

FAITH IN CRISIS.
REFLECTIONS ON MICHEL DE CERTEAU'S
THEORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Marc De Kesel

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.¹ 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" 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 when the Christian 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 to 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 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 impli-

¹ „Le Christianisme, une nouvelle mythologie?", Certeau / Domenach, 1974, 7. Page numbers in the text all refer to this edition.

cated in modern discourse theories, if it is in the modern discourse „as a drop of water in the sea“, how then Christianity can 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?

1. *From the Oral to the Scriptural*

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“.² 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 some of the raised issues. In a way, here, Certeau's sole concern is the act itself of writing down the discussion in a proper essay or, more generally, it is the passage from the oral discussion to the written report. The sole thing he wants to make clear is that, by reaching up his pen, writing down what is said and adding to it a proper essay, he is not willing to deny, repress or change what occurred in the oral happening.

„Le passage de l'oral à l'écrit n'a pas pour but d' ‚assurer‘ la place d'où je parlais, d'y empiler des preuves et d'obturer les ouvertures que les propos d'un soir y auraient laissées. Des ‚lapsus‘ provoqués par une discussion, de tout ce qui échappe au contrôle dans le langage parlé, je ne voudrais pas que l'écrit fût la reprise en main – ou l'oubli – comme s'il fallait soumettre à la légalité d'une écriture – ou refouler – les advenues du désir dont l'autre est le principe.“³

² 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“ (Certeau: *La faiblesse*: 267-305. 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 the ‚official‘ version.

³ Certeau / Domenach, 1974, 79; *La faiblesse*, 267.

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 is rather blocking 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 of saying, escapes the said and resists written reports; 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 letting in a „desire whose principle is the other“, breaking through within a settled discourse.⁴ 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.

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 hide – 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.

„Ces échappées permettent au contraire un recommencement de l'écriture. Un travail introduit alors dans les systèmes établis les mouvances que l'oral trahit déjà. Il inscrit sur nos cartes les plus longs voyages qu'inaugurent les fugitives 'sorties' de la conversation. Au lieu d'aller de l'écrit à l'oral, d'une orthodoxie à son illustration verbale [...] la démarche part d'une mobilité orale, poreuse, offerte, plus facilement altérée par ce qui ne s'y dit encore qu'à demi-mot, et s'en va produire un langage réor-

⁴ 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“ (Certeau: *L'énonciation mystique*).

donné par ces premiers aveux, organisant ainsi un déplacement dans les rangs d'un savoir ou d'une raison."⁵

Reintroducing in writing the slippery movements that are inherent to oral speaking: this is what Certeau intends to practice in his essay accompanying the discussion report. Giving a followed path deliberately all chances 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.⁶ In his comments on the oral radio discussion about Christianity, Certeau opts for such kind of disorientations and therefore follows the unusual way. Instead of going from Christianity's written doctrine to its oral illustration, he turns the doctrine to its oral origin – ‚oral‘ in the sense of non-fixed, a not fully known realm of potentialities, filled with ‚half-words‘ still able to tell different things than 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.

2. *Christianity's „coupure instauratrice“*

What, however, do these remarks about the relation between writing and speaking, between the scriptural and the oral, 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:

„Cette démarche concerne ici le christianisme: en fait, un rapport entre une question de vérité et ma propre place. Toute analyse de ce problème met donc en cause le lieu d'où j'en traite. Il n'y aura un travail de texte que dans la mesure où seront exhumés hors de leur silencieuse opacité les

⁵ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 79-80; *La faiblesse*, 267.

⁶ 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 Certeau: *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 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: Certeau: *Le lieu de l'autre*, 89-111; see also: Blommestijn: Michel de Certeau, 173.

postulats des propos que je tiens *sur* le christianisme. Le sujet, c'est finalement la relation de ces discours avec leurs lieu de production."⁷

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.⁸ 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, be it in a mute way. As if in those texts, God's silence itself was given voice. As if His silence was a more adequate way to express Himself than all that was written down in the doctrine of His religion and His theology.

Here, in his essay commenting the radio talk he had with Domenach, he makes use of this thesis, be it 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 („*sur le christianisme*“), but in the *way* this is said or, more precisely, in the way it relates to the oral act of its saying. 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 have 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 a established ‚enunciated‘ (*énoncé*).

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 „*lieu de production*“ is finally „*ma proper place*“, „my own place“. What is revealed by exhuming the postulates of written discourses or doctrines, is the way I am their „subject“. And

⁷ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80; *La faiblesse*, 267-268.

⁸ See, among other publications, Surin: *Guide spiritual*; Certeau: *Le lieu de l'autre*.

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 he 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‘.⁹ 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, on the locus of that lack, on 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 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 returned on the *subject of enunciation*.

But, again, how this kind of advanced typical 20th century theory of the subject is telling something about Christianity’s essence, about what it means to lend an ear to the Good Tidings in our modern times? In his typically cryptic style, Certeau explains it in what follows:

„Le retournement qui ramène l’objet de l’énoncé vers le lieu de son énonciation doit être situé, d’ailleurs, dans le voisinage d’une ‘manière de faire’ caractéristique du christianisme si on ne le prend pas seulement comme un objet d’étude, mais comme une opération. Toute la tradition évangélique fait d’un déplacement la condition d’une pratique: elle articule sur une ‚conversion‘ la possibilité même de produire une ‚œuvre‘ ou un ‚logos‘ de la foi. Si le lieu d’où je parle n’était pas soupçnable, s’il

⁹ Or, as he puts it in *L’énonciation mystique*: „existe-t-on de parler à lui où d’être parlé par lui?“ (Certeau: *L’énonciation mystique*, 200). It is this confusion which in the mystical writings come to the surface, as he explains in the last part of this essay (Certeau: *L’énonciation mystique*, 209ff.).

était mis à l'abri de l'interrogation, l'analyse cesserait d'être évangélique pour se muer en l'établissement d'une ,vérité' à contenu religieux."¹⁰

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 on „the place from where I speak“.

Does that mean that, producing Christianity on the „the place where I speak from“, 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, as 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 scepticism. And on 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 on a certain position. Yet, that place given to me by that discourse, is at the same time the place from where I convert and ,displaces' that discourse. It is the locus where I express my scepticism about it or put 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 preexists 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

¹⁰ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80-81; La faiblesse, 268.

depends on the insight in the ‚displacing‘ activity of the subject. A few pages further 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 Good Tidings‘ call.

„Ce ‚modèle‘ renvoie à la combinaison néotestamentaire entre ‚suivre (Jésus)‘ et la ‚conversion‘ – entre la *Nachfolge* et la *metanoia*: le premier terme indique un dépassement, qu‘ouvre le nom de Jésus, et l‘autre une transformation de la conscience et des conduites, qui lui répond.“¹¹

The subject’s relation to the discourse is modelled on the believer’s relation to Christ’s call. Christ asks to follow him, but in order to do so, one has to change conscience and attitude – one needs *conversion*. Yet, conversion seems not 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 it is written a few sentences further, it is my „decision“ – that decides on the call coming from Christ and from the text reporting his call. A few lines further, Certeau writes: „Actually, the call, the principle of this relation can only be known in the reply it is given.“¹²

And what is one answering to, when responding Christ’s call? What does he become faithful to, once saying ‚yes‘ to the Lord’s injunction ‚follow me‘? 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 that very commandment. Precisely that absence is followed. Christ’s call comes from his *voice*

¹¹ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 87; *La faiblesse*, 288.

¹² „En effet, l’appel, principe de cette relation, n’est connu que dans la réponse qui lui est donnée. Il n’a pas d’expression propre. Jésus ne nous est accessible que par des textes qui en parlant de lui racontent ce qu’il a éveillé, et décrivent donc seulement leur propre statut d’être des écritures croyantes ou retournées. Nous n’avons que des variantes du rapport entre l’appel et la décision, et jamais un énoncé qui en fixant à l’appel son lieu propre donnerait à la réponse une formulation exemplaire et authentique. Aucun texte, fût-il ‚primitif‘ ou ‚apostolique‘ ne représente autre chose qu’une ‚modification‘ (une écriture) rendue possible par un appel sans objectivité propre et reconnu seulement de proche en proche à travers des conversions successives.“ (87-88.)

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 in the same essay:

„Le ‚suis-moi‘ nous vient d’une voix qui s’est effacée, à jamais irrécupérable, évanouie dans les changements qui lui font écho, noyées dans la foule de ses répondants. Il n’a pas de propre, ni place concrète, ni formule abstraite. Il n’est plus rien, sinon, rendu possible par lui le tracé d’un passage, rapport entre une venue (naissance) et un départ (mort), puis entre un retour et une disparition, indéfiniment. Rien qu’un nom sans lieu.“¹³

Obeying 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 and 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“¹⁴, to the ‚other‘ haunting within the identity it performs.

