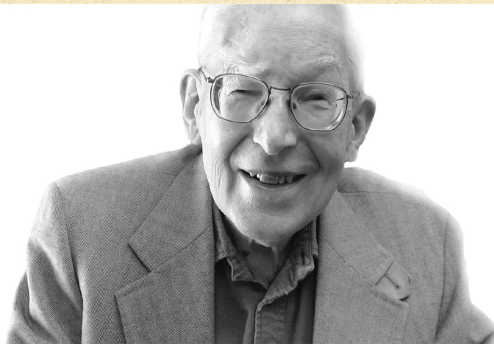


Alister McGrath

J. I.
PACKER

HIS LIFE
AND THOUGHT



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I

The Beginnings of a Journey: From Gloucester to Oxford

James Innell Packer was born in the English cathedral city of Gloucester on 22 July 1926, the son of James Percy Packer (died 1972), a clerk at the divisional headquarters of the Great Western Railway, and Dorothy Mary Harris (died 1965), who had trained as a schoolmistress in Bristol. Packer's sister Margaret was born in 1929 – the year of the Wall Street crash. The effects of this financial crisis on Britain were severe. By the end of 1930, unemployment in Britain had more than doubled from 1 million to 2.5 million. The Packer family, however, managed to cope with this austerity, living modestly in rented accommodation close to the city's railway station.

In September 1933, Packer began to attend the National School in London Road, Gloucester. He did not fit in easily with other boys at this junior school, and within days had become the victim of playground bullying. On 19 September, Packer was chased out of the school grounds onto the London Road – one of the busiest traffic thoroughfares in Gloucester. Perhaps the driver of a passing bread van was inattentive, preoccupied with his delivery schedules; more likely, however, he simply did not have time to react when a seven-year-old boy suddenly ran into his path. As a result of this collision, Packer suffered a major head injury. He was taken to the nearby Gloucester Royal Infirmary and rushed into an operating theatre.

Packer's condition was serious. He had suffered major damage to his skull on the right of his forehead, leading to injury to the frontal lobe of his brain. The resident surgeon at the hospital was able to extract fragments of bone from inside Packer's skull, leaving him with a small hole in his right forehead, some two centimetres in diameter. This injury would remain clearly visible for the rest of his life. After three weeks in hospital, Packer was allowed to return

home, where he would spend six months recovering from the trauma of his injury. It was not until the spring of 1934 that he was allowed to return to the National School. Packer had to wear a protective aluminum plate over his injury, making it impossible for him to join in normal schoolboy games and sports.

During his period of convalescence away from school, Packer developed a love of reading which remained with him ever after. Packer's grandmother was an admirer of Agatha Christie and began to lend him some of her own books, including *The Mystery of the Blue Train* and *The Secret of Chimneys*. This appetite for books may have been a great asset for his later academic career, but at the time it probably reinforced the perception that he was a 'bookish' child who did not fit in easily with other children. Packer has freely admitted that he is 'something of a bookworm', devouring a wide range of literature that is reflected in many of his occasional pieces.¹

After his return to the National School, Packer fell into the habit of accompanying his father on Saturdays when he returned to his office at Northgate Mansions, close to Gloucester Railway Station, to make sure the week's paperwork had been properly completed and filed. Packer later described his father to me as 'a railway clerk in charge of another clerk and two typists'. As a result, there were two typewriters in his father's office. His father used one of these to do his paperwork and, as nobody else was in the office on a Saturday afternoon, Packer was allowed to play around with the second. Noting how much their son enjoyed this typewriter, his parents gave him an old Oliver machine for his eleventh birthday in July 1937. Packer had secretly hoped to be given a bicycle, like all other boys of his age, but the risk of worsening his head injury through a fall made this impossible. He happily mastered the use of the typewriter and was soon typing out his own stories.

In September 1937, Packer left his local National School and moved on to the Crypt School in Greyfriars, Gloucester. The school had a long and distinguished history going back to 1539 and counted among its former pupils the great English preacher and evangelist George Whitefield (1714–70) and Robert Raikes (1736–1811), the founder of the Sunday School movement. On entering the school's sixth form, Packer chose to specialise in classics – the study of the

language, literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome. He was the only pupil in his year who wished to take this option; as a result, he was taught on a one-to-one basis by the Headmaster of the school, David Gwynn Williams.

