Between the Weakness of Believing and Practices of the Self: Christianity and Culture in a Scientific Age with de Certeau and Foucault

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The postmodern "turn to religion" might be said to perform a "re-modulation" of the "religious" upon scientific modernity's cultural and discursive displacement of Christianity. As such, a new religious space is opened up which is neither a simple reversal nor affirmation of the cultural shift inaugurated by modernity. In this more welcoming milieu, Christian discourse experiences its displacement, less in the apologetic terms that have dominated a whole strand of modern theology, than as an invitation and challenge to rethink its relationship to culture and to express its specificity differently. Yet, insofar as it is not obvious that the specificity of Christian discourse, not least its commitment to a decisive historical event of revelation-salvation, can be articulated in terms of postmodern religiosity, that re-modulation continues the modern questioning of its legitimacy, albeit in a new form.

Taking the lead from Michel de Certeau's treatment of the contemporary "weakness of believing,"[1] I propose to examine the possible space of a Christian discourse which refuses a reversion to an

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[1] While the question of Christian belief and discourse informs the whole of Michel de Certeau's work, his explicit treatments of these questions are gathered in *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

apologetic stance, but attempts instead to find in this displacement the possibility of a new modulation of its message that genuinely engages the demands and possibilities of postmodern thought at the same time that it remains consistent with Christianity's specific commitment to mediating its founding event. I will address as well certain implications for Christian discourse of Michel Foucault's treatment of Christian practices of the self, to complement and offer an alternative to aspects of de Certeau's approach.

La faiblesse de croire

De Certeau's analysis of the possibility of a Christian discourse today begins with the problem of the loss in the modern period of Christianity's "social body," that is, with its thoroughgoing embodiment in broader society. This social embodiment represented, in de Certeau's view, the authorising site (*lieu*) of Christian discourse in the pre-modern period.[2] To the extent that the ground of Christian discourse was immediately historicised, an apologetics for the existence of the discursive form itself is rendered unnecessary, with attention being paid instead to the form of Christian discourse appropriate to the new cultural situation. In fact, de Certeau's basic criticism of modern Christian discourse is that, faced with the loss of its social body, it has attempted to retain, albeit through a reversal, its basic pre-modern structure. Where its social embodiment had authorised a Christian discourse, Christianity has sought in modernity to substitute a framework in which discourse produces an "imaginary" body. This body inhabits the spaces where the regional rationalities of modern discourse have left "gaps," on the claim that by so doing it is supplying a discourse by which society's self-understanding may be completed. But by defining its relationship to modern discourses in this way, it effectively places itself beyond critique, and, in de Certeau's view, puts itself beyond history and thus beyond consideration as a serious discourse.[3]

De Certeau interprets the whole complex of ecclesiological changes or reversals in the period centred on Vatican II in this light.[4] There

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[2] *Ibid.*, 265-267.

[3] M. de Certeau, op. cit., 269.

[4] For what follows, see ibid 267-270.

is a reversal from a discourse governed by the single ecclesial body to a multiplicity of ecclesial communities defined and produced by discourses committed, not to Christianity as such, but to specific cultural, socio-economic, or political concerns. This way, however, they become isolated from one another and lose touch with what is specifically Christian. In a second reversal, ecclesial groupings emerge that are defined by a commitment to what is "other" in Christianity. These, de Certeau asserts, tend to turn inward upon themselves. Sharing, in effect, the same structure as the first set of groups, the only recourse available to them to escape this reductive spiral is an oscillation between this and the first form. As such, there is an alternation between a purely Christian and a purely secular ground of discourse, but no sense that a Christian specificity might include a relationship to culture. A third more nuanced approach, which nonetheless falls short, seeks to restore what might be termed a "virtual" Christian body by articulating a specifically Christian style of engaging with the world, based on an appeal to Christianity as it was in some period of the churches' history. The difficulty here, for de Certeau, is that even if one were to agree that the Christianity of a certain period ought to be normative, it would be impossible to determine the content of Christianity at such a time. While de Certeau's reading has considerable analytical cogency in the contemporary context, the key point for the purposes of this paper is his insistence that these approaches fail insofar as they seek to circumvent the reality that Christian discourse no longer fundamentally informs modern, scientific culture. Henceforth, Christianity must articulate its specificity without being able to appeal to an authorising body, whether real or imaginary. It must accept the "weakness of believing," *la faiblesse de croire.*

Inspired by the writings of marginalised mystics of the early modern period and drawing upon aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis,[5] de Certeau proposes a Christian discourse on the model of a practice of writing, of *écriture.* In reading Christian texts, he argues, one experiences an "excess," that is, the *imaginary* construction and articulation of the

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[5] On the former, see M. de Certeau, *La fable mystique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); for the parallels he proposes between the structure of discourse in Christianity and in Lacan, see 'Lacan, une éthique de la parole', *Le Débat* (22 Nov 1982).

