Ever since that lunch-hour horror on April 21, 1999, when Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris murdered 13 people, then killed themselves, at Columbine High School, there’s been controversy—not so much about the culture of violence that spawned the attack but the "new faith" that has risen in its wake. At issue in Watson’s short book is the "martyred" girls, Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott, the two of the thirteen who were Christians. Their brethren, mostly evangelicals, maintain that the pair, separately, replied when asked by the gunmen whether they believed in God—both, supposedly, said yes, and then were shot, supposedly, for believing. Justin Watson’s fact-obsessed book about their martyrdom presents near-conclusive evidence that these statements were not true and that the evangelicals, among them Darnell Scott, the father of Rachel, have propagated the untruth ceaselessly. Taking this story to frightened young people in school assemblies, they insist that Christianity be put back into public schools and that violence in America is the result of godlessness or, better, Christlessness.

One of Watson’s final remarks in the book is this: “The real truth about Columbine will never be reducible to a mere constellation of facts.” But, in a brief, repetitive, and Titanically footnoted 160 pages, Watson has presented no more than a "mere constellation of facts" to back up the falsified martyr story. Seldom do we hear what this

means
to an American culture riddled with adult and teenage bullies with guns. His exhaustively registered facts form the basis of an analysis that is never undertaken. OK, the girls died
Review: The Martyrs of Columbine by Justin Watson

ingloriously. How is that the "real truth"? What does it mean that the radical Christians and their allies, the girls' parents, have wanted the rest of us to accept their "conclusions"? Why has any larger truth escaped Watson's search for answers?

Granted, Watson takes a few good turns with his material. One chapter, devoted to the tradition of Christian martyrs, states that as awful as their suffering was, the two girls did not suffer for their beliefs *long enough*, prior to being killed "for believing." An apt definition, "The martyr makes a deliberate and clear choice to die an otherwise avoidable death." Cassie and Rachel had little if no chance to avoid their demise, so as classic martyrs, they don't qualify. Watson reports on the wildly variant "eyewitness" testimony surrounding Cassie's and Rachel's murders. Traumatized recollections by the eyewitnesses in the hours after the shootings became the crucible in which the martyr legends were forged. Watson cites Darrell Scott's insistence that the police and the media still refuse to see the true significance of Columbine—as a "spiritual event." Scott wants the tragedy to inform our spirituality as well as open up the pubic school system to his religious preferences. Watson takes Scott to task by proving that individual prayer was never absent from Columbine because government guidelines have allowed "voluntary and personal religious expression" in clubs.

However, the author, a religious studies teacher at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, does very little with these seeds. Instead, he toils in an overgrown garden, spending nearly one-third of the text quoting the evangelicals who, like pushers, force the drug of martyrdom upon high school-age kids. It's not that reporting the vigor of this movement is not part of the story. But it is definitely not the whole story. Page after page slogs by with Watson reviewing the thousand ways a few Christian men reshaped the exaggeration of the two martyred deaths until it became the "truth." He quotes too much from the ghost-written books of the girls's parents. There are lengthy near-glowing paraphrases of the "lives" and "messages" these girls had embodied before the shootings as well as the testimonials of those saved after their deaths. (That none of the other 11 victims had any of this "spiritual dimension" prior to their random deaths, or been remembered with any sanctity since then, has been mentioned only by the able Dave Cullen at Salon.com, who broke the story that the girls did not affirm God before dying.)

Because Watson has recounted how shrewdly the youth-martyr machinery in America works, he tends to legitimize (instead of challenge or point up the mendacities in) their cause. We've heard all this before: the web sites, pamphlets, magazines, radio talk shows, speaking tours, designed to carry the God-message forward. Christian Coalition 101. The "politics of tragedy" are simple—control the moral agenda in America via the spread of Christianity.
Watson seldom directs our attention to wider issues, for example, the grief spectacles with which evangelicals manipulate the young. I have seen firsthand in the school shooting in Santee, California, in 2001, how the media and Christian groups colluded to bring the "healing process" into schools, which as trained grief workers will tell you, do nothing but divide students between believers and non-believers, forcing emotionally unstable kids to publicly account for their "sins." The non-believer or agnostic teen has little recourse but to feel shame or be bullied by Christian youth groups when school violence occurs.

What drove the parents of Cassie and Rachel to evangelize was the pre-ordained notion that Christians are taught to make hay with the memory of their dead. The reason that the stories of the other murdered students and one teacher have not been written, again points to Christian self-interest. Theirs were not "good" deaths. Without prior ties to the cross, no martyring hearsay followed their dying and, thus, politicizing the grief of their families will not play. Small and large book publishers, haymakers themselves, have capitalized nicely off the martyrs. While a few Columbine-inspired analyses that argue for fewer guns and more tolerance have been published, the majority of books about the event are Christ-centered calls for a moral crusade to convert the young.

I was disappointed that Watson avoided the media’s post-Columbine role in helping proselytize Christianity, the publisher’s role in exaggerating two of the 13 deaths (even Watson is part of the fury), and the gun lobby’s use of the killings for political ends. But then this reveals how deeply rooted Christian ideation is in America. The secular majority is afraid of sounding unsympathetic when grievers express faith; thus, the faith-based movement is infiltrating our public institutions and facing scant protest. Why this is happening would make a hell of a good book. Nearly 100 years ago, Mark Twain excoriated religious belief in a series of fiery polemics, among them, "Letters From the Earth." How much America is in need of his muck-raking voice today to expose the public relations ploys of the evangelicals.