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Making History with Michel de Certeau: Place, Alterity, and Victory over Death

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In this paper, I will be using the work of Michel de Certeau, a Catholic, Jesuit historian of early modern religious movements and Christian spirituality, as a dialogue partner for a reflection on my own work as a Christian historian. Certeau was a philosopher of history and a historian whose work reveals both his Christian theological stance and his reading of twentieth-century French critical theory often identified with post-modernism. My awareness of Certeau and interest in him originates with Elizabeth Clark's book *History, Theory, Text*. Clark, an influential historian of late antiquity and early Christianity, my own area of research, has taken her colleagues to task for "disciplinary blindness" in ignoring currents in the philosophy of history. She is convinced that "the study of early Christian texts stands to benefit handsomely from close attention to critical theory," and Michel de Certeau is one of several authors she discusses as worthy of attention.[1] Thus, in what follows, I will explore to what extent Certeau's philosophy of history helps me to reflect on the theory and practice of history.

I begin with an introduction that briefly lays out the debate on one of the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline, the ideal of objectivity, and then situates Certeau in the midst of this debate. I will then turn to a discussion of Certeau's work that will highlight several areas that are important to his thinking. In the third part of the paper, I will reflect on my own work as a historian, both publications and on going research, in light of Certeau's ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Almost thirty years ago, Peter Novick summed up the state of professional historians with an apt verse from the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."[2] Novick's book, *That Noble Dream*, provoked much discussion among academic historians as he chronicled the demise of the objectivity standard in the historical profession and more broadly described a profession in which there was no longer an ideological center. This ideal of objectivity, a traditional goal of professional historians, was based originally on a selective reading of the philosophy of history of the German historian Leopold von Ranke. Professional historians believed that by maintaining a stance of objectivity and neutrality they could discern what actually happened in the past through a careful study of all relative documents. As a scientist conducting an experiment, the outcome of which did not depend on the personal whims of the practitioner but on the meticulous following of correct procedure, so too the historian would devote himself to a correct method, maintain complete

[1] Clark, *History, Theory, Text* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2, 8.
[2] Judges 21.25 (NRSV). Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 628

objectivity and neutrality, and simply present the evidence that provided an accurate picture of what happened at a particular point in time.[3] It was this seminal basis for the discipline that had been seriously challenged by the late twentieth century, and it is the origin and development of this challenge that Novick narrates.

Writing in the 1980s, Novick wondered just how long the profession would be in "those days;" it is clear to those in the profession today that there is still no king nor is there an heir apparent.[4] Instead, the profession has become the home of multiple and competing theoretical approaches that has led to building bridges with other disciplines, such as the social sciences and literary criticism, while leading to even more basic questions such as the purpose of history and the appropriate subject matter of the discipline. As Novik tells the story, there were several key moments in the questioning of the objectivity standard, including the criticisms of Carl Becker and Charles Beard in the 1930s, and most significantly, in the 1970s, the publication of Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. The former questioned the ability of historians to be completely objective and to remove their own politics and passions from the studies they produced. The latter called into question the very idea that history is a science. For White, history is a form of literature, it is fiction, and its truth claims are akin to the truth claims of any species of fiction.[5]

Some historians have found all of this unsettling and dismiss questions on the theoretical foundations of the discipline as of no consequence. They continue to follow the basic trajectory initiated in the early 20th century: focusing on a sound method, pursuing objectivity as a goal, and producing competent studies of the past. Other historians have engaged new methods, often under the umbrella of post-structuralism and post-modernism, welcomed literary theory in particular as a positive development for historians, and encouraged other historians to do the same. There have been some exchanges between those on both sides over the years. A recent example is the altercation between Richard Evans, a historian convinced that the profession does and should attempt to arrive at objective truth about the past, and Keith Jenkins, a scholar of post-modernism who has made a career out of attempting to debunk the very notions that Evans and others believe are so vital to the discipline.[6]

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[3] The work of Georg G. Iggers is still the best starting point on what Ranke believed about history, how this was translated to the American scene, and how this translation influenced the profession. See Iggers, "The Image of Ranke in German and American Historical Thought," *History and Theory* 2.1 (1962), 17-40; and Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, rev. ed. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 63-89; and more recently, Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

[4] The last chapter of Novick's book is titled, "There was no king in Israel," and it catalogues the variety of approaches and questions that historians pursued from the 1960s through the 1980s [*That Noble Dream*, 573-629].

[5] For Becker and Beard, see *Noble Dream*, 252-278; and for White see *Noble Dream*, 599-607.

[6] Richard Evans, a historian of modern Germany, became famous for compiling evidence against the previously popular historian of Nazi Germany, David Irving [Evans, *Lying about Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2001)]. Two years prior to publishing this account of the David Irving trial, he wrote against the post-modern attack on the traditional theory and practice of history, a method that had informed his discrediting of David Irving [Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)]. Keith Jenkins had already published several books on historiography and the philosophy of history when, in 1999, he published *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*. In this volume he devotes a chapter to Evans, whose intellectual world, he remarks, is "of the flat-earth variety"

Christian historians have generally recognized the importance of theoretical questions (meaning a Christian philosophy or theology of history), and in fact, by and large engage very important questions regarding the nature of the discipline. Those of us who would place ourselves under the umbrella of the Reformed and Augustinian theology and philosophy of history are used to returning again and again to questions about how the Christian theological tradition, with its notion of redemption history, should influence our craft as historians both in its theory and practice. In short, what does it mean to be a Christian historian? It is not surprising at all, therefore, that several Christian historians have attempted to engage the questions post-modernism has raised with respect to the nature of the discipline and its truth claims as well as what posture the Christian historian should assume in the midst of this debate. I am encouraged that some Christian scholars have recognized the importance of staking out a place for Christian historians to stand, a place that allows them to maintain their faith while fully engaging and valuing the use of post-structuralist and post-modernist literary critical theory.[7]

In his own way, Michel de Certeau is pursuing this project as well. A historian of sixteenth and seventeenth-century religious movements, particularly mysticism, Michel de Certeau has earned the respect not only of early modern European historians but also the respect of scholars whose work intersects post-modern literary studies. Unfortunately, his work as a philosopher of history is not as well known – "sadly under-read" is what one Certeau scholar remarks – by those in the profession.[8] Very much at home in the world of post-modernist critical theory, and very influenced by scholars such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, Certeau, nevertheless, carves out his own space to occupy in the discussion of the philosophy of history that is at home neither with those who wish to maintain a traditional understanding of the discipline nor with those who wish to question whether history has any relevance at all in the world of post-modernity. "What is so compelling about Certeau's work, in other words, is that, unlike so many historians, he took seriously the challenges to the traditional practice of history rather than resisting them at each and every turn, but unlike many 'critics' of history, he never dismissed historical practice or the past off hand as something with which we need not bother."[9] I am convinced that Wandel's summary is correct, and I concur with him that it is this unique position that he claims for himself that makes him so important for historians to read.

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[Jenkins, *Why History?* (London: Routledge, 1999), 95]. He is convinced that Evans has misunderstood much of what postmodernism is driving at.

[7] For example, I note the following articles that have appeared in the journal *Fides et Historia*, a journal that encourages Christian scholars to probe questions regarding a Christian philosophy of history: Robert Sweetman, "Of Tall Tales and Small Subversive Stories: Postmodern 'Fragmatics' and the Christian Historian," *Fides et Historia* 28.2 (Summer 1996), 50-68; Scott H. Moore, "Christian History, Providence, and Michel Foucault," *Fides et Historia* 29.1 (Winter/Spring 1997), 5-14; and William H. Katerberg, "Is There Such a Thing as 'Christian' History?" *Fides et Historia* (Winter/Spring 2002), 57-66.

