

To Know and Serve God: A Biography of James I Packer by Alister McGrath: An Extended Review

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To Know and Serve God: A Biography of James I Packer Alister McGrath
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Dr McGrath has produced yet another book, this time in a field which is relatively new for him. He has written biography before, but not (as far as I know) of a living person – a task which is always much more difficult than dealing with the dead. Dr Packer has given the book his *imprimatur* by declaring that it is factually correct, though he admits to feeling a bit strange when reading it. And well he might, for in many ways this is a strange book. Parts of it are excellent, and shed real light on the subject being discussed. Other parts, however, could have been left out without much loss, and replaced by more detailed information which would have helped the reader unfamiliar with Anglican Evangelicalism to find his way more clearly.

One point, which Dr McGrath does not stress, is that he is writing from the standpoint of an outsider. Partly of course, this is a matter of age – he is too young to have known many of the people he mentions, and his narrative sometimes gives us the feeling that there are gaps which personal knowledge of the events concerned could have filled in. More seriously though, although Dr McGrath is the principal of an evangelical theological college, he is a stranger to the central institutions of Anglican Evangelicalism. He mentions the importance of Latimer House in Oxford, Tyndale House in Cambridge, and the Inter-Varsity Press, all of which Dr Packer has been involved with in his time, but neglects to add that he himself has never had anything to do with any of them! He may be a better person as a result, of course, and it may not be noticed by the American readers whom he quite clearly has in view, but it is a strange record for a well-known author and speaker on the evangelical circuit.

This essential foreignness to the subject matters in a book like this, because so much of Dr Packer's life has been bound up with Anglican Evangelicalism in England, warts and all. In Dr McGrath's favour it can be said that his relative distance from the people, places and events he is describing allows him a freedom to comment on them which an insider would not have. On the other hand, it is bound to expose him to the charge that he is not entirely acquainted with the facts, and in some cases it will be difficult for him to refute the charge convincingly.

The first area of weakness in this book is the description of Anglican Evangelicalism in the early years of this century. Dr McGrath nowhere tells us what Evangelicalism is, nor does he have much to say about the evangelical heritage. Charles Simeon, for example, is not mentioned once, in spite of his great importance. Virtually nothing is said about the great ritualist and liberal controversies which split the Church of England in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and which did so much to shape the mentality of twentieth-century Evangelicals. We are told that in 1945 Evangelicals were few in number and felt beleaguered, but are left to guess why that was so. Nor are we given much insight into the peculiar bonds which linked those who were Evangelicals – their common sense of being a misunderstood and despised remnant, their belief that they and they alone were charged with bringing the gospel to a benighted nation, and their extreme sensitivity to anyone who deviated (however slightly) from the approved line as laid down by bodies like the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. It was a narrow world, but it had its attractions as a company of true believers who were prepared to accept ridicule for the sake of the truth as they saw it. Dr McGrath may know this in his head, but he does not feel it in his bones, and so it does not come across to his readers in a coherent or convincing way.

It is, however, of great importance in understanding Dr Packer's background, and in particular the problems which he was later to have with Martyn Lloyd-Jones. A lot of people will read this book to see what is said about this, and Dr McGrath's analysis is liable to get him into trouble with what might loosely be called the 'Lloyd-Jones camp'. His portrait of 'the Doctor' leaves one with the impression that he was manipulated by a coterie of lesser individuals who pushed his separatistic tendencies to such an extreme that it caused a breach in personal relations between the two great men which should never have taken place. In fact, they were already moving off in different directions when the split occurred and, although it left a legacy of unpleasantness, the blame for this should not be placed all on one side.

