

**Boston University School of Theology  
Commemoration for *motive* magazine  
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**Talk by Tom F. Driver**

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Beginning to prepare for this occasion, I pick up the copy of *motive* magazine that lies on top of the stack of back issues that I have kept. Here is what I read :

*“The inescapable dramatic situation for us all is that we have no idea what our situation is. .... We are plunged into an existence fantastic to the point of nightmare, and however hard we rationalize, or however firm our religious faith, however closely we dog the heels of science or wheel among the stars of mysticism, we cannot really make head or tail of it.”*

That was from *motive*'s Vol. XII, No. 6, dated March, 1952, a time when ever so many young people of my generation were trying to understand what the Christian faith really means. Many of us were veterans of World War II. We were suspended in a Cold War. We felt ourselves under the shadow of the atom bomb. We were hearing and seeing the first stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement against Jim Crow in a country that was not ready for change.

The words I have quoted were written by the Christopher Fry. The magazine was running an excerpt from his play, *A Sleep of Prisoners*. The magazine's readers, although not entirely asleep, were known as the silent generation. Dwight Eisenhower, who would be elected President that year, was the very embodiment of hunkering down. It was *motive*'s mission to keep us awake and attentive.

I am grateful to B.J. Stiles and all the others here who have brought me back into connection with *motive* magazine. It's like

coming home. The theology that emanated from the Boston University School of Theology in the first half of the 20th century reached me indirectly when I was growing up in the Southern Methodist Church in the hills of Tennessee. In my congregation, and in some others, liberal Methodism found a voice right there in the Bible Belt. It was my church pastors and educators who taught me to be critical of my own culture; and this has been, more or less, the substance of my life's work.

On this occasion, then, I am giving thanks to two important influences upon my life as a Christian -- Boston University's Personalist theology, on the one hand, and *motive* magazine, on the other. Earlier this week I had an email exchange with Ray Hart, the former Dean of this school. When I told him that I would be here for this occasion, he replied: "*The debt [that our] generation owes to Motive [sic] magazine is incalculable.*" And so it is.

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When I made the transition from soldier to college student in the aftermath of World War II, trying to put my world together on a new basis, *motive* magazine helped me to continue casting a critical eye upon my culture. I pounced upon each issue when it arrived. The quality of the articles was so good that they continued to educate me when I became a graduate student at Union Seminary in New York, and at Columbia University, and then on into my teaching at Union, until the magazine finally succumbed to the political and social conservatism that began to flow over America, including the Methodist Church, in the 1970s.

To open *motive* magazine was to be plunged into a discourse -- graphic as well as verbal -- that pointed toward both mystery and morality. Espousing a non-dogmatic version of Christian faith, the magazine directed our attention equally to art and to society. For instance, that March 1952 issue of the magazine that I happened to pick up, led off with 24 pages of articles about the theater, before

devoting another 28 pages (10 articles) that dealt with journalism, medicine, politics, education, sex, and interpersonal relations -- all from the perspective of a worldly-wise Christian faith. The visuals in this issue were mostly black and white photographs of scenes from plays on stage, but there was also a striking pen and ink sketch of a scene from Fry's play, performed in a cathedral, and numerous drawings of various sizes to accompany many of the articles. This was something beyond journalism. This was creativity with a moral conscience.

There is surely no need to remind anyone that we live today in a different world from that of the 1950s. The first two decades of *motive's* existence, the 40s and 50s, were the heyday of liberal Protestantism in America. Every Monday morning *The New York Times* published accounts of sermons preached the day before in several tall-steeple churches in the city.. Today you can read the *Times* for weeks on end without learning that there is a single Protestant north of the Mason-Dixon line, and a year without discovering that a liberal Protestant has ever existed. In those days the theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich each appeared on covers of *Time* magazine. All major publishing houses had liberal departments of religion. The country was clearly capitalist, but capitalism had not yet turned into a religion itself, nor aligned itself politically with the conservative elements of American Protestantism, though that did start to happen in the 50s..

The guiding spirit of the magazine at its inception was its first editor, Harold Ehrsberger. I admired him immensely, and still do, these long years after his demise. I came to know him slightly through the offices of Ruth Winfield Love, a personality who had a strong influence upon me.

Ruth, as some of you may know, together with her husband, Joe Brown Love, was a leading voice in the student ministries of the Methodist church. At the time I met the Loves they were leading the Wesley Foundation at Vanderbilt University. I met Ruth at one of the many rousing national conferences of the Methodist Student Movement, where she and I soon discovered our mutual love of theater. I spent my summer between college

and seminary (1950) acting in plays Ruth directed at the Wesley Foundation in Nashville. I think she introduced me to Harold Ehrensberger at that time, although it might have happened at a student conference.

The following summer, taking along my girl friend, later to be my wife Anne Barstow, I was a member of a tour group Ruth Love took to visit museums, churches, and theaters in Europe. Harold Ehrensberger joined us for part of that tour in London. I still remember his talking to us in Westminster Abbey, where he made insightful remarks about the difference between medieval and modern Christianity. He loved both.

It was Ehrensberger who guided *motive* into its unique character -- unique in American religious publications -- of publishing issues as noteworthy for their display of the arts as for their attention to Christian responsibility and insight in the social sphere. In the magazine, the two threads of social responsibility and the artistic insight were woven into a single cord to which many of us clung as we tried to find out how to live lives of both wonder and work. The artistic side of the magazine was developed first by Gregor Goethals and later by Pegg Rigg, who came to *motive* in 1954. By that time Ehrensberger had been succeeded as editor by Roger Ortmyer, but it was Harold with Gregor who had set the tone and the direction.

By 1952 I was writing for *motive* -- articles about the theater. I was still a seminary student, and I think these were my first published articles anywhere. They continued until 1956, the year that I became the theater critic for *The Christian Century* magazine and at the same time began to teach at Union Seminary.

The conservative wave that began in American life in the 1970s under Richard Nixon was consolidated under Ronald Reagan in the 80s. It has put American liberal Christianity, of which *motive* magazine was an important part, under an eclipse. Now, in 2015, it is not clear whether that wave of conservatism has crested. Next year's election will tell us much. The political center has moved to the right, and only a strong, grassroots liberal wave can turn it back in the direction of the priceless treasure that found expression in *motive*.

We have to be very grateful to the Boston University School of Theology, and to *motive*'s final editor B. J. Stiles, for keeping the magazine's memory alive.

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