

Overhearing the Gospel

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As One Without Authority
(Fourth edition)

Craddock Stories
(edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward)

REVISED AND EXPANDED

Overhearing the Gospel

FRED B. CRADDOCK



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Preface to the First Edition

I feel I owe you a word about the context in which these reflections occurred. Perhaps this sense of obligation arises out of a reaction to some experience of a teacher or preacher who privately arrived at a conclusion that I was to accept immediately upon delivery, with no clue as to the whence, whither, or why of the speaker's journey. It may be that I have so often urged students to "build the nest before you lay the egg" that I dare not face them having bypassed my own counsel. Or maybe I know that the more perceptive readers will catch in mood and echo some very un-Oklahoma sights and sounds that subtly form the penumbra of these paragraphs (I thought and now write with surf pounding, sea gulls squawking, clam diggers bending over low tide, cottages nesting on islands in the sun, and crackling fire sending blue signals above the snow), and they will wonder whether I have been carried away, or should be.

Having been granted that change of pace and place that Phillips University called a research leave and that Yale University called a research fellowship, Nettie and I leased a cottage on Great Harbor off Old Sachem Head in Guilford, Connecticut. The cottage served for a time as a retreat because the work to which I was and am committed had, for a number of reasons, lost its edge, lying dull and heavy on my mind. There was nothing, thank goodness, of that terrible emptiness observed in some teachers and preachers who, while still carried along by the momentum of their profession, have lost appetite and replace it with cynicism. If anything, I am more and more moved and awed, even frightened, by the importance of teaching. But even so, it is possible to be immobilized now and then by the sense of how difficult it is and how small, at least apparently, are the gains we make. When this happens, it seems wise to back off in order to gather the advantages of distance. In other words, retreat.

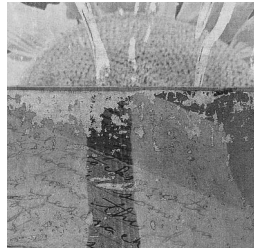
But not for long. The time soon comes for inviting guests to the cottage to talk of teaching and preaching, of communicating

the Christian message. It is important to have guests who have themselves faced the ponderous problem: How can we teach those who already know? How can we preach to those who have already heard? You who continue to read will observe in quotation and footnote the quality of those who shared with me in these conversations. But by far the most noticeable presence was Søren Kierkegaard. The text will reflect that of all the visitors, he came earliest and stayed latest. Never have I had a guest in my mind more delightful and stimulating. But he was not easy company. He was of such capacities of intellect and imagination that he often pushed the rest of us to the margins of the manuscript. More than once I had to remind myself that this was to be a book not about Kierkegaard but about a subject central to his life and to mine. In the pursuit of that subject, any person who can bring lively new ways of thinking and speaking to a church grown cynical about its own lectern and pulpit; any person who can move in on our vague and sterile concepts with a language of imaginative elasticity; any person who can offer an alternative to the predictably dull patterns of studying, speaking, and listening beyond which few of us have ventured; any person who has the grace to restrain the display of knowledge in order to evoke and increase my own; any person who, instead of simply adding increments to my knowledge, awakens in me the sense of having already known; any person who can bring to our heavy business the delights of wit and humor and the pathos of personal investment; that person is always welcome in my cottage, even if his presence is a judgment on my own dull efforts.

To Dean Joe R. Jones and the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University, I am grateful for this time of study and reflection. To Dean Colin Williams and Yale Divinity School, I am doubly grateful: for the invitation to spend a year enjoying that wealth of resources in library and faculty that is Yale and for the high honor of returning as Lyman Beecher Lecturer for 1978.

Fred B. Craddock
Enid, Oklahoma
February, 1978

Part I



The Illusion

Concerning Method

*There is no lack of information in a Christian land;
something else is lacking, and this is a something which the
one cannot directly communicate to the other.*

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

I suppose you could say this statement from Kierkegaard is my text for the discussion that follows. As such, it is a radical departure from old custom and deep conviction, which have invariably dictated that if a text be used for a Christian discourse, it must be drawn from Holy Scripture. After all, what else is a sermon, or the whole of theology for that matter, but the continuation of the biblical discourse, engaging and being engaged by the ancient text? But I have granted myself an indulgence in this instance, because what follows is neither sermon nor theology.

