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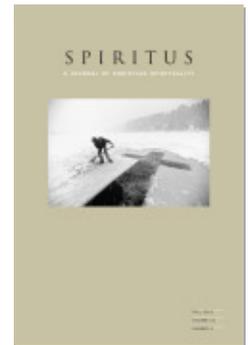
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# Michel de Certeau: Spirituality and The Practice of Everyday Life

PHILIP SHELDRAKE

*B*renna Moore's essay highlights the growing divergence and then final "rupture" between Michel de Certeau and his erstwhile hero and mentor Henri de Lubac. This centered around their contrasting understandings of how theology connects, or does not connect, with the everyday world or the "secular" and of whether the past is accessible to and useable in the present. My own sense is that de Certeau refuses to adopt a simple theology versus secular polarity. Even if the importance of the "secular" for de Certeau stems partly from his social and political conversion as the result of the riots of 1968, more straight-forwardly the secular refers to "the here and now," this age. De Certeau was preoccupied with the way all our relationships—whether with the human or the divine "other"—are shaped by space and time. This sensibility to the immediate and the tentative was born of de Certeau's immersion both in Ignatian spirituality and in historical theory. In reference to the latter, de Certeau's historical training, particularly his exposure to the French *Annales* school of historical theory and interpretation, made him far more sensitive than Henri de Lubac to the unavoidable "otherness" and strangeness of the past. This contrasted strongly with de Lubac's more fervent belief in the possibilities of historical continuity and its impact on his sense of how Christian tradition "works."

De Certeau's critical historical perspective on Christianity ran alongside a complex yet deep engagement with faith. Overall, I seriously question the assumption among some English-speaking social scientists that de Certeau's life and writings are neatly divisible into two parts—a first religious part up to the early 1970s and then a second social scientific period when theological interests and a religious narrative are essentially absent. I do not believe that de Certeau left theology behind or moved in some simple way into a form of postmodern fragmentation and dispersal. However, the problem with some attempts to retrieve him as a religious thinker, for example by "Radical Orthodoxy" theologians, is that they concentrate too much on his explicitly religious writings and bypass the implicit yet real religious underpinning to much of his social scientific writing.<sup>1</sup> This omission fails to do justice to de Certeau's emphasis on the **spiritual quality of everyday practices**—something which I



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believe has a **covert Ignatian trace**. My dominant concern in this essay is to underline certain continuities in de Certeau's work by highlighting key spiritual values that I believe are present in his collaborative social scientific project entitled "The Practice of Everyday Life."

Luce Giard, de Certeau's closest collaborator and executor, notes in several places his youthful fascination with solitary **journeys**.<sup>2</sup> The theme of journeying is, in various ways, at the heart both of de Certeau and of Ignatian spirituality—including the lifestyle of the Jesuit order of which de Certeau remained a member until his death. This was part of what attracted him to the Ignatian path. Solemnly Professed Jesuits take a fourth vow to journey anywhere in the world to undertake mission. "This is a vow to go anywhere His Holiness will order . . . without pleading an excuse and without requesting any expenses for the journey."<sup>3</sup> "One should attend to the first characteristic of our Institute . . . this is to travel."<sup>4</sup> Ignatius Loyola's assistant, Jeronimo Nadal, in his commentary on the Fourth Vow, wrote: "The principal and most characteristic dwelling for Jesuits is not the professed houses, but in journeyings."<sup>5</sup>

Journeying is both a geographical concept and a spiritual value. In broad terms, this value is implicit in de Certeau's later religious essays. In "The Weakness of Believing,"<sup>6</sup> he suggests that Christian spirituality must avoid the temptation to settle down into a definitive "place."

