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Christianity and the Computer

DONALD GUTHRIE BD MTH PHD reviews Christianity and the Computer by A. Q. Morton and James McLennan (Hodder and Stoughton, 1964, 95pp. 5s.) and The Structure of Luke and Acts by A. Q. Morton and G. H. C. Macgregor (Hodder and Stoughton, 1964, 155pp. 21s.). This review first appeared in The Christian Graduate (December 1964) and is reprinted as the sequel to the article by PROFESSOR D. M. MACKAY which appeared in the Autumn 1964 issue of this Bulletin.

Considerable interest was aroused by an article in *The Observer* in November last year written by A. Q. Morton. In this he claimed that the application of computer methods to Christian literature would result in a radical reappraisal not only of the literature but of the doc-

trines based upon it. This author made the most sweeping claims of a thoroughly dogmatic kind; these were supported by very little tangible evidence, although couched in scientific terminology, and linked with extremely liberal views. In the conclusion of the article Morton declared that his work had cut the ground from under any notion of absolute religious authority. The recent appearance of two books in which Morton has a part share seemed to hold promise of a more adequately reasoned approach. However, those who expect to find a clearer exposition of his principles will be largely disappointed, for his so-called scientific approach is mixed up with a good deal of muddled thinking.

Morton and McLennan's book on *Christianity and the Computer* is

claimed to be a simple and non-technical account of the work so far done in the use of the computer in New Testament literary studies. The book is in two parts; one on the Bible and the other on the Church. In both parts a polemical purpose is unmistakable. The authors are opposed to the notion of authority, in order to leave the modern Christian perfectly free to formulate his own ideas of true personal religion. It is as well to have a clear understanding of their presuppositions before assessing the book, and fortunately they leave us in no doubt in their initial chapter. According to them a scientific reading of the Bible must lead to an excision of all miraculous elements. In short, miracles are impossible (p. 12). Moreover they find no difficulty in dispensing with the historical truth of any narratives, provided some symbolic meaning can be attached to them (p. 13). With suppositions such as these it is not surprising that at the close of the opening chapter the authors can characterize the evangelist who clutches his Bible and thunders 'The Bible says' as a man who exercises less care and thought than when choosing his wallpaper (p. 14). The inappropriateness of the comparison will not blind the thoughtful reader to the deep-seated prejudice with which the book is written.

All this initial airing of ideas appears before the computer comes into the argument at all, which inevitably creates the impression that the computer is going to be used to support the authors' own presuppositions. This impression proves true. Before any computer evidence is cited to disprove the Pauline authorship of most of the Pauline Epistles the reader is informed that the introduction to an Epistle in which an author identifies himself is rarely to be trusted (p. 21). Morton and McLennan's approach clearly depends on acceptance of a definite presupposition regarding this which is open to serious challenge.

In the third chapter we arrive at the computer, but our approach to it has been heavily weighted *en route* in a decidedly liberal direction. There is no doubt that this mental conditioning is intended to create a definite image of the computer. It is to be regarded as a kind of Delphic oracle whose pronouncements must be treated as scientifically authentic. But it should not be forgotten that computers, however valuable they are in saving time and energy in the sorting of facts, have no power

whatever to interpret those facts. That must be done by the statisticians themselves, who will clearly be governed by their own independent presuppositions. Morton and McLennan, however, claim that comparisons with a wide enough selection of samples from non-biblical writers lead to the enunciation of principles which are universally applicable. They examine sentence-lengths and the occurrences of the colourless work *kai*, which they claim are unaffected by subject-matter, and they conclude that any author will always show the same pattern in all his works. Since in the Epistles ascribed to Paul different patterns are found, this is regarded as evidence of different authorship. On their theory one may be sure that dissimilar patterns in works attributed to one author point to dissimilar authors, but yet one cannot assume the reverse that similar patterns found in works ascribed to different authors point to identical authorship. The theory assumes that self-consistency is an infallible guide to unity of authorship. But is this so?

