* must be re-turned towards the *subject of enunciation*.

But, again, we ask, how does this kind of advanced typical 20th century theory of the subject tell something about Christianity's essence, about what it means to lend an ear to the Glad News in our modern times? In his typically cryptic style, Certeau explains it in what follows:

The movement which turns the object of the statement [*énoncé*] back towards the site of its utterance [*énonciation*] must moreover be situated in relation to a 'way of proceeding' specific to Christianity, if one is to take the latter not solely as an object of study but also as an operation. The whole evangelical tradition makes of such a movement the condition of a practice: 'conversion' is that without which no

¹² 'Il n'y aura un travail de texte que dans la mesure où seront exhumés hors de leur silencieuse opacité les postulats des propos que je tiens *sur le christianisme*.' (*Le christianisme éclaté*, 80; *La faiblesse de croire*, 267)

¹³ Or, as he puts it in 'L'énunciation mystique': 'existe-t-on de parler à lui où d'être parlé par lui?' (p. 200). It is this confusion which in the mystical writings come to the surface, as he explains in the last part of this essay (209ff.).

‘work’ or ‘logos’ of faith may be produced. If the site from which I speak were above suspicion, were placed beyond question, my analysis would cease to be evangelical and would become the establishment of a ‘truth’ with a religious content.¹⁴

Christianity is more than a doctrine to be examined as an ‘object of inquiry’. It is an ‘operation’, a ‘practice’, producing an ‘oeuvre’, a ‘work or a “logos” of faith’. And, Certeau adds, that oeuvre – as well as its operation – is based in a ‘conversion’ that occurs at ‘the place from where I speak’.

Does that mean that, producing Christianity at ‘the site from which I speak’, I invent it? That I create it out of nothing? Not at all. I do not invent it, I *convert* it, and I do so, so much that I am *converted by* it and *to* it. The point from where I speak is ‘soupçonnable’, Certeau writes. It is the locus of suspicion, of *scepsis*. And at that locus, I do not invent a discourse, but make it operative. I do not create it – since it already exists – but I make that discourse produce, and produce *even me*. Preceding me, the discourse offers me a place in its discursive world. It put me in a certain position. Yet, that place given to me by that discourse, is at the same time the place from where I convert and ‘displace’ that discourse. It is the locus where I express my *scepsis* about it or bring it into question. It is the locus of its displacement, and because that point of displacement is *my* place (the place where I am the discourse’s subject), I make that discourse ‘work’.

So, I – as locus of a ‘displacement’ – am the point where the discourse *happens, occurs*, in the sense of being made contingent. In me, that discourse, which as an autonomous entity exists before me, contingently occurs. As subject, I am the discourse’s *incarnation*, giving body to it, being its contingent bearer. I convert the ‘infinity’ of the Christian doctrine into a finite reality, supported by a finite subject that, converted to that doctrine, at the same time converts that very doctrine. Although I am myself the product of that discourse, being its subject, I made it contingent, working, productive.

Now we might see better how that theory of the subject as ‘displacement’ expresses ‘la tradition évangélique’ (the evangelic tradition), and in what sense the evangelic character of the analysis depends on the insight regarding the ‘displacing’ activity of the subject. A few pages further on in his essay, Certeau explains this as the core of what happens in the evangelic procedure, i.e. in the attention and the response one has to the Glad News call.

This ‘model’ refers to the New Testament combination of ‘following [Jesus]’ and ‘conversion’ – of *Nachfolge* and *metanoia*: the first term indicates a going beyond which the name of Jesus opens up, the other a corresponding transformation of consciousness and of conduct.¹⁵

The subject’s relation to the discourse is modeled on the believer’s relation to Christ’s call. Christ asks people to follow him, but in order to do so, one has to change conscience and attitude – one needs *conversion*. Yet, conversion seems not

¹⁴ *The Certeau Reader*, 215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80-81; *La faiblesse de croire*, 268.

¹⁵ *The Certeau Reader*, 226; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 87; *La faiblesse de croire*, 288.

to be that simple, for Christ's call can only be heard *on the very basis of* someone's conversion. So, conversion in a way comes first, and makes Christ's call if not possible, at least effective. It is in this sense that the conversion makes the call 'productive'. It is my conversion – or, as written a few sentences further on, my 'decision' – that decides on the call coming from Christ and from the text reporting his call. A few lines further, Certeau writes: 'The call which is the principle of this relation cannot be known outside of the response which it receives'.¹⁶

And what is one answering to, when responding to Christ's call? What does he become faithful to, once saying 'yes' to the Lord's injunction 'follow me'? It is neither to the content of Christ's discourse, nor to the fullness of his presence. What one follows by obeying Christ's commandment, is absent in (from) that very commandment. It is precisely that absence that is followed. Christ's call comes from his *voice* that, in his commandment, is wiped away by the response or by, even, the mass of responses and respondents, as Certeau declares a few pages further on in the same essay:

The 'follow me' comes from a voice which has been effaced, forever irrecuperable, vanished into the changes which echo it back, drowned in the throng of its respondents. It has nothing which is proper to it, no concrete place and no abstract expression. It is no longer anything except the tracing of a passage – made possible by it – a relation between an arrival (birth) and a departure (death), then between a return (resurrection) and a disappearance (ascension), indefinitely. Nothing but a name without a site.¹⁷

Obedying Jesus is obeying a 'passage'. It is obeying what, in the addressed commandment, is absent. It is following only a name, a name without a proper place, a name indicating an unlocalisable absence. That absence solely 'is' there *because of* my obedience and *thanks to* the performativity of my response, to the 'practice' of my 'conversion'. Christ's commandment – or, more generally, Christianity's commandment – is a discourse, and my obedience, which converts me, 'converts' that discourse as well: it opens that discourse to its own absentee, to its own 'excess',¹⁸ to the 'other' haunting within the identity it performs.

