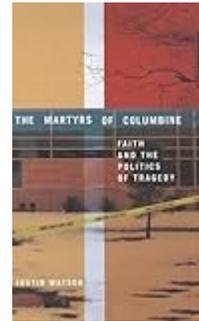




Justin Watson. *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xii + 212 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-23957-2.



Reviewed by Arthur Remillard (Department of Religion, Florida State University)

Published on H-USA (December, 2003)

Restoration and the Memory of Martyrdom

Restoration and the Memory of Martyrdom

In the United States, catastrophic events often become tools for advancing religious agendas. The 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, are no exception. Examining the conservative evangelical response to Columbine, Justin Watson's *The Martyrs of Columbine* begins with two seventeen-year-old victims of the tragedy, Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott. Witnesses claimed that the gunmen shot Bernall and Scott after the young women affirmed their faith in God. While various sources now question the veracity of these reports, evangelicals have continued remembering Bernall and Scott as martyrs. Following the release of the martyrdom accounts, Watson argues that the memory of Bernall and Scott entered into an ongoing evangelical operation to restore "traditional" Christian values in America. Watson makes good use of the available data. He interweaves his academic insights with accounts from newspapers, books written by the parents of the victims, polls, Internet sites, public speeches, and police reports. Scholars concerned with contemporary evangelicalism, religion, popular culture, and memory studies will find

this book valuable. Additionally, those teaching courses on religion in the United States should consider assigning *The Martyrs of Columbine* since it challenges students to think critically about religion's role in an important event from their own lifetimes.

Much like his *The Christian Coalition*, Watson centers his discussion on the evangelical community's push for restoration.[1] Following Columbine, evangelicals used the examples of Bernall and Scott to declare, "the only hope for America is a return to traditional forms of religion as the basis of law and morality" (p. 5). Columbine, therefore, was both a direct result of America's "satanic secularism" and a call to restore the nation's faith in God (p. 27). Chapter 1 explains that the standard definition of martyrdom does not exactly match the cases of Bernall and Scott. Such technicalities, however, were of little concern to evangelicals after Columbine. Watson reasons that Bernall and Scott's martyr status grew from their unwavering affirmation of faith in the face of certain death. This high level of commitment perfectly exemplified the evangelical ideal of Christian devotion. Chapter 2 details the many ways that Bernall's last words became

immortalized. Websites such as www.yesibelieve.com, merchandising paraphernalia like T-shirts, and her parents' book *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (1999) became parts of the enormous industry that extolled Bernall's memory. Watson argues that in all of these locations, "Cassie's last words became a rallying cry for the cause of Christ," as devotees used her stellar example to fortify their own commitment (p. 30). Chapter 3 examines how politically motivated church and state issues took center stage in Rachel Scott's martyrdom. Darrell Scott, Rachel's father, began an extensive speaking tour that blamed the secular public schools for his daughter's death. Restoring "the spirit of God" in America's public schools, Darrell Scott has argued, would ensure against the possibility of another Columbine (p. 78). Chapter 4 draws together the previous discussions and demonstrates how the memory of Bernall and Scott played into the post-Columbine "politics of tragedy." For evangelicals, Watson asserts, the victims were part of a larger project to further the "standard program of cultural renewal through public affirmations of traditional religion and morality" (p. 92). The martyrs became central in the campaign against what evangelicals perceived as the various pernicious enterprises of modern America. Chapter 5 examines the actual data from the shootings to determine if Bernall and Scott were indeed martyrs. While the details are still hazy, Watson ultimately shows that there is a large shadow of doubt lingering over the martyrdom accounts. Nevertheless, the challenges have not significantly altered the evangelical memory of Bernall and Scott as martyrs.

Taken from John Ford's 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the subtitle of the book's conclusion reads, "Print the Legend." "The stories of Cassie and Rachel," Watson writes, "mesh seamlessly into the larger narrative of America's secular decline and the need for religious restoration. But as in Ford's *Liberty Valance*, the facts do not match the legend" (p. 148). The facts of the past, then, mean little to those who want to actualize a Christian future for America. In making this statement, *The Martyrs of Columbine* joins an emerging body of scholarship concerned with similar issues of memory. David Blight's *Beyond the Battlefield*, for example, argues that the rhetoric of the Lost Cause obscured the

presence of racial oppression that existed in the antebellum South.[2] Likewise, Catherine Lutz's *Homefront* explores how World War II white America imagined a culture of harmony on military bases, while in reality, Jim Crow thrived in the armed services.[3] Like Blight and Lutz, Watson states that memory, even an inaccurate memory, drives ideologies. Also noteworthy is Watson's willingness to examine a contemporary issue through a rigorous academic lens. Readers should not underestimate the challenges of such an undertaking. In his preface, Watson says that his methodological aim in writing this book is to remain both "a decent human being and a responsible scholar" (p. xii). Watson achieves both ends. He acknowledges the powerful pangs of grief that still haunt the America psyche, while at the same time, his evaluation brings a provocative and insightful perspective to this unfortunate event. The book's principal shortcoming is its anemic discussion of martyrdom. Watson over-relies on Samuel Z. Klausner's "Martyrdom" entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. "The Columbine martyr stories are problematic," Watson asserts, "because they lack the element of voluntarism and the dimension of group/ideological conflict" that Klausner says are essential (p. 21). When considering the Columbine martyr stories, however, the truly "problematic" element is Klausner's confining definition. For evangelicals, "voluntarism" and "group/ideological conflict" are not as important as Bernall and Scott's definitive pronouncements of faith during a moment of crisis. Watson would have done well to challenge Klausner by generating a new definition of martyrdom that includes this evangelical perspective.

Notes

[1]. Justin Watson, *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[2]. David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

[3]. Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Arthur Remillard. Review of Watson, Justin, *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy*.

H-USA, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8586>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.