Elevating a passage to the level of “text” does not mean passively accepting it as unqualified truth, to be served only by elaborations, applications, and exhortations. If with the sacred text one wrestles and grasps with the tenacity of Jacob—“I will not let

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you go until you bless me”—one can be no less vigorous when engaging Kierkegaard. He delights in picking a fight with his reader, loading his sentences with exaggeration, humor, irony, sarcasm, and homely analogy, offering with one hand what he takes away with the other. So in the ways that a text properly functions—provoking thought and reassessment of old convictions, confirming prior wisdom while serving as governing consideration for new reflection and action—this statement is my text. Phrases within it will prompt our discussions to move in many directions, but its greatest single impact will come in its continually raising the question that refuses to leave the room all the time we are talking: How does one person communicate the Christian faith to another?

But that question itself already hinders us, arousing a widespread notion that threatens to abort fruitful discussion. The threat lurks in a general feeling about the word *how*. *How* is for many an ugly word, a cause of embarrassment. There is large opinion that *how* is to be found not among the prophets or the philosophers, but among mechanics and carpenters. After all, does not *how* introduce methods and skills more appropriate to a course in driver training than to probing into the mysteries of ultimate reality? What has skill to do with the kingdom of God? Kierkegaard sensed some of this condescension among the clergy and regarded it as a major cause for the decline in the quality of preaching. Perhaps no word among us has suffered more abuse than *how*, not the honorable abuse of attack, but the humiliating abuse of inattention, disregard, slight. *How* has been made to stand out in the hall while *what* was being entertained by the brightest minds among us. What is the issue? What is the truth? What do we believe? What is being taught? Those are the worthy questions, and who would suffer the embarrassment of interrupting the discussion with “But how can we...?” This arrogant dismissal of all considerations of method could properly draw the fire that Somerset Maugham intended for certain haughty devotees of culture among his acquaintances:

Who has not seen the scholar’s thin-lipped smile when he corrects a misquotation and the connoisseur’s pained look when someone praises a picture he does not care for? There is no more merit in having read a thousand books than in having ploughed a thousand fields. There is no more merit

in being able to attach a correct description to a picture than in being able to find out what is wrong with a stalled motorcar. In each case it is special knowledge. The stockbroker has his knowledge too and so has the artisan. It is a silly prejudice of the intellectual that his is the only one that counts. The True, the Good, and the Beautiful are not perquisites of those who have been to expensive schools, burrowed in libraries and frequented museums. The artist has no excuse when he uses others with condescension. He is a fool if he thinks his knowledge is more important than theirs and an oaf if he cannot comfortably meet them on an equal footing.¹

If this language is too strong for our present consideration, then at least it can register the intensity of my feelings when I survey the devastation wrought by an arrogant dismissal of method in our churches, colleges, and seminaries. Countless young men and women, graduates of excellent schools and of unquestioned intelligence and commitment, are paralyzed early in their ministries because in those tasks that are ministry, in the only sense that really matters, they do not know the how. Of course, there have always been those who insisted on preparation in the how of teaching, preaching, worship, and administration, but the long struggle upstream against the heavily theoretical curriculum tended to make some of them so reactionary and defensive that those of us who had been of a mind to champion their cause grew suspicious of what seemed to be anti-intellectual, nonsubstantive, shallow, and faddish. And these symptoms, in turn, reconfirmed and reinforced the original low opinion of programs centering on method. But the quarrel over the stature of the question *how?* and whether it deserved a place among the tall questions of our faith was radically shifted by my listening to Kierkegaard. He wrote thirty-five books, all of them in pursuit of a how: how to be a Christian, here in this place, now at this time. As the profundity and significance of those books testify, the pursuit of that question leads one not away from but deeper into the great issues of church history, theology, ethics, and scripture. I grow more and more convinced that the total curriculum of the church, from Sunday school to seminary, should wrestle with the Christian faith as *how*. Every *what* deserves consideration only as it serves the overarching question of how to be Christian.

