Cultist Subversion of Scientists and Physicians


In Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence and the New Global Terrorism, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton chronicles the activities of the Aum Shinrikyo cult that carried out the chemical weapons attack in the Tokyo subway in 1995. Lifton focuses on the motivations of the few Aum members he interviewed. The result, unfortunately, is an overly analytic, often tedious accounting of the roles of individual Aum members. It is difficult for the reader to gain an overall assessment of the Aum. The book is ambiguous about how the Aum functioned as a cult and how its members chose to follow its leader, Shoko Asahara, in his quest to destroy the world, presumably to save it. The book does, however, show its readers the risk that groups like the Aum present to the world. Throughout, Lifton illuminates the central roles played by physicians and scientists in the Aum’s plans to force Armageddon. Lifton characterizes the Aum’s reversal of healing and killing as the most systematic since the Nazis. Had the Aums been successful, their mass killing would have dwarfed the Holocaust, he contends.

The revelation of the subversion of science and medicine by the Aum must be especially troubling to members of the scientific community. According to Lifton, “Totalistic groups seeking forms of absolute control tend to seek out physicians for their death-linked knowledge and power” (p. 138). Within the Aum, doctors replaced healing with killing. This was similar to the Nazi use of German physicians “to medicalize their killing project, that is, to transform it into something on the order of medical treatment” (p. 136). The psychological foundations for acts of mass killing is a recurring theme of Lifton’s writings, a theme that he continues by comparing the motivations of the Aum members to the Nazis and to members of several cults who committed mass suicides. The Aum justified mass killing as a means of spiritual purification; Asahara viewed Armageddon as the ending for a corrupt world and the time for rebirth of a spiritually pure world.

Aum physicians fulfilled its leader’s world-ending fantasy to acquire deadly chemical and biological agents. They carried out assassinations, oversaw the development of biological and chemical weapons, and participated in the well-publicized Sarin attack in the Tokyo subway. “Without their scientific knowledge bent to [Asahara’s] will, [Asahara] would have had neither the imagination nor the means to force the end,” according to Lifton (p. 135). Clearly, the Aum was able to subvert physicians from the ethical practice of medicine to the insane terrorism aimed at destroying the world. How could well-educated physicians enter into such unethical roles as mass murderers? Given the traditional role of physicians as the gatekeepers between life and death—the symbolic view is that the physician holds life in his or her hand—Lifton proposes that “physicians can be all too amenable to the feeling of omnipotence that such collaboration affords them” (p. 138).

Within the Aum, “medicine was completely in the service of the cult’s theology and central to its various levels of violence” (p. 139). Physicians used drugs to control the behavior of cult members and even poisoned members who were considered a threat to Asahara. Scientists and physicians also led the efforts to produce and release chemical weapons such as Sarin, cyanide, and other gases, and biological weapons such as botulinum toxin and anthrax-causing bacteria. Physicians and scientists also contributed to the Aum’s fantasies about medical resources that would help the group survive Armageddon. “Like Nazi doctors and Chinese Communist administrators of ‘thought reform,’ Aum leaders and scientists saw themselves as advanced practitioners let loose in a vast human laboratory that required of them neither ethical nor intellectual restraints” (p. 127).

Lifton’s analysis leads him to conclude that seven features characterize apocalypse-seeking cults like the Aum: “totalized guruism that leads to paranoid guruism and megalomanic guruism...vision of an apocalyptic event or series of events that would destroy the world in the service of renewal...its ideology of killing to heal, of altruistic murder and altruistic world destruction...the relentless impulse toward world-rejecting purification...the lure of ultimate weapons...a shared state of aggressive numbing...extreme technocratic manipulation, coupled with its claim to absolute scientific truth” (pp. 203–207). Lifton repeatedly points to the Nazis of World War II and other cultist movements as fulfilling many of these characteristics.

Particularly disturbing was the Aum’s ability to unite a religious view of Armageddon, with its leader’s aim of forcing the end of the world and his ability to subvert scientists and physicians to achieve this goal of ultimate death, with weapons of mass destruction. According to Lifton’s analysis, it was a short step for Asahara from wit-