

## A Handful With Quietness

# The Christian Break

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Christianity is a program for *revolution*. That's what I tell my more liberal, anarchic friends in and out of the Church. They never believe me, of course, because they stereotype religious orthodoxy as something rigid, settled, secure, and stony-hearted. When I tell the same thing to my more conservative friends (few as they are), they don't believe me either. They want to believe in something that will preserve values for them, save the past for them, keep body and soul together for them, and they read religion according to their personal insecurities. So I talk to myself about it. These are among my best conversations.

By "revolutionary," however, I don't mean what some others have meant: that Christianity gives a person a whole new way of life to live, or that it is progressive and stimulating, or that its rigidities result in creative rebelliousness, or even that it lifts one's perspective up to the level of the Utopian, the millenarian, the transcendental. Those are generalities that are hard to prove as unique to Christianity—even if such features are true—and "revolutionary" would most certainly be an excessive way of thinking of them anyway.

Where Christianity can most certainly be thought of as revolutionary, as I love to argue whenever I get a chance, is in the *breaks* that it encourages. Christianity has never proved itself very satisfactory as a politics (it fragments as much as it coheres a society) or as an esthetic (it often discourages the arts and distorts what it produces) or even as an ethic (it loves to dehumanize, either with its puritan rigidities or its bathetic emotionalism and sentimentalities). However, what Christianity has always produced, often to the dismay and anger of its own establishmentarians, is a method for change, for progress, for individuality, for revolt.

This method is usually without any leaders, without promoters, however, for it is destructive of the established, the promotable. One is not apt to find anyone on the inside writing about it much; no church teachers would dare say such things. Only the underdog, the outsider, the loner can speak about it, convincing me that perhaps true Christianity has always been mainly an underground movement, a quiet revolution, a private matter. Perhaps it survives best, not as an organization, not as an authority, not even as a theology, but in the form of individual hope—a hope encouraged by the fact that it knows how to break with the past and make a substantially different future. That is where it is effective.

What I mean by *break* is this: the past becomes the future unless in some present moment one initiates an alternative different in method and substance from what has been done already. The past is so phenomenal a burden on us, both individually and collectively, that it continues to dominate all thought and action until one knows a method of reversal, an alternative. Change of attitude, innovation, modification, reconstruction, reorganization, restoration, building onto—none of these is sufficient, for they grow out of what *has* been and only make its continuance more acceptable. The Christian break occurs then when one thinks and acts in reaction against what will be.

Let me illustrate. Repentance is a break with the past, forgiveness a break with one's own emotions, faith a break with fact, hope a break with the determined. Love breaks a pattern of mistrust or hate: if someone hurts you and you don't hurt him back, then the chain of hate is broken, but if you hurt him in return for hurt and he does the same, there is no end to the fighting and the injury. Mercy does the same thing: even if an injustice has been done you, there is no change in the injustice if justice is done in return, but only if one is, instead, merciful, kind, forgiving, sincere, loving. Then change is possible. Honesty breaks a pattern of corruption. Forgiveness breaks a pattern of mistrust. Kindliness breaks a pattern of oppression. Humility breaks a pattern of arrogance and ignorant pride. The genealogy of the world is an ugly pattern in which hate begets hate, war begets war, meanness begets meanness, oppression begets oppression. In the humbler Christian virtues is the power to break these. It is good for Christians to realize that about the only form of organization inherent to Christianity is *break, revolt, reversal*. It is the very opposite of program, organization, church. Robert Lowell has written these good lines:

*Christ, also, our only king without a sword,  
turning the word forgiveness to a sword.*

These are easily exploitable virtues, however, and perhaps that is why political and religious leaders push them so hard. A nation (or a church membership, for that matter) that is humble, sincere, loyal, kindly, forgiving, meek, and faithful is a nation (or a church membership) under someone's thumb—or under someone's foot. But what the exploiter