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Nevertheless, concern with how to be a Christian can sink into private rituals of self-probing, self-accusation, and self-approbation unless a prior question is faced and met with attempts at solution. That question has already been raised: How can one person communicate the Christian faith to another? As we reflect on the surpassing importance of this question, it is amazing that our condescension toward “how to do it” has not long since been overcome. I say “our” because I am by no means innocent. In graduate school, the program of study operated on the assumption that mastery of the subject matter of my field qualified me to teach in that field. Not only did I voice no complaint about this arrangement, I would have been incensed if my advisors had urged that, in view of my intention to teach, I learn something about teaching. How dare anyone dilute my *what* with a *how*!

I am speaking not simply as one who wishes to be a more effective communicator; I have another field of endeavor in which I work daily: listening. This is by far the more difficult, and I hope it is not pure unadulterated selfishness on my part to wish that those communicating to me would give more attention to how, to method, to style. Some listeners in churches have accepted boredom as one of the crosses that come with the commitment, but I cannot.

The issue is not one of simply being gracious in an unpleasant situation. Boredom is not just a condition that prompts humorous stories about this stale professor or that dull preacher. Boredom is a form of evil; perhaps one of Kierkegaard’s characters was more correct when he said, “Boredom is the root of all evil.”² Boredom is a preview of death, if not itself a form of death, and when trapped in prolonged boredom, even the most saintly of us will hope for, pray for, or even engineer relief, however demonic. Sincere Sunday worshipers will confess to welcoming in muffled celebration any interruption of the funereal droning. Be honest: Have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew or a bird flew in a window or the lights went out or the organ wheezed or the sound system picked up police calls or a dog came down the aisle and curled up to sleep below the pulpit? Passengers on cruise ships, after nine beautiful sunsets and eighty-six invigorating games of shuffleboard, begin to ask the crew hopefully, “Do you think we will have a storm?”

Recently I heard a quiet and passive clergyman tell of his attending the Indianapolis 500. He confessed that after two hours

of watching the same cars speed by again and again, the boredom turned him into a degenerate sinner. At first, he said, he simply entertained thoughts of "What if...?" and his own imagination thrilled him. But soon his boredom demanded more. A car caught fire. Hoorah! Not until later did he remind himself that he, a Christian minister, had experienced no concern for the driver. But a burning car was not enough; something more dramatic was needed to effect a resurrection from the death of boredom. Voices within him, he admitted, began to call for a smashup. The demon of boredom had totally transformed him. Shift the scene to a classroom or sanctuary, subject him or you or me to repeated and prolonged boredom, and a similar process begins. For the communicating of the Christian faith, formally or informally, to be boring is not simply "too bad," to be glossed over with the usual "but he is really a genuine fellow" or "but she is very sincere." Boredom works against the faith by provoking contrary thoughts or lulling to sleep or draping the whole occasion with a pall of indifference and unimportance.

Now, I am as quick as you are to come up with reasons why the burden of boredom does not lie solely on the one speaking. The variables are many and certainly are factors in the case: room temperature, time of day or night, physical and mental state of the listeners, and so forth. But after we have completed our lists, scattered the blame lightly over three dozen possible causes, and assured one another that we will take them all into account, especially when holding postmortems over our own failures, should we not then accept a large share of responsibility for the condition and move on?

What is it that sustains the illusion that the Christian faith can proceed effectively without giving prime time or our best intelligence to such lesser considerations as method and style of communicating? The illusion seems to be fed by several fictions that have been naïvely embraced as the truth about how things are and are to remain. One such fiction is the formula widely accepted though seldom voiced that prescribes that attention to method, form, and style will be in inverse ratio to the importance of the subject matter. For example, if the subject is a new brand of barbecue sauce, not exactly a matter of transcendent importance, the speaker will not open his mouth until full and thrice-checked attention to details of method and style have been made. But suppose the subject is the Christian gospel; are we not to assume

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that the sheer weight of its significance is its own style, cutting a clear path straight to the hearer's mind and heart, and hence poorly served by any consideration that the speaker might give to appropriate form and method? As a matter of fact, many listeners entertain some suspicion of a speaker's sincerity if it is sensed that there has crept into the presentation a modicum of attention to the most effective method for communicating. Let the salesperson be lively and brilliant with a bar of soap, but let the person who speaks to and for the church be neither lively nor brilliant. There is no place for the charlatan in the kingdom!

