

A better response to the decline of the Christian West

Some fight to preserve what is fading. Michel de Certeau shows how this is an enormous theological error.

by [Mac Loftin](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue

Published on September 13, 2023



Illustration by Simón Prades

In 1973, scholar and Jesuit priest Michel de Certeau wrote that he was “feeling the Christian ground on which I thought I was walking disappear, seeing the messengers of an ending, long time under way, approach.” These melancholy lines capture a feeling as widespread 50 years ago as it is today: the Christian West is fading away, “destined to lose itself in history,” as Certeau says.

This was not an unreasonable feeling for a French Catholic to have in the 1970s. The 1958 constitution formally declared France a secular republic, Vatican II's policy of *aggiornamento* signaled that the church would adapt to the world and not the world to the church, the sexual revolution upended traditional gender roles and family forms, Europe's great empires rapidly contracted as decolonial movements swept the Global South, the May 1968 rebellion threatened to bring this revolutionary energy home. Old Europe was dying, and it was not clear what, if any, role the church would play in the new world being born.

Another French Catholic, Jean Raspail, saw these transformations as unmitigated catastrophe. He turned fear into fable in his apocalyptic and grotesquely racist novel *The Camp of the Saints*, also from 1973. Raspail told of a Europe drowned in a flood of non-White, semi-human immigrants, its demise assured by traitorous globalist elites.

Today's far right views Raspail as a prophet: Viktor Orbán, Steve Bannon, Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, and a whole galaxy of lesser right-wing figures in Europe and the Americas pepper their apocalyptic warnings of the death of the Christian West with references to Raspail's screed. For them, as for him, "Christianity" names not simply a faith but a particular constellation of religion, nation, sexuality, the family, and race. Any shift in that constellation is taken to be a danger to Christianity itself. Thus Orbán can declare, as he did at the Conservative Political Action Conference last year, that what threatens to "separate Western civilization from its Christian roots" is globalization, migration, and gender ideology.

Now as then, the feeling that a familiar Christian West is slipping away and an unfamiliar world rising in its place is not itself unreasonable. Christianity in Western Europe and the United States is rapidly declining. Climate change will only accelerate emigration from the Global South into the north in the coming decades, shifting the religious and racial demographics of Europe and North America dramatically. We will either end our global fossil-fueled economy ourselves or it will be ended for us. The Euro-American world of 50 years from now will not look much like the Euro-American world of today, and still less like that of 50 years ago, when Raspail and Certeau felt themselves at a similar threshold.

Of course, the right doesn't have a monopoly on funneling anxiety about the death of Christendom into ill-advised political alliances. Take the Episcopal Church (my own spiritual home), a progressive denomination that has long worked toward a

different kind of Christian nationalism through its Washington National Cathedral and its “Church of the Presidents,” St. John’s in Lafayette Square, Washington, DC.

In 2021, in a desperate bid for cultural relevance, the National Cathedral hosted Jeff Bezos—billionaire, union buster, and overseer of the brutal Amazon warehouse archipelago—for an evening of panegyrics to private space travel and warnings of Chinese threats to national security. It was an embarrassing display of flattery, reeking of the vain hope that giving a whiff of incense to Silicon Valley techno-optimism might keep church membership numbers afloat for a few more years.

Raspail and Certeau shared this sense that Christianity in the West is dying, but they offer two markedly different paths. Raspail’s, openly celebrated by the far right and tacitly accepted by many progressive and mainline churches, takes the self-preservation of Christianity as nonnegotiable, justifying alliances and compromises that might otherwise be unthinkable.

Certeau lights the way down a different path. In his intellectual life, he wandered between a host of institutional and disciplinary sites: Jesuit and priest, founding member of Jacques Lacan’s *École Freudienne*, groundbreaking scholar of history and historiography and everyday life. He also wandered quite literally: while his initial plans to be a missionary in China fell through, later in life he taught in the United States for several years and traveled extensively across Latin America.

Toward the end of his wandering years, Certeau wrote a handful of difficult and provocative theological essays. In them, he urges Christianity to resist the siren song of self-preservation and follow instead Jesus’ path of self-effacement and withdrawal. It is self-renunciation, not self-preservation, that is nonnegotiable for Certeau. If the urgent question for those of us who live in the Euro-American world and who feel ourselves called into the Christian life is how to live amid the dying of both our civilization and our faith tradition, Certeau can teach us to see transience not as catastrophe but as grace.

For Certeau, the heart of the Christian faith is the empty tomb and the angel’s words: “He is not here; he has gone to Galilee.” This moment, in which Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and, finding it empty, is sent out into the world to search for the absent Jesus, inaugurates Christianity as “an impossible mourning,” a ceaseless wandering and searching for the one who is never here but always elsewhere. The tomb is empty, and Jesus’ call to follow him “comes from a voice

which has been effaced, forever irrecoverable, vanished into the changes which echo it back, drowned in the throng of its respondents.”

What Certeau means is as simple as it is provocative: Jesus did not set down a full and final account of who he is and what his life and death mean, penned in his own hand. Instead, he handed his story over to others. Withdrawing from history, he makes room for a breathtaking diversity of texts and communities that will tell of the changes and transformations that he awakened in them. And our access to Jesus is always mediated through these responses. We cannot hear, see, touch him directly; instead we hear stories of him told to us by others, see the transformations worked in people’s lives by their responding to his call, touch those whose lives have been touched in an endless chain of responses.