[8] Torbjorn Wandel, "Michel de Certeau's Place in History," *Rethinking History* 4.1 (2000), 55.

[9] Wandel, "Michel de Certeau's Place in History," 67

As a Jesuit active in the world of French Catholicism and the French academy in the 1960s through the 1980s, Certeau wrote his history and philosophy of history in the context of post-Vatican II European Catholicism. Similar to all Jesuits, his education had involved advanced studies in scripture and theology, but he never published extensively on theology or overtly developed a theology of history. Nevertheless, I will start my discussion of Certeau with a piece he wrote that does engage his theological ideas, particularly as they relate to the role of the church in the world (an idea much in keeping with the Second Vatican Council), because this piece also introduces some of the same ideas that will surface in his thinking about the theory and practice of history.[10] I will move into as discussion of his philosophy of history proper, therefore, after exploring his theology.

Working within the already established Christian theological tradition of creation, incarnation, redemption and recreation, Certeau's struggle is with the place of the Christian in the contemporary world. I use the word "place" deliberately because the notion of location from which one expresses faith – or, as we will see, from which the historian makes history – is so critical to his thinking. To put it simply, Certeau is convinced that Christians no longer have a place from which to act and speak as Christians. The real existence of a self-authenticating ecclesial body, a site for Christian production, that was present in the ancient and medieval worlds, has now been lost to modernity. Certeau is not of course saying that there is no physical community of Christians making up a church or churches; rather, he is registering his conclusion that the pre-modern church of antiquity and the middle ages became susceptible and was eventually undermined by "powers of another order," by which he means all the forces of modernity – politics, science, economics, technology.[11] Christians, eager to maintain the relevance and authority of the church, were all too quick to work with the political power and social movements, and this move only demonstrated that the ecclesial body alone was no longer a place from which they could act or speak.[12] Similarly, Certeau is not suggesting that Christians do not do visibly or identifiably Christian things; there is still a Christian ethics and practice. The problem for Certeau, however, is that this is an indefinable body of actions whose visibility is dependent not on the presence or authority of an ecclesial body but on the work of individual Christians. Individual Christians determine to what extent the "checks" – heeding prohibitions –

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[10] One of the most important events in twentieth-century church history, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) dramatically changed the outward face and inward orientation of the Catholic Church. It was at this council, for example, that the hierarchy determined that it was permissible for parishes to use a liturgy in the vernacular rather than Latin and formally acknowledged that other Christian churches existed and should be considered "brothers and sisters." For our present concern with Certeau, it is worth remembering that one of the most influential documents that emerged from Vatican II was *Gaudium et Spes* ("The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World").

[11] Certeau, "From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit," trans. by Saskia Brown, in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 219.

[12] Certeau's example is the move of nineteenth-century Christians towards socialism and the rhetoric of the working poor. In his view, this only further revealed that the church could not act or speak on its own authority without an external metaphor to authenticate it [Certeau, "From the Body to Writing," 220-221].

or the "excesses" – practicing supererogatory piety – of Christianity are in fact part of Christian practice and visible experience.[13]

The notion and reality of Christianity as an ecclesial body, a place, has become no more than an "ideological reference;" it no longer authenticates Christian speech and action but is itself in constant need of rhetorical buttressing and recreation.[14] Christians, in Certeau's view, have become much like ancient Israel. "The Christian 'new Israel' seems to rejoin the old Israel in exile and in the diaspora. Just as, after the destruction of the temple, the Jews were deprived of a country, with no proper place and hence without a history (there is history only were there is a site), so believers are abandoned to the road with only texts for luggage."[15] Midway through his essay, it is clear that what Certeau wants to underscore is the importance of the Christian process of reading and re-reading and of writing and re-writing. Beginning with modernity, the Christian site, or the locus of Christian identity, has shifted from the ecclesial body to this all consuming concern with the text because this is all Christians have left. The title of Certeau's essay, "From the body to writing, a Christian transit" reflects well this major thesis.

What has come to constitute Christian practice, Certeau explains, is an individual recapitulation of the "model" of the New Testament narratives of Jesus that emphasizes 'following' and 'conversion.' We only have access to Jesus in texts, and what these texts produce, the "repent and follow me" model, has no connection to any site of production, any ecclesial body.[16] It is simply the response of the pilgrim on the road to the luggage that she carries with her. The pre-modern church, a locus of authority, fostered and inscribed this relationship between the text and the individual Christian with institutional and textual authority. Now, Certeau suggests, the believer re-inscribes the narratives of Jesus, the texts, from a place in which there are a variety of non-Christian influences at work. What the individual Christian "writes" through their practice of repenting and following, therefore, does not have a clear relationship to what other Christians have written because there is no common site of production.[17]

At this point it might seem that what Certeau has in mind is hardly community at all, and this would not be an accurate reading of his theological concerns. Rather than a dour vision of loss of community, what Certeau is stressing is that in the Christian church there is a fluidity of Christian identity that is rooted in the conditions of the modernity (and now post-modernity) of the individual Christian's response to the texts that serve as the basis for Christian identity. Rather than pessimism, the thread that runs through Certeau's study is the need for humility. Interpreting the scriptures is therefore a matter of understanding limitations: "we must accept the distance which separates us from writers and speakers no longer living…" Even more, those engaging the text should not "pride himself on being where the speaker speaks from – the

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[13] "From the Body to Writing," 224-226.
[14] "From the Body to Writing," 224.
[15] "From the Body to Writing," 236
[16] "From the Body to Writing," 226
[17] "From the Body to Writing," 227-228

(historical) authors, or God – in order to explain what they 'wanted to say.'"[18] As a stance of humility, it should prevent the Christian from assuming the place of the original author, the "subject," and thus fully understand and restate better what the author stated. Similarly, it should prevent the Christian from making the Bible into an object, a "fetish" or a "relic," that somehow preserves a connection with what is desired through faith.[19] Certeau has something else in mind: "Christian interpretation will be a process of work of the self on the self, responding from a distance to texts encountered on the way,… productive because of the turmoil or (to take a more evangelical term) the "crisis" which, like dreams, they first provoke in us."[20] And for Certeau, what this produces in the modern Christian is not a new site, a new locus of spiritual authority or production, but rather a relationship "which is not defined by conformity to a Law but by conversion to the other, no longer a 'fidelity' but a 'faith.'[21] Here Certeau is drawing on his long interest, as a historian and theologian, in Christian mysticism. While the moments of conversion are critical in the spiritual life, these are not stopping points or resting points, they are above all, signals of difference and distance and emphatically "non-sites.' They remind the Christian of just how wide the gulf is that separates us from the 'other' we wish to attain.[22]

Before taking this further, I want to recap what I have discussed above. For Certeau, 'place' and 'text' are key elements of his theological vision that focuses on how Christians should live in the contemporary world. Christians can no longer claim to speak or act from a locus of authority that authenticates itself and is identifiable in and of itself; such an ecclesial body no longer exists. Rather, with humility and recognizing the difference and distance between themselves and their text, Christians must find their identity in a constant and humble re-inscribing of the scriptures in their practice that will ensue from and result in following Christ and conversion. Thus, in Certeau's thinking, the community of all Christians, "[t]he body of Christ as the church, has to weave a problematic way between its founding experience and its social reality."[23]

There is a consistency between his primary theological concerns, as discussed above, and his philosophy of history. In several of his most important publications addressing the philosophy of history, Certeau picked up on these themes of the critical importance of recognizing the place of the writer as well as the difference and distance between the historian and his subject, and this distance had profound implications on how one read texts and interpreted the past. In the discussion of his philosophy of history that follows, I will use his monograph *The Writing of History* as a base text while drawing on several of his other publications as well.