The writers claim that an examination of the use of *kai* in the three parts of the Shepherd of Hermas, in twenty-one works of Isocrates and in nine books of history by Herodotus shows self-consistency, whereas a similar examination of the Pauline Epistles reveals inconsistency. As a result they maintain as a general principle that large differences between samples are always associated with difference of authorship (p. 32). But the computer did not tell them that. They have interpreted the computer data to support this principle, but it is not self-evident. Isocrates and Herodotus were literary men and were very different from the missionary Paul. Moreover, Morton and McLennan make a significant stipulation when requiring 100 sentences as a minimum sample (p. 28), and yet according to their own table most of Paul's Epistles fall short of this requirement. Indeed, apart from the four Epistles which these writers accept as genuine (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians), only Philipians, 1 Timothy and Hebrews contain more than 100 sentences. Moreover, as the writers admit, samples from longer works give a different proportion in the case of *kai* than samples of a corresponding length from shorter works. Since, however, there is great variation in the number of sentences in Paul's Epistles — from 22 in Philemon to 627 in 1 Corinthians, it is not surprising that so many variations are found. In Isocrates

the variation in number of sentences ranges between 42 and 200, with all but four containing more than 100.

It is difficult to escape the impression that much more investigation must be made before the conclusions reached by these writers can be substantiated by the method employed. It is not surprising that they speak warmly of the work of the radical nineteenth-century critic F. C. Baur and regard favourably the eschatological hypothesis of Schweitzer. The specific direction in which such theories lead is never seen more clearly than when the authors maintain that any theological argument based on exact interpretation is an imaginative extravagance (p. 36). This prepares the way for the rejection of the idea of an infallible record (p. 42).

In the second part of the book the writers should have made more clear the sense in which they use the word 'church'. Sometimes illustrations are drawn from the Roman Catholic Church, at other times from the Church of England. It would appear that the writers mean to include anything ecclesiastical, so vague and undefined is their use of the word. One thing however is clear: the purpose of this whole section is to remove all the obstacles in the path of a man believing precisely what he chooses. But this is a dangerous approach, for it exalts human reason above revelation.

There are many half-truths in this book. No true Protestant would quarrel with the view that the church in the sense of any external organization does not possess absolute authority. But the writers are not the only ones who have been prepared to challenge ecclesiastical authority, although they write as if the idea had never occurred to anyone before the age of the computer. What they have failed to do is to take account of a faith based on true biblical exegesis. They have dismissed this without consideration on the strength of their own presupposition that no authority can now be claimed for the Bible.

Those prepared to dispense with all notions of orthodoxy, to deplore all forms of dogmatic statements, to jettison all the hard-won positions of the past and to launch out on an uncharted sea of 'personal religion' (however this might be understood) may find some stimulus from this book. But others will see in it a muddled and unsuccessful attempt to produce something positive out of essentially negative modern criticism.

In the other book, *The Structure of*

Luke and Acts, A. Q. Morton collaborates with the late G. H. C. Macgregor. This book is on the same pattern as these authors' book on the structure of John's Gospel. The main idea is that Luke was dominated by the physical restriction of the fixed length of the manuscript material which he used and was obliged therefore to adapt his literary structure accordingly. In the case of Luke's Gospel the Proto-Luke hypothesis is accepted as a working basis; then, on the principle of measuring the text by the number of lines in each section, a mathematical basis for the Proto-Luke theory is evolved. The argumentation comes very near to being circular, for unless the Proto-Luke theory is first accepted on other grounds no mathematical calculations could lead one to be convinced of its truth.

Because the writers, in common with practically all scholars, accept that one author wrote both the Gospel and Acts they proceed to study Acts on the analogy of Luke. This involves the production of a Proto-Acts theory. Unfortunately such a prior edition of Acts cannot be recreated by extracting any source which exists independently, as Proto-Luke is created by extracting Mark. The procedure used is to accept Harnack's theory regarding the early part of Acts; this involves treating certain parts as secondary, which means that they can consequently be excluded from Proto-Acts. In addition several of the illustrative speeches together with passages containing difficulty are assigned to the S2 source which was used to supplement Proto-Acts. In spite of the appeal to measurement by number of lines, the method used in this book is based on definite theological presuppositions. For instance, all miracles are assigned to S2, which leaves Proto-Acts free of all kinds of difficulty. But are we to accept as scientific a process which assigns all problematic data to later editorial procedure? It is not surprising that these writers' reconstruction of Acts is somewhat radical. It is surely a more logical procedure to make sense of Acts as it stands, if that is possible. These authors give no grounds for supposing that it is not.

Of the 155 pages in this book, 102 are occupied with a reproduction of the text of Luke and Acts in the Revised Standard Version, arranged according to sources. The amount of discussion of the theories put forward is therefore disproportionately small for the size and cost of the book.