The temptation of the "spiritual" is to constitute the act of difference as a site, to transform the conversion into an establishment, to replace the "poem" [of Christ] which states the hyperbole with the strength to make history. . . . In its countless writings along many different trajectories, Christian spirituality offers a huge inventory of difference, and ceaselessly criticises this trap.<sup>7</sup>

His primary symbol of discipleship becomes Christ's empty tomb.<sup>8</sup> This is the foundational "rupture" that we confront. The Church no longer dominates Western culture and strong dogmatic statements will no longer be heeded. Christians are called to journey onwards with no security apart from the story of Christ that is to be (re)enacted rather than authoritatively proclaimed.<sup>9</sup> "He is not here. . . . He is going ahead of you to Galilee" (Matt 28, 6–7). **The Christian vocation for de Certeau is increasingly a question of following after the perpetually elusive Christ.**

In his essay "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" (originally a 1971 lecture at St Louis University) de Certeau draws implicitly upon the Ignatian mysticism of practice. This was mediated through the *Memoriale* of Loyola's early companion, Pierre Favre, which de Certeau edited for his doctorate and also through the paradoxical life of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mystic, Jean-Joseph Surin (carefully confronted in Douglas Burton-Christie's essay), who fascinated him until his death.<sup>10</sup> This "mysticism of practice" offered de

Certeau the Ignatian language of the *magis*. In the Exercises, God is the *semper maior*, the “always greater,” the always more, and Christian “practice” is the quest for this elusive “more.” Hence the need perpetually to transgress boundaries—in de Certeau’s words: “Boundaries are the place of the Christian work, and their displacements are the result of this work.”

One important Ignatian concept, echoing this value of transgression, appears frequently in de Certeau—that is the word “procedures” or the phrase “ways of proceeding.” The Jesuit Constitutions employ this concept to embody Jesuit life. The Jesuit way of life is described as “our way of proceeding” (*nuestro modo de proceder*).<sup>11</sup> In de Certeau, a major Ignatian scholar, this language is echoed in his later religious writings. In “The Weakness of Believing” Christianity itself is “a way of proceeding”—a fluid “practice” rather than a fixed site.<sup>12</sup> In “Mystic Speech”<sup>13</sup> mysticism is “a domain in which specific procedures are followed” as opposed to a body of doctrines. De Certeau suggests that, “mystic procedures” produce “endless narrativity.”<sup>14</sup> The mystical is not an escape from “history” and “the secular” but is mediated through them.

In terms of his **social scientific writings**, in the first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, written by de Certeau alone, he uses similar language to evaluate quotidian practices in contrast to the totalising strategies of the socially powerful. The Preface speaks of working out a “science of singularity”—the “relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances.” This is not merely descriptive but value-laden.<sup>15</sup> De Certeau’s purpose is to inspire readers “to uncover for themselves, in their own situation, their own tactics, their own creations and their own initiatives.” In the General Introduction the subtitle is “The procedures of everyday creativity” and the notion of everyday “procedures” is present throughout.<sup>16</sup> In the Conclusion to his *Culture in the Plural*, the everyday has an almost transcendent, mystical quality. “Daily life is scattered with marvels” and these are to be found everywhere. Luce Giard notes that de Certeau was predisposed by the Ignatian Exercises to see wonder in everyday realities.<sup>17</sup> **Giard also suggests that de Certeau’s essays in *The Practice of Everyday Life* disclose the ordinary as mystical.** To echo a phrase from Amy Hollywood’s essay, in *The Practice* the finite is already riven by the infinite. Giard refers to the overall research project as a reflection on what she calls “other ways of believing” beyond the Church.<sup>18</sup>

It is thus not difficult to detect in de Certeau echoes of the Ignatian understanding of spirituality as everyday “practice.” We should recall that de Certeau, like many of his generation, was influenced by Maurice Giuliani, an important exponent of new approaches to the Ignatian Exercises. One of Giuliani’s key themes was that, in the Ignatian spiritual economy, **everyday life was itself meant to become a spiritual exercise.**<sup>19</sup>

We should also note the climax of the Exercises, which invites the retreatant to “find God in *all* things.”<sup>20</sup> In a recent essay to mark de Certeau’s anniversary, his erstwhile Jesuit colleague Philippe Lécrivain underlines that in multiple ways de Certeau’s particular understanding of the Ignatian mysticism of finding God in all things lays the foundations for his later thought.<sup>21</sup> He draws attention particularly to de Certeau’s 1966 article in *Christus*,<sup>22</sup> “L’universalisme ignatien, mystique et mission,” in which he identifies the “Contemplatio” as the key to Ignatian discernment, understood as a movement from contemplation to a “spiritual reading” of the everyday world as the source of a mysticism of practice. In Ignatian mysticism one learns through encounters with everyday “otherness” to seek the God who is **always “more.”** Lécrivain draws parallels between the vision of *The Practice* and of *The Mystic Fable*, which he calls two diptychs of a single altar-piece.