Williams is of considerable importance to our story, in that he became something of an intellectual role model to Packer. He had studied classics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford University. The close personal attention which he offered helped Packer to develop his own vision of what he wanted to do when he left the Crypt School. Like his Headmaster, he set his heart on going to Oxford University to study classics at Corpus Christi College. Williams' expert tuition helped Packer to build the competence and confidence that would be essential if he was to achieve this goal. Yet if Packer was to study at Oxford, this would require more than academic brilliance on his part; given his family's modest financial circumstances, he would need substantial scholarship support.

In March 1943, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, announced it would be awarding two major scholarships in classics for the following academic year: the Charles Oldham Scholarship, and the Hugh Oldham Scholarship. The scholarships, which would be awarded on the basis of a competitive examination to be held in Oxford on 7 September, were both worth £100 per annum, a very substantial sum at the time. Packer knew it was essential that he should win one of these scholarships; without this support, his family simply would not have been able to afford to send their only son to Oxford. Packer duly travelled to Oxford to sit the examinations, and shortly afterwards learned that he had been awarded the Hugh Oldham Scholarship – a remarkable achievement for someone who had only just turned seventeen.

Yet Packer's future at Oxford was still not certain. All able-bodied British males aged between eighteen and forty-one were liable to compulsory military service for the duration of the Second World War. If called up, Packer would have been able to begin his studies at Oxford that October but would have to interrupt them to serve in the armed forces when he turned eighteen. However, a medical examiner considered that Packer's head injury of 1933 exempted him from compulsory military service. That injury might have

disqualified him from military service; it clearly did not impact on his intellectual capacities.

In the end, Packer decided he would defer entry to Oxford by a year. He would only have been seventeen in October 1943; it would, he concluded, be preferable to wait until he was eighteen and better prepared for the rigorous intellectual environment he knew he would experience there. This meant that he remained at the Crypt School. While everyone else in his year group left to go to college or take up jobs, Packer spent a third year in the sixth form, using the time and the school's library resources to read some of the classics of literature in preparation for his time at Oxford.

At this stage, Packer had little interest in Christianity, tending to regard it as probably true, but of little significance. Yet his interest was piqued by C. S. Lewis who, he later remarked, led him to 'something approaching orthodoxy'. He had read Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* in 1939 during a phase when he devoured stories about space-travel, and in his final years at the Crypt School read *The Screwtape Letters* along with the three smaller books that were later brought together to become the classic *Mere Christianity*.

Yet the young Packer remained puzzled by Christianity. Although he saw himself as doctrinally orthodox, something seemed to be missing from this rather cerebral account of the Christian faith. One of his schoolfriends tried to explain to him what it was all about. Eric Taylor had entered the sixth form at the Crypt School at the same time as Packer, and the two had struck up a friendship. While Packer stayed on at the school until the summer of 1944, Taylor had left a year earlier to study at the University of Bristol. During his first year at Bristol, Taylor was converted to Christianity through the ministry of the Bristol Inter-Faculty Christian Union. He wrote Packer a series of letters, in which he attempted to explain how he had discovered a living faith.

Packer found these letters somewhat baffling. He recalls his difficulty in understanding why Taylor believed that formal assent to the Christian creeds was not enough to mark someone as a Christian. What more could be required? The two friends met up in the summer of 1944, as Packer was preparing to go up to Oxford University. Despite Taylor's best efforts to describe the change that

had taken place in his life, Packer was unable to comprehend it. In the end, Taylor suggested that Packer get in touch with the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union on his arrival and attend one of their meetings – a suggestion to which Packer agreed.

*Oxford University: Studying Classics
– Discovering Christianity*

In the second week of October 1944, Packer left his parents to begin his life as an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. It was a momentous transition. Packer would be living away from his parental home for the first time, and entering an environment in which he had no friends or family. Oxford was a mere shadow of its normal self at that time since most able-bodied students and academic staff were serving in the armed forces. There were only a few eighteen-year-old students who would be studying for the regular three or four years for Oxford's undergraduate degree courses; most were undertaking truncated six-month courses before going on to undertake military service.

