



## EXCERPT



**J. I. Packer**  
*His Life and Thought*

November 10, 2020 | \$25, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4177-6

J. I. Packer was one of the most influential evangelical theological and spiritual writers of the twentieth century. In this beautiful recollection of Packer's life and faith, Alister McGrath explores his many contributions to theology and spirituality, engagingly setting out the central themes of his work for a new generation of readers.

## "The Biggest That Ever Was"

I first came to appreciate the importance of J. I. Packer's story in November 1991, when I travelled from Oxford to Cambridge by coach to give a lecture. On boarding the bus, I discovered Packer was also a passenger. We had met in London two days earlier and sat down beside each other to continue our conversation as the coach wended its way through the English countryside on its long and slow journey to Cambridge. We had more than three hours together. Packer told me the story of his conversion at Oxford, and his gradual discernment of what he should be doing with his life. The story was so moving it led me to plan and write his biography over a period of five years, just as it has now led me to write this reflection on his life and thought.

C. S. Lewis regularly emphasized that great writers sought to share something with their readers – something which they themselves had grasped or seen and wanted to pass on to others, so that they might benefit. The best writers are not self-promoting narcissists who demand that we look *at them*, but those who invite us to look *through them* at what they have seen, enabling us to share in their experience. They are thus windows to something greater. Lewis himself saw authors not as spectacles to be admired, but as a 'set of spectacles' through which we can look at the world and see it in sharper focus and greater depth.

If Lewis is right, it follows that a good theologian should be transparent to the gospel. In other words, they avoid the cumbrously technocratic language and obscurity of expression that prevents their readers from grasping what they have seen. In part, Packer's appeal lies both in his accessible and engaging writing style, alongside his seamless integration of a loving and attentive reading of the Bible, the weaving together of its themes in theology, and the working out of this vision of the Christian faith in holy living and prayerful adoration. In June 2016, Packer was asked what he hoped to achieve through his teaching for that year's Regent College summer school. His answer to that question deserves close attention:

What I shall be saying to my class, in substance, is: Look! This is the biggest thing that ever was! And we Christians, most of us, still haven't appreciated its size. We've been Christians for years and years, and yet we haven't fully grasped it.

For Packer, theology is about unpacking this 'biggest thing that ever was' – faithfully and reliably. That is the evangelical core of preaching, prayer, proclamation and adoration. And it also stands at the heart of the joyful and prayerful discipleship of the mind that Packer calls 'theologising'.

Like the Puritans before him, Packer saw the natural place of the theologian as lying within the community of faith – not standing *above* the community of faith, still less standing *outside* it, but rather speaking to the Christian community as one who shared in their journey of faith and hoped to encourage them to reflect on it more rigorously and profoundly. This small volume aims to help its readers explore and reflect on what Packer so vividly describes as 'the biggest thing that ever was'.

—Adapted from the introduction



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Alister McGrath, a bestselling author and friend of Packer, tells the story of Packer's faith and how it sustained him during his time in England and Canada. Along the way he explores Packer's many contributions to theology and spirituality, alternating narrative with reflection. By engagingly setting out Packer's ideas and the central themes of his work, McGrath helps to explain why Packer and his writing continue to be so helpful to millions on the journey of encountering God.

## Alister McGrath, Bestselling Author and Friend of J. I. Packer

**Alister McGrath** (DPhil, DD, Oxford University) is the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University and fellow of Harris Manchester College, Oxford. After initial academic work in the natural sciences, Alister turned to the study of theology and intellectual history, while occasionally becoming engaged in broader cultural debates about the rationality and relevance of the Christian faith. He is the author of many academic and theological works, as well as the international bestseller *The Dawkins Delusion?*, the acclaimed *C. S. Lewis—A Life*, and *A Theory of Everything (That Matters)*.

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"Like thousands of other pastors, I can say that Packer's work and witness are of inestimable value to me. He was a master of making the divide between doctrine and piety disappear."

—Derek Rishmawy, University of California, Irvine

"J. I. Packer's primary legacy is the influence he held over events in Christendom and over people's lives during his lifetime. . . . J. I. Packer gave evangelicals a place to stand in regard to the authority of the Bible."

—Leland Ryken, *Christianity Today*, obituary, July 17, 2020

"Packer was magisterial in substance, but adopted the tone of a fellow traveler. He convinced us that the study of God 'is the most practical project anyone can engage in.'"

—*Christianity Today*, "The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals"



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