¹⁶ 'The call which is the principle of this relation cannot be known outside of the response which it receives. We have access to Jesus only through texts which, in talking of him, narrate what he awakened and hence describe only their own status as writings of belief or of those who have turned round to respond. Jesus can only be identified in his concrete responses. We have only variants of the relation between the call and the decision, and never a statement which would lend the response an exemplary and authentic formulation by assigning to the call a site which might be proper to it. No text, whether 'primary' or 'apostolic,' represents anything other than a 'modification' (a writing) made possible by a call which cannot objectively be uttered in its own terms and which is recognized only gradually through successive conversions.' (*The Certeau Reader*, 227)

¹⁷ *The Certeau Reader*, 227; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 88; *La faiblesse de croire*, 288.

¹⁸ See the paragraph 'The work of an "excess"' (*The Certeau Reader*, 224-230; *La faiblesse de croire*, 283-293). See, for instance, p 226-227 / 288: 'An excess which in history is named Jesus calls forth a decision which is inscribed as renewing in objective situations. The call to

A signifying practice intervenes in received identities (...) and in contractual stabilities (...), as a break which institutes a relation which is not defined by conformity to a Law, but by conversion toward the other, no longer 'fidelity' but a 'faith.' Instead of a sacred 'existence' [*être-là*] as principle and domain of just actions, there is the act of 'coming' or 'following,' which makes for trust in the other, signals to him and 'makes truth' [*qui fait confiance à l'autre, lui fait signe et fait la vérité*]. But it functions in a necessary relation to institutions and received forms which in principle are maintained. The eruption of Jesus does not found a new site – a Testament, a religion – which would have a different content but the same form as the preceding one. It introduces the non-site of a difference into a system of sites [*Il introduit le non-lieu d'une différence dans un système de lieux*].¹⁹

Christianity *as such* is a matter of *practice* vis-à-vis Christianity as doctrine and as institution. It 'cuts' doctrine and institution in order to convert them to the 'other' whose absence they hide, an 'other' who is their very origin. In its core, Christianity is a 'founding break' (*rupture instauratrice*).²⁰ In the longer version of Certeau's essay we read that the 'Christian specificity can now be signaled only by a break in operative rationalities or social formations'.²¹

Yet, taking up again the 'rupture instauratrice' does not *reconcile* Christianity with its origin or restore its originality. That origin is 'other', it is a 'passage' that never can be appropriated. It can only be 'practiced' in a moment of 'rupture', a moment of cutting the reigning institution or doctrine. And it can do this *only for a moment*, since that practice is not capable of appropriating the possibilities of that 'break'. This is why, according to Certeau, Christianity *as such* cannot be defined as 'fidelity' to its doctrine. It is a 'faith', which for him means having trust in what precisely lacks in the doctrine. It is having faith in the openness to the doctrine's own subversive potentialities, to its own otherness. And that kind of faith can only be 'practiced' in an 'act of coming and following', that '*does make [me] have confidence in the other, that does make sign, that does make truth*'.

4. A SUBVERSIVE DROP OF WATER IN THE SEA

Certeau himself does not use the word 'subversive' here, but it is exactly what, in his theory, characterizes his definition of the founding core of Christianity. For Christianity's auto-critical gesture only 'functions in a necessary relation to institutions and received forms which in principle are maintained', as said in the

'follow' and the possibility of 'chance' entertain a formal relation which finds its truth in no single concrete expression'.

¹⁹ *The Certeau Reader*, 235; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 94-95; *La faiblesse de croire*, 301.

²⁰ See the 1971 essay entitled 'La rupture instauratrice', in: Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 183-226. See also: Alfred Bastenier, 'Le croire et le cru: Les apparences religieuses au sein du christianisme européen revisitées à partir des travaux de Michel de Certeau', in: *Social Compass* 54 (2007) no.1, 13-32.

²¹ *The Certeau Reader*, 221; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 279.

quote above. So, it is a matter neither of destroying²² nor of changing Christianity, but of celebrating its non-appropriable origin: ‘the ineffability of the subject saying itself’,²³ or the always already disappeared ‘passage’ it is based upon. That ‘passage’ has always already been repressed, and it can only be celebrated as the inherently momentaneous ‘return of the repressed’, as something repressed that, even in its return, re-founds its repressed state.²⁴

That founding ‘passage’, ‘the eruption of Jesus’, is strictly *subversive*, since (as Certeau writes in the quote above) it ‘does not found a new site – a Testament, a religion – which would have a different content but the same form as the preceding one. It introduces the non-site of a difference into a system of sites’. The entire history of the relation between ‘the elected people and the one God’ is characterized by ‘the caesura’ at work, Certeau writes in the next sentence.²⁵

A ‘caesura [...] at work’: another name for the subversion being the core of Christian and, even, monotheistic tradition; another name for faith, defined as ‘the relation that this caesura *inscribes* in the *site* where it has been produced (the one of the Covenant)’.²⁶

Believing is ‘coming’ or ‘following’ (a gesture marked by a separation), leaving one’s place, being disarmed by this exile out of identity and contract, and thus renouncing possession and heritage so as to be delivered to the voice of the other and dependent on his coming or response.²⁷

Faith is the transfiguration ‘of the “letter” of the Law into a “poem” of difference’, the ‘conversion of the legality of the text [...] into the weakness of a fable’.²⁸ So, faith puts Christianity’s ‘rupture instauratrice’ into operation. It is: ‘the operation which is traced in the effective sites of our social belonging when these sites are put

²² Though, in this context, Certeau sometimes speaks of destruction. Mentioning the ‘Christian specificity’ as a ‘break in operative rationalities, he speaks of ‘ruin[ing] the discourse from within’. But also in that case, the destructions is not meant to build something new but to ‘make it own up to the ineffability of the subject saying itself’ (Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 279).