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[18] "From the Body to Writing," 233
[19] "From the Body to Writing," 233-234
[20] "From the Body to Writing," 234
[21] "From the Body to Writing," 235
[22] "From the Body to Writing," 236-237.
[23] Graham Ward, "Postmodern Theology," in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 597

Certeau returned repeatedly, and in several different ways, to the notion of the place of the historian and the influence this had on her writing.[24] At its most basic level, most historians write from a professional place that directly influences how they go about making history. "Akin to a car produced by a factory, the historical study is bound to the complex of a specific and collective fabrication more than it is the effect merely of a personal philosophy of the resurgence of a past 'reality.' It is the *product* of a *place*."[25] He notes the habit that historians, and other professionals in organizations, have of using the authorial "we" to express conclusions or questions. Although the historian occupies the professional place by virtue of his individual labor, nevertheless, this "I" has always been guided by a pervasive "we." It is the professional organization who not only dictates methods but also prompts questions and problems to be explored.[26] Through a process of "permission and interdiction" the profession guides the historian so that she can not write about "just anything" and so that she writes about topics from a particular point of view.[27] Thus, Certeau notes, there is a tendency to identify religious movements in 1500 as pre-Reformation rather than identifying them as creative continuations of medieval civilization; similarly, Renaissance humanism is a break with the past rather than a continuation of intellectual trends of late antiquity and the middle ages.[28] For Certeau, recognizing this gentle determinism, this powerful influence of place, in the work of the historian is crucial because it prevents a historical study from becoming simply "legendary (or edifying)" or more sinister, for Certeau, from becoming an unmoored, ahistorical ideology.[29]

This seemingly monolithic picture of determinism, however, is not the complete picture. There is no doubt that Certeau stresses the importance of the place of production, but he wants to emphasize that there can be multiple places of production that compete with each other. An ecclesiastical setting can shape scholarship that is competent but very different than something from a secular context.[30] Thus two historians, reading the same texts and deploying the same professional tactics can develop very different interpretations of the same event or individual. In addition, Certeau does not want to downplay the role of the individual. The individual is not autonomous, as we have already observed, but the individual historian does play a role in how she or he reads the texts, and this is related to the individual site of the historian. In a candid moment in one of his publications, Certeau describes how he came to choose to research the seventeenth-century Jesuit mystic Jean-Joseph Surin. He went into the project expecting more of a connection between himself, a French Jesuit in the twentieth century and his subject. What he

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[24] For a treatment that situates Certeau's ideas on 'place' in a cultural studies context see Ian Buchanan, *Michel de Certeau: Cultural Theorist* (London: Sage Productions, 2000), 58-65, 108-124. In what follows I will be addressing what he says about place as it relates to the historian.

[25] Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 64 [emphasis original]

[26] *Writing of History*, 64

[27] *Writing of History*, 68

[28] *Writing of History*, 31. Similarly, Certeau notes that there is practically no work on the theological treatises from the 17th century because of the rising secularism of the century.

[29] *Writing of History*, 69

[30] *Writing of History*, 31-32.

found was a disorienting sense that their own shared Christian and cultural experience, being members of the same religious orders in the same country, made Surin all the more distinct. There was a "difference not only of ideas and feelings but also of modes of perception, systems of reference, and a form of experience that I could neither deny was Christian nor recognize as my own."[31] Thus, while the location of the historian can be a powerful influence that does not necessarily cause bad history, for Certeau, it can also be a problem. It can be a screen that filters and obscures the view of the historian.

This potential problem with the location of the historian is related to the second major issue in Certeau's philosophy of history, and this is the problem of the difference and distance, the alterity, between the historian and the object of study. It is, in a sense, artificial to distinguish this concern about difference with his discussion of the place of the historian because they are closely related to each other in Certeau's thinking. In fact, the issue of the distance of the place of the historian from the place of his object of research is the main problem he explores as he develops his philosophy of history.

Certeau emphasizes, first of all, the origin of this distinction between subject and object that has influenced western historiography. Modern medicine and modern historiography begin at the same point in European history – the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both betray a common aspect of modern western culture that dictates "intelligibility is established through a relation to the 'other.'"[32] Both disciplines are concerned with the problem of translating a body into a legible picture that can then be inscribed with meaning – "the body is a cipher that awaits deciphering."[33] In the one case it is the mute physical body, the corpse, whose secrets and systems are revealed through the careful study of the physician; in the other case it is the social body whose manifestations in texts is revealed to the historian through careful prodding and examination. "Modern medicine and historiography are born almost simultaneously from the rift between a subject that is supposedly literate, and an object that is supposedly written in an unknown language. The latter always remains to be decoded. These two heterologies (discourses on the other) are built upon the division between the body of knowledge that utters a discourse and the mute body that nourishes it."[34]

For Certeau, this distinction is pervasive and basic to western historiography. The western notion of history begins with the division of the past from the present, creating an "other" out of what came before the present moment, and then further differentiates this other into a host of alterities: the ancient world, the medieval world, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment.[35] Each break in the past becomes a new place for a new discourse which the inhabitants recognize and which is affirmed and made more rigid by the present historian. Western tradition, although at times fostering notions of continuity, particularly with respect to

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[31] Certeau, "History and Mysticism," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *Histories, French Constructions of the Past, Vol. I: Postwar French Thought*, Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds. (New York: New Press, 1995), 439-440.
[32] *Writing of History*, 3
[33] *Writing of History*, 3.
[34] *Writing of History*, 3.
[35] *Writing of History*, 4

religion and culture, has consistently maintained a notion of temporal linear progress marked by ruptures that differentiate segments of this linear progression. Occupying this intellectual space, the historian then infuses a social identity into a chronological period, other than his own, by assuming and inscribing the rupture that defines it. The history of the French *ancien regime*, Certeau notes, always assumes and is conditioned on the French Revolution. The contemporary historian views French history from the vantage point of this cataclysmic rupture.[36] Western historiography is, in short, completely dependent on the historian thinking about the past as a different place, the other, that is distinct from his or her own place and then further dividing the past so that it is alienated from itself: the *ancien regime* is not revolutionary France, Roman civilization is not medieval civilization.[37]

It is not enough, however, to recognize that western historiography is a heterological literature that is based on the historian and her subject existing in two different temporal and cultural places. Despite his disconcerting sense of vertigo as he realized the significant gap that existed between himself and Surin, Certeau became convinced that his experience should not be unique and that historians must foreground, even in a personal way if necessary, the alterity and difference she encounters. There must be that sense of vertigo; if there is no sense of alterity, then the scholar will not be producing history. At an important moment in his essay, "Making History," Certeau makes the following statement: "History would fall to ruins without the key to the vault of its entire architecture: that is, without the connection between the act that it promotes and the society that it reflects; the rupture that is constantly debated between a past and a present."[38] He goes on to explain that history can not be simply a narrative of what happened, this he refers to as fiction, nor is it simply a discussion of the place of the writer and his methods, this he explains would be a criteriology. The historian walks the line between these two, between the historian's present and the subject's past, striving to not stray too far into the territory of either one and yet aware that both must be present in his method and his product.[39] Those moments of uncertainty that arise, just as Certeau experienced, are the essential experience for the historian.[40]

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[36] *Writing of History*, 45.