real Jesus, who strictly is absent from the text.[6] Jesus is encountered as an "originary absence" that meets and answers what de Certeau calls the "primary passion" of the reader, and that invites and calls forth a "re-writing" of the text which is at once the realisation of the reader's relationship with the absent Jesus and his or her witness to him. Of course, this re-writing figuratively encompasses a whole field of socio-cultural action that shares its structure. The experience of the "excess" is shaped by the socio-cultural experience one brings to the text, as well as by the excess itself articulated in it. The re-writing is a performance upon one's socio-cultural context that "modifies" it in such a manner as to embody the "excess" which points to the Jesus who continues to remain inaccessible as such. Thus it symbolises the precise points at which Christ bears upon a culture, pointing to both Christ and his concrete significance but without, on the other hand, reducing Christ to culture. The Christian discourse that emerges, therefore, has no site of its own and no purely Christian content. Rather, it is materially continuous with human culture and yet, insofar as it communicates a Christ "excessive" to that culture, represents an intervention in it—as the repeated writing of its founding event upon new cultural contexts.

At the same time, insofar as, in and through this process, certain texts and practices of reading and "writing," as well as means of maintaining and facilitating them, emerge as "Christian," de Certeau makes allowance for a certain institutionalisation of Christianity,[7] necessary for the articulation of a specific Christian *parole*, but at the same time external to it. As a continuing process of writing Christian texts into new contexts, while this institutionalisation may be secondary and provisional, it is reminiscent of a "nomadic" discursive practice in the tradition of a negative theology. Indeed, de Certeau conceives of the progressive distinguishing of the Christian *parole* from the socio-cultural contexts of its emergence and transmission in terms of the move away from an institutionalised Christianity toward a pure mysticism.[8]

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[6] For what follows, see M. de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 277ff.

[7] See C. Duquoc, 'L'Éthique de la parole, la dramatique de l'école freudienne et la critique du christianisme' in C. Geffré, ed., *Michel de Certeau ou la différence chrétienne*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991), 61-76.

[8] M. de Certeau, op. cit., 115.

Thus, de Certeau succeeds in conceiving of a Christian discourse that survives its displacement by modern, scientific culture, but finds positive possibilities in this "weakness of believing." This discourse retains its specific relation to its historical origins and elaborates its specificity in relation to culture. However, this rich and subtle synthesis embodies a number of tensions related to de Certeau's notion that the specific Christian *parole* is experienced as an excess over and above culture and progressively distinguished from it. This leads to two specific but at the same time related tensions. First, the problem arises as to whether we can be certain that the distinctive Christian *parole* that emerges does not in fact reflect the progressive institutionalisation of discourse in a particular direction, rather than that which exceeds that institutionalisation. The only available criteria in resolving such a problem would appear to be institutional. There is a suspicion here that de Certeau does not sufficiently problematise the notion of a specifically *Christian* discourse prior to its (post)modern[9] displacement. Second, the kind of tactical, nomadic discursive space for which de Certeau aims seems poorly equipped to engage with the strategic question of the degree to which Christianity's historical inculturation and institutionalisation has penetrated and been internalised within its specific *parole*, and continues to do so even after the social displacement of its body.

Practices of the Self

Michel Foucault's treatment of Christian discourse would seem to offer a valuable contrast to de Certeau's approach. Foucault locates Christian "practices of the self" as both in continuity with pagan practices and as introducing a new element into them. In particular, he suggests that between the classical practices of the self of about the 4th century BCE and the established Christian practices of the self of the 4th century CE, there stands an intermediary phase in which an anxiety concerning desire enters into the classical concern to achieve the appropriate

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[9] The writing of the term postmodern as '(post)modern' is to emphasise the point made in the introduction: that the postmodern constitutes a modulation of the modern, which both introduces both new elements into contemporary culture and its relation to Christian discourse, and in other respects is in continuity with modernity and its displacement of Christianity.

moderation in one's action and behaviour, and which paves the way for the paradoxical Christian notion of self-renunciation as a practice of self.[10] The implicit notion of the Christian at work here, I wish to suggest, is one which distinguishes certain cultural formations as characteristically and recognisably "Christian" but understands these formations as a "product" of the interaction of Christian and broader cultural impulses and practices. As in de Certeau, Christian practices, and by extension Christian discourse, do not imply a pure Christian content introduced into culture. Unlike de Certeau's appeal to an "originary absence," what is encountered in Foucault's analysis is a "product" or "compound" of the Christian and the cultural, which is nonetheless capable of being characterized as Christian. In light of Foucault's broader rejection of the explanatory power of origins, the prior "Christian" element combined with culture is itself best understood as such a product. Even if, in this view, one follows this process back to Christ himself, one does not find an origin in the technical sense, for he is already, for instance, a "product" of Jewish messianism—in theological terms, not a pure divine irruption in history but an *incarnation*. These Christian "products," then, do not point to an origin but rather, inversely, such appeals to an origin are themselves Christian "products" in particular cultural contexts aimed at articulating a relationship to its founding event.