Like C. S. Lewis before him, Packer would study classical literature, history and philosophy. The two-part undergraduate course at Oxford which focused on these areas was popularly known as 'Mods' and 'Greats', although the University preferred it to be known as *Classical Moderations* and *Literae Humaniores*. While most of Oxford's undergraduate courses lasted three years, the intellectual rigour of classical studies required four. The demanding linguistic, philosophical and historical training which Packer would receive during his time at Oxford unquestionably lies behind his ability to handle complex arguments with ease and clarity. Though his Oxford tutors were excellent, Packer could not help but feel that they lacked the flair and pedagogical commitment of David Gwynn Williams. He had, he realised, been very fortunate in having had Williams as a mentor at such a formative stage in his life.

Shortly after his arrival, Packer was invited to attend a meeting of the Corpus Christi College Christian Union. This turned out to be a rather uninteresting affair. However, mindful of his promise to his

friend Eric Taylor, Packer subsequently agreed to go along to hear a Christian Union sermon on the evening of Sunday, 22 October 1944 – ‘Sunday of Second Week’, to use the traditional Oxford way of referring to days during a university term – at St Aldate’s Church in the centre of Oxford. The preacher, Earl Langston from the southern English coastal town of Weymouth, told his audience about his own conversion, which had taken place at a Boys’ Camp. He had been asked by one of the older boys if he really was a Christian. This unexpected challenge forced him to acknowledge that he was not, and subsequently led him to make a personal response to Christ.

Packer had found the first part of the sermon a little dull, but this narrative of conversion spoke to him deeply, appealing to his imagination. A picture took shape within his mind. He was looking through a window into a room where some people were partying, enjoying themselves by playing games. As he watched, he found he could understand the rules of the games they were playing. But he was *outside*, while they were *inside*. Packer recalled grasping his situation with crystalline clarity. *He needed to come in.*

The service ended with the singing of Charlotte Elliot’s famous hymn, ‘Just as I am’, with its constant emphasis on coming to Christ – ‘O Lamb of God, I come’. Packer made his decision: it was time for him to come inside. And so, not far from the place where the great evangelist George Whitefield committed himself to Christ in 1735, Packer made his own personal commitment.

Six weeks later, close to the end of his first term at Oxford, Packer had a second experience which he often recounted in his later writings. Thirteen years earlier, C. S. Lewis had described a ride with a friend to Whipsnade Zoo. At the start of this journey, he did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; at the end, he did. Lewis was not entirely clear how this radical change of mind happened. It was as if a series of disconnected ideas suddenly fused together, leading him to a compellingly clear conclusion. Packer considers something very similar to have happened to him concerning his views on the Bible.

In 1944 I went to a Bible study at which a vision from the book of Revelation (I forget which one) was expounded, and whereas at the

start I did not believe that all the Bible (which I had been assiduously reading since my conversion six weeks before) is God's trustworthy instruction, at the end, slightly to my surprise, I found myself unable to doubt that indeed it is . . . When, years later, I found Calvin declaring that every Christian experiences the inward witness of the Holy Spirit to the divine authority of Scripture, I rejoiced to think that, without ever having heard a word on this subject, I had long known exactly what Calvin was talking about.²

So was this some kind of experiential flash in the pan, an expression of religious enthusiasm lacking any real intellectual substance? Not in this case. Recognising his need to think through and consolidate what he had experienced, Packer turned to George Whitefield as a possible role model and mentor. After all, he had attended the same school as Whitefield, and both had been converted in the same city and university. Packer went to the city library and borrowed the two volumes of an 1876 biography of Whitefield. They would be his staple reading over the forthcoming Christmas vacation, which he spent with his family in Gloucester. Packer found that studying Whitefield was both enriching in itself, as well as serving as a gateway to the riches of the Reformed theological tradition.

Discovering the Importance of Theology

During the 1940s, the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union fell under the influence of what is often described as the 'Keswick holiness teaching' or 'victorious living'. Although this teaching took various forms, its central theme was that Christians come to a point of crisis in their lives when they realise they cannot live victoriously in their own strength. In this moment of crisis, God assures them that they can surrender to Christ, trusting in his power to give them victory over sin. The Keswick approach offered what many Christians longed for: full deliverance from sin and a closer relationship with Christ than anything that they had hitherto experienced. The slogan that lay behind this understanding of how sin might be conquered and expelled was simple: 'Let go, and let God'.