[37] Certeau notes that all of this is distinctly western. There are examples of very different approaches to the past to be found in Asian and African civilizations. In India, his prime example, it is 'coexistence and reabsorption' that informs historical thinking rather than creating distinctions and emphasizing alterity [*Writing of History*, 4].

[38] *Writing of History*, 44

[39] History, Certeau says in another essay, is a work of conjunction. It "mends the rents in the fabric that joins past and present" [Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 205].

[40] Phillipe Carrard has identified this as Certeau's important contribution to western historiography: all historical studies are necessarily split between the "utterances originating with the historian and testimonials – quotations and references whose function is to warrant the veracity of such utterances" As he observes, this puts Certeau in a different position than Hayden White and other post-modern critics who view history as a narrative construction that is narrative 'all the way down.' There are no facts upon which the historical discourse ultimately rests [Carrard, "History as a Kind of Writing: Michel de Certeau and the Poetics of Historiography," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.2 (Spring 2001), 468-469]. On this point see also Tobjorn Wandel, "Michel de Certeau's Place in History," 65-66.

Certeau, takes this a step further by describing his research on Surin. Historians, he explains have a habit of attempting to "domesticate the 'dear departed' so that they will not seem out of place in our shop windows or our thoughts; we preserve them under glass, isolate them, and deck them out so that they may edify us or serve as examples." Suddenly, he continues, such tamed exhibits of people so like us, become "savages to the extent that their lives and works seem intimately connected with a bygone era."[41] It is at that moment that the historian suddenly begins to produce history. History is a "reconnaissance of the past not in the manner of a present possession or yet another science but in the form of *a discourse structured by a missing presence*."[42] Or again, the historical product, a book or an article, is a literary "structure whose purpose is to articulate the *other*: a structure associated with the production or manifestation of an absence."[43] As always, Certeau is able to make this very personal. When the historian is doing his work properly he or she will respond as Certeau did to Surin: "I am an other in relation to this stranger; I am life in the presence of death."[44]

At first reading, it seems that this is to state the obvious. Of course at the most basic level the alterity that the historian experiences when confronting the past is based on a distinction between the living and the dead. Furthermore, Certeau acknowledges that history is based on this fact. "Historiography is a form of writing, not of speech. It assumes a vanished voice. Only after a once-living unity has been decomposed into a thousand fragments – only after its death, in other words –can the scattered traces that attest to what it was be assembled as an object of discourse, a unity whose purpose is to create intelligibility." Stating it more simply, Certeau explains that history, in part, depends on two things: "something (the object of study) *once took place* but that something *no longer exists*."[45] It is not completely defined by these two things, of course, because it is the present place of the historian that informs how he is aware of the disparity and disjunction between himself and the dead and how he understands and inscribes this difference as an historical narrative. Nevertheless, Certeau emphasizes that this is the heart of the historical problem: the historian is concerned with death, with what no longer exists.

It is here that it becomes clear that Certeau is moving far beyond what initially seems obvious. Confronted with death in this way, Certeau, the Christian historian, is not content to simply 'let the dead lie.' Not only because, as all historians, he feels compelled to understand the dead and their actions from a present vantage point, but because as a Christian historian he thinks about the confrontation with death from a theological perspective. Certeau is convinced that western culture in general is obsessed with death. In western historiography, this obsession is manifest in the way historians have given identity to civilizations based on the death of preceding ones. For Certeau, therefore, all history is a "confrontation with death," but, more importantly, he emphasizes, and presumably this is true for him, that history is a "labor against

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[41] "History and Mysticism," 440
[42] "History and Mysticism," 440 [emphasis original]
[43] "History and Mysticism," 441 [emphasis original]
[44] "History and Mysticism," 441
[45] "History and Mysticism," 441

death."[46] He broaches this topic first in his introduction to *The Writing of History* and he returns to it later in the same text. Through writing, the historian meets death and makes death manifest; this is the nature of writing about the past. But what the historian is really doing, he suggests is struggling against death and through this struggle is able to create a space for (re)production.[47]

On one level, Certeau explains, scholarly history can quickly become a game. What the historian is set on accomplishing is nothing more than a grand slight of hand; the historical study intends "to deceive death or to hide the real absence of the figures with which it deals."[48] It is a game, Certeau continues, because it is playing with notions of authority. The authenticity of a text does not come from the presence of figures in the text on whom death has a claim, but who apparently have been released from death for a moment; rather, the authenticity and authority rests with the specialist, the historian, who in order to accomplish his sleight of hand must conceal his own place and time. The historian collapses the distance between present and past and thus gives the illusion that the reader is for a moment with those whom death has claimed.[49]

There is more, however, to Certeau's thinking on the historian's relationship with death. Elizabeth Clark has suggested that Certeau's thinking on the practice of history as an effort to overcome death is central to his entire philosophy of history, and she seems to be hinting that this originates from his religious vocation as a priest. Certeau views history as "a burial rite that attempts to exorcise death through its insertion into discourse."[50] He is not content to simply analyze the past and develop models to understand the documents of the past; although important, such an approach is ultimately consumed with method. Instead, what Certeau wants is a history committed to the possibility of "resuscitating or reviving a past. It would like to restore the forgotten and to meet again men of the past amidst the traces they have left."[51] Certeau fleshes this out elsewhere. History revives the dead and "places a population of the dead on stage."[52] Much like the Christian burial rite that Certeau invokes, the historical text acts as an "enclosure for the evil genius of death," and in this way both honors the dead and eliminates death.[53] He goes on, "Through its narrativity, historiography furnishes death with a representation that, in placing the lack within language, outside of existence, has the value of an exorcism against anguish."[54] Again, just as the Christian burial rite admits the pain of death while offering hope, so too historical study is able "to deny death and almost defy it."[55]

Through history, "[t]he dead souls resurge."[56] Certeau was convinced that this is an important aspect of the historians craft; making history assumes an encounter with death and a

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[46] *Writing of History*, 5
[47] *Writing of History*, 11
[48] *Writing of History*, 323
[49] *Writing of History*, 323
[50] Clark, *History, Theory, Text* , 120.
[51] *The Writing of History*, 35-36.
[52] *The Writing of History*, 99.
[53] *The Writing of History*, 101.
[54] *The Writing of History*, 101.
[55] *The Writing of History*, 47. Although Certeau does not mention this text, the words of Paul in I Corinthians seem to be hovering in the background of his argument here: "Death where is your victory; grave where is your sting"?
[56] *The Writing of History*, 36-37.

revival of the dead that is inscribed as a victory over death. But to what end? On the one hand it changes the historian who is producing an account of the dead. In the face of the profound sense of alterity he experienced in his research on Surin, Certeau, by his own account, was changed because of his work on reviving this early modern Jesuit mystic. "Once I chose him as my object of study, I made myself a subject vis-á-vis the space formed by the traces he left behind."[57] As much as he was recreating Surin and his world in his mind, both through reading the documents at hand and eventually through writing, he was also recreating himself as a 'subject' different than Surin. Just as his understanding of Christian identity involves the work of biblical interpretation, a process that is a "work of the self on the self," so too his work on Surin was a self-construction as much as it was a reconstruction of Surin.[58]