„Par rapport aux identités reçues [...] et aux *stabilités* contractuelles [...] intervient *une pratique signifiante*, la coupure, instauratrice d’une relation que définissent non plus la conformité d’une Loi, mais la conversion vers l’autre, non plus une ‚fidélité‘, mais une ‚foi‘. A un ‚être-là‘ sacré, principe et région des actions justes, se substitue l’acte de ‚venir‘ ou de ‚suivre‘, qui *fait* confiance à l’autre, lui *fait* signe et ‚*fait* la vérité‘. Mais il fonctionne dans un rapport nécessaire avec des institutions et des formes en principe maintenues. L’irruption de Jésus ne fonde pas un nouveau lieu – un Testament, une religion – qui aurait un autre contenu mais la même forme que le précédent. Il introduit le non-lieu d’une *différence dans un système de lieux*.“¹⁵

¹³ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 88; *La faiblesse*, 288.

¹⁴ See the paragraph „Travail d’un ‚excès‘“ in the original version of the essay (Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 283-293). See for instance Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 288: „Un excès qui dans l’histoire se nomme Jésus appelle une *décision* qui s’inscrit comme renouvelante dans l’objectivité des situation. L’appel à ‚suivre‘ et la possibilité de ‚changer‘ entretiennent une relation formelle dont aucune expression concrète est la vérité.“

¹⁵ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 94-95; *La faiblesse*, 301 (Certeau underlines).

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 absent they hide, an ‚other‘ who is their origin. In its core, Christianity is a „founding cut“, a „*coupure instauratrice*“,¹⁶ Within the longer version of Certeau’s essay we read that „the Christian specificity can only be indicated by a *coupure* in the operational rationalities or in the social formations“.¹⁷

Yet, taking up again the „*coupure 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 „*coupure*“, 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 „*coupure*“. 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“.

3. 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 forms that in principle are kept save“, as said in the quote above. So, it is a matter neither of destroying¹⁸ nor of changing Christianity, but of celebrat-

¹⁶ See the 1971 essay entitled „La coupure instauratrice“, in Certeau: La faiblesse, 183-226.

¹⁷ Certeau: La faiblesse, 279 (my translation, MDK).

¹⁸ Though, in this context, Certeau sometimes speaks of destruction. Mentioning the „spécificité chrétienne“ as a „*coupure dans les rationalités opératoires*“, he speaks of „ruiner de l’intérieur le discours“. But also in that case, the

ing its non-appropriable origin: „the unutterability of the uttering’s subject“¹⁹, 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 a repressed that, even in its return, re-founds its repressed state.²⁰

That founding „passage“, „the irruption of Jesus“, is strictly *subversive*, since (as Certeau writes in the quote above) it „does not found a new place – a Covenant, a religion – that would have another content but the same form as the previous one. It introduces the non-place of *a difference within the system of places*“ (Certeau underlines). The entire history of the relation between „the Chosen People and the Unique Yahweh“ is characterized by the „working of the caesura“, Certeau writes in the next sentence.²¹

A ‚working caesura‘: 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 *place* where it has been produced (the one of the Covenant)“.²²

„Croire, c’est ‚venir‘ ou ‚suivre‘ (geste marqué par une séparation); sortir de son lieu, être désarmé par cet exil hors de l’identité et du contrat, re-

destructions is not meant to built something new but „à lui faire avouer ainsi l’ineffabilité du sujet se disant“. Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 279.

¹⁹ Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 279: „[...] l’ineffabilité du sujet se disant.“

²⁰ 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 (to appear).

²¹ „Depuis la naissance qui trouble une généalogie jusqu’à la mort qui déhanché 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.“ (Certeau / Domenach 1974, 95; *La faiblesse*, 302)

²² „La relation que cette coupure *inscrit* dans le lieu où elle se produit (celui de l’Alliance).“ in: Certeau / Domenach 1974, 95; *La faiblesse*, 302.

noncer ainsi à la possession et à l'héritage, pour être livré à la voix de l'autre et dépendant de sa venue ou de sa réponse."²³

Faith is the transfiguration „of the ‚letter‘ of the Law into the ‚poem‘ of difference“; „the conversion of the legality of the text [...] in the weakness of a fable“ (97). So, faith puts the Christianity's „coupure instauratrice“ into operation. It is

„l'opération que trace *dans les lieux effectifs* de nos insertions sociales leur mise en relation avec *la coupure* dont la fable évangélique nous est, à travers ses écritures d'hier ou d'aujourd'hui, la condition de possibilité.“²⁴

But what, if Christianity has lost its own „*lieux effectifs*“? For in previous times it did have such „effective places“. 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 institute 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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 initia-

²³ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 95-96; *La faiblesse*, 302.

