Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s readable new book *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* (New York: Twelve, 2017) is a superficial defense of democracy promotion as part of American foreign policy. But to what extent, if any, should democracy promotion be a key part of American foreign policy?

One way to argue with her superficial defense of democracy promotion is to revisit the thought of the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ong’s multivariate account of the infrastructures of our Western cultural history shows how certain key conditions contributed to the historical emergence in print culture 1.0 in Western culture of modern democracy as exemplified in our American experiment in representative democracy. However, many parts of the world today are still not dominated by the cultural conditions of print culture 1.0 that emerged in the West after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s. Instead, many parts of the world today are still dominated by residual forms of oral culture 1.0.

But economic globalization is making inroads in parts of the world today that are still dominated by residual forms of oral culture 1.0, ready or not. However, as Rice notes, a form of democratic government was instituted in India (pp. 397-400), despite residual forms of oral culture 1.0 in India. Consequently, Rice could argue that democracy promotion should also be a key part of American foreign policy in those parts of the world today, ready or not.

But Ong’s thought about the infrastructures of our Western cultural history deserves to be lionized by people such as Rice who want to get their bearings about our Western cultural history.

Thomas M. Walsh has compiled a complete bibliography of Ong’s 400 or so publications, including information about reprinted and translated items: “Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Bibliography 1929-2006” in *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Walsh (New York: Hampton P, 2011, pp. 185-245). However, despite the wide range of Ong’s publications, he published only five book-length studies:
In his mature work from the early 1950s onward, Ong worked out a sweeping account of cultural history. His sweeping thesis about cultural history can serve as a conceptual framework for understanding Western cultural history. In the preface to his book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1977), Ong himself explicitly sets forth at long last his sweeping thesis about cultural history, which he claims is not reductionist:

[My mature works] do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to electronic orality, which produces secondary orality, causes or explains everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish (pp. 9-10).

Major developments in Western cultural history would include modern science, modern capitalism, modern democracy, the Industrial Revolution, and the Romantic Movement. Ong’s relationist approach to cultural studies tends to be phenomenological and personalist in cast. In his mature work, he tends to be irenic in style and tone. Even though he was not uncritical of certain trends in Western cultural history such as racism and sexism and genocide, it would be out of character for him to sound alarmist. But he is characteristically alerting us about the infrastructures of Western cultural history. However, he usually does not frame his presentations as polemics with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions).

Ong aligns the polemic tendency to think in terms of a strong polarity of good-versus-evil with primary orality. Consequently, he tends to avoid expressing hostility in his publications, even when he is making critical statements. But that tendency gives his publications a contemplative aura. In other words, his publications do not sound like calls to action, but calls to contemplation before undertaking to consider possible good courses of action and decision making. As Ong himself explains in *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (pp. 78-81 and 87), Jesuit spirituality trains persons to carefully consider possible good courses of action in the process of decision making. Contemplation before action makes for a contemplative in action.
Nevertheless, in the polemical spirit, I will formulate here the antithesis of Ong’s thesis: No, major developments in culture and consciousness are NOT related to the evolution of the word from primary orality through writing and print to electronic orality. But few scholars would advance this antithesis as an alternative to Ong’s relationist thesis. Of course, in addition to advancing the antithesis of Ong’s thesis, there are numerous other ways in which to disagree with particular points that Ong makes.

Overall, Ong’s sweeping relationist thesis may understandably give more timid scholars pause. Scholars are trained to be specialists. Ong himself was a Renaissance specialist. Nevertheless, as a polymath, he tended to situate the particular person and/or work in the panoramic context of the long view of the big picture of the cosmos and culture.

Because Ong himself explicitly describes his sweeping thesis as relationist, we may take a hint from hint and look for scholarly works that can be related to his thought, even if the authors of those works do not happen to advert explicitly to his thought.

Because Ong sees technology as instrumental, a necessary but not a sufficient condition, in the development of the infrastructures of Western cultural history, his explicit attention to the technologizing of the word as a significant variable sets him apart from many other thinkers.

Definition of terms: At times, Ong refers to the cultural constellation that evolved historically in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s as print culture. In the present essay, I will refer to that historical constellation as print culture 1.0. The interactive impact of what Ong refers to as secondary oral culture (oral culture 2.0), due to communications media that accentuate sound that resonates deeply in the human psyche, print culture 2.0 has emerged in Western culture in recent decades as exemplified by photocopiers and printers attached to computers. For Ong, oral culture 2.0 is not exactly the same as primary oral culture (oral culture 1.0), but is similar to it inasmuch as the communications media that accentuate sound resonate deeply with memory of oral culture 1.0 in the collective unconscious (in C. G. Jung’s terminology). Ong operationally defines oral culture 1.0 as pre-literate culture in the sense that it historically came before the invention of phonetic alphabetized literacy. But Ong rejects a cyclic view of time commonly found in oral culture 1.0, and a cyclic view of cultural history, in favor of a linear or evolutionary view.

Now, Ong discusses cyclic thought and linear (or evolutionary) thought in Orality and Literacy (pp. 139-47) and elsewhere. His theme is nicely illustrated in Donald L. Fixico’s The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Concerning the historical emergence of linearity in Western culture, see Richard Elliott Friedman’s The Hidden Book in the Bible (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). The classic study of cyclicity versus linearity is Mircea Eliade’s The Myth of the Eternal Return, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954). Today there is no shortage of publications in evolutionary theory.

Now, Ong first adumbrates his sweeping relationist thesis in his massively researched book Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason. In that book, Ong centers his attention on the French logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572), whose logic (or dialectic) was the central curriculum not only at Cambridge University in England, but also at Harvard College (founded in 1636) in New England. In that book, Ong works with the aural-visual contrast that he acknowledges (p. 338, note 54) that he borrowed from the
French philosopher Louis Lavelle (1883-1951). In that book about the history of the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (or dialectic) in Western cultural history, Ong uses the aural-visual contrast to adumbrate his sweeping relationist thesis. But he subsequently preferred to work with his signature orality-literacy contrast.

Incidentally, Ong’s ancestors on his father’s side of the family left East Anglia, where Cambridge University is located, on the same ship that brought Roger Williams to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631.

Now, what Ong refers to in his subtitle as the Art of Reason, is the philosophical stance common in the Age of Reason (also known as the Enlightenment). In what he refers to as the Art of Discourse, the orator or author usually frames his or her discourse as a polemic with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions). But what Ong refers to as the Art of Reason usually does not involve explicitly structuring one’s discourse as a polemic with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions).

However, Ong’s signature way of proceeding is to work with bipolar contrasts such as the aural-visual contrast or the orality-literacy contrast. In this respect, we could say that the polemic spirit in Ong’s thought is inherent in the bipolar contrasts he works with. For further discussion of Ong’s philosophical thought, see my essay “Understanding Ong’s Philosophical Thought” online:

http://hdl.handle.net/11299/187434

Now, in *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, Ong aligns the polemic spirit with oral culture 1.0, and with residual forms of oral culture 1.0 (pp. 192-286). The Greek term “polemos” means war, struggle.


The part of the human psyche that Plato and Aristotle refer to as “thumos” (or “thymos”) is the driving force of the agonistic psychodynamic that Ong and Bloom describe – and of our flight/fight/freeze response.


Thus, when Ong works with bipolar contrasts such as aural-visual or orality-literacy, the two bipolar terms represent an agonistic tension. Strictly speaking, he is not engaging in what he himself terms the Art of Discourse. But Ong’s way of proceeding to work with contrasts makes his thought a tough act to follow. However, the trajectory of the Canadian literary critic Marshall McLuhan’s thought in his experimental but flawed book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1962) parallels, intersects with, and diverges from Ong’s thought in in his 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, which McLuhan explicitly refers to more than once (pp. 129 and 159-60). As a young man, McLuhan (1911-1980; Ph.D. in English, Cambridge University, 1943) taught
English at Saint Louis University from 1937 to 1944, during which time Ong was in graduate studies there in philosophy and English as part of his Jesuit training.

But certain other themes in Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* have been studied by other scholars in recent years. For example, the theme of visuality, part of his aural-visual contrast (pp. 117-23), has been studied in the following scholarly works, for example, which can be related to Ong’s thought:

1. John DeFrancis’ *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1989);
2. Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1990);
4. Raymond Adolph Prier’s *Thauma Idesthai: Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1989);
8. Marco Mostert’s *A Bibliography of Works in Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012);
9. Johannes Hoff’s *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI; and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013);

But enough examples of works that can be related to Ong’s theme of visuality!

The theme of orality in Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 1-76) has been studied in various ways in the following scholarly books, for example, which can be related to Ong’s thought:
(1) David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1996);

(2) John Miles Foley’s *Teaching Oral Traditions* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1998);

(3) Jeffrey Walker’s *Rhetoric and Poetic in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000);


(5) David Robey’s *Sound and Structure in the Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000);

(6) Adam Fox’s *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon P/ Oxford UP, 2000);


(8) James L. Wimsatt’s *Hopkins’s Poetics of Speech Sound: Sprung Rhythm, Lettering, Inscape* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 2006);

(9) Gerd Hurm’s *Rewriting the Vernacular Mark Twain: The Aesthetics and Politics of Orality in Samuel Clemens’s Fiction* (Trier, Germany: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003);

(10) Willi Erzgraber’s *James Joyce: Oral and Written Discourse as Mirrored in Experimental Narrative Art*, translated by Amy Cole (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002);

(11) Kathleen E. Welch’s *Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy* (Cambridge, MA; and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1999);


But enough examples of works that can be related to Ong’s theme of orality!

The following works amplify and support Ong’s discussion of the art of memory in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 33-36 and 139-55) and elsewhere:

(1) Mary J. Carruthers’ *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory and Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK; and New York: Cambridge UP, 1990);

(2) Carruther’s *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998);

(3) Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski’s *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002);


Historically, the art of memory involved the storage and retrieval of information in the living human memory. Today the storage and retrieval of information is greatly increased with the assistance of computers and searchable databases.
But enough examples of works about the art of memory that can be related to Ong’s discussion of the art of memory!

The following works amplify and support Ong’s discussion of commonplaces and composing processes in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 108-12) and elsewhere:

3. John Miles Foley’s *Homer’s Traditional Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999);
4. Dennis R. MacDonald’s *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000);
8. MacDonald’s *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2017);
10. Miller’s *Martin Luther King’s Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012);

But enough examples of works about commonplaces and composing processes that can be related to Ong’s discussion of commonplaces and composing practices!

The following works amplify and support Ong’s discussion of the inward turn of consciousness in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 178-79) and elsewhere has also been studied in various ways in the following scholarly works, for example:

3. M. David Litwa’s *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books/ Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013);
4. Litwa’s *Desiring Divinity: Self-deification in Early Jewish and Christian Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016);
But enough examples of works on the theme of the inward turn of consciousness in Western culture that can be related to Ong’s discussion of the inward turn of consciousness in Western culture!
Now, because the above seven themes that Ong discusses in *Orality and Literacy* and elsewhere in his extensive body of work have been further delineated by recent scholarly work, what else can be involved in the reluctance of other people such as Rice to accept and endorse Ong’s sweeping relationist thesis about Western cultural history? For example, is his way of relating and connecting certain manifestations possibly a stumbling block for other people such as Rice?