This structure of continuity and discontinuity of events with culture, which could be shown to be replicated in other of Foucault's researches,[11] suggests a complex relation between Christian specificity and its founding event on the one hand, and between Christian and cultural discourse on the other. A Christian discourse is confronted less with the problem of the cultural repetition of its origin (or, indeed, its *telos*) than it is with the challenge of constructing itself as "Christian" in its encounter with culture. With no pure access to an origin,

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[10] A concise presentation of this material is to be found in Foucault's lecture, 'The Culture of the Self' delivered at Berkeley, 12 April 1983. See also the second and third volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

[11] Close examination of the epistemic breaks Foucault's proposes in his major works of the 1960s reveals, that although he argues for a fundamental discontinuity, he also elaborates multiple levels of continuity across these breaks. Not least, he proposes intermediary phases where a discourse, still within one episteme, addresses problems and strains toward formulations in a manner that on the surface mirror the discourse that will emerge within the new episteme.

Christianity's constructed relationship with its historical origin must be evaluated as a "product" that may or may not continue to be appropriate to the new Christian discourse being produced. The difference here from de Certeau's account is that the specifically Christian *parole* is not something that is experienced primarily as an excess to which one responds with a writing irreducible to it, and not something constant, but rather something repeatedly constructed differently, and thus a religious-cultural Christian product. While Foucault's approach to discourse in general promotes a continual process of freeing ourselves from the current order of things, the space of identity and change which he envisages allows for a considerably greater engagement with and responsibility for its institutional expression than does de Certeau's "negative" approach. While his earlier work sought for a decisive "outside" of reason and discourse, the later work increasingly figures itself as an immanent and ongoing process of drawing upon resources within our history in order to think otherwise. While his thought shares with negative theology a permanent suspicion of all discourses, practices of the self and relations of power,[12] it shares with Nietzsche and Deleuze a rather more "affirmative" concern to engage the concrete, contingent possibilities associated with the contemporary context. In other words, where the locus of a negative theology tends to describe a continual movement beyond itself and all finite formulations in a self-negation in favour of an asymptotic ground or goal, the locus of Foucault's thought might be said to be immanent and lateral, examining the heretofore unseen less dangerous possibilities within the present order of things and, however provisionally, promoting those possibilities.

Between De Certeau and Foucault

The notion of specificity drawn from Foucault's treatment of Christian discourse provides potential resolutions to certain difficulties posed by de Certeau's approach. Its emphasis on the historical

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[12] For interpretations of Foucault's work as a kind of negative theology, see, for example, J. Bernauer, 'The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology,' *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1987), 365-380; A. Bradley, "Thinking the Outside: Foucault, Derrida and Negative Theology." *Textual Practice* 16.1 (2002), 57-74.

production of a specifically Christian, inculturated discourse makes Christianity's institutions, taken in the broadest sense of the term, the site of negotiation between existing forms of Christianity and the specific Christian discourse and institutions that are appropriate to today's culture and yet faithful to its founding event. Equally, the problem of determining what is specifically Christian is transformed from one of determining the pure Christian parole, even as it is articulated upon culture, to the intra-cultural production of a Christian specificity appropriate to the context. However, these benefits are accompanied by a considerable complication of the notion of a specifically Christian discourse. It is not clear that this approach would not fall into the trap, highlighted by de Certeau, of ecclesial identifications with aspects of modern culture. Does not some cultural standard become the criterion of Christian specificity? There would appear to be something irreplaceable in de Certeau's notion of the Christian message fulfilling a "primary passion," and faith consequently as that which one simply cannot live without.[13] A "Foucauldian" response might be, on the one hand, to emphasise with Deleuze that we are always in the middle of things. While a pure Christian parole may not be accessible, one approaches the problem of Christian specificity informed and inspired, indeed constituted as a Christian, by existing "Christian" productions of its specificity. Although it perhaps bears different nuances, this encounter with the Christian need be no less decisive or profound. On the other hand, the particularity of the Christ-event has involved Christians in judgments about the relationship to it of other traditions, values and insights, and in allowing elements of these traditions to inform and condition its self-understanding. In a (post)modern context in which the previously established site of Christianity has been displaced, the struggle to elaborate an alternative (non-)site not only necessarily brings the whole "technology" of the production of Christian discourse to the fore of consciousness but into the heart of Christian practice itself. The tension between a traditional encounter of faith and the problem of a specifically Christian discourse, the sense of threat to it, would appear to be the price of a positive reading of Christianity's displacement in a (post)modern, scientific culture.

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[13] M. de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 26, 289.

Conclusion

While I have only been able to briefly sketch some of the issues impacting upon the possibility of a contemporary Christian discourse, it would seem clear that a fundamental issue concerns the manner in which a relationship to culture is included in the notion of a specifically Christian discourse. Following both de Certeau and Foucault, it seems clear that in a postmodern context, an explicit consciousness of such a relationship underpins the possibility of negotiating a new discursive practice in the displacement of its pre-modern authorising site, of retaining its characteristic as a discourse standing in relation to a particular founding event, and ultimately of intervening in contemporary culture through its specific parole. Indeed, in the space that opens up between their projects, de Certeau and Foucault offer a rich matrix in which to explore these possibilities. ✧