Interestingly, the only explicit reference to Ignatian spirituality in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is in the co-edited Volume 2 and is not by de Certeau but by Pierre Mayol. This is unlikely to be coincidental. Mayol is discussing the concept of “neighbourhood” in reference to the Croix-Rousse district of Paris.

I realise that by focusing my information on just one family group on one street, the rue Rivet, I have respected the first preamble. . . . from the First Exercise of the Spiritual Exercises . . . about “a contemplation of the place” which fixes the imagination on “the physical location of the object contemplated.”<sup>23</sup>

To return to volume 1 of *Practices*, one of the most influential ideas is de Certeau’s distinction between **“strategy” and “tactics.”** Strategy is linked to structures of power. Tactics are utilized by individuals to create space for themselves in environments defined by other people’s strategies. This notion of the tactics of marginal people is overtly illustrated in his urban writing but is also present in *The Mystic Fable* and, as Douglas E. Christie points out, in de Certeau’s analysis of Loudun. Mystical practice is developed among people with no public power, such as medieval Beguines like Hadewijch discussed by Amy Hollywood, those such as Surin, who blur the boundaries between mysticism, demonic possession and madness or, to use de Certeau’s terminology, “tortured Semites” (closet Jews) such as Teresa of Avila or Ignatius’ close companions Juan de Polanco and Diego Lainez.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, de Certeau suggests, these outsiders affirm the “elsewhere” of God while challenging traditional centers of authoritative power.<sup>25</sup>

Again I emphasise that in *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau’s notion of “tactics” is not a disinterested observation but articulates an ethical imperative, which I believe is also implicitly religious. *The Practice* does not

merely *note* the existence of “other voices” but seeks to make space for them to be heard. Importantly, the “political” in de Certeau predates the riots of 1968 and his subsequent left-wing commitment. Before he entered the Jesuits, de Certeau was inspired by the Christian humanism of Emmanuel Mounier and by Catholic social teaching and continued to write in later life for Mounier’s journal *Esprit* with which de Certeau’s collaborator Pierre Mayol was also associated.

Finally, I want to focus briefly on two of de Certeau’s urban essays in relation to his emphasis on everyday practices. First, “Ghosts in the City,” originally a famous lecture addressed to architects, probably targets the Swiss architect Le Corbusier who had a powerful influence on mid-twentieth century urban regeneration.<sup>26</sup> Le Corbusier symbolised two aspects of modernist planning that de Certeau abhorred: first, a tendency to erase the past and, second, to subordinate the realities of people’s lives to abstract concepts of space. Le Corbusier fundamentally believed in a Gnostic matter-spirit dualism.<sup>27</sup> For him, true knowledge and value were found in the inner, individual life. The outer, public, world was of dubious worth and was not a determining factor in human identity. Consequently, his urban schemes created sterile public space and made it difficult for people to congregate casually.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, de Certeau was concerned that Modernist regeneration projects created upmarket apartments while displacing existing communities to low-cost housing projects on the edges of cities, which created instruments of isolation. For de Certeau, such **gentrification** of the inner city was **colonization by another name**. He was critical of “fresh start” architecture as vain and grandiose and was concerned that urban regeneration too often meant creating a *tabula rasa* by bulldozing older buildings. **For de Certeau, “the new” could only be welcomed when it respected history. Otherwise, the “ghosts” of the past (hence the title of the lecture) haunt the new spaces and make them dysfunctional.** What de Certeau objected to was the quest for what he called “rational geometries” that eliminate the “opaque ambivalence” of the human oddities that make cities real.