During 1945, Packer found himself deeply troubled by this teaching. Like many, he longed for the state of sustained victory over sin which the Keswick preachers so enthusiastically described, and in which Christians would be enabled to avoid failure and achieve things which were otherwise beyond them. Yet he found that his attempts at ‘total consecration’ seemed to leave him exactly where he was before – ‘an immature and churned-up young man, painfully aware of himself, battling his daily way, as adolescents do, through manifold urges and surges of discontent and frustration’.³

His fellow students who followed the Keswick teaching urged him to figure out what barrier he was unwittingly placing in the path of the blessings that awaited him. He should surrender himself totally to the lordship of Christ, and experience the victorious presence of Christ within him. Yet, as Packer later reflected, the technique did not work – and could not work: ‘Since the teaching declared that everything depends on consecration being total, the fault had to lie in me. So I must scrape my inside again to find whatever maggots of unconsecrated self-hood still lurked there.’⁴

Throughout this process of critical reflection, Packer never doubted that he was a Christian, nor did he have any concerns over the truth of the Christian faith. Both these matters were settled in his mind. The difficulty involved the tension he was experiencing between a specific (and influential) way of understanding the Christian life and his own experience of that life. Something was wrong. But what?

Packer clearly needed a theological framework within which he could position and understand his spiritual struggles – and thus find a solution to them. He was certain that the Keswick position was unsatisfactory. Yet recognising the failure of one approach does not in itself indicate what the best answer might be. In the end, Packer’s answer came to him unexpectedly, when he was asked to curate a collection of old books that had been given to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union by C. Owen Pickard-Cambridge, a former scholar of Balliol College, Oxford, who went on to serve as a missionary in Japan and later as Vice-Principal of the Bible Churchmen’s College in Bristol.

The history of evangelicalism offers many instances of an apparently chance reading of Puritan classics leading to the personal spiritual revival of those who went on to become leading Christian preachers and evangelists. We might think of John Pawson (1737–1806), who relates how Joseph Alleine’s *Alarm to the Unconverted* (1672) providentially fell into his hands – we are not told how! – and triggered the process of his conversion.⁵ Or William Grimshaw (1708–63), who accidentally came across a copy of John Owen’s treatise on justification (1677) lying on a table in a friend’s house – and, on opening the work and discovering its topic, felt ‘an uncommon heat’ flush his face.⁶ As one of his biographers put it, Grimshaw had realised ‘he could not put himself right with God by a multitude of devotional exercises, however arduous’. Yet there seemed to him to be no way out of his dilemma – until he read John Owen.

Something very similar happened to Packer in Oxford’s Northgate Hall in 1945. Packer’s reputation as a somewhat bookish person led John Reynold, the Christian Union’s Senior Librarian, to suggest that Packer might like to organise and catalogue the collection. As Packer worked through the piles of books, he came across a complete set of the writings of John Owen (1616–83), a noted Puritan preacher and theologian who had been appointed by Thomas Cromwell to be Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University during the period of the Puritan Commonwealth.

What attracted Packer’s attention, however, was not Owen’s close links with Oxford University, but the titles of two of Owen’s treatises, which appeared to address and illuminate his own spiritual anxieties: ‘On Indwelling Sin’ and ‘On the Mortification of Sin’. These works, he found, spoke directly to his condition. As he later recalled, ‘Owen helped me to be realistic (that is, neither myopic nor despairing) about my continuing sinfulness and the discipline of self-suspicion and mortification to which, with all Christians, I am called.’⁷

Packer went on to write a synopsis of Owen’s approach, which he circulated to other students in the hope that they might share his liberating experience – not, it has to be said, with any great success. However, his concise summary and application of Owen’s insights

laid the ground for his later and more systematic exploration of the relevance of the Puritan heritage for today. Here, he believed, was a theologically serious and pastorally rooted approach to the problems of the Christian life, which could be part of his emerging evangelical vision of faith. It was a theological epiphany which opened his eyes and his mind to a viable and defensible way of understanding and living out the life of faith. It has remained at the heart of Packer's spirituality and theology ever since.

