

Holy drama

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [December 2, 1998](#) issue

When I was an adolescent, one of the visions that filled my head with flash and color and glory was the French Revolution. I actually knew very little about it. Some vague impressions, incidents and names mixed haphazardly in my mind to produce a drama of pure romance, excitement and the triumph of righteousness. I imagined something spiritual and blazing, something extravagant and glorious.

I pictured idealistic, devoted men and women marching through a corrupt, sinful world with the ringing affirmations of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity on their lips, and purging that world with their righteous ideas and actions. Heroism and villainy were in apocalyptic conflict. The guillotine was an instrument of the Last Judgment separating the sheep from the goats.

Thus my imagination, untroubled by facts, spun a wonderful fantasy. When I arrived at college and looked through the catalog of courses, I was delighted to find a course in the French Revolution and signed up immediately. I had to wait a year to take the class, but that only heightened my appetite.

Nothing of what I expected took place. The professor was a slight, elderly woman who dressed in dark, shapeless silks and spoke in a soft, timorous monotone. Although she was academically well qualified, as a teacher of the French Revolution she was a disaster. She knew everything about the French but nothing about revolution.

Sitting in that college classroom day after day, I never sensed the drama of revolution. Ill-fated Marat, murderous Charlotte Corday, the black Bastille, the bloody guillotine, venal and opportunistic Danton, giddy Marie-Antoinette, oxlike Louis XVI--all the players and props in that colorful and violent age were presented in the same platitudinous, tired and pious voice. This professor presented each character as if he or she were a neatly labeled specimen, a butterfly on a mounting board on which a decade or so of dust had settled.

Today I realize that I knew practically nothing about the French Revolution when I entered that class. But I was right about one thing: revolutions are events that turn things inside out and upside down. Revolutions are titanic struggles between antagonistic wills. Revolutions express the desire for a better life of freedom, promise a better life of freedom. Sometimes they make good on their promises. More often they don't. But after a revolution nothing is quite the same again.

After taking that class, however, the French Revolution seemed to me only a great bore. Say the words "French Revolution" and I yawned.

A few years later I became a pastor and preached weekly to a congregation. I was astonished to find men and women in my congregation yawning! Matt Ericson went to sleep every Sunday; he always made it through the first hymn but ten minutes later was sound asleep. Red Belton, an angry teenager, sat on the back pew out of sight of his parents and read comic books. Karl Strotheim, a bass in the choir, passed stockmarket tips to Luther Olsen. One woman gave me hope--she brought a stenographic notebook with her every Sunday and wrote down everything I said. At least one person was paying attention. Then I learned that she was getting ready to leave her husband and was using the hour of worship to practice her shorthand so she could get a job.

These were good people, nice people. They were familiar with the Christian faith, knew the Christian stories and showed up on time for worship each Sunday. But they yawned. How could they do that? How could anyone go to sleep ten minutes after singing "Blessing and Honor and Glory and Power"? How could anyone sustain interest in Batman when Romans was being read? How could anyone be content to practice shorthand when the resurrected Christ was present in word and sacrament?

It seemed that I had a whole congregation of saints and sinners who knew everything about the Christian life except that it is *holy*, a blazing and glorious, extravagant and spiritual resurrection life. They knew the word "Christian" pretty well, and identified themselves as Christians. But *holy*?

I knew I had my work cut out for me. I had supposed that my task was to teach and preach the truth of the scriptures so that people would know God and how he works their salvation; I had supposed that my task was to help people make moral decisions so that they could live happily ever after with a clear conscience. I had supposed that my task was to pray with and for them, gathering them in the

presence of a holy God who made heaven and earth and sent Jesus to die for their sins.

Now I realized that more than accurate learning was at stake, more than moral behavior was at stake, more than getting them on their knees on Sunday was at stake. Life was at stake--their lives, their souls. People can think correctly and behave rightly and worship politely and still live anemically.

That's when I got seriously interested in the word "holy," what Gerard Manley Hopkins described as "the dearest freshness deep down things." I started looking for signs of the holy, evidence of the holy, the energy that creates the holy--holy lives, holy places, Holy Spirit. What surprised me, and continues to surprise me, is how much of it there is around. It was like the French Revolution. Once I was rid of my fantasy-induced disappointments and adolescent romanticizing and had shaken loose from the perceptions and perspectives that explain everything about life except that it is alive, God-alive, I was on my way.