Modernist urban restoration also implied a separation of design from human lives. “Through its own movement, the restoration economy tends to separate places from their practitioners. . . . In this particular case, it is not surprising that technical administrations are so interested in buildings and so little in the inhabitants.”<sup>29</sup> De Certeau believed that a city is a richly textured fabric woven by its “users”—their chance encounters with the “otherness” of strangers, the stories they tell, the dreams they nurture. As he said, “Gestures are the true archives of the city. . . . They remake the urban landscape everyday.”<sup>30</sup>

It is important to realise that de Certeau’s attack on modernist urban planning was not simply nostalgic. Rather, he emphasized the power of narrative

to shape environments. It is “story” as much as design that enables people to *use* the city for creative living.<sup>31</sup> Stories take ownership of spaces and create bridges between people. For de Certeau, making space for grass-roots narrative is a vital factor for the city to be a community rather than simply a collection of buildings.<sup>32</sup> The essay “Ghosts in the City” is rhetorical in the sense that it seeks to evoke our sympathies and to focus attention on stories and practices rather than on what de Certeau calls “the law of the market” as the driving force of urban regeneration.<sup>33</sup>

In a second essay, “Walking in the City,” de Certeau expressed another of his favourite themes, “resistance” to systems that leave no room for otherness and transgression.<sup>34</sup> The “weak,” that is those who actually live in the city rather than plan it, find ways to make space for themselves and to express their self-determination. De Certeau, influenced by Roland Barthes’ essay on Paris seen from the Eiffel Tower, describes standing on top of the World Trade Center where panoptic visions contrast with the “practices of space” that shape the lived city down below. De Certeau writes of the almost erotic temptation of “seeing the whole”—that is, looking down upon the city and totalising it. On top of the World Trade Center people were lifted out of Manhattan’s grasp and became *voyeurs* rather than walkers. They read the city as if it were a simple text, but this is an illusion. As de Certeau puts it, “The fiction of this kind of knowledge is related to a lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.”<sup>35</sup>

The word “lust” is interesting. It is the perversion of desire. The notion of “desire,” true or false, is an important key to de Certeau’s thought—one that he shared with postmodern French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida but which is also central to the Ignatian Exercises. In the Exercises, desire refers to the inner motivations that drive us and govern our “ways of proceeding.” The point of the Ignatian Rules for Discernment is to distinguish between superficial impulses and life-directing desire. In de Certeau, mysticism is also associated with desire as both Charlotte Radler and Amy Hollywood note in their essays. To paraphrase de Certeau, Hadewijch is drunk with desire for what she does not possess. Thus, from the top of the World Trade Center the “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” is a false desire to escape our limits and to feel God-like as opposed to truly experiencing the divine revealed through everyday practices of ordinary people on the sidewalks.

Thus, for de Certeau, the true practitioners of the city are the walkers “down below.” For him, what he called “the Concept-city” of Modernist urban planning was decaying. What outlives this abstraction are “the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to control or suppress.”<sup>36</sup> Ordinary people construct their identities by the everyday practices of continually encountering otherness. “The act of walking

is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.”<sup>37</sup> Language is an abstraction until it is actualised in speaking. Similarly, the walker “makes the urban exist as well as emerge.”<sup>38</sup> De Certeau calls this dimension of the city the “noise”—which is a city’s lifeblood without which it becomes an empty shell. That is why he believed in the role of indeterminacy (also echoed in *The Mystic Fable*). For “to eliminate the unforeseen or expel it from calculations as an illegitimate accident and an obstacle to rationality is to interdict the possibility of a living and ‘mythical’ practice of the city.”<sup>39</sup>

De Certeau rejected the urban utopias of Le Corbusier mostly because they promised fulfilment engineered purely by planned design. For de Certeau, the “ineffable something” that he perpetually sought, that is the divine, was present in *people* and their communications rather than in the minds of urban designers. Interestingly, for de Certeau the events of 1968 in Paris saw a release into the wind of this “ineffable something.”<sup>40</sup> People were, in his words, “starting to speak.” Thus, de Certeau’s emphasis on “tactics” becomes itself almost a mystical sign. His anti-utopianism is a counter-blast to false gods. Walking is for de Certeau both the key to making a real city and also to his understanding of how the mystics operate. As the final page of *The Mystic Fable* suggests, the mystics are precisely those people who “cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, know of any place and object that it is *not* that, one cannot stop *there*. . . .”