²³ *The Certeau Reader*, 222; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 279.

²⁴ See my essay ‘Jochanam ben Sakkai revisited: Reflections on Michel de Certeau’s reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*’, in: Inigo Bocken (Ed.), *Spiritual spaces: History and mysticism in Michel de Certeau*, Leuven: Peeters (in press).

²⁵ ‘Depuis la naissance qui trouble une généalogie jusqu’à la mort qui déhanche à son articulation l’alliance entre le peuple élu et Yahvé l’unique, depuis la parole qui détonne jusqu’au miracle qui tranche, partout la césure travaille. L’homogénéité des traditions, la cohésion des appartenances, l’unité du peuple ou du publique d’auditeurs, le rapport des maîtres à leurs autorités, etc., tout se clive, obéissant à la pratique signifiante qui organise le texte’ (*Le christianisme éclaté*, 95; *La faiblesse de croire*, 302).

²⁶ ‘The relation which this break marks out in the site (that of the Covenant) where it is produced is called faith.’ (*The Certeau Reader* 236); *Le christianisme éclaté*, 95; *La faiblesse de croire*, 302)

²⁷ *The Certeau Reader*, 236; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 95-96; *La faiblesse de croire*, 302.

²⁸ *The Certeau Reader*, 236; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 97 ; *La faiblesse de croire*, 303.

into relation with the break of which the condition of possibility is the evangelical fable, throughout its present and past versions.²⁹

But what, if Christianity has lost its own 'lieux effectifs'? In former times it did have such 'effective sites'. Its religion reigned over the Western world and, in the eyes of Certeau, it lived its 'essence' as a kind of 'homogeneous tactics of its *borderlines*'. Together with the institution and its doctrinal power, these borderlines have faded away. As hegemonic power, 'civil society has replaced the Church'. So, Christianity's 'de-centering' and 'subversive' activity now concerns civil society, and does no longer act within a proper Christian space (the Church). Now, Christianity only exists in 'anonymous' practices – practices which Christians can no longer consider to be theirs.³⁰ Now, it is up to the initiative of the individual believers and their contingent alliances to de-center and subvert (not the Church, its institution and its doctrine, but) the institutionalized secular culture that has replaced the Church.³¹ So, since Christianity is no longer itself a social body, it is reduced to its very essence and, in a way 'privatized'. It is up to private Christian initiatives to make the 'transit' from 'body' to 'writing' (as the title of the longer version of Certeau's indicates: 'Du corps à l'écriture: un transit chrétien').³² 'Writing', here, is to be understood in the active sense Certeau gives to the word: allowing, within the boundaries of its written and fixed text, the voice of the other's *oral* call.

What survives this progressive collapse of the 'body' – a central problem for all present developments – is the formal relation between going beyond a situation and the decision to 'do' faith. (...) As the ecclesial 'body of sense' loses its effectivity, it is for Christians themselves to assure the articulation of this 'model' with actual situations.³³

It is up to the individual Christians to make their own connection between transgressing society's and culture's borderlines and taking the decision to subvert its institutions by being faithful and giving voice to the 'other' calling through society's and culture's *ruptures*. That decision, however, is not meant to create a new and proper identity. It can no longer be seen as the 'homogeneous tactics' of an ecclesial body, of a Church or of any other visible Christian identity. That body or identity is gone, it can only survive as the return of the repressed, as something which even in the time of the Church was disappearing in its return. It can only survive in a 'fable', in a story unable to fix its saying (*fari*) in an established discourse, doctrine or *doxa*. So, the return of the Christian repressed content is even more invisible and ungraspable now. Breaking with the notion of an *Ecclesia*

²⁹ *The Certeau Reader*, 237; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 98; *La faiblesse de croire*, 304.

³⁰ 'The problem of Christianity is therefore displaced towards practices, but these could be anybody's, anonymous, stripped of distinctive rules or marks.' (*The Certeau Reader*, 224; *La faiblesse de croire*, 283)

³¹ *The Certeau Reader*, 226; *La faiblesse de croire*, 287; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 86).

³² Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 267. The English translation has this as subtitle: 'From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit'; *The Certeau Reader*, 214.

³³ *The Certeau Reader*, 226; *La faiblesse de croire*, 287; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 86-87.

Aeterna, Certeau ends his essay with the idea that Christian faith, fable and practice are a kind of

fragile and floating text, witness to itself alone, yet lost in the innumerable murmur of language, and hence perishable. But this fable heralds the joy of obliterating itself in what it figures, of returning to the anonymous work of which it was born, of converting itself to this other which it is not. The writing of belief, in its weakness, appears on the ocean of language only to disappear, taken up into the work of uncovering, in other writings, the movement by which, ceaselessly, they 'come' and 'go'. According to an expression of the mystics, it is a 'drop in the ocean' ['une goutte d'eau dans la mer'].³⁴

These are the last words of Certeau's essay. At least in the version that appeared in *Le Christianisme Éclaté*. The original and longer version gives one more paragraph to read.³⁵ There, the core of Christianity is once more described as an *opération passante et passagère*. To explain this, he refers to the 'angel' with whom the patriarch Jacob was fighting in the night near the Yabboq when his name was changed to 'Israel', as well as to the thief in the night the Gospel talks about as being the way the Messiah will come (1Tess 5:2). And he relates both figures to the idea of the uncanny – *unheimlichkeit* – as Freud ascribes it to dreams.

