

Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)

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Review: Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

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Because I subscribe to the electronic version of the *New York Times* (NYT), I tend to visit its homepage each morning. I usually look over the titles of the op-ed commentaries. I recently noticed (1) Daniel Bergner's "A Major Problem With Compulsory Mental Care Is the Medication" (dated June 2, 2023) and (2) Ezra Klein's "If You're Reading This, You're Probably 'WEIRD': The anthropologist Joseph Henrich parses how culture shapes our psyches" (dated May 26, 2023).

I have my own personal trickle-down theory about books and NYT op-ed columnists: Even though the NYT publishes book reviews regularly, when an NYT op-ed columnist singles out a certain book for discussion, that NYT op-ed column tends to promote more attention to the book in question than an ordinary NYT book review does. Consequently, as a result of Klein's attention to Henrich's 2020 book, I decided to order a copy of his book.

Henrich's WEIRD is an acronym. It stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Harvard's Joseph Henrich uses it in the title of his 2020 book *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Klein's piece prompted me to order Henrich's 2020 book.

It belongs to the growing genre of books known as Big History. Two other books in Big History are (1) Robert N. Bellah's 2011 book *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*; and (2) David Graeber and David Wengrow's 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. I discuss Bellah's 2011 book in my 2021 4,500-word review essay "Robert N. Bellah's 2011 Book *Religion in Human Evolution*, and Walter J. Ong's Thought" online. In any event, Wikipedia has an entry about Henrich's 2020 book that highlights reviews of it: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_WEIRDest_People_in_the_World

Now, as a thought experiment, I have tried to imagine, per impossible, Klein interviewing the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist, cultural historian, and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) about his most widely translated and most widely read 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. It is easy for me to imagine that Klein would be able to understand the term "Literacy" in the book's title. But what would Klein make of the term "Orality"? More to the point, what would Harvard's Henrich make of Ong's term "Orality" in his 1982 book's title – and of Ong's operationally defined and explained characteristics of "Some psychodynamics of orality" in Chapter 3 (pp. 31-77) and especially Ong's account of orally based thought and expression (pp. 36-57)?

I discuss Ong's account of orally based thought and expression in my article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom can help us understand the Hebrew Bible" in the journal *Explorations in Media*

Ecology, volume 11, numbers 3&4 (2012): pp. 255-272.

For several years now, I have been assembling a 12-category categorized and annotated bibliography of books and articles related to themes in Ong's work. Eleven of the 12 categories are keyed to relevant pages in Ong's 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. All the bibliographic entries contain some annotation; many of the entries include annotations that are short essays. My bibliography now stands at 1,489 double-spaced pages in length, and according to the word-count feature on my computer, it includes 367,454 words. I have listed Henrich's 2020 book in Category XII on print culture, because WEIRD people/cultures emerged in the print culture that emerged after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s. In any event, I have compiled "A Concise [Bibliographic] Guide to Five Themes in Walter J. Ong's Thought, and Selected Related Works" (2017) online.

Now, I propose to borrow a technical term from Daniel Bergner's recent *NYT* op-ed commentary and then apply it here to Joseph Henrich's catchy acronym WEIRD in Ezra Klein's earlier *NYT* selection. In Bergner's most recent op-ed commentary "A Major Problem With Compulsory Mental Health Is the Medication," he uses the technical term anosognosia.

In the present essay, I want to write a bit about Bergner's recent use of the technical term anosognosia, which he operationally defines and explains as meaning "the state of being too sick, too far beyond reason, to recognize one own mental illness." But I do not want to use the term in its technical sense. Rather, I want to use the term in a more metaphoric way to account for resistance to Ong's pioneering work as a media ecology theorist (1958, 1962, 1967, 1971, 1977, 1982).