What Dr Lloyd-Jones saw clearly – more clearly, one feels, than either Dr Packer or John Stott did – was that Anglican Evangelicals were in

danger of losing their cutting edge if they got too involved in the structures of the Church of England. This was at a time when a younger generation of Anglican Evangelicals was beginning to feel that such involvement was both right and necessary, and in this they were supported by Packer and Stott. Trying to decide who was right in this debate is not easy, because so much depends on one's point of view. The Packer-Stott line would have had a good deal to commend it had Anglican Evangelicalism been united around a coherent Reformed theology, but it was not. Those who wanted to 'go into' the Church of England, as they put it, were often quite happy to ditch whatever theology they possessed, especially if it could get them a bishopric. Whether Dr Lloyd-Jones realized this or not, subsequent events have shown that his was a prophetic voice. At the Evangelical Anglican Leaders' Conference in January 1995, for example, all the main speakers were bishops, but not all of them could be clearly identified with the evangelical wing of the church. A purple shirt was obviously more important than a committed soul, which is exactly what the Doctor could see coming twenty-five years before. For the record, I can testify that Dr Lloyd-Jones was not anti-Anglican as such, because when he found out that I was going to seek ordination in the Church of England he came to see me and encouraged me in my vocation. The one thing he warned me about was the danger of becoming an ecclesiastical politician!

Dr McGrath moves on to surer ground when he talks about Dr Packer's desire to revive interest in the Puritans. 'Puritan' is a slippery term, and the eventual fall-out between conformists and non-conformists could have been predicted from the start. After all, both can claim the Puritans as their own, and in some ways the non-conformists have a clearer title to the inheritance. This is not to say that there have not always been Puritan-minded Anglicans, but their position in the church (and their attitude towards it) has been complex. In attempting to bring an Anglican neo-Puritanism into being, Dr Packer was heading for trouble, as this book makes perfectly clear. This is basically because modern Anglican Evangelicalism is thoroughly 'Arminian' in character, and is deeply marked by an amateurish do-it-yourself outlook which is its true uniting characteristic. Bash-campers ('Christ for the upper crust'), charismatics and neo-evangelical liberals all have this in common. They do not believe in the total depravity of the human race, they most certainly do not believe in unconditional election (you have a much better chance of being saved if you have gone to the right school, for example) and, despite what they may claim, they have little conception of atonement, limited or otherwise. Oddly enough, they probably do believe in irresistible grace (how could you refuse such a generous offer?) and they certainly believe in the perseverance of the saints, as long as one defines the word 'saint' according to particular criteria, which vary somewhat trickily from group to group within the broad evangelical spectrum.

The do-it-yourself mentality makes many English Evangelicals allergic to anything which smacks of professional, systematic theology, which they perceive as liable to 'quench the Spirit'. In other words, they might have to sacrifice their petty prejudices and eccentric notions in the interests of objective truth, and there is no way that they are going to do that. Dr Packer, with his Oxford qualifications and logical mind, was on to a loser from the start, a point which has to be grasped if the events of the late 1960s and 1970s are to be properly understood. These events must also be seen in their proper context. At least three other theologians mentioned in this book (Geoffrey Bromiley, Colin Brown and Philip Hughes) found themselves in North America during these years because there was nowhere for them to go in England, and in this respect Dr Packer's only originality is that he went to Canada and not to the USA. But as Dr McGrath points out, this has enabled him to have a wide and fruitful ministry in the land of the free while at the same time giving him the benefit of a moderately British environment to come home to. Again, unlike the other three, Dr Packer is still occasionally to be heard on the English lecturing circuit, though it must be said that, when he spoke recently in Oxford (at a meeting which I happened to be chairing), Dr McGrath was nowhere to be seen – another sign of his essential distance from the real world of Anglican Evangelicalism.

The book is undoubtedly at its most interesting when it described the complicated events surrounding the formation of Trinity College Bristol, and Dr Packer's relationship with that institution. Dr McGrath is to be congratulated for exposing the wickedness and deep-seated hypocrisy of the so-called Evangelicals who made such a mess of things at Clifton. He shows quite clearly that not only were they determined to have their way inside their own institution, but that they were prepared to exact revenge on people like Colin Brown, who protested against their behaviour from the outside. This part of Dr McGrath's narrative will shock many readers, and therefore it needs to be underlined that every word he writes is true – indeed, if anything, he has probably toned it down in the interests of charity, and possibly also because so much of what happened was – and has remained – 'confidential'. Those events have left lasting scars on the people who were involved, and the men responsible have never been called to account by anyone. In writing these things down, Dr McGrath has exposed the moral void at the heart of so much Anglican Evangelicalism, and unfortunately what he says can be supported by similar events elsewhere.