It is a fleeting and rapid operation. Its 'evangelical' mark would be the wound which the angel at Yabok (Genesis 32:223-32), the night-time thief of the parable, the uncanny familiarity of the dream produces by day in a territory or an activity.³⁶

And it is then that he 'signs' his text, saying that even his name hides the relation with this 'other' whom no identity, no 'name' can appropriate. Which is to say that any identity or name ultimately originates in a call coming from the other. 'Signing' his essay he writes how even a signature calls its 'other':

This text is in fact a stage in the itinerancy produced by the quest for the proper name ; that is to say, the name which comes to us always from an other. 'Michel' is 'Who is like El?' – who is like the Unnamable, God? This word says the opposite of the proper. In the (fearful? respectful? retiring ?) mode of the question, it calls for its erasure.³⁷

To have a name spelled 'Who is like the nameless?' wipes out one's identity in the very moment it is named and fixed. As a drop of water in the sea. According to Certeau, Christianity's core and essential mission is that wiping gesture, deconstructing each identity's construction, including its own. The impossibility of

³⁴ *The Certeau Reader*, 237; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 99; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 305.

³⁵ A footnote is added as well, giving the reference in the mystical tradition of the image of a 'drop in the ocean': 'Voir saint Bernard, *De diligendo Deo*, § 28; Harpius, *Theologica Mystica*, II, 3, chap. 33; Surin, *Guide spirituel*, VII, 8; Fénelon, *Instructions sur la morale et la perfection chrétienne*, in *Oeuvres*, t. 6, p. 116' (Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 305; *The Certeau Reader*, 243).

³⁶ *The Certeau Reader*, 237; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 305.

³⁷ *The Certeau Reader*, 238; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 305.

his *own* name, of an own proper name as such: this is for Certeau the ‘evangelical mark’; this is what Christian faith is about.

5. FRAME OF REFERENCE – ONE WAY

At the background of Certeau’s theory of Christianity, one can recognize the influence of several theoretical frameworks dominant in his days. First of all there is Michel Foucault. He provides Certeau with a model for his basic research activity, which is analyzing discourses – discourses dug up in the basements of unfrequented libraries as well as the ones heard on everyday’s streets. But the way he handles this method is not exactly the same as the way Foucault does, for Certeau’s aim is not simply to lay bare the discourses that have formed – and changed – the different *epistemes* and epistemological caesuras constituting the genealogy of the *episteme* we live in today.³⁸ Nor is it simply to discover the ‘dispositives’, which in Foucault’s conceptual apparatus are broader than epistemes since they include the non-discursive elements as well, such as practices, strategies, institutions.³⁹ Of course, like Foucault, Michel de Certeau is interested in the changing *epistemes* and *dispositives* that made both our history and present identity, but, unlike Foucault, his interest goes beyond that.⁴⁰

At least his interest in the subject does so. For Foucault the subject is ‘simply’ the instance ‘subjected’ to the primacy of the discourse. This is why ‘man’, once become a ‘subject’ – in the sense of ‘object’ – of the human sciences, will disappear with these sciences as easily as ‘a face engraved in sand on a seashore’.⁴¹ If only therefore, the discourse’s subject is not Foucault’s main point of interest, just as little is the interest for himself being the subject of his text. Asked where he is himself in his text, Foucault replied: ‘No, no I am not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you’.⁴² The subject of a discourse is never where one expects it to be, not even the subject of Foucault’s own discourse. The subject is

³⁸ ‘Episteme’ can be defined as a ‘non-unified, multiple and complex field’ of various discourses constituting the ‘discursive universe of a historical time. See for instance chapter 2 in Alec McHoul & Wendy Grace, *A Foucault primer: Discourse, power and subject*, London-New York: Routledge, 1993, 45-46. See also: Judith Revel, *Le vocabulaire de Foucault*, Paris: Ellipse, 2002, 25-26.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 3: 1976-1979 (ed. Daniel Defert & François Ewald), Paris: Gallimard, 1994, 300-301; Revel, *Le vocabulaire de Foucault*, 26-27.

⁴⁰ In a way, Certeau is more interested in the changing dispositive as such, as if he considered it changing itself as a dispositive, arising in the change from Middle Ages/Renaissance to Modernity. See for instance Certeau, ‘L’énunciation mystique’, 184.

⁴¹ Thus Foucault in the last sentence of *Words and Things*: ‘l’homme s’effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable’, in: Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 398.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge (Classics), 2002, p. 19; cited by Certeau in ‘Le rire de Foucault’, in: Idem, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* (ed. Luce Giard), Paris: Gallimard, 1987, 51.

by definition ‘passing’, vanishing, and one can practice even discourse analysis precisely to write himself away. In the same passage from *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault adds: ‘I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same’.⁴³ It is clear that Certeau cannot but fully approve this thesis. Real thought is not fixed to a subject or identity:

Identity freezes the gesture of thinking. It pays homage to an order. To think, on the contrary, is to pass through; it is to question that order, to marvel that it exists, to wonder what made it possible, to seek, in passing over its landscape, traces of the movement that formed it, to discover in these history supposedly laid to rest ‘how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise’.⁴⁴

Foucault’s remark about the subject matches the way Certeau ends the essay we followed in detail – at least in its original version as posthumously published in *La Faiblesse de Croire*. There, he evokes his own proper name in its quality of, precisely, wiping away all property (‘il appelle son rature’). Now, the theoretical frame of reference is not so much Michel Foucault as Jacques Derrida, more exactly the way Derrida signs some of his essays, thus proposing the radical ‘improper’ condition of proper names.⁴⁵ Derridian deconstruction has shown that the inscription of the scriptural trace inherently spoils the unstained and full identity it intends to affirm. Even a signature, in its very act of confirming the authenticity of the subject of the enunciation (*le sujet de l’énonciation*), at the same time crosses out that authenticity. Acknowledging the authentic author, a signature is supported by the unavoidable possibility of inauthenticity characterizing/ deconstructing any authenticity. By presenting his own proper name as ‘the contrary of what is proper’, it is obviously Derridian deconstruction that Certeau refers to.