The seventeenth-century Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin, addressed in Douglas E. Christie’s essay, was a life-long obsession of Michel de Certeau—one of his quintessential wanderers and transgressors. In this notion of wandering and transgression there is also, I believe (parallel to Charlotte Radler’s and Amy Hollywood’s remarks about mysticism) a framework for the powerful dialectic between kataphatic imagery and apophatic negation. In the mystical theology of pseudo-Dionysius these are not alternative spiritual paths but ultimately are mutually dependent dimensions of the human engagement with a God who, while self-revealing, is ultimately beyond all concepts, human speech and attempts at definition. Thus, “speech,” “practices,” “procedures,” “narratives” and, above all, “walking” (both of mystics and of city dwellers) are certainly actions, but in de Certeau they are actions which inherently refuse to “capture” or “state” a definitive arrival or conclusion to the journey in quest of the divine.

## NOTES

1. See Graham Ward, “Michel de Certeau’s ‘Spiritual Spaces’” in Ian Buchanan, ed., *Michel de Certeau—In the Plural*, special edition of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Spring 100.2 (2001), 501–517
2. See her recent biographical essay on the French Jesuit website: [www.jesuites.com](http://www.jesuites.com).

3. "The First and General Examen which should be proposed to all who request admission into the Society of Jesus," 7 in George Ganss, trans. & ed., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 79–80. See also "Formula of the Institute," 4 in Ganss, *The Constitutions*, 68 and "Constitutions," paragraphs 529 & 603 in Ganss, *The Constitutions*, 239 & 268.
4. Ganss, "Constitutions," paragraph 626.
5. *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu, Monumenta Nadal*, V nos 195 & 773.
6. Michel de Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 214–243 at 234. This 1977 essay was originally published in *Esprit*.
7. De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," 236.
8. See De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," 234.
9. See, De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," *passim*.
10. On the impact of Surin on de Certeau, see his reference to "my guardian" in *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2 and numerous references throughout the book.
11. De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Part 1, chapter 2, paragraph 152. See Ganss, ed., *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 129.
12. De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," 215.
13. De Certeau, *L'énonciation mystique*, originally published in 1976. Quote found in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 80–100.
14. See Michel de Certeau, Chapter 6 "Mystic Speech," *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 81–2.
15. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, volume 1, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), ix.
16. De Certeau, *The Practice*, xiv.
17. Luce Giard, "Introduction to Volume 1: History of a Research Project," in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard & Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, volume 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xiii–xxxiii.
18. Luce Giard, "The Question of Believing," in "Special Issue on Michel de Certeau," *New Blackfriars* 77: 909 (November 1996), 478.
19. See Maurice Giuliani, "The Ignatian Exercises in Daily Life," in *The Way Supplement* 49, (Spring 1984): 88–94.
20. The "Contemplatio," *Exercises*, paragraphs 230–237. Emphasis added.
21. Philippe Lécrivain, SJ, "Theologie et sciences de l'autre, la mystique ignatienne dans les 'approches' de Michel de Certeau SJ," link on [www.jesuites.com](http://www.jesuites.com).
22. De Certeau, "L'universalisme ignatien, mystique et mission," *Christus* 13.50 (1966): 173–83.
23. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 263 paragraph 5.
24. De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 22–23.
25. De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, especially Introduction, 1–26.
26. See comments in Buchanan, *De Certeau*, Chapter 1, especially 20.
27. For sharp criticisms of the kind of Cartesian "rhetoric of interiority" that imbued Le Corbusier, see, for example, Walter A. Davis, Chapter 1: "The Modern Philosophy of the Self" in *Inwardness and Existence* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) and also Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (London: SPCK, 1997).
28. For a detailed study of Le Corbusier's theories of self and society see Simon Richards, *Le Corbusier and the Concept of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
29. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 139.
30. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 141.

31. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 115.
32. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 122–30.
33. De Certeau, *The Practice*, 138.
34. De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, 91–110.
35. De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 92.
36. De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 96.
37. De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 97.
38. De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 98.
39. De Certeau, “Indeterminate,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 203.
40. See, Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11.