Dr Packer, as a theologian, was a threat to people like that, and they were determined that on no account would he be allowed to have any say in the running of Trinity, once it was founded. The only surprise is that they were prepared to tolerate him at all, but that is perhaps the

compromise which had to be accepted for the merger of Clifton and Tyndale Hall to go forward. They need not have worried, of course. A decade later, when both Jim Packer and Alec Motyer had gone, Trinity rapidly sank to a depth which even the men of Clifton may not have envisaged, as it was used as a launching pad for the career of one George Carey, ex-Evangelical and future archbishop. Today, there are many who remember the Packer-Motyer years as a golden age in Bristol, though we may be quite sure that no one who thinks the way they do would be found anywhere near Trinity now.

This may all seem unbelievable, but it is only too plausible to those who are familiar with the way such institutions and some of the people who run them behave. Even at Oak Hill, there was a time when there were serious doctrinal differences, especially in respect of orthodox Reformed theology as taught by Dr Packer as I was only too sad to find out. Anglican Evangelicalism will not shake itself free from this evil unless enough people are prepared to stand up and expose it, but public accountability goes so much against the grain in evangelical circles that the chances of this are remote. Then too, there is always the problem of the amateurish do-it-yourself mentality, as even a glance at Reform will quickly demonstrate. Conservative Evangelicals know what they do not want; it is quite another thing to ask them to unite around a positive programme.

Dr Packer left this universe in 1979 for a new life at Regent College Vancouver, and Dr McGrath presents this as a wider opportunity given to him to develop his preaching and teaching ministry. It has to be said here that this perception is the exact opposite of the one generally held by Dr Packer's admirers in England. Once more, a little background is necessary. When I was a student in the 1960s there were four books which every Evangelical possessed – John Stott's *Basic Christianity*, T C Hammond's *In Understanding Be Men*, and Jim Packer's two mini-classics, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. It was widely assumed (or at least hoped) that Dr Packer was in the process of writing a great theological synthesis which would be the definitive work of evangelical theology for the next generation. What we were looking for was a new Charles Hodge, or even just a new Louis Berkhof, but what we got was *Knowing God*. As Dr McGrath points out, the chapters of this book attracted little attention when they were published separately, and it was really only when it hit the American market that it took off. Unfortunately, this says more about the gap between theory and practice in so much American Evangelicalism than it does about the value of the book itself.

Knowing God is a good book and a refreshing read, but it is not a textbook of evangelical theology of the kind recently attempted by Wayne

Grudem (from a different theological standpoint). Many of us believe that Dr Packer could and should have produced such a work, and from this point of view *Knowing God* is a disappointment. When I meet like-minded friends in England, we sometimes talk about this and wonder whether Dr Packer will ever find time to write this missing volume. We fervently wish that he would spend less time on ephemeral projects like *Essentials 94* (presented by Dr McGrath as if it were a major event in Christian history!) and devote himself to activities of long-term value and impact. Whether that is still possible or not only Dr Packer can answer, but it has to be recorded that this has been the expectation of his English friends and admirers, and that so far we have felt let down.

Dr Packer has an excellent mind, and is a deeply devout Christian believer. His writings are always refreshing and helpful to those who read them. His teaching is remembered by many as one of the high points of their lives. His influence has been real, if less than one might have hoped – especially in England. Dr McGrath brings all this out in his book, and for that we must be grateful. Yet as Dr Packer says himself in the foreword, it makes for a strange read. Perhaps the real lesson from it is that it is impossible to assess the true importance of most current events; one normally has to wait at least a generation for the dust to settle. The real test of this book will come when the historians of 2040 start to pick over our time. Will they agree with Dr McGrath that the life and events described here were really central, not only to the evangelical movement, but to the church as a whole, during this period? Or will they pass them by as being of little long-term significance? It is hard to say, but the researcher of the future may be gratified to discover at least one note of contemporary scepticism, even if he rejects it in his overall conclusion.

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