²⁴ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 98; *La faiblesse*, 304.

²⁵ „Le problème du christianisme se déplace donc vers les pratiques, mais celles de tout le monde, anonymes, dépouillées de règles et de marques propres“ (Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 283).

²⁶ „De cette agir [Christian act, tactics, practice], [...] plus rien n'en fixe les remplissements objectifs, parce que, pendant un premier temps, la société civile a remplacé l'Église dans le rôle de définir les tâches et les statuts pour ne lui laisser que la possibilité, marginale, d'en corriger ou dépasser les circonscriptions, et qu'aujourd'hui le lieu ecclésial où pouvait se décider une tactique homogène de ces *border-lines* se dissout à son tour et laisse à chaque croyant le risque de les préciser.“ (86.)

tives 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“).²⁷ ‚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.

„Ce qui survit à l'effondrement progressif du ‚corps‘ – problème de toute l'évolution présente –, c'est un rapport formel entre le dépassement d'une situation et la décision de ‚faire‘ la foi. [...] A mesure que le ‚corps de sens‘ ecclésial sort de l'effectivité, l'articulation de ce ‚modèle‘ sur des situations effectives revient aux chrétiens eux-mêmes.“²⁸

It is up to the individual Christians to make their own connection between transgressing the borderlines of society and culture, and taking the decision to subvert its institutions by being faithful and giving voice to the ‚other‘ calling through society's and culture's ‚coupures‘. That decision, however, is not meant to create a new and proper identity. It can no longer be seen as a „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 a established discourse, doctrine or *doxa*. So, the ‚returning‘ of the Christian repressed is even more invisible and ungraspable now. Breaking with the notion of an *Ecclesia Aeterna*, Certeau ends his essay with the idea that Christian faith, fable and practice are a kind of

„[t]exte fragile et flottant, témoin de lui seul, pourtant perdu dans la ruine innombrable du langage, et donc *périssable*. Mais le statut de cette fable annonce la joie de s'effacer dans ce qu'elle figure, de retourner au travail anonyme d'où elle naît, de se convertir à cet autre qu'elle n'est pas. L'écriture croyante, dans sa faiblesse, n'apparaît sur l'océan du langage que pour y disparaître, prise elle-même dans le travail de déceler en d'autres écritures le mouvement par lequel, sans cesse, elles ‚viennent‘ et

²⁷ Certeau: La faiblesse: 267.

²⁸ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 86-87; La faiblesse, 287. Here, I quote the original version that differs slightly from the 1974 edition.

„s'en vont'. Selon un expression des mystiques, c'est „une goutte d'eau dans la mer'“.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 patriarch Jacob was fighting in the night near the Yabboq when his name has been changed into ‚Israel', as well as to the thief in the night the Gospel talk about as being the way the Messiah will come (1 Tess 5, 2). And he relates both figures to idea of the uncanny – *Unheimlichkeit* – as Freud ascribes it to dreams.

„C'est une opération passante et passagère. Sa marque ‚évangélique' serait la blessure que produit dans un territoire ou une activité diurne l'ange du Yabboq (Gn 32, 23-32), le voleur nocturne de la parabole, l'inquiétante étrangeté du songe.“³¹

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 origins in a call coming from the other. ‚Signing' his essay he writes how even a signature calls its ‚other':

„Ce texte est en effet un étape dans l'itinérance produite par la quête du nom *propre*, c'est-à-dire du nom qui nous vient toujours d'un *autre*. ‚Michel', c'est ‚Qui est comme El?' – Qui est comme l'Innommable, Dieu? Ce mot dit le contraire du propre. Sous le mode (craintif? respectueux? pudique?) de l'interrogation, il appelle son rature.“³²

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 wa-

²⁹ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 99; *La faiblesse*, 305.

³⁰ A footnote is added as well, giving the reference the references in the mystical tradition of the image of a ‚drop of water in the see': „Voire 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*, 305)

³¹ Certeau: *La faiblesse*, 305.

³² *Ibid.*

ter 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 his *own* name, of an own proper name as such: this is for Certeau the „marque ,évangélique“; this is what Christian faith is about.