Now, I do not mean to suggest that all of the people that Henrich refers to with his catchy acronym as WEIRD are suffering from a form of mental illness – the field in which the technical term anosognosia used. However, I do mean to suggest here that most of the people that Henrich refers to as WEIRD are not fully aware of just how "Psychologically Peculiar" they are compared, say, to our prehistoric ancestors from what Ong refers to as primary oral cultures – and even compared to most people today in non-Western cultures, which often typically are what Ong refers to as residually oral cultures. Then again, how many, if any, people today in non-Western cultures are, due to their Western formal education, also best described by Henrich's acronym WEIRD?

For all practical purposes, what Ong refers to as primary oral cultures corresponds to what Jared Diamond refers to as traditional societies in his 2012 book *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* – another book in Big History. Yes, David Riesman refers to tradition-directed people in his widely read 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, in which he celebrates inner-directed people (roughly equivalent to Henrich's WEIRD people) and expresses his fears about the emerging other-directed Americans. Ong briefly discusses Riesman's 1950 book in his 1957 book *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (pp. vii and 39), where he fundamentally rejects Riesman's fears about the emerging other-directed people.

Now, the 2021 Picador paperback edition of Henrich's book contains praises for it from 25 named persons – many of whose names appear in Henrich's "Bibliography" (pp. 587-656).

Henrich's name appears in the "Bibliography" as the sole author or as a co-author or as the editor or co-editor 47 times. His 2020 book is a massive synthesis of his own and others' research.

Now, according to Professor Henrich's CV at his personal website, he received his Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA in 1999; his M.A. in anthropology from UCLA in 1995; his B.A. in anthropology from the University of Notre Dame (with high honors) in 1991 – when he also received his B.S. in aerospace engineering from the University of Notre Dame (with high honors).

In Henrich's Chapter 16: "Domesticating the Competition" (pp. 322-359), a chapter that features the subsection on "Europeans Made War, and War Made Them WEIRDer" (pp. 332-340), he mentions his own undergraduate experience at the University of Notre Dame in the subsection "In Politics, Society, and Religion" (pp. 348-349). In part, he says, "Intergroup competition has also embedded itself in society through team sports, religious groups (e.g., churches), and other voluntary associations. Participation in team sports such as ice hockey and soccer provides many children and adolescents with their first experience of intergroup competition, which may have lasting psychological effects. As adults, people emotionally attach themselves to professional or collegiate teams linked to their cities, regions, countries, or favorite universities. The power of this effect became intuitive for me when, as a student at the University of Notre Dame, I'd experience the entire campus rise in exuberance or collapse in sorrow throughout the fall football season, depending on whether our team – the Fightin' Irish – won or lost on a particular Saturday. This shared experience seemed to create a collective sense of meaning and greater solidarity among the student body. While some research does support my intuitions, high-quality studies that effectively isolate the long-term psychological impact of team sports on fans and players are limited" (pp. 348-349).

More generally, Johan Huizinga discusses the contesting or competitive spirit as pervading Western cultural arrangements in his famous book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955).

Also more generally, Ong discusses play in his 1967 "Preface" to the German Jesuit scholar Hugo Rahner's book *Man at Play*, translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn (1967, pp. 9-14). Ong's "Preface" is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 345-348).

In addition, drawing extensively on Huizinga, Ong discusses the contesting spirit in his 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*, the published version of his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

Now, on the back cover of the 2021 Picador paperback edition of Henrich's 2020 book, we are told, "Tracking the origins of monogamous nuclear families back to Late Antiquity, Henrich reveals how the Roman Catholic Church unintentionally shifted people's psychology, and the trajectory of Western civilization, by transforming the most fundamental of human institutions: those related to marriage and kinship." Because Ong was an orthodox Roman Catholic priest, he almost certainly would have no objection to the church's teachings related to marriage and kinship that Henrich highlights. But what, if anything, would Ong say about Henrich's discussion of kinship and marriage from which "the Roman Catholic Church unintentionally shifted people's psychology"? In all honesty, I do not know what Ong would say about Henrich's argument. In any event, Henrich's discussion of kinship in what Ong refers to as

primary oral cultures, and as residually oral cultures, is, by far, the most important aspect of his 2020 book.