So what did Packer discover in Owen? Put briefly, Packer realised that, despite being a regenerate believer, sin remained a presence within him. Sin was a self-serving energy in the fallen human spiritual system, which had to be constantly challenged and corrected by focusing on Christ. He would have to learn to be watchful for sin's presence and influence, and pray for strength to resist it. Packer's characteristic emphasis on what he later called 'disciplined, Bible-based, Spirit-led self-examination' flows out of his early reading of Owen.

Ministry: The Decision to be Ordained

Following the end of the Second World War in the summer of 1945, Packer gave long and careful thought to what he ought to be doing with his life. He might, of course, become a classics teacher, trying to do for others what David Gwynn Williams had done for him – imparting a vision for scholarship. Yet this did not seem right. He had a deep sense of wanting to serve God, and believed that this was best done through ministering within a church. He was not quite clear what specific form this ministry might take, but knew that he felt called to full-time ministry in some shape or form. While Packer was aware of his own personal limitations, he believed it was important to offer his talents, no matter how limited they might be, in the service of Christ. If God really wanted him to serve in this way, God would have to find a means of overcoming his weaknesses.

But within which church should he minister? Packer had attended the local Plymouth Brethren Church in east Oxford during his first two years as an undergraduate. It was a formative experience, and

allowed him to benefit from its preaching, as well as the friendship of some older academic members of the congregation, especially James M. Houston and Donald Wiseman. From October 1946, though, Packer settled down as a member of the congregation of St Ebbe's, an evangelical Church of England parish in the centre of Oxford, which was experiencing new growth under the leadership of Maurice Wood. By the end of 1946, Packer had come to the conclusion that he ought to offer himself for ministry in the Church of England. Although he had misgivings about the Church of England itself, he believed that he would be able to work – perhaps even to flourish – within its structures, which would allow him to deploy his talents where there were real needs.

Packer set out his reasons for being – and remaining – a member of the Church of England in a pamphlet he published thirty-five years later. He was not an Anglican on account of his personal history, but because he had come to consider it the best option for someone in his position, despite its faults and weaknesses. Why? Because of its rich theological and spiritual heritage.

I am an Anglican not so much by sentiment or affection as by conviction . . . I cannot say that I ever particularly liked the Church of England as I found it, but I remain an Anglican out of conviction that here is the right place, for here I possess the truest, wisest and potentially richest heritage in all Christendom.⁸

Historically, Packer believed, the Church of England was given its identity, coherence and theological legitimacy by the creeds, the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) and the Prayer Book (1662), set alongside a core commitment to the norms of Scripture, tradition and reason. This helps us understand Packer's concern during the 1960s with the theological consequences of the erosion or displacement of these historical boundary-markers, particularly the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Packer's decision to offer himself for ministry did not, of course, mean that he would automatically be admitted to the Church of England's theological education and ministerial formation programmes. He was invited to attend a 'Selection Conference' early

in 1947, at which he was interviewed by a group of selectors to discern his motivation for offering himself for ministry, his pastoral gifts and his educational achievements. Typically, these conferences involved three days spent with other candidates and five selectors. The candidate would have private interviews with each of the selectors, after which they would confer and reach a joint decision on the ministerial potential of each of the candidates attending the conference. Within a week, Packer was told the outcome: he had been recommended for training for ministry in the Church of England.

The Church of England required its ordinands – those preparing for ordination – to study at one of a number of established ‘theological colleges’, and was generally happy for its students to choose the college at which they would train. Packer self-identified as an evangelical Anglican, with a strong emphasis on the importance of the Bible as a source of Christian doctrine and as a guide to Christian living. In 1947, there were four theological colleges in or near Oxford which were recognised as centres of ministerial education by the Church of England, one of which had an evangelical tradition. Packer already knew both the Principal and Vice-Principal of Wycliffe Hall through his church connections, and considered that it was an obvious home for him during his period of training for ministry. He felt he could flourish there.

We shall return to this narrative in Chapter 3. It is appropriate at this point, though, to reflect further on a theme introduced in this chapter, which has been of central importance to Packer throughout his whole career – the recognition that today’s Christians can be enriched and informed through the wisdom of the past. Packer’s discovery of the writings of John Owen proved to be a spiritual and theological gateway, opening his eyes and mind to the riches to be found there.

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