In those academic circles where those who teach and preach receive their education, this same fiction about important matters needing no support from communicative arts is sustained in a way only slightly different from the above. In these circles, the preoccupation is with the truth. Of course, no one regards this as other than laudable, for where else is truth to be pursued with such objectivity, with such disregard for party interests or personal gain? Here the sober facts about life are handled with an imperturbability that could strike a casual observer as total indifference. It has to be; success in the educational endeavor demands adequate isolation from bombarding interests and distracting concerns about consequence and relevance. The basic assumption here is simply this: If the issue of all serious study is the truth, if we can find the truth, then no one need be further concerned with how to relate this truth to human life or human life to the truth. Once the truth is known, personal and communal appropriation of it will follow as naturally as night follows day.

That such is simply not the case is a realization painfully gained. The burden of it is expressed in the text from Kierkegaard: "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking." Kierkegaard's whole literary activity takes the measure of that immense gulf between concept and capacity. It is one thing to talk about a concept such as love, and quite another to have the capacity to love. And the one does not lead directly to the other. Knowledge about ethical concepts does not make one ethical. Burghardt DuBois, a great African American educator, sociologist, and historian, upon completion of studies at Fisk University, Harvard University, and the University of Berlin, was convinced that change in the condition of the African American could be effected by careful scientific investigations into the truth about the African American in America. So he proceeded. His

research was flawless, and his graphs and charts impeccable. After waiting several years and hearing not the slightest stir of reform, DuBois had to accept the truth about the truth: Its being available does not mean it will be appropriated.

This does not mean that we should pause here and hurl charges against the general public for its blind indifference to higher values in its low pursuit of the thrills of pop culture. Maybe the theologians among us wish to speak here about original sin. Whatever the cause, the plain fact is, it is a tragic error to assume that the truth is its own evangelist. Whoever thinks that "telling them the truth" is all that is necessary to dispel human ills is going to spend a great deal of time shaking dust off the feet and traveling. You and I should face it: speeches on the transcendent values of ultimate reality can be awfully dull. As Kierkegaard put it, "Truth is not nimble on its feet"; it can be heavy-footed and pedestrian. And those of us concerned with communicating the Christian gospel, while confessing to the intrinsic adequacy of the message for salvation, must all the while follow the operational principle, if it has been heard. To effect that hearing is no small task.

The line of thinking productive of the errors discussed above presupposes an even more widespread fiction in our culture, that content and form of expression are separate considerations. Wherever this assumption exists, almost invariably content is on the inside and style on the outside; content is essential, and form is accessory, optional. It is supposed that matter and manner are separate entities, as though one has a message that, incidentally, is then expressed in a poem, or a historical event that just happens to then be cast into a story. Not so. How a speaker or singer or artist does is no subordinate dimension of what he or she does. How they do is what they do, and what they do is how they do it. A song is a song, a story is a story, a syllogism is a syllogism, and a parable is a parable.

For instance, analyze a parable to ascertain its meaning, dispense with the parabolic form, state its message as a proposition, and you have altered not just the how but also the what. Another case in point is the gospel. A gospel is a form as well as a message; it is a narrative conveying a sense of historical chronology and continuity, naming places and times and characters. That particular form of communicating is saying something important about the life of faith, and it is something quite different from a proverb or paradox or poem. Or permit a

homely analogy. Have you ever noticed how much of what we experience is shaped by the anticipation of how we will share it with someone? You did not listen across the Austrian Alps for the fivefold echo of your own “hello,” you did not coax your daughter into her very first step, you did not lean against the rail and stare into the fog for the first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, and then sometime later think of communicating the experience. Were you not at the very time of the experiences already searching for words, phrases, analogies to go into the journal, the letter, the phone call? How experiences are communicated is a major factor in defining what those experiences are. There is no surgery—literary, logical, or experiential—by which what and how can be severed.

Even more regrettable, however, than the thought that style of expression would be regarded as separate from, subsequent and accessory to content, is that style would be viewed negatively, at best unnecessary embroidery on the truth and at worst subversion of it. You and I know that there is always style in communication. The bare and chaste description of a scientific undertaking is a style. But unfortunately, the word *style* enters our conversations only when there is a flourish, a flair, a noticeable artistry in the communication, and then sober brows denounce it as an intruder, a detractor. Of course, that can be and often is the case, and our highest and best thoughts suffer rather than profit from such glare and gloss. As Somerset Maugham said of certain writers,

Their flashy effects distract the mind. They destroy their persuasiveness; you would not believe a man was very intent on ploughing a furrow if he carried a hoop with him and jumped through it at every other step.³

But all extremes and distortions aside, we still have a problem: “How is one to exorcise the feeling that ‘style,’ which functions like the notion of form, subverts content?”⁴ We are still haunted by the ancient fear that style, especially attention to artistic form, compromises truth and morality. Ezekiel, prophet of the vivid image and metaphor, complained that the people took him lightly, as an interesting storyteller, a singer of beautiful songs (Ezek. 20:49; 33:32). In *Divine Hymns and Poems*, a volume for the church published in London in 1704, the editors devoted a lengthy preface warning all Christians of the dangers of poetry that, as is said of the siren’s song, “While it charms it kills us.” In a paragraph that

could easily be enlarged to cover interest in form and style in all communication, the readers are sternly lectured:

Vice is a deformed and odious thing, and if exposed naked would have but few admirers; it owes all its lustre to false colours, and these it chiefly borrows from the poets; 'tis they that smooth the monster's brow, and make her smile, that conceal her defects, and set her off to the greatest advantage. How many, who would have started at the open face of vice, have been enticed into its fatal embrace by means of those bewitching disguises that poetry has bestowed on it?⁵

It is because this warning contains some undisputed truth about the twisted uses of form and style to disguise and beguile that it has gained acceptance as a general truth about all effort after effective technique. Such acceptance erects a formidable barrier to progress in dealing seriously with the question, How can one person effectively communicate the Christian faith to another?

As an indication of how nervous most of us get when discussing method, here I am already feeling the need—and I hate that I do—to reassure the reader that none of these comments are to be construed as depreciation of content. Let us confirm one another at this point in the conviction that it does matter extremely what is said and what is heard. The question each generation has addressed to the desk, the pulpit, and the lectern of the church is, in William Temple's famous line, not "What will Jones swallow?" but "Is there anything to eat?" My own church tradition has often reminded its classrooms and sanctuaries that it is not in chewing but in chewing food that we are nourished.

But having paused to affirm the what of our communicating, I must return to our subject and repeat the insistence on effective form and style. Our task is not just to say the word and to tell the truth, but to get the truth heard, to effect a new hearing of the word among those who have been repeatedly exposed to it. Without that hearing, glorious claims for content and substance remain functionally theoretical, boasts of ore as yet unmined. Undoubtedly there are many powerful and life-changing ideas lying impotent in pale paragraphs and slipping unheard past bored ears, written and spoken by great thinkers who had no time or interest to give to such marginal matters as how one person

communicates to another. On the other hand, who can deny that much of the lasting power of Nietzsche's philosophy is owed to his vivid and effective style? We tend to praise as "original" that thinking that comes to us in such a way as to get our attention.

Since we have paused to remind one another of misunderstandings that may arise when we heavily underscore or totally neglect style or method, we might as well be clear on another related matter. It is not to be assumed that the gospel provides religious and moral constraints on what we say but leaves how we say it to be governed solely by practical considerations of effectiveness. This simply is not true. I am sure all of us have had the experience of coming under the smiling attack of a sidewalk witness, overwhelming us with well-worn clichés and scripture fragments. Perhaps we were left speechless—sputtering sounds of anger, confusion—with a sense of having been violated. Very likely the primary cause of our being so disturbed was not the content of what was said, even if the biblical exegesis and theological perspective left much to be desired. Then why was the whole experience so blatantly and grossly unchristian, regardless of the amount of scripture quoted and the witness' assurance that we are loved? Because of the method by which the message came, because we know almost instinctively that if the province of the gospel does not include manner as well as matter, music as well as words, then we are not interested. Vague as it may seem at first, there is such a thing as appropriate style, a style that fits, a style that is a part of the very fabric of an occasion, of a relationship, of an event, of the truth. We recognize it when it is present, and we are so aware of its absence that we may have no choice but to stomp out of the room to escape the insult, even if that room be a sanctuary. There is such a thing as a Christian style, a method of communicating congenial to the nature of the Christian faith. As Brian Wicker has stated, "To say a story is a Christian story is to speak not just of its content but of its structure."⁶

