Who Was Ong?

With a Ph.D. in English from Harvard University and three other graduate degrees to his credit, Ong first rose to prominence in the 1950s when white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture still dominated the United States. Despite the fact that he was not a Protestant, but a Roman Catholic priest, he could claim that he came from a somewhat Protestant background because his father Walter Jackson Ong, Sr., was a Protestant when Walter Jr. was growing up, and his father’s family were Protestants. But his mother and her family were Roman Catholics, so young Walter and his younger brother were raised as Roman Catholics.

The middle name “Jackson” in the name of both Walter Sr. and Walter Jr. commemorates that President Andrew Jackson was a family relative. The family name “Ong” is English; for centuries it was spelled “Onge”; it is probably related to the English name “Yonge.”

But by the time that Ong received his Ph.D. in English from Harvard University in 1955, the strident anti-Catholic spirit of American WASP culture was beginning to give way to a more expansive and inclusive spirit in the United States, despite Paul Blanshard’s stirring anti-Catholic books in the 1950s (XII.11; XII.12). Then in the 1960 presidential election, the Harvard-educated white Irish-American Catholic John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States, narrowly defeating Vice President Richard M. Nixon. But of course President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963 -- for reasons that are debated to this day -- see Fetzer (III.51; III.55; III.56); Douglass (III.42); Janney (III.91). For its part, the Roman Catholic Church tempered its strident anti-Protestant spirit a bit at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which the strident anti-Catholic critic Paul Blanshard wrote a book about (XII.13). Thus on the one hand, we in the United States underwent the tempering of the strident anti-Catholic spirit of American WASP culture, about the time when the American Catholic subculture (or ghetto) in the United States, which Ong in the 1950s characterized as extremely conservative culturally (compared to French Catholics at the time, for example), was undergoing the tempering of the strident anti-Protestant spirit that had characterized it for centuries. These two temperings could be likened to the shifting of tectonic plates that produce earthquakes and tsunamis. We in the United States are still undergoing the aftereffects of these two cultural temperings, as more Roman Catholics have risen out of the American Catholic subculture that Ong in the 1950s characterized as extremely conservative culturally to play more prominent roles in the larger American culture of our time – as I write, six of the nine Supreme Court justices are Roman Catholics, a proportion that would never have happened under the pre-1960 WASP culture.