Yet, what is definitely neither Foucauldian nor Derridian is Certeau’s persistent emphasis on the subject. The subject is his main point of interest, however passing, disappearing, non-identical or non-original it may be. In spite of its vanishing character, he ascribes its locus nonetheless an active productivity and emancipatory force, and even an ‘evangelic hallmark’.

Except for the latter, the frame of reference here is Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is an explicit theory of the subject.⁴⁶ Certeau is very familiar with it. He was a

⁴³ Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, p. 28, in Certeau, ‘Le rire de Foucault’, 51.

⁴⁴ Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by B. Massumi, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 194; Certeau, ‘Le rire de Foucault’, 52. He quotes Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*. Vol. 2: *L’usage des plaisirs* (1984), p. 15.

⁴⁵ See for instance the ‘signature’ at the end of his essay ‘Signature événement contexte’, in: Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1972, pp. 365-393, p. 393. So the fact that, at the bottom of his essay, Derrida puts in fact three signatures – his name, his initials, and his handwritten signature – indicates that even in the origin-declaring act of signing, repetition – and, consequently, difference and inauthenticity – is structurally involved.

⁴⁶ For an explanation of Lacanian theory as a theory of the subject, see the first chapter in: Marc De Kesel, *Eros & ethics: Reading Lacan’s Seminar VII*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. See also:

member of ‘L’École Freudienne de Paris’ (Lacan’s school), a loyal participant of Lacan’s weekly seminar, and wrote several essays on psychoanalytical theory.⁴⁷ Like so many French theories of the 20th century, Lacanian theory is post-structural. Not without reserve, it embraces the paradigm of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism that affirms the relative autonomy of the ‘symbolic order’, i.e. the field of representations that people share with one another and that constitute their ‘culture’. That field is not to be understood on the basis of the people’s intentions, of the sense of life expressed in it for instance. It functions in an autonomous way, independently from the sense expressed or understood in it. Following merely linguistic laws, that field *precedes* the individual, who, contrary to his own impression, is subjected to it. That symbolic structure, disconnected from the biological level and obeying an autonomous logic, is the field where man lives his cultural life, including his subjective identity. The libidinal logic Freud discovered – the polymorphously perverse logic obeying the pleasure-principle – is at work in that field, as far as it constitutes the unconscious of the individual. This is why the field of the unconscious – *die andere Schauplatz*, as Freud calls it⁴⁸ – is not the private set of repressed wishes, but the public realm of the symbolic order. Man’s subjectivity is but an effect of that symbolic order. That order is the real *subjectum*, the real support bearing man’s identity. The individual subject is but a supposition, imagined by the symbolic structure and enabling the individual to consider himself as being his own subject/bearer.

In a strictly structuralistic view, the subject/support/bearer of man’s identity is the symbolic order. If Lacan is a *post*-structuralist, it is because of his different view on the individual subject. For Lacan, that subject, in whatever way it may be imagined, intervenes in the symbolic field in a specific way. It introduces a proper logic subverting the logic of that field. Its locus is the void of the symbolic system. Being a realm of signifiers endlessly referring to other signifiers without ever arriving at the final ‘signified’ or the ‘real’ thing referred to, that order rests on a constitutive lack. That lack – i.e. the point in the system where it is on the verge of making a full circle without ever succeeding in it – is the subject’s locus. That lack is the locus where the libidinal being constitutes itself as an unfulfillable longing for a ‘self’, i.e. as subject of desire.⁴⁹ At that point, the libidinal system acts *as if* it has a ground, and it is this ‘as if’ – this radically fictitious subject – that intervenes in the

Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995; Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A beginner’s guide*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009.

⁴⁷ See for instance Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*. For an essay on Lacan’s version of the psychoanalytical theory, see especially the last chapter: ‘Lacan, une éthique de la parole’ (168-198).

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 4, London: Hogarth Press, 48-49; Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966, 548, 685, 689, 799.

⁴⁹ ‘An unfulfillable longing for a *self*’: this implies that there is no *real* self. This is why Lacan defines the ultimate goal of desire not as a ‘self’ or a ‘subject’, but as an ‘object’, ‘*object small o*’, which is *real* but, therefore, beyond the reach of the subject.

logic of the symbolic order. Not as its creator, since it is a mere effect of that order. But as what is able to subvert its 'normal' logic. So, although the subject consciously considers himself to be the fixed ground of a symbolic system, unconsciously, this is the place where the system is susceptible to changes, since the locus of that subject is the system's void, its 'non-ground', its lack of ground (which precisely is his only ground).

Even if the Lacanian system is not its direct source, Certeau's thought is so imbued with it, that this reference is able to clarify a lot of the concepts he used in the essay we read. What happens in the age of *writing* (as Certeau defines it), is the denying of the real status of the subject, of the fact that the subject is a fictitious invention at the locus where our symbolic universe rests in its lack. The Cartesian subject, supposing itself to relate to the world as if it is a blank sheet of paper on which it limitlessly can write what it wants, is built upon a denial. This is why anything that escapes this written world cancels out that denial and gives truth a chance, and that truth tells that the world is built upon a void, upon what Certeau calls a 'founding break', '*une rupture instauratrice*': at the point where the world (symbolic order) lacks, there is its foundation. At the locus of its 'displacement', it has its 'proper' place. That 'proper' place is mere lack, mere difference, 'the non-site of a difference into a system of sites'.⁵⁰

