

known of a person who seems to have lived so much of his life in public. For all the years wags spent ridiculing the once rotund Ebert's fondness for food, we never knew that his real, dangerous weakness was booze. The book's most compelling essays are sober considerations of alcohol. Ebert celebrates a rollicking Chicago journalists' dive called O'Rourke's, then makes an impassioned case for the honest self-appraisal offered by Alcoholics Anonymous. (Of the barroom he remarks, "We knew who we said we were, who we wanted to appear to be, and who O'Rourke's thought we were, and that was knowing each other well enough.") He also celebrates his history of interracial romances—his wife, Chaz, is African-American, and he once tried, unsuccessfully, to date Oprah Winfrey.

Though Ebert never cites it explicitly, the book that *Life Itself* most closely mirrors is *A Child of the Century*, the 1954 autobiography of the fluent Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht, a former reporter who wrote *His Girl Friday*. Like Hecht, Ebert spends more time chronicling Windy City newsroom capers and childhood idylls than he does contemplating the pictures he liked or didn't. And the two men, each a writer working at the edges of a temporal art, give special place to the enduring quandaries: God and girls. For Ebert, these two are inextricably linked: His mother wanted him to be a priest, and he resisted, keeping "as much of my life as possible a secret from her" as she slipped into angry alcoholism. He remains anguished about the relationships he let slip away, sheltered in movie theaters watching other lives.

It is perhaps with these losses in mind that he offers his ultimate philosophy. "To make others less happy is a crime," he writes. "To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts." This book will bring others happiness, because the author so deeply feels pleasure and so honestly acknowledges its obstacles.

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## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

## God's Experts

Reviewed by Kevin M. Schultz

TO THOSE ON THE OUTSIDE, America's evangelical community might look like an uneducated mass of people who subscribe to beliefs that defy common sense. And we know very little about who has done the spadework for these ideas—including the notion that America has a Christian mission to fulfill and the belief that the Earth was created in six days.

In *The Anointed*, Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, professors at evangelical Eastern Nazarene College near Boston, draw a fascinating group portrait of today's most popular intellectual leaders among evangelicals and attempt to explain why so many of the faithful buy their arguments. While it is clear that the authors are baffled and even frustrated by many of their cobelievers, they strive to be dispassionate and fair. Most of the time they succeed.

Texan David Barton is perhaps the most visible of these leaders. He heads a media empire that reaches millions of radio listeners and was a regular guest on Glenn Beck's television talk show until it went off the air earlier this year. Barton, who has the ears of a number of conservative politicians, interprets American history to comport with the idea that the United States is a "Christian nation." The Founders never intended to erect a high wall between church and state, according to Barton, and secular historians have sought to obscure the evidence of God's role in American affairs throughout history.

Then there's Ken Ham, an Australian émigré and former high school science teacher who has had a large hand in promoting creationism. Ham delivers dozens of lectures a year in which he amplifies on this concept, offering such pseudoscientific details as an explanation

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a Secular Age.

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and Karl W. Giberson.  
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of how Noah's flood jumbled the fossil record so that it's impossible to know which animals lived on earth when. His books feature prominently in homeschooling curricula, and, at his Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, thousands of visitors each month view displays of young children playing with dinosaurs.

The authors also profile Christian psychologist James Dobson, founder of the vast organization Focus on the Family, and the late televangelist Jerry Falwell. Both have advocated child-rearing principles from the Bible—including the famous dictate that to “spare the rod” is to “spoil the child,” based on several verses in Proverbs—and have suggested that wives should submit to their husbands on the model of biblical patriarchy.

For the most part, these leaders have dubious credentials. Though Barton is often referred to as “Dr.,” for instance, his only advanced degree is an honorary doctorate from Pensacola Christian College. Dobson has a PhD in child development from the University of Southern California—but he hasn't published in a mainstream professional journal since the mid-1960s.

The question that animates *The Anointed* is why so many people believe these guys (they're all men) when there are highly credentialed evangelicals competing to be heard. The authors cite with admiration Mark Noll, an evangelical historian at the University of Notre Dame who, in 1994, wrote a book decrying evangelical anti-intellectualism, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. And why give credence to Ham's theories about how life started when you could listen to evangelical Christian Francis Collins, the former head of the Human Genome Project and the current director of the National Institutes of Health?

Men such as Ham and Barton have been “anointed,” in part, because they offer easy-to-grasp answers delivered with conviction. More important, they employ us-versus-them rhetoric, castigating those who disagree with them as mortal enemies trying to ensnare the righteous.



All eyes are on evangelist David Barton at a prayer event sponsored by presidential candidate Rick Perry earlier this year.

But the real key to their success, Stephens and Giberson suggest, may be the nearly airtight “parallel culture” that evangelicals have created in America. They have their own curricula, publishing houses, music industry, and social spaces, such as Christian bookstores. Outsiders are hardly heard, and those within who disagree with cherished narratives are looked on with suspicion. NIH director Collins may be an evangelical, but in advocating evolution he suffers from a bad case of secular-itis.

The authors present the story of one young evangelical who felt constrained by this parallel culture until he transferred from a fundamentalist college to Gordon College, a liberal Christian institution in Massachusetts where his questions were welcomed, not quashed. One of the principal virtues of *The Anointed* is that it represents an effort to demonstrate that the evangelical community is not a monolith of the unthinking. Yet if that were as true as the authors hope, they probably would have felt less pressed to write this book.

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