I feel, then, the burden to work unceasingly at how to communicate. This burden is not laid on me simply by the practical concern to remain employed (a benefit not unwelcome) but by the nature of the gospel and of the call to effect a hearing of that gospel. All attempts to rid myself of this burden—I never had a way with words; a person should not be fancy with the truth; style is for novelists and poets, but I am a preacher; I just tell it

like it is, and if they miss it, that is their problem—have been quite unsuccessful. *How* is a question that will not leave. If I toss it out the door with loud disclaimers that style is a matter of art and that I am without such gifts, it returns through the window, quietly but firmly reminding me that “art is not a gift which a few people are given, but rather it is a gift which most people throw away.”

The way to begin, for all of us, is to recognize and to accept the complexity and the difficulty of communicating. We read a book by an author for whom it seems so effortless; we hear a lecturer or preacher who seems to float along on natural gifts. We ask “how?” and they all speak of work, work, work. Some flashes, to be sure, but usually working without ecstasy. The difficulties are there, whether preparing for formal presentations or simply negotiating the normal flow of human relations. All sensitive persons have more than once been reduced to quivering silence, mute before the unexpected gift, mute beside the bereaved friend, mute at the table with a hurt and alienated son. The difficulties of communicating were there long before we began wrestling with law and gospel, judgment and grace, time and eternity, bondage and freedom, myth and history, exegesis and hermeneutics. It is one of the painful discoveries of childhood that there are powerful forces that isolate us one from the other, forces that persuade us to be safely silent rather than hurling a word against the enclosing glass that ensures our privacy.

As a boy, I spent pleasant summer evenings gathering fallen stars. As I think back on it, the spent stars were worthless, but it was something to do. My brothers and I would go into a field near the house, climb up on tree stumps (all that remained after the blight of a once beautiful chestnut grove), and wait for stars to fall. From these perches we could see exactly where they fell, and it was not uncommon to have our pockets filled within an hour. Sometimes, whether in greed or out of compassion for fallen stars that might otherwise go unnoticed, I do not know, we would sneak from the back porch with Grandma’s clothes basket and harvest the remaining stars still flickering on the ground. And sometimes, dragging the heavy basket home left us too tired to empty it. “We will do it in the morning,” but in the morning Grandma was already fussing about a residue of gray ashes in her

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clothes basket. (Everyone knows you cannot save stars over until the next night.) We denied charges of having kindled a fire in her basket and snickered off to play, protected from punishment by the mystery. But during her last illness, Grandma called me to her bed and told me, almost secretively, that she knew what we had been doing with her basket. My guilty silence was broken by her instruction for me to bring to her from the bottom of an old chest a package wrapped in newspaper. I obeyed and then waited the eternity it took for her arthritic fingers to open the bundle. "Oh, it's gone," she said, showing me where it had been. In the bottom of the package was a little residue of gray ashes. We stared at each other.

"You too, Grandma? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid you would laugh at me. And why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid you would scold me."

Multiply sevenfold the awkwardness, the pain, the obstacles in that simple scene, and we are in the frame of mind to entertain our central question: How? How can one person communicate the gospel to another? When Kierkegaard began seriously to wrestle with that question, he saw immediately that his efforts would be futile unless he faced squarely the condition before him. That condition he came to describe most frequently as "a monstrous illusion." According to his diagnosis of the spiritual state of Denmark, "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking." On the basis of that assessment, Kierkegaard developed his method of communication. Any appropriateness of his method for us depends to a large extent on the correspondence between his situation and our own.

We have explored something of the shape and nature of the illusion surrounding considerations of style. According to Kierkegaard, an even more forbidding illusion surrounds the listener "in a Christian land." To this subject we now turn.