This is above all a christological argument. Who Jesus is is the one who effaces himself so that others can take his place, the one who allows himself to be transformed into what he is not. “Since Jesus,” Certeau writes, “an internal law links his death to the necessity of making room for others. It expresses an essential covenant of Christianity with the unforeseeable or unknown spaces which God opens everywhere and in other ways.” It is because Jesus is absent that the church can arise as his body; it is because his voice has faded into silence that others can tell of what he made possible. This means that we’re called to look for Jesus not by turning inward to the already known but by leaving the familiar behind and seeking him in an unknown future. Since the empty tomb, Certeau writes, “the believers have continued to wonder: ‘Where art thou?’ And from century to century they ask history as it passes: ‘Where have you put him?’”

This Christology has profound implications for how Christians should treat others—religious, cultural, national, sexual, and racial others. If the church is the body of Christ, and if Christ is the one who effaces himself to make room for others, then the anxious desire to preserve Christianity or Western civilization at all costs is revealed as an enormous theological error. We are not called to beat back the stranger so that we might remain as we are, nor to welcome the stranger by assimilating them and making them more like us. Instead, we’re called to welcome the stranger *so that we might be made more like them*. The empty tomb, for Certeau, is the grave of any shallow traditionalism or “missionary totalism.” Christ’s salvific work, his work of making us like him, achieves not our self-preservation but our self-effacement: “There is proffered the grace of being altered by what comes, from ahead or from the side, and which goes on further.”

Though Certeau saw dispersal and alteration as grace, he was not driven by a hatred of the old and a mania for the new. He felt deeply the vertigo of civilizational transformation, the grief of shuttered churches and empty pews. The passing away of Christendom was for him something to be mourned. What he offers us is a way out of the insular melancholia of reaction, a path of mourning that winds through the empty tomb. If to be Christlike is to be open to transformation, then the Christian path “is not compromised by the weakening, dissemination and even disappearance of the (ecclesial) sites which it has traversed.” These sites were never sites to fortify and hold but sites from which to depart.

This is a far cry from Raspail and his acolytes. Longtime *American Conservative* blogger Rod Dreher has written several paeans to Raspail’s “prophetic” novel, warning that the West is committing “cultural surrender” by allowing in so many refugees that its own particular cultures are giving way to theirs. He sees the West facing an acute moral dilemma: Christians are called to welcome the stranger, but what if there are so many strangers at the door that their entrance might render our home unrecognizable?

Pushing things into the unthinkable, Dreher asks, “When, if ever, would lethal force be morally justified against unarmed invaders?” If the self-preservation of Christianity is taken as nonnegotiable—and even more so if “Christianity” collapses culture, nation, and race—then one can quickly end up justifying in the name of Christianity unjustifiable and blatantly un-Christlike horrors.

What if, instead, we followed Certeau in insisting that “the plural is the manifestation of the Christian meaning,” that the truth of Christianity is not a fragile artifact to be clung to and defended but something waiting to be made? Certeau reveals the will to self-preservation as a betrayal of Jesus’ call. “The response which it allows cannot remain moored, tied to a delimited space of the call, nor can it be confined to a (social or historical) site of the event. . . . It always has to take risks further on, always uncertain and fragmentary.” Self-styled defenders of Christendom take themselves to be protecting tradition, but in Certeau’s cutting words, they reduce tradition to “a (perhaps beautiful) museum, a (perhaps glorious) cemetery.”

To cling so tightly to the beloved and familiar is to be like Peter on Mount Tabor, striving in vain to nail down the ephemeral. Instead, Certeau urges us to be like Jacob at Bethel:

Always on the move, in practices of reading which are increasingly heterogeneous and distant from any ecclesial orthodoxy, [Jesus' call] announced the disappearance of the site. Having passed that way, it left, as at Bethel, only the trace of stones erected into stelae and consecrated with oil—with our gratitude—before departing without return.

For the foreseeable future, Christians will be tempted on all sides by jeremiads on the disappearance of “our way of life.” Right-wing nationalists will warn that all the traditional arrangements of family, culture, property, and faith are fading away, transforming into something new and strange. Progressive and mainline leaders will warn that their denominations will die out if they are not made to accommodate the appetites and prejudices of the market. This chorus may well be right. Christianity—at least Christianity as we in the West have known it—may very well be in its last days. But Christians should reject the temptation to rage against the dying of the light, whether by weaponizing state power against those bringing change or by cozying up to the rich and powerful and well-connected. Permanence was never our calling.

In a late work, Certeau describes the Christian mystic as one “who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere.” The loss of the traditional and familiar is certainly a cause for mourning, as the death of anything cries out to be mourned. But—having consecrated these passable forms with our gratitude—we must allow our mourning to pull us forward, elsewhere, on toward the unknown. We as Christians are called to have faith that while our wanderings will bring risk and danger, we might also find grace in being altered by what comes, in listening with attention to the incomprehensible words of the strangest stranger as perhaps the word we have been listening for.