Beyond the work on the individual, however, the revival of the dead affects society as a whole. Historical writing creates a dialogue, a line of communication, between the living, who are veiled and obscured in language, who are present in body but in a sense absent because of the discourse of the historian, and the dead, who are absent in body but present through the historian's discourse.[59] While the historian is overcoming the 'evil genius of death' and reviving the dead, the historian, with this process, is also creating life for the living. Not surprisingly, "making history," for Certeau is not only about the past but also concerns the present. It is the "living reader" who is at issue because the resurgence of the dead "provides a place for the living."[60] Place matters for Certeau, and here it carries all the significance he invested in the word. "Society furnishes itself with a present time by virtue of historical writing," because the discourse of western historical writing has the power of creating the past and differentiating that past, that alterity, from the present place of both the historian and her audience.[61]

In the discussion above, we have already had opportunity to observe Certeau as a historian discussing his work on Surin. Before turning to a reflection on my own work as a Christian historian in light of Certeau's ideas, I want to discuss briefly Certeau's most important historical study, *The Possession of Loudun*.[62] By the time Certeau published his *The Possession of Loudun* in 1970, there was already a significant bibliography as well as popular treatments of this early 17th century story of demonic possession, sorcery, and exorcism. His initial reading public in France would have needed no introduction to the story of the possessed Ursuline nuns of Loudun, the free-spirited priest Urbain Grandier who was accused of sorcery and executed, the Jesuit mystic and exorcist Jean-Joseph Surin, and the nun Jeanne des Anges whose exorcism and hand, marked with demonic writing, made her a celebrity after Grandier's execution. Standing apart from all the other studies of these events and figures, Certeau's book alone has become the standard account and has been translated into several languages, including English. The book, in fact, is noteworthy for several reasons.

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[57] "History and Mysticism," 441
[58] "From the Body to Writing," 234
[59] *The Writing of History*, 101
[60] *The Writing of History*, 100.
[61] *The Writing of History*, 101
[62] Certeau, *Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

First, there is the format of the book. Certeau himself admits early on that the book is in a sense divided with a noticeable seam between the two elements. All historical studies are divided this way: on the one hand there are the "ideas we have about the past," ideas that are conventional or unconventional that form part of the discourse of the historian, and on the other hand there are the remains of a past, the sources or documents, that inform the present historian.[63] Thus all historical studies live in the "inter-space." His book, "is cracked from top to bottom, revealing the combination, or the relation, that makes history possible."[64] In his book, Certeau does not simply refer to large sections of these documents but he inserts them into the narrative he is constructing. Around these quotations is his own commentary in which he contextualizes and connects these passages with the story he is telling and the argument he is making in the book. This is not a unique approach for a historian; there have certainly been others who have quoted extensively from their sources or constructed a book in this way. What is unusual, however, is the self-conscious way that Certeau does this.[65]

Second, this is a book that is not simply about a series of events at Loudun; rather, it is a study concerned with exploring aspects of a changing world. In other words, Certeau is able to connect these individuals with the cultural changes that mark the early modern period. During the height of the sorcery and possession phenomenon of the 1600s in European history, which corresponded with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, European culture was facing basic questions such as: "how can firm ground be found to replace those certainties now undermined by suspicion, those no longer credible resources and situations henceforth devoid of meaning."[66] This is a moment in European history when a confrontation emerges between what had always been certainties and what were now becoming certainties. Although all historians want to make their event or person of cosmic significance, few actually achieve it. With mastery of his subject and wider European culture, Certeau is able to achieve this.

But even when he is teasing out these connections, Certeau is also disarmingly circumspect about making such sweeping generalizations. This is the third item of note about this book: Certeau is very frank that there is an element of mystery that remains even after the historian has made his history because "history is never sure."[67] History is never sure, first of all, whether a phenomenon such as witchcraft in the 1600s in Europe represents the rupture onto the public stage of European town life of something that had been lurking "discreetly below the streets" or represents something new, a new religious movement in European society certainly connected with the past but also infused with entirely new motivation.[68] Even more, however, the historian is never sure because the historian is confronting in the events at Loudun an alterity

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[63] *Possession at Loudun*, 7-8
[64] *Possession at Loudun*, 8.
[65] On this see Phillipe Carrard, "History as a Kind of Writing," 477. Carrard claims that Certeau's insistence on a self-reflective component to history, which he clearly practices in *Possession at Loudun*, has had a wide ranging influence on many disciplines.
[66] *Possession at Loudun*, 2.
[67] *Possession at Loudun*, 2, 227-228.
[68] *Possession at Loudun*, 1

that has no real resonance in the contemporary place of the historian.[69] It is the sometimes radical, but always certain, difference between the historian and the past, a difference that is so important to Certeau, that makes history uncertain.

Aside from its contribution to the study of early modern European culture, *Possession at Loudun* is important because of the way it exhibits how Certeau put into practice his philosophy of history. Here one finds his notions of place and alterity very much apart of the study both in its format and in Certeau's own comments on the book. If anything, Certeau was consistent in his overarching concerns as a Christian intellectual, concerns that found their way into his theological reflection on the church as much as his work as historian. Although he never wrote a manifesto on his deathbed laying out his entire intellectual system, clearly, succinctly and completely, one can walk away from time spent with Certeau's body of writing with a very good sense of what mattered to him.

PLACE, ALTERITY, AND VICTORY OVER DEATH

In this last part of my paper I am going to engage these pervasive touchstones of Certeau's thought – place, alterity, and overcoming death – from a more reflective and personal angle. I do so not only to think broadly on what Certeau has contributed to historians in general but also how Certeau's ideas have helped me, as a Christian historian, to think about the theory and practice of history in my own work. For the past few years, my work as a historian has focused on the fourth-century bishop Eusebius of Emesa. With two substantial articles on him already published and now a book in print, I have worked extensively on him but I fear that this work has had more to do with the practice and technique of historical research and writing and less to do with thinking on what I am doing as a historian.[70] To the end of engaging Certeau's ideas, I list below three questions that relate to these three aspects of Certeau's thought I discussed above.

1. Should 'place' matter to the Christian historian as much as it does to Certeau? Central to Certeau's thinking is the idea that the present place influences what an individual or a group produces, whether that is Christians being Christians or historians being historians. The question of the place of an author is very much in keeping with a common post-modern criticism of the modern understanding of the human person as a rational and autonomous individual, and this criticism extends to the traditional understanding of the practice of history as an objective science. In this view, the historian is able to remove himself completely from the practice of history and with impassioned objectivity lay out what happened in the past through a careful study of the documents. The historian is absent; what he produces is a strictly an account based on facts. Thus, Certeau is completely undermining this traditional notion by his stress on place,

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[69] *Possession at Loudun*, 227

[70] Robert Winn, *Eusebius of Emesa: Church and Theology in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011); and Winn, "The Church of Virgins and Martyrs: Ecclesiastical Identity in the Sermons of Eusebius of Emesa," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.3 (2003), 309-338; and Winn, "The Natural World in the Sermons of Eusebius of Emesa," *Vigiliae Christianae* 59 (2005), 31-53. .

but it is important to note that Certeau is doing this not to undermine the discipline but to secure its relevance and credibility. For Certeau, if the historian is not self-conscious about his own presence in the representation of the past, in its resurrection, then the historical study is not history but fable that can easily become the tool of ideology.

