Ong’s Relationist Way of Thinking

But apart from the works listed in the present bibliography that can be related in one way or another to Ong’s thought, is his thought important enough for ordinary Americans to be interested in it?

Because Ong’s relationist way of thinking about major cultural developments is not yet a familiar way of thinking for most Americans, I should explain that Ong’s relationist way of thinking does not involve straightforward cause-and-effect claims. Relationist claims are usually claims about significant factors and the interaction of those factors with one another. So let me illustrate how this kind of relationist thought works.

(1) No print culture, no modern capitalism as we know it in Western culture.

(2) No print culture, no modern science as we know it in Western culture.

(3) No print culture, no modern democracy as we know it in the United States or elsewhere in Western culture.

(4) No print culture, no Industrial Revolution as we know it in Western culture.

(5) No print culture, no Romantic Movement as we know it in Western culture.

But so what?

So what happens in non-Western countries in the world today when the United States engages in democracy promotion?

Ong’s relationist way of thinking suggests that modern democracy is actually a juggernaut of cultural factors that emerged historically in Western culture. A clash of cultures is inevitable, but violence may not be inevitable.

Next, what happens when the globalization of the economy today leads to some form of modern capitalism making inroads in non-Western countries?

Once again, Ong’s relationist way of thinking suggests that modern capitalism is actually a juggernaut of cultural factors that emerged historically in Western culture. A clash of cultures is inevitable, but violence may not be inevitable.

Ong used to like to say that the English title of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* should have been *Civilization and Its Discomforts*. Instead of civilization, I will refer to refer to culture.

As democracy promotion makes inroads in non-Western countries today where democracy has not already been established, we should expect that there will be certain cultural and personal discomforts associated with the inception of democracy.

Similarly, as capitalism, or something like capitalism, makes inroads in non-Western countries today where it has not previously been native to the culture, there will
be certain cultural and personal discomforts associated with the development of capitalist economic arrangements.