And how can I discover the world's 'non-lieu'? At 'the site of its utterance' (*le lieu de son énonciation*).⁵¹ At the place where the discourse constituting the world (the symbolic order) is spoken out, in that 'practice', that 'operation': there, I meet the unfixed base of the world. There, I feel the possibility to intervene in the discourse that constitutes me, which is not to say that I can create that discourse/world at will. The 'site from which I speak' (*le lieu d'où je parle*)⁵² cannot be appropriated, not even by me, but from that place I can affirm the lack my discourse rests upon, thus allowing otherness and change. Subverting from within (from 'my own position')⁵³ the discourse that constitutes me, I can open its 'lieu de production', the place where it is produced and, thus, changeable. Being subjected by that enunciated discourse, I can take the position of its 'sujet de l'énonciation' (subject of the enunciation), which is the way to open its 'énoncé' towards its otherness, its active productivity, its changeability. It is the way to open it towards its truth, so Certeau argues. That is, to recall just one example, the way Certeau interprets the May 68 Revolt: it is a 'prise de parole', a 'capture of speech'.⁵⁴ In a closed world, it rediscovers the practice and the subject of enunciation, of speaking

⁵⁰ *The Certeau Reader*, 235; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 94-95; *La faiblesse de croire*, 301.

⁵¹ *The Certeau Reader*, 215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80-81; *La faiblesse de croire*, 268.

⁵² *The Certeau Reader*, 215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80-81; *La faiblesse de croire*, 268.

⁵³ *The Certeau Reader*, 215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80; *La faiblesse de croire*, 267.

⁵⁴ Michel de Certeau, *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques* (ed. Luce Giard), Paris: Seuil, 1994, 27-129; translated as *The capture of speech and other political writings* (translated by Tom Conley), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

instead of writing, of displacing the written, and opening it towards alterity and change.

6. FRAME OF REFERENCE – THE OTHER WAY ROUND

It is clear now that many of Certeau's concepts and schemes can be translated in Lacanian terms without betraying the core of his thought. In a modern world become a fixed and controlled system, Certeau's theory tries to affirm its unfixed ground: only there, the true subject/bearer of the world is to be found. And only there, in the locus of that subject, one finds the truth as being 'different', other, 'Autre'.

But once again the question arises: where is Christianity in all this? Certeau's answer is already known: this *is* Christianity. Christianity is that practice, returning the 'énoncé' – its own Christian one, yes, but, since this has lost social support, the one of our post-Christian age as well – to the *sujet de l'enociation* and, thus, opening it to alterity and truth, i.e. God. For, according to Certeau, God is not the rock of certainty giving our world its solid foundation. God is uncertain, and faith means abandoning oneself to uncertainty, going away to a still unknown country, like Abraham leaving Ur in Chaldea. Faith is *scepsis*: it means abandoning oneself to a questionable place, i.e. the 'place where one speaks from'. As we have already read in the essay: 'If the site from which I speak were above suspicion, were placed beyond question, my analysis would cease to be evangelical and would become the establishment of a 'truth' with a religious content'.⁵⁵

Listening to Christ's call or being subjected to his doctrine implies a 'conversion' that not only converts me (recognizing the void – the Other – I am speaking from), but at the same time converts the doctrine and makes it open to changes. Saying 'yes' to Christ is confronting Christian or other doctrines with their own subject as 'passing', 'vanishing', unstable, excessive – as 'the non-site of a difference into a system of sites'.⁵⁶ Being Christian implies braking open its tradition and doctrine to re-found its '*rupture instauratrice*'.

Yet, the question remains: where is Christianity in all this? If Christianity is to be defined in theoretical terms referring to Lacan and others, what then is still typically Christian in Christianity? And, another question directly linked to this one: are the terms Certeau borrows from contemporary discourse theories not twisted in such a way that they are made compatible with Christianity? Does Certeau not 'christianize' the concepts and schemes of the discourse theories of his time? In other words, are the discourse theories of his age really Certeau's theoretical frame of reference to explain Christianity, or does he, the other way round, use Christianity as a frame of reference to interpret those modern theories?

⁵⁵ *The Certeau Reader*, 215; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 80-81; *La faiblesse de croire*, 268.

⁵⁶ About saying yes to the '*rupture instauratrice*', see Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique XVI^e – XVII^e siècle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982, 239-240. See also Derrida's comment in 'Nombre de oui', in: Jacques Derrida *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, 639-650.

As long as Certeau analyses the 16th and 17th century corpus of mystical texts, it is legitimate to notice that God's voice, becoming mute in the outside world, still is heard in the 'interior castle' of the Christian mystic.⁵⁷ In these texts, the term 'voice' refers to the historical paradigm valid in medieval times and saying that God's *word* is the creative base of reality and that it *speaks* through nature. Medieval natural science was founded in – and is a translation of – that speaking. Become more and more mute, the reference to that voice became an element in the deconstruction of the new epistemological paradigm – or, which amounts to the same thing, the new subject – that was established. From the 16th and 17th century onwards, man no longer relates to reality supposing himself being borne by the same *subjectum* of that reality, i.e. the divine Creator. Now man supposes to be himself the subject or ground founding his relation to reality, a subject considering himself to be 'substantial', i.e. to be founded in the fullness of its being. God's voice, as spoken of in the mystical text, is one of the elements in the marginally ongoing deconstruction of that kind of 'subjectivity'. Focusing on its own subject, the mystical experience discovers a void within it, a trace in its heart referring to an absentee, to an alterity that the mystic connects to the God whom he sees disappearing from the outside world. The new modern subject, self-assured as he is to *write* the world at his will, discovers himself as being haunted by a 'voice' – a voice that he thought to be gone but, although mute, remains perceptible in the inner experience of his mystical nights. Instead of being a fixed point guaranteeing a fixed world, the subject experiences itself as a lack of fixedness, as a void without borderlines, as an endless wandering movement deconstructing the newly established constructions of his times.