Historians are trained to contextualize. We understand a particular person or event or text from the past by grounding them as much as possible in their world of people, and places and ideas. It is only when this work has been done that we can begin to speak with authority on the significance of the object of our study. This being the case, it does not seem to be remiss for the historian to contextualize herself. In fact, I would argue with Certeau that this is absolutely critical to what historians do. When we think about the historian, a human subject who is constructed out of a whole array of influences that in turn goad her to think about her own world and, consequently, the world of the past, in certain ways, how can we not come to the conclusion the historian in her context is a vitally important part of making history? When the historian has self-consciously situated herself in her own place, exposing the cultural, political, or religious predilections that have shaped her, the same historian has also revealed much about how and why she chose to provide a context for her own topic. Contextualizing is little more than deciding what individuals or ideas or places or events are most helpful to understand the subject a historian is studying. It is, in other words, a matter of the historian making choices; weighing the value of all possible influences and judging what is most important. When a historian is self-conscious about who they are and their place, when a historian, with humility, acknowledges that his study is not the universal, final word on a topic, then the history achieves a level of credibility it would not otherwise have as the work of a particular historian about a particular subject.

Some historians have balked at this picture of the historian as a construct whose context is as much the story as the historical study itself. Does this not undermine the objectivity of the historian and the accuracy of his account? Thomas Haskell, who published an important essay on this very problem, provides some useful guidance to think through this problem. Writing in response to Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream,* Haskell's thesis is very simple: objectivity does not equal neutrality.[71] Although historians should overcome themselves as much as possible for the purpose of attempting to record accurately the interpretations of a particular historical problem that differ from their own, this does not mean that historians should erase themselves completely with the hope of maintaining neutrality when engaging in his research and writing. For Haskell, a historian who holds passionate political views or who is openly committed to some cause that intersects with a research project does not at all violate the ideal of objectivity. A historian can be fair to opposing interpretations and fair in their assessment of evidence and still maintain their commitments. A historian can, in Haskell's words, still construct a "powerful argument," a rhetorical approach that articulates all other positions as persuasively as their exponents would before laying out a different position.[72]

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[71] Thomas Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice n Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History and Theory* 29.2 (1990), 34-43.

[72] Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality,"

Haskell's suggestion to historians, therefore, is to think of 'objectivity' as a technique or method and not as an ideological posture, and, in this way, he occupies the same space as Certeau. Neither would say that a historian should attempt erase themselves from the process of making history; in fact, Certeau in particular, but Haskell as well, would say that you are unable to do this. I use myself as an example. My book on Eusebius of Emesa represents well the practice of good history.[73] It would, I am confident, pass the test of both Certeau and Haskell on what characterizes the acceptable standards of historical craft as well as being fair and open to all positions. However, I would be foolish to suggest that my study is the last word on him; in fact, I am forced to concede, in light of what Certeau has argued, that my work on Eusebius is just that – my work, my Eusebius. Is is an account of Eusebius seen through the eyes of a 21st century, American, protestant academic. Although I hasten to point out that these studies have much in them that any scholar looking at Eusebius's writings would recognize as valid, I would also admit that there is a 'Winn nuance' to this picture of Eusebius. I wonder, for example, if another scholar would have seen in Eusebius's sermons as strong of a link as I did in his thinking between correct biblical interpretation and ecclesiastical identity such that the church is dependent on a correct reading of scripture? Could one read Eusebius in such as way that the issue of biblical interpretation, which, there can be no doubt, is vitally important to him, was subsumed under the authority of the church along with his other theological concerns? Should a portrait of Eusebius, in other words, emphasize the primacy of scripture or the primacy of the church?

Again, I certainly am not invalidating my study of Eusebius, nor I think would Certeau, but I, with Certeau, am suggesting that all historical studies must be understood as a product of a place. The breath I breathed into Eusebius that revived his powerful rhetoric, at least on the printed page, is twenty-first century, American protestant breath and not fourth- century, eastern Mediterranean, episcopal breath. It is the unusual, even unnatural, invasion of the present into the past that makes history, and all historians, no less Christian historians, should readily admit this and recognize the limitations and value of their studies.

2. Should the notion of 'alterity' concern the Christian historian as much as it does Certeau? Certeau's insistence on the critical importance of place in history is directly related to his equally insistent emphasis on the alterity of what the historian investigates. The historian, occupying one place, confronts in the people and events of the past the 'other,' and this profound sense of alterity is what a historian should experience. On one level, there can be no arguing with Certeau on his observations about how rooted western historiography is in the notion of difference and distance. Historians and popular culture in general often understand the identity of a given period in relation to a past that was different. Periodization such as the "middle ages" and "early modern Europe" have become standard ways of discussing the past; and by discussing

[73] Both available for your inspection in my tenure file.

the past in this way, historians are giving tacit if not open agreement to the idea that the defining characteristics of a period are how it differs from other periods rather than their continuity.

The discontinuity between the historians present and the past, that sense of vertigo that Certeau's claims is so important to experience when studying the past, is another matter. In part, my instincts as a historian resist this claim. What makes history so attractive and so fascinating, and, to be honest, so relevant to many people, is that there is continuity between the past and present. It is satisfying to find that people living at various times shared similar concerns and problems and navigated similar relationships; it is satisfying to know that they lived and died like us. We want history to be useful, to speak to us, to provide guidance across the centuries, even to provide evidence in confrontations over the character of politics or institutions in the present. Such sentiments are based on the notion that there is continuity with the past that can speak to the present, and it is precisely on this point that Certeau appears to register his unequivocal "no."

I say 'appears' because of course Certeau is not denying that there can be elements of continuity; what he is claiming, however, is that all the slogans I trotted out in the previous paragraph are evidence of the place of the historian. These are present concerns in search of continuity just as Certeau was in search of continuity as he began his research into Surin. But the bridges of continuity that he had thrown over the temporal and cultural chasm that separated himself and Surin crumbled one by one the more he attempted to reach Surin in his place. What he was forced to admit, and it is to Certeau's credit that he was willing to admit this, is that what ever continuity might have existed between himself and his brother Jesuit, the stark reality of alterity overpowered and overwhelmed the sense of continuity he imagined he could use to access him.

I know Certeau is right, and I know this because of the nature of my own research area of early Christianity. For the Christian historian studying early Christianity, it is very important to check oneself repeatedly to make sure that this sense of distance is maintained. In the historiography of early Christianity, this has not always been the case. There is a long tradition of studies in patristics whose sole purpose is to prove that the early church believed or worshiped or read the Bible or performed charity "just like us" and, more often than not, "not like them." It has, in other words, served an apologetic function to authenticate one's own religious community, whether Protestant, or Catholic, or Orthodox, and discredit, either respectfully or viciously, other Christian denominations. This attempt to marshal the past to serve under a particular denominational banner is in a sense an effort to erase any difference or distinction or alterity between the early church and the temporal and cultural place of the historian representing a religious group. There have been several examples of this. One can think, for example, of the nineteenth-century British attempt to make early Christianity into a form of Anglicanism.[74] Or

[74] The most famous example of this in patristic studies is the series of translations of and commentaries on early Christian writers made in the nineteenth century by British authors and now published in a multiple volume series: *The Ante Nicene Fathers* and *The Nicene Fathers, series I* and *series II*. In the hands of these British divines, the entire period of late antique Christianity begins to feel remarkably like Victorian England with little difference between the gentlemen Anglican bishops of the nineteenth century and the bishops of the 4th and 5th century Mediterranean world.

again, the current attempts to make biblical commentaries from late antique Christian writers available for protestant, largely evangelical, Christians to use as if there were no significant cultural gap between the original authors and the experience of twenty-first century Christians today.[75]