4. Frame of Reference: One Way

At the background of Certeau's theory of Christianity, one can recognize the influence of several theoretical frames dominant in his days. First of all there is Michel Foucault. He provides Certeau 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 neither simply to lay bare the discourses that has formed – and changed – the different *epistemes* and epistemological caesuras constituting the genealogy of the *episteme* we live in today.³³ Nor is it simply to discover the ‚dispositives‘, which in Foucaults conceptual apparatus are broader than *epistemes* since they include the non-discursive elements as well, such as practices, strategies, institutions.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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 he has become a ‚subject‘ – in the sense of

³³ ‚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 McHoul / Grace: A Foucault Primer, 45-46. See also: Revel: Le vocabulaire, 25-26.

³⁴ Foucault, 1994, 300-301; Revel: Le vocabulaire, 26-27.

³⁵ In a way, Certeau is more interested in the changing dispositive as such. As if he considered changing itself a dispositive, arising in the change from Middle Ages / Renaissance to Modernity. See for instance Certeau: L'énonciation mystique, 184.

‚object‘ – of the human sciences, will disappear with these sciences as easily as „a face engraved in sand on a seashore“.³⁶ 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: „Non, non, je ne suis pas où vous me guettez, mais d’ici où je vous regarde en riant“.³⁷ The subject of a discourse is never where one expects it to be, even not the subject of Foucault’s own discourse. The subject is 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: „Plus d’un, comme moi sans doute, écrivent pour n’avoir plus de visage. Ne me demandez pas qui je suis et ne me dites pas de rester le même.“³⁸ It is clear that Certeau cannot but fully approve this thesis. Real thought is not fixed to a subject or identity:

„L’identité fige le geste de penser. Elle rend hommage à un ordre. Penser, au contraire, c’est se demander ce qui l’a rendu possible, chercher en parcourant ses paysages les traces des mouvements qui l’ont formé, et découvrir sans ces histoires supposées gisantes ‚comme et jusqu’où il serait possible de penser autrement‘.“³⁹

Foucault’s remarks about the subject matches with 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 putting for-

³⁶ Thus Foucault in the last sentence of *The words and the Things*: “l’homme s’effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable” (Foucault: *Les mots et les choses*, 398).

³⁷ Foucault: *L’archéologie du savoir*, 28; cité par Certeau in *Le rire de Foucault*, in: Certeau: *Nombre de oui*, 51. See also, in this volume, the chapter by Inigo Bocken, „Le rire des mystiques: Der Standpunkt der Kritik bei Michel de Certeau im Hinblick auf Michel Foucault“.

³⁸ Foucault: *L’archéologie du savoir*, 28; Certeau: *Nombre de oui*, 51.

³⁹ Certeau: *Nombre de oui*, 52. He quotes Foucault: *Histoire de la sexualité*, 15.

ward the radical ‚improper‘ condition of proper names.⁴⁰ Derridian deconstruction has shown that the inscription of the scriptural trace always already spoils the unstained and full identity it intends to affirm.⁴¹ Even a signature, in its very act of confirming the authenticity of the subject of the enunciation (*‚le sujet de l’ nonciation’*), 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 a 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.⁴² Certeau is very familiar with it. He was a member of *L’ cole Freudienne de Paris* (Lacan’s school), a loyal participant of Lacan’s weekly seminar, and wrote several essays on psychoanalytical theory.⁴³ Like so many French theories of the midst of the 20th century, Lacanian theory is post-structural. Not without reserve, it embraces the paradigm of L vi-Strauss’ structuralism that affirms the relative autonomy of the

⁴⁰ See for instance the „signature“ at the end of his essay *Signature  v nement contexte* in *Derrida: Marges de la philosophie*, 393. So the fact that, at the bottom of his essay, Derrida puts in fact three signature – 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.

⁴¹ Derrida: 1967.

⁴² For an explanation of Lacanian theory as a theory of the subject, see the first chapter in Kesel: *Eros and Ethics*.

⁴³ See for instance Certeau 1987b. For an essay on Lacan’s version of the psychoanalytical theory, see especially the last chapter: „Lacan, une  thique de la parole“ (168-198).

