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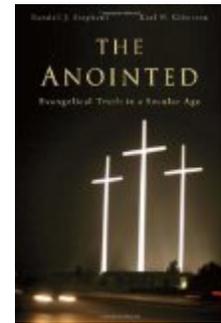


Randall J. Stephens, Karl W. Giberson. *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 384 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04818-8.

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Contentious election seasons always serve as a reminder of the deep cultural and religious divides that exist in America. Timely and fascinating, *The Anointed* explores the historical and religious roots of culture wars over climate change, LGBTQ civil rights, evolution, and the separation of church and state. Coauthors Karl W. Giberson and Randall J. Stephens discover that, even in the face of tremendous diversity, the majority of American evangelicals question and, largely, reject the knowledge of experts whose conclusions do not directly conform to their existing religious beliefs and understandings. Most evangelical Christians view the educated elite, from historians who contend that most of the founding fathers were not evangelical Christians to scientists who have proven that the earth is not six thousand years old, as little more than God-hating ideologues whose evidence, science, and expert consensus carry as much, if not less, weight than the passing observations of Sarah Palin or Glenn Beck.

A powerful and deeply entrenched parallel subculture seems to be largely responsible for the success of evangelical anti-intellectualism. Led by a vanguard of “anointed” leaders like David Barton (WallBuilders), James Dobson (Focus on the Family), and Kenneth Ham (Answers in Genesis), evangelical Christians are equipped for battle in the culture wars. Armed with unaccountable experts, bad information, and religious conviction, they have managed to wield enormous cultural and political power.

Balancing intellectual history, biography, cultural analysis, and ethnography, *The Anointed* competently tackles an enormous and diverse religious community

with nuance and meaningful analysis. For example, in the chapter “A Carnival of Christians,” the authors shift from exploring the ministries of giants like Dobson, Ham, and Barton to a study of evangelical subculture through the lived experience of Paul Smith. Reared entirely within evangelicalism, Smith easily managed never to have a secular friend. Although this may seem extraordinary, the reality is that Smith’s story is remarkably common. Stephens and Giberson cleverly narrate Smith’s life as a foil for exploring the holistic nature of the subculture, one that provides Smith with education, entertainment, and social support at every stage of his life and spiritual development.

The force of *The Anointed* lies in its overwhelming demonstration that evangelicals have been quite successful in repackaging religious beliefs as empirical science and scholarship. Although they reject mainstream expertise, evangelicals happily advertise their own, often honorary, credentials from any of hundreds of Bible colleges, using the title “Dr.” to bolster their credibility without the accountability of peer review or the intellectual rigor of academia. Indeed, evangelicals are compelling because they co-opt scholarly authority. Rhetorical shifts are essential for framing religious belief as objectively verified fact. For example, they use the term “creation science” to describe a biblical myth or citations of biased or wildly misinterpreted studies to prove that homosexuality is harmful and a choice. Evangelicals may not ultimately be successful in translating their positions into national public policy, but they have unquestionably created a powerful subculture bent on presenting pseudoscience and unvetted research as equally sound and authoritative as peer-reviewed work produced by “secular”

academics. Consequently, evangelicals have been able to stall political progress and shift the terms of the debate away from what we should do with the conclusions of experts to whether or not those conclusions are even valid.

Students and scholars will find tremendous explanatory value in this book as the authors repeatedly make note of the fact that evangelicalism does not have to take this form. Many important evangelical leaders and scholars reject the culture wars and have little difficulty maintaining and reconciling their deeply held beliefs with science and expert knowledge. However, evangelicals like Francis Collins, David Myers, N. T. Wright, George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, and Randall Balmer are unable to gain traction. Stephens and Giberson argue that this is partly due to the overwhelming persuasive

force of leading charismatic leaders who wield power through demonizing outsiders, drawing on supernatural authority, and playing on fear through dogmatic “us vs. them” rhetoric. Successful leaders describe a world locked in a battle between ultimate good and ultimate evil. Everyone is a soldier, the stakes could not be higher, and the timeline is urgent. Moderated and balanced positions offered by other evangelical leaders are simply not as effective for mobilizing a movement.

After reading *The Anointed*, I felt deeply satisfied and impressed. The book has explanatory power, is well written, and balances attention to nuance and complication with meaningful analysis. Stephens and Giberson’s seamless collaboration produced a mature, complex, and thorough piece of scholarship that has changed the way I will think about and teach American evangelism.

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