In Henrich's Chapter 14: "The Dark Matter of History" (pp. 469-489), he has a spirited concluding subsection titled "Globalization and Its Discontents" (pp. 484-489), in which he singles out policy analysts and policy makers who most need to understand his 2020 book – rather than follow "standard approaches to policy" (p. 487). Well, good luck with that. Because policy analysts and policy makers tend to follow "standard approaches to policy," I am here proposing a metaphoric use of the technical term anosognosia that Bergner (2023) discusses. Frankly, it might be easier for Henrich himself to become a policy analyst and then let his analyses compete with those put forward by others.

Now, in Henrich's "Preface" (pp. xi-xvii), he recounts in some detail how his personal professional life from 2006, after he left his position in anthropology at Emory University, to 2019, when he was at Harvard University, contributed to his writing his 2020 book.

In any event, Henrich's "Index" (pp. 657-680) includes an entry on the Western Church (Roman Catholic Church) (p. 680) and numerous sub-entries referring to it. Even the table of contents clearly shows just how significant the Western Church is in Henrich's book: Henrich's Chapter 4: "The Gods Are Watching. Behave!" (pp. 123-152) includes the subsection "Moralizing Gods and Contingent Afterlives" (pp. 128-139). Henrich's Chapter 6 is titled "Psychological Differences, Families, and the Church" (pp. 193-232). It includes the subsection titled "The Church Altered Kinship and Changed Psychology" (pp. 224-230). Henrich's Chapter 7: "Europe and Asia" (pp. 233-254) includes the subsection "The Church's Footprints" (pp. 234-237) and the subsection "The Last Remnants of Intensive Kinship" (pp. 237-242).

Because Henrich's acronym WEIRD is catchy enough to catch Klein's attention, let's engage in a thought experiment about each of its major components.

Henrich's term Western calls to mind the contrasting term non-Western, which, of course, includes a vast number of other cultures.

Henrich's term Educated calls to mind the contradictory term "not educated" (or at least "not educated" in formal Western education?). But in American today, we often hear of college-educated versus non-college-educated (e.g., many of Trump's white supporters). However, as Henrich uses the term Educated, it appears to mean functionally literate in vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy – which presumably includes most non-college-educated Americans.

Concerning vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy, see the following three books by Eric A. Havelock: (1) his 1963 book *Preface to Plato*; (2) his 1978 book *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato*; and (3) his 1982 book *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*.

Concerning the historical development of the ancient Greek vowelized phonetic alphabetic writing system, see Barry B. Powell's 1991 book *Homer and the Origins of the Greek Alphabet*.

But for a more general discussion of ancient Greek culture, see Eric Voegelin's 1957 book *The*

World of the Polis.

In any event, I rely heavily on Havelock's historical account of vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy in ancient Greece in my controversial article "IQ and Standard English" in the NCTE journal *College Composition and Communication* (1983). In it, I rely especially heavily on Havelock's Chapter 13: "The Early History of the Verb 'to Be'" in his 1978 book (pp. 233-248). In my article, I argue that the black and white IQ differences are most likely due to environmental and cultural differences, not to genetic and hereditary differences – to counter Arthur R. Jensen's suggestion that they are due to genetic and hereditary differences. More specifically, I set forth a hypothesis that could be tested through longitudinal studies. I framed my hypothesis about cultural and environmental differences in terms I had learned from Ong about residual forms of primary oral culture and about print culture in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s.

Also see my follow-up article "A Defense for Requiring Standard English" in *Pre/Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory* (1986). It is reprinted in the book *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, and Boundaries*, edited by William A. Covino and David Jolliffe (1995, pp. 667-678).

In any event, I take Henrich's term Educated to refer to people who are sufficiently educated in Western education that they are functionally literate in what Havelock refers to as vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy.

Now, Henrich's term Industrial calls to mind "non-industrial." In American society today, I guess that "non-industrial" would include farmers and farm workers.