,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 base of the peoples intentions, of the sense of life expressed in it for instance. It functions in a autonomous way, independently from the sense expressed or understood in it. Following merely linguistic laws, that field *precedes* the individual, who, in contrast 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 live, including his subjective identity. The libidinal logic Freud discovered – the polymorphously perverse logic obeying the lust-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 – ,*der andere Schauplatz*', as Freud calls it⁴⁴ – 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, whatever imagined it may be, 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 in a constitutive lack. That lack – i.e. the point in the system where it is the verge to make 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. In that point, the libidinal system does *as if* it has a ground. And it is this ,as if' – this radically fictitious subject – that intervenes in the logic of the symbolic order.

⁴⁴ Freud, 1942, 51.

Not as its creator, since it is a mere effect of that order. But as what is able to subvert its ‚normal‘ logic. Thus, although the subject consciously considers himself to be the fixed ground of a symbolic system, unconsciously, it 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 it 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 shied 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 cut“, a „coupure instauratrice“: at the point where the world (symbolic order) lacks, there is its foundation. On the locus of its ‚displacement‘, it has its ‚proper‘ place. That ‚proper‘ place is mere lack, mere difference, „le non-lieu d’une différence dans un système de lieux“.⁴⁵

And how can I discover the world’s ‚non-lieu‘? On „the place of its enunciation“ („le lieu de son énonciation“).⁴⁶ On 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 „place from where I speak“ („le lieu d’où je parle“)⁴⁷ cannot be appropriated, not even by me, but from that place I can affirm the lack the discourse rests upon, thus allowing otherness and change. Subverting from within (from „my

⁴⁵ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 94-95; 1987a, 301 (Certeau underlines).

⁴⁶ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80-81; 1987a, 268.

⁴⁷ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80-81; 1987a, 268.

proper place")⁴⁸ 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, so Certeau argues, the way to open it towards its truth. That is, to recall just one example, the way Certeau interprets the May 68 Revolt: it is a „prise de parole“, a „capture of word“.⁴⁹ In a closed world, it rediscovers the practice and the subject of enunciation, of speaking instead of writing, of displacing the written, and opening it towards alterity and change.

5. *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 which became 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, 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 uncertainty, and faith means abandon oneself to uncertainty, to go away to a still unknown country, like Abraham leaving Ur in Chaldea. Faith is scepisis, is abandoning oneself to a questionable place, i.e. the „place where one speaks from“. As we have already read in the essay:

⁴⁸ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80; 1987a, 267-268.

⁴⁹ Certeau, 1994, 27-129.

„If the place from where I speak is not questionable [*soupçonnable*], if it was protected against interrogation, the analysis [of Christianity, of current culture] would cease to be evangelical in order to be transformed in the establishment of a ‚truth‘ of religious content.“⁵⁰

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-place of a difference in a system of places“.⁵¹ Being Christian implies braking open its tradition and doctrine to re-found its ‚*coupure instauratrice*‘.

Yet, the question insists: where is Christianity in all this? If Christianity is to be defined in theoretical terms referring to Lacan and others, what then is still typical 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?

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.⁵² 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. Natural science was founded in – and was a translation of – that speaking. Become more and more mute, the reference at that voice became an element in the deconstruction of the new epistemological

⁵⁰ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 80-81; 1987a, 268.

⁵¹ About saying yes to the „*coupure instauratrice*“, see: Certeau: *La fable mystique*, 239-240. See also Derrida’s comment in *Nombre de oui*.

⁵² Teresa of Avila: *The Interior Castel*.

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 that founds his relation to reality, a subject that considers 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 false pretension. Focusing its own subject, the mystical experience discovers a void within that subject, 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 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 void without borderlines, as an endless wandering move 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 its 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 these times as well. 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 pretended 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 „irruption“ that does not found a new place – a

Covenant, a religion – [...]. It introduces a non-place of a *difference in a system of places*“.⁵³

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 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 – 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 and where one cannot ‚stand‘ but only wander.

All these concepts and schemes are ‚negative‘. They ‚destroy‘ the foundations the world once was build upon. They have been used precisely to destroy the world's Christian foundations, as they had become valid after Antiquity and last well into Early Modernity. For Certeau, however, these concepts and schemes 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, then, are we not in a sadistic universe?

Faith is the basic supposition of Certeau's affirmation of Christianity. Christianity is an affirmation of its own lack of ground, its own basic weakness. If it is to be defined as „the weakness of faith“, as suggested in the book of that title (*La faiblesse de croire*), it is even more basically to be defined as ‚the faith in weakness‘. If Christian

⁵³ Certeau / Domenach 1974, 94-95; *La faiblesse*, 301.

faith is in crisis, Christianity is already re-finding itself, for on its most fundamental level, it is a faith in that very crisis.

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