No doubt that argument of Certeau is valid. Yet, when this scheme is used to define the essence of Christianity *as such*, its validity is less sure. The crisis Christianity was hit by at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modernity, is not only a crisis, but at the same time Christianity's very essence, so Certeau argues. The mute voice which then speaks through the written world is not simply a voice that in medieval times spoke loudly, being recognized by the then established culture. That mute voice was Christianity's essence in those times as well. According to Certeau, even in the fully Christian Middle Ages, the God who spoke through nature was not the God providing the world its solid ground but the God that broke – or, more exactly, subverted – such assumed ground. The core of the Christian message – Jesus' call – is an obedience, not so much to a Law, but to what subverts that law, to an 'eruption [that] does not found a new site – a Testament, a religion – (...). It introduces the non-site of a difference into a system of sites'.⁵⁸

Certeau embraces 20th century's critical and deconstructive thought undermining the entire tradition of western metaphysics and discrediting any ontological foundation of reality. That which we call reality is based on a lack, so he

⁵⁷ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, London: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2010.

⁵⁸ *The Certeau Reader*, 235; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 94-95; *La faiblesse de croire*, 301.

acknowledges a central Lacanian insight. The point from where we relate to reality – our *subjectum* – has no ground in that reality; it is a merely fictitious point we imagine escaping all doubt and fiction. Returning to that point (i.e. to what he, with Lacan among others, calls *le sujet de l'énonciation*), one discovers a lack of ground, a non-place that wipes itself out, or, what amounts to the same thing, a 'place' where one cannot 'stand' but only wander.

All these concepts and schemes are 'negative'. They acknowledge the 'destruction' of the foundations the world once was built upon. Yet, for Certeau, they are positive, precisely because of their Christian value. How is that possible? Is it not precisely his Christian presupposition that allows Certeau to embrace these critical concepts and schemes? In advance, he already has faith in what lacks any ground, and it is on that basis that he appropriates modern critical theory undermining all foundations of reality. Does Certeau not neutralize the critical theories he uses? If things have no ground, who guarantees that this kind of non-ground is in fact a positive thing, a thing in the service of men, a thing as good as the Christian God claims to be? Why not consider it to be a bad thing, the source of radical evil? If things have no ground, if a non-place to wander is our real home, if excess and transgression belong to our obedience to laws, one can just as well conclude that we are living in a sadistic universe.

All this implies that faith is the basic supposition of Certeau's affirmation of both Christianity and modernity. Christianity is an affirmation of its own lack of ground, its own basic weakness. Its 'weakness of faith' (title of *La Faiblesse de Croire*) can be read as 'faith in weakness'. If Christian faith is in crisis, it is an excellent mood in which to re-discover itself, for, on its most fundamental level, it is a faith *in* that very crisis. If, 'as a drop of water', Christianity is disappearing 'in the ocean' of time, the most Christian attitude is to acknowledge and to approve it. The Holy Spirit is gone forever, but his revival in the broad variety of spirituality movements is genuinely Christian, thus Certeau.

7. WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

So, what is spirituality according to Certeau? It is not so much a matter of having faith in a 'sense' that persists in the modern senseless world. It is, on the contrary, rather a matter of having faith in the very absence of sense. Spirituality is about trusting our condition of being lost in a senseless world. It is not meant to fill in that lack of sense, but to live it as it is, as our positive human condition. We are ourselves that lack of sense and, therefore, we 'wander' ('like Jesus, this "considerable wanderer"'), meeting the truth about our 'self' in the moment it passes by and disappears. As a drop of water in the sea.

So, what then is spirituality? Is it the exercise (in the sense Ignatius of Loyola uses the word) of trying to get us to a point at which we disappear in that 'sea'? Or is it the exercise of remembering that disappearing like a drop in the sea is not an aim but only a point of reference, a point our desire is pointed to but is not meant to

really disappear in? Is spirituality a way to lose ourselves in the lack of sense that characterizes our modern world, or is it a way to *relate to* our genuine *desire to* get lost in it? Is it wandering in order to find the lack we can disappear in? Or is it wandering even if we have found that lack, precisely in order *not* to disappear in it? To put it with another of Certeau's terms and in parallel with the way he treats mysticism: is spirituality a 'fable', or is it what the fable is *about*? Is it the fable telling *about* 'the drop of water in the sea', or is it the way to *become* that drop?

Let us take up again a passage already cited above: the last sentences of his 1973 radio talk. In the light of his own theory, his thesis about Christianity goes for spirituality as well. It is a

fragile and floating text, witness to itself alone, yet lost in the innumerable murmur of language, and hence perishable. But this fable heralds the joy of obliterating itself in what it figures, of returning to the anonymous work of which it was born, of converting itself to this other which it is not. The writing of belief, in its weakness, appears on the ocean of language only to disappear, taken up into the work of uncovering, in other writings, the movement by which, ceaselessly, they 'come' and 'go'. According to an expression of the mystics, it is a 'drop in the ocean'.⁵⁹

Christianity – and, by extension, spirituality – is a praxis or 'écriture': a 'writing' in the shape of a 'fable' (i.e. allowing the *voice* of what is beyond writing). It is a 'writing' and a 'fable' announcing 'the joy of obliterating itself in what it figures, [the joy] of returning to the anonymous work of which it was born, of converting itself to this other which it is not.'

Is Christianity/spirituality a matter of being wiped away and disappearing in the lack, the *rupture instauratrice* it rests upon? The quoted passages tell something else. Christianity/spirituality is the 'writing' telling about this; it is the 'fable' announcing it. It is a fable being aware of the fact that, by times, its subject both fades away in the lack upon which it rests and reappears again at that very place. It is the 'movement' by which, in the universe of discourses, the ones of faith 'endlessly come and go'. To which Certeau adds: 'According to an expression of the mystics, it is "a drop of water in the sea".'