Although I am the first to affirm that interest in ancient Christianity is a good thing and that Christians thinking about their past is a very good and healthy thing, I am also fearful that such works do as much to obscure as they do to illumine the Christian past. It is so important to not fall into the trap, a trap that I easily fall prey to, of lazily assuming that when a third-century Christian writer begins to talk about some Christian practice or theological concept or biblical passage that they mean the same thing that I do. Hard work and the willingness to experience the kind of disorientation Certeau describes are required to avoid this problem. Although perhaps not with the same intensity, I understand what Certeau is describing. In my studies of Eusebius, I found myself often jarred out of complacency as I read through his sermons that, up to a point, offered no resistance to my cultural and temporal place but would suddenly shock me into an awareness that I am encountering a very different world. This could take the form of anything from how he read the Bible to how he understood the person of Christ to the activities in which he assumed Christians were regularly participating.[76]

I would agree with Ceretau that this is necessary. If there is no sense of destabilizing vertigo at times, no sense that this is an encounter with another world, then the historian should seriously inquire what she is writing and for what purpose. In the case of my own field, I would point out that apologetics might use texts from the past, but it is not history. History revives people and institutions and events from the past in all their glory and shame, their beauty and ugliness, their similarity and difference. In the interest of polishing the glory and beauty of a present institution, apologetics conceals the shame and ugliness; it sacrifices difference on the altar of similarity. What should emerge from a historical study, whether this is a deliberate goal of the historian or not, is as much the discontinuity between past and present as any continuity between them.

3. Is conquering death a useful way for the Christian historian to think about their craft? If emphasizing the notion of place and alterity situates Certeau in the broad category of post-modernism, it is in his emphasis on victory over death, a feature that is unavoidable in his

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[75] I am thinking of the *Ancient Christian Commentary* series published by Inter-Varsity Press. On one level, I applaud the publisher and scholars who have committed themselves up this task. Educating evangelicals about the traditions and the ideas of the early church is vitally important. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the method they have adopted to present this material and the lack of distance that is communicated between these writers of the late antique Mediterranean world, a *very different* world, and our own contemporary scene.

[76] For example, it is obvious that Christians in the mid-fourth century eastern Mediterranean simply did not think about the Christian life in the same way that contemporary American Christians do. Most American Christians do not think that it is reasonable to be a loyal Christian while at the same time believe that prayers for the sick should be handled by the local rabbi (everyone knows of course that the prayers of a rabbi are much more effective when it comes to sickness!) and that devotion to the solar cult, the sun god, is an important part of personal piety. But these are the Christians that Eusebius addressed regularly in his church, and the little glimpses that we get of his audience in his sermons suddenly casts all the sermons in a different light.

writings, where one hears the unique voice of Certeau. The analogy of the historian as officiating at a burial rite might unnerve some historians; to others, this may seem like little more than necromancy. I am convinced, however, that Christian historians ought to follow Certeau's lead, and take up the idea that what we are doing is extending life as disciples of the one who is "the way, the truth, and the life." There are good reasons for the Christian historian to adopt such a posture, and in what follows, I am going to take up two additional dialogue partners, both of whom, I am convinced, have something to contribute to my conclusion.

Robert Wennberg, formerly of Westmont College, has suggested that the historian has a moral obligation to the dead on several levels. "Telling another's story is filled with consequences for those whose story it is, potentially conferring on them benefits or harm, dispensing justice or injustice by fair or unfair treatment. It is, therefore, never a morally indifferent activity. To the extent that historians seek to tell another's story, they do so with moral obligations not only to the consumers of their efforts but to their subjects as well."[77] Having argued that the dead have a moral standing, that they must be approached with the same thoughtful concern and responsibility as the living, Wennberg is underscoring that history is "never a morally indifferent activity."[78] Careless analysis, one-sided interpretation, suppression of information, and other actions of historians that could result in a depiction of an individual in a less than attractive light are not just an issue of distorted truth but of injustice, of wronging an individual or group who are part of the "moral community."[79] But Wennberg takes this a step further. It is not just a concern about injustice that should drive the historian, particularly the Christian historian, but maintaining the moral concern for the dead should lead to an effort to "redeem the past." Historians respond to the moral standing of the dead by extending justice to those who have suffered injustice, to the marginalized and exploited groups that haunt the past. Wennberg admits that this is certainly beneficial to the living who are in someway connected to such groups, whether ethnically or culturally or, in the case of the exploitation of women, according to gender, because they may benefit from new "public respect" and possibly civic equality through the story of how their forbearers suffered injustice. More importantly, however, "there is also a benefit here, posthumous in this case, that comes to the dead, whose suffering and oppression is being (partially) redeemed." It is an act of redemption because the good that comes from their story being told is an extension of their own story that has now achieved a happier ending.[80] Furthermore, this act of redemption that the historian performs by remembering and reminding her audience about the dead, this "redemptive word" that saves an individual or group from "oblivion," ensures that death is not the last chapter nor that the cruelty and oppression that some have suffered is the final word.[81]

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[77] Robert Wennberg, "The Moral Standing of the Dead and the Writing of History," *Fides et Historia* 30.2 (Summer/Fall 1998), 56.
[78] Wennberg, "The Moral Standing of the Dead," 56.
[79] Wennberg, "The Moral Standing of the Dead," 57.
[80] Wennberg, "The Moral Standing of the Dead," 59.
[81] Wennberg, "The Moral Standing of the Dead," 61.

Although moving along different intellectual trajectories and using different language, Certeau and Wennberg are nevertheless moving in a parallel direction. Assuming that one accepts Wennberg's argument that the dead have a moral standing, and I for one am convinced, he has provided a compelling reason to take seriously Certeau's notion that history involves engaging people of the past as just that, individual whose lives are worthy of recognition and as a means of "denying death" its final say on their lives. Although writing from the stance of a Christian philosopher and ethicist, Wennberg's essay is not theological per se in his discussion of the historian and the dead; my second dialogue partner, the fourth-century bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, will introduce a theological rationale for taking up Certeau's commitment to extending life to the dead, what follows is a brief discussion of his most important theological text, *De Incarnatione Verbi* [*On the Incarnation of the Word*].[82]

In this text, Athanasius begins his discussion of the story of Christianity, and for him it is an epic story of the victor overcoming all obstacles and enemies, with Genesis 1-3, and immediately narrows his focus to two verses – Genesis 1.26-27. Human beings are made in the image of God.[83] For Athanasius, it was important to underscore that while the Word, the Logos in Greek, brought all things into existence, human beings are who they are because they alone bear the divine image and participate in an intimate way with the life of the Logos and thus a life of divine reason.[84] This, for Athanasius, is the essence of human nature – being an image bearer of the Logos.[85] The Genesis narrative continues, of course, and the human couple does not stay in this original state. For Athanasius, there are two important facets of the fall that are crucial to understand. First, the event of the fall was the moment that the two in the garden turned away from the Logos and rejected him. This was not simply an affront to God and an act of disobedience; it was much more. By rejecting the Logos, the human couple was rejecting the divine image and their participation in the life of the Logos and thus a life of divine reason. In fact, by rejecting the Logos, they were rejecting their own creation and thus embracing non-existence. They were choosing death. Secondarily, the human couple, by rejecting the Logos, was also choosing irrationality over a rational life. Thus, religious and cultural error, sin, follows unavoidably from this choice of death.[86]

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[82] And here I am, openly attempting to "domesticate" a figure so far removed from my "place" that the chasm between myself and him is all but unbridgeable. Our shared religious views provide the only tenuous link between his world and my own, but even this link, based on what I had already said in this paper, should be handled with great care. For my purposes, I will draw on the theology of Athanasius with the following assumption in place: his theology, as outlined here, is an important source for of a long lived tradition that is still alive and well in Christian theology. It is, in other words, not so much a domestication of Athanasius as it is reviving him to be the spokesman for a position that Christians have articulated and re-articulated down to the present.

