Book Review: Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism

Jacques Parker

4 Nov 2025

Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism, by Amanda Montell. HarperCollins, 2021. Hb. 320 pp. $27.99. ISBN: 9780062993151

Although no longer new, Cultish (2021) by linguist Amanda Montell is still a widely popular book among the American general public. Written with flair and accessibility to non-academics in mind, it may seem not of interest to scholars of new religious movements (NRMs). However, its value comes from the strategies with which Montell deconstructs and reconstructs the category of "cult" in a unique way, primarily through the lens of linguistics, a highly under-utilized discipline in the field of new religious movement studies. Montell covers a wide range of groups in her analysis of "cultish" language, from the religionists of Jonestown, to the gym-goers of CrossFit, to the conspiracists of QAnon. She recognizes a few patterns in their use of language to create group adhesion, like thought-terminating clichés, euphemisms, and the redefinition of common words. For Montell, it is language that defines what a "cult" is, and that is where this book is useful for scholars of new religious movements. Her argument is linguistically relative: language shapes and molds the worldview of an individual. "Cults" are categorically distinct from other groups because of their strong linguistic patterns and influence on their members, as Montell would argue.

The book is in six parts. Part 1 discusses previous research into new religious movements and cults, drawing from NRM and cultic studies scholars. Part 2 details archetypal NRMs like Jonestown and Heaven's Gate, and she discusses the implications of their use of language using the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis as a methodological backdrop. Part 3 covers the Church of Scientology and its unusual English vocabulary, as well as Shambhala in the United States. Part 4 is about multi-level marketing schemes like Optavia, LuLaRoe, and Amway. Part 5 is about fitness groups and companies like SoulCycle, CrossFit, and Peloton. Lastly, Part 6 discusses social media influencers and online phenomena like QAnon; this part includes the short conclusion to the book.

In the latter half of the book, the argument begins to tail off when discussing fitness groups and multi-level marketing schemes. For many pages, it seems that Montell only discusses the way in which those fitness groups and multi-level marketing schemes are different from "traditional" gyms and businesses, without really connecting them back in a meaningful way to her original argument. She could have gone further in these sections to make an even more compelling argument for the inclusion of fitness groups and multi-level marketing schemes in the "cult" category. Montell discusses real people and real businesses, so it would not be too surprising for a trade publisher to worry about potentially calling a fitness industry giant or a million-dollar multi-level marketing scheme a "cult", with all the negative things that that connotes.

At the very end of Cultish, she states that "SoulCycle is not Scientology. Instagram influencers are not Jim Jones" (p. 282). I agree; however, I find this distinction indicative of Montell's paradigm regarding the variety of groups she discusses. Montell's argument is that SoulCycle and Scientology's use of language connects them

categorically to cult via the concept of "cultish". However, within that category there are distinctions—which may be best summarized as groups that do more harm than others (if they do harm at all). It seems that Montell, and perhaps the publisher, were wary about including Instagram fitness influencers with the likes of David Koresh and L. Ron Hubbard. I think that wariness is a reflection of Montell's and the publisher's internalized definitions of what a "cult" truly is—i.e., a group that is bad. Awareness of this underlying assumption would have improved the book, as it has an intriguing thesis.

Overall, Montell is making a powerful statement about the category of cult that should be at least acknowledged by NRM studies scholars. At the very least, some of her thinking is informed by scholars like Eileen Barker, Tanya Luhrmann, and Rebecca Moore, which should provide it with some merit, despite her citations primarily being non-academic sources. The formatting of those citations as notes (but not noted in the body text) at the end of the monograph may annoy some scholars, myself included. But that may just be a result of what the publisher believes was best practice for the non-academic audience of the book, and it is not necessarily reflective of Montell's work and research.

The field of new religious movement studies has much to gain from delving into linguistics, and Montell's work is a stepping stone toward that. Her deconstruction and reconstruction of the category of "cult" as groups that use linguistic strategies to maintain group cohesion and limit critical thinking about the group is an intriguing argument with potential. Understanding that Montell is not a religious studies scholar, someone with a greater understanding of religious studies theory could grow this argument into something much more rigorous for an academic audience.

Jacques Parker
Book Review: Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism
4 Nov 2025

International Journal for the Study of New Religions, 14(1), 111–113.
<www.doi.org/10.1558/ijsnr.31707>
Author affiliation: University of California, Santa Barbara
Author correspondence: jacquesparker@ucsb.edu