So, what is like 'a drop of water in the sea' is not something (the subject, the voice beyond 'writing') disappearing once and for all in the lack it rests upon, but its disappearing *and* re-appearing in the *fable* telling about that very disappearing/re-appearing. For Certeau, Christianity and spirituality are first of all narrative practices, telling about our condition of disappearing in the discourse that represents us. Within the realm of 'writing', it tells, remembers, considers all that is repressed by – and beyond – 'writing'. But it does not bring it to the surface once and for all, it does not turn it into reality, neither does it say that we *should* do so, that we should actively disappear before – and in – that 'other that [we] are not'.

The disappearance of the subject in its fable tells us the human condition we are in, the void or absence which is our genuine support, our subject. But, unlike a wide

⁵⁹ *The Certeau Reader*, 237; *Le christianisme éclaté*, 99; Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 305.

spread interpretation with a long tradition, it does not tell us that we really should vanish in it. The ‘fable’ is not to be confused with a commandment or a law, telling us we should *become* ‘a drop of water in the sea’.

If Christianity and spirituality are fables, those fables also have to tell us about this kind of erroneous interpretation, which indeed belongs to the fable of the Christian tradition. ‘Spirituality’ is also there in order to remember and keep us attentive for that incorrect interpretation.

In that respect, it is a pity Certeau leaves his references to the quote about the ‘drop’ unelaborated. Especially the reference to Fénelon would have been clarifying. To be faithful to God, so Fénelon states on so many pages in his voluminous *oeuvre*, one must be aware that he is nothing more than a drop of water in the sea, and that, even to be faithful to himself, he has to do everything in order to become such a drop, which is to say that he has to exist in a way that is almost similar to disappearing. The one who really loves God (in what Fénelon calls the *pur amour*, which is the absolute opposite of *amour propre*) knows he is nothing and, consequently, has to do everything he can in order to really become nothing:

Be a real nothing, everywhere and in all you do; do, however, not add anything to that pure nothing. Of that nothing, no grip is possible. It can lose nothing. The real nothing never resists, and it has no ‘I’ to worry about. So, be nothing, and nothing beyond; and you will be all without supposing so. Suffer in peace, abandon yourself; go, like Abraham, knowing not where. Receive from the people the comfort that God will give you through them.

(...) We must love the hand of God that strikes and destroys us. Creature is only made for being destroyed in order to please the one who made it only for him. Oh, excellent use of our substance ! Our nothing glorifies eternal Being and the whole God. May perish all that the amour-propre would want to conserve. Let us be the holocaust that the fire of love reduces to ashes.⁶⁰

According to Certeau, Christianity/spirituality is about the modern subject’s repressed truth: that it is disappearing in the ‘rupture instauratrice’ of its discourse. But this is not an incitement to really disappear, as is the case in Fénelon’s *pur amour*. There, the reference to the ‘rupture’ turns into cruelty and even masochistic

⁶⁰ My translation from : ‘Lettres Spirituelles: Lettre CLIX’, in: *Œuvres de Fénelon Archevêque-duc de Cambrai*, nouvelle édition revue et corrigée avec soin. Tome V, Paris: Tenré et Boiste, 1822, 156-157: ‘Soyez un vrai rien en tout et partout ; mais il ne faut rien ajouter à ce pur rien. C’est sur le rien qu’il n’y a aucune prise. Il ne peut rien perdre. Le vrai rien ne résiste jamais, et il n’a pas un ‘moi’ dont il s’occupe. Soyez donc rien, et rien au-delà ; et vous serez tout sans songer à l’être. Souffrez en paix, abandonnez-vous ; allez, comme Abraham, sans savoir où. Recevez des hommes le soulagement que Dieu vous donnera par eux. (...) Il faut aimer la main de Dieu qui nous frappe et nous détruit. La créature n’a été faite que pour être détruite au bon plaisir de celui qui ne l’a fait que pour lui. O heureux usage de notre substance ! Notre rien glorifie l’Être éternel et le tout Dieu. Périr donc ce que l’amour propre voudrait tant conserver. Soyons l’holocauste que le feu de l’amour réduit en cendre.’

perversion.⁶¹ Christianity/spirituality is not so much what its ‘fable’ is about, it is that ‘fable’ as such. It is a discursive praxis remembering that kind of disappearing as the basic condition of the human subject, a condition that holds the human discourse open and makes man free. Yet, to that ‘fable’, *oeuvres* like Fénelon’s do belong as well. And of course, this is not to be remembered as a *example* to follow, but as an image, showing us the dark side of the ‘rupture instauratrice’ that at the same time produces openness and freedom.

For Certeau, spirituality is never simply a matter of experience. Of course, it is about an experience, but this is always already mediated by a discourse, turning that discourse into a ‘fable’. This is why spirituality – even if it goes beyond Christian religion, even if it turns into an everyday life spirituality – never can neglect the religious traditions it originates from. For in those traditions it meets a struggle with the kind of *rupture instauratrice* that is at the heart of its own praxis. Remembering the bad, pernicious pages in the history of that struggle is as important as to remember the glorious ones. For the relation to the *rupture instauratrice* cannot allow a fixed position (the position of a ‘writing’ subject, as Certeau defines it); it requires a ‘wandering’, a ‘passing’, in the sense that the subject never stops to pass by and to wander around the locus of its disappearance. Which is why the subject does not *really* disappear, but keeps talking about its disappearing as about its ‘proper’ but impossible condition.

⁶¹ For a penetrating evocation of the dark side of the *pur amour*, see: Daniel Vidal, ‘Du pur amour: Mystique et désaffect’, in: *Essaim: Revue de Psychanalyse* (2002), no.2, 49-72.