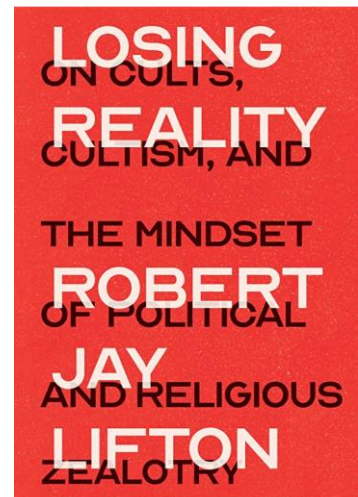


***Fantastic Intro to Big Name Leader
Cults***

A Review (1-2023) by Dick Burkhardt of

**Losing Reality:
On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of
Political and Religious Zealotry**
By Robert Lifton (2019)



This book is a marvelous precis of Lifton's earlier masterworks on cultism, combining both religious and political cultism, with uptodate commentary, especially on Donald Trump. He draws on his pioneering investigation of the brainwashing of the 1950s Communist Party of China, also the deadly 1990s Aum Shinrikyō cult of Japan, and the WW II Nazi doctors of Auschwitz. He illustrates his well-known "eight deadly sins" of cultism with passages quoted from his previous writings.

The one thing I found to be missing is that in popular usage the word "cult" has a broader meaning, including charismatic movements which practice many of the 8 techniques or behaviors of cultism. Lifton focuses exclusively on the most spectacular cults - those centered around gurus or dictators or other leaders who've lost touch with reality. Thus Lifton defines a cult by 3 features:

1. A powerful, charismatic leader
2. Abusive thought control or persecution of dissidents
3. Alluring ideologies, visions, or promises.

I would add to the first feature "or movement", not just leader.

The cultish behavior people complain about is described by the 8 deadly sins:

1. Milieu Control (of communication, information, & habitat)
2. Mystical Manipulation (justified by singular historical or divine purpose)
3. Demand for Purity (with guilt & shame for resisters, rewards for believers)
4. Cult of Confession (confess to false accusations or face severe punishment)
5. Sacred Science (doctrine is proclaimed as truth: deniers are punished)
6. Loading the Language (think & speak in clichés or jargon, resist reasoning)
7. Doctrine over Person (dogma overrides personal experience and knowledge)

8. Dispensing of Existence (deniers and the excluded deserve their fate, even death)

When you dig deeper, the ultimate goals of cults, according to Lifton, are obedience and submission – a merger of the follower with the leader or movement. This suggests a power play. Yet potential followers must first yearn for the moral clarity of a transcendent leader or movement. Lifton notes that this seems almost inevitable, part of human nature, under certain social and historical circumstances. An obvious situation would be rapid social change that leaves many people behind or living with great stress or anxiety. Today we've had 40 years of escalating inequality in the US plus rapid technological development.

Lifton also cites the apocalyptic threats, such as weapons of mass destruction and the escalating climate crisis. His proposed solution is for society to focus on developing what he calls the "protean self" – "a view of the self as always in process; as being many-sided rather than monolithic, and resilient rather than fixed" (p 177), Proteus being the Greek god of many forms. But Lifton recognizes that developments in this direction have led to backlash – a power struggle between Proteanism and fundamentalist reaction, often between prudent adaptation and violence.

Lifton's background is in psychiatry, so it is natural for him to focus on psychological solutions. Yet the existential threats come from large scale human interactions with the natural world. So the solutions are far more likely to come from the natural sciences, especially the study of ecosystems and resource globally, combined with much-needed advances in the social sciences at the regional, global, and civilization levels.