[83] Athanasius, "De Incarnatione Verbi 3" in *Contra Gentes; De Incarnatione Verbi*, ed. and trans. Robert Thompson, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 139-143.

[84] The Greek word *logos* carries the connotations of 'word,' 'statement,' 'thought,' 'idea,' 'reason,' 'argument,' and even 'text' or 'treatise.'

[85] Athanasius , "De Incarnatione Verbi 3," 139-143. Athanasius is of course drawing on John 1 in this part of the text, and in a common hermeneutical tactic for early Christian theologians, he is reading Genesis 1 and John 1 as passages that complement and complete each other.

[86] Athanasius, "De Incarnatione Verbi 4-5," 143-147

The consequence of the fall, therefore, was simply a natural consequence as much as it was an active punishment from God. The first humans chose non-existence and that is what they received. Although a just outcome, according to Athanasius, nevertheless, this outcome created an "improper" and "absurd" situation.[87] It would be improper if creatures whom God had brought into existence and on whom he bestowed the divine image should suddenly pass into non-existence. Such a possibility, Athanasius concludes, would call into question the power and authority of God. But it would be absurd if the creatures did not justly receive what they had chosen and what God had decreed, as recorded in Genesis 1, would follow from their rejection of him.

For Athanasius, therefore, this is the human predicament. It is the mortality of humanity, the specter of death, that is the obstacle which God, through the incarnation, must address. Although a debilitating problem, sin is not the ultimate problem for human beings; if this were the case, then, Athanasius reasons, God would have simply demanded repentance. There would be no need for the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Logos.[88] Why did the "Word become flesh"? The Word became flesh because this was the only way that God could abolish once and for all the law of corruption and death and, secondarily, the irrational sin that had come to characterize human civilization. Only the original creator of human life could restore and recreate it; consequently, the word joined human nature to himself and by doing so both restored the divine image in human nature and then, most importantly, offered himself to the law of death in order to fulfill it and destroy death.[89]

At the heart of Athanasius's theology, therefore, lies a strong affirmation of creation and human life. Further, at the heart of his theology lies the conviction that the story of Christianity is the story of the death of death and the renewal of life, life in the Logos or in Christ. The Christian church, for Athanasius, is the vehicle through which God was beginning the process of recreating life out of the death that human beings had initially embraced. Through the church paradise is regained and life is renewed.

Athanasius's theology provides a rationale and context not only for Wennberg's ethics of history, with its emphasis on extending justice, redeeming the past and ensuring that death does not have the final word, but also provides context for Certeau's understanding of the role of the historian as one who denies and defies death as he vivifies the dead. I do not claim that Certeau is drawing directly on Athanasius as he discusses the practice of history, but I think we can safely assume that as a Jesuit well versed in the catholic theological tradition, Certeau was aware of this notion of Christ as victor over death and re-newer of life. Certeau was not speaking to a confessional audience alone when he figured the historian as one who confronts death and denies and defies it, but I have no qualms about fully christening his ideas with this rich theological tradition of the defeat of death and the renewal of life.

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[87] Athanasius, "De Incarnatione Verbi 6-7," 147-151
[88] Athanasius, "De Incarnatione Verbi 7," 149-151
[89] Athanasius, "De Incarnatione Verbi 8-10," 151-159

If Christ, who is the way and the truth and the life, will renew life on a cosmic level at the end, as Christian theology teaches, then in the here and now of the kingdom of God it seems that Christian historians can participate in this renewal of life by extending life already to the departed. Just as the kingdom of God, in my view, is an already but not yet phenomenon, Christian historians who are citizens of this kingdom and who make up the body of Christ participate in the work of Christ of undoing the law of death and, drawing on Wennberg, of extending justice and redemption. All Christians do this, regardless of how inchoate and infantile such efforts may be in the present world. This is what Christians do as disciples of Christ. Christians extend life, and Christian historians should do likewise. Christians are agents of justice, attending to those who are marginal and from whom there is no one to speak, and Christian historians should be likewise. Thus, what Certeau understands to be the work of all historians, calling a past that really did exist but no longer does into a present that does exist in the here and now, an action that deceives and defies death, is for Christian historians an operation that can be embraced as a theological underpinning for the practice of history. that can complement notions of God's providential care for human history and the Christian notion of history as an area for redemption.

CONCLUSION

Lucien Febvre, an early twentieth-century French historian of the early modern period, is supposed to have proclaimed "There is no history; there are only historians."[90] His point was to stress the powerful influence historians have in shaping the past and creating history, and this influence is in its turn driven by the present concerns of the historian. Febvre died the same year that Certeau was ordained as a priest in the Society of Jesus. They belong to two different generations of scholars, but Certeau built on his legacy even as he came to diverge from him. Although never citing this quotable line from Febvre, at one point in *The Writing of History* Certeau notes with approval a similar passage from Febvre in which he comments on the unavoidable role of "current events" in the research and thinking of historians.[91]

Certeau, however, would never accept the quote I started with above as an absolute and unqualified statement. It is not all the historian; there is a real past, real people and real events that the historian studies and can access through documents and other evidence. It is how he would qualify this statement, as I have described and reflected on in this paper, that makes him worth of the attention of historians. On the one hand, history as a discipline is truly about the historian and without historians there is no history. For Certeau, this means that the historian must be self-conscious and with integrity admit the idiosyncrasies of his place, and, even more, to expose, rather than conceal, these idiosyncrasies in the historical study. The place of the

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[90] This line has been quoted multiple times by a variety of scholars, but I have yet to see anyone pin it down to 'chapter and verse' in a publication of Febvre. It expresses, nevertheless, the kind of sentiments that Febvre communicates throughout his writing. Paul Ricoeur's study of French historiography is often the source cited for the quotation: Ricoeur, *The Contribution of French Historiography to the Theory of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 9.

[91] *Writing of History*, 11.

historian will be present at every moment of the historian's labor, from the initial decision to pursue a research to the final editing of the written product, so what Certeau is advocating is simply the transparency of the historian. On the other hand, history as a discipline is truly about the past and without the past there is no history. The burden of Certeau's writing, however, is to stress that a chasm of alterity separates the historian's present place from this past. Historians should never approach the past with the naiveté that they will find people "just like us" whom we can safely and easily appropriate as our own. Instead, the historian will honestly expose this difference and be self-conscious about the chasm between her place and the place of what she is studying.

The most important distinction between the present place of the historian and the alterity of the past is the final difference of the human experience. It is life confronting death. Without suggesting that history erases this alterity, Certeau nevertheless envisions the historian defying death by reviving the dead of the past. It is a very Christian stance: simultaneously the historian not only acknowledges the "anguish" and loss and absence of death but also defies it by proclaiming victory over death through his work and writing. The Christian historian stands with Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus; he feels the profound sense of loss and alterity at the grave of the departed but he then calls his subject forth to walk among the living. Possibly, as Wennberg has advised, the historian does this to extend justice and redemption. At its most basic, however, the historian does this for one simple reason: to proclaim that death does not have the last word.