Henrich's term Rich calls to mind the contradictory term "not rich." However, in American culture today, we often hear the expression 1 percent versus 99 percent. But by the term Rich, Henrich appears to mean most moderately well-off Americans – compared to the wretchedly poor of the world.

Henrich's term Democratic refers to the reigning political system in the Industrialized Western world in which people live. For Americans today, the reigning political system remains Democratic – with record voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election.

In any event, Henrich's explicit reference to "the West" in the subtitle of his 2020 book calls to mind my sweeping account of Western culture in my article "The West Versus the Rest: Getting Our Cultural Bearings from Walter J. Ong" in the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2008).

Subsequently, I also discussed Ong's work in my article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom can help us understand the Hebrew Bible" in the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012).

Concerning the Hebrew Bible, also see the Jewish biblical scholar James L. Kugel's perceptive 2017 book *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*. What Kugel refers to as "The Great Shift" in ancient Hebrew culture with the emergence of phonetic alphabetic writing and reading is also be described as the early aural-to-visual shift that Ong describes in its later manifestation after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]* (for specific page references to the aural-to-visual shift, see the "Index" [p. 396]). However, because Ong famously refers to the communications

media that accentuate sound in Western culture as representing secondary oral culture, as distinct from primary oral culture (i.e., pre-literate culture), and as distinct from ancient and medieval forms of residually oral culture, we may wonder if we in the West today are now undergoing something like a visual-to-aural shift in our cognitive processing and sensibility.

For a penetrating account of ancient Hebrew culture that is especially useful for understanding Kugel's perceptive 2017 book, see Eric Voegelin's 1956 book *Israel and Revelation*.

Concerning the continuing shift to the visual in ancient Jewish culture, see the prolific Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner's 1992 book *The Transformation of Judaism: From Philosophy to Religion*.

Now, in addition, I have discussed Ong's work and related work in my exploratory article "Early Christian Creeds and Controversies in the Light of the Orality-Literacy Hypothesis" in the journal *Oral Tradition* (January 1987).

More recently, I have also discussed Ong's work in my somewhat lengthy *OEN* article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020).

Now, Henrich's "Bibliography" (pp. 585-656) contains only one author to whom Ong also happens to mention: Jack Goody (p. 611). In Ong's "Bibliography" in his most widely translated and most widely read book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982, pp. 180-195), he lists four selections by Goody (p. 185). Subsequently, Goody published at least four books that are generally related to Ong's work: (1) *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1986) and (2) *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (1987); (3) *The Power of the Written Tradition* (2000); and (4) *Myth, Ritual and the Oral* (2010) – none of which are listed in Henrich's 2020 "Bibliography." The four Goody items listed by Henrich in his 2020 book do not overlap with the four Goody items listed by Ong in his 1982 book.

Subsequent to Ong's death in 2003, Stanislaus Dehaene published his 2009 book *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*. It is one of five items by Dehaene that Henrich lists in his 2020 "Bibliography" (p. 602) – all five of which were published after Ong's death in 2003.

In any event, because I am here highlighting only certain selected points about Henrich's 2020 book, I want to quote at length four points he makes in his "Prelude: your Brain Has Been modified" (pp. 3-17). He says that "four key ideas that will run through the rest of this book" are worth setting forth explicitly:

1. Religious convictions can powerfully shape decision-making, psychology, and society. Reading the sacred scripture [in the Protestant Reformation] was primarily about connecting with the divine, but the unintended side effects were big, and resulted in the survival and spread of some religious groups over others. [But the ability to read has never been a requirement for baptism in the Roman Catholic Church, where connecting with the divine did not necessarily mean reading sacred scripture.]
2. Beliefs, practices, technologies, and social norms – culture – can shape our brains, biology, and psychology, including our motivations, mental abilities, and decision-

making biases. You can't separate "culture" from "psychology" from "biology," because culture physically rewires our brains and thereby shapes how we think.

3. Psychological changes induced by culture can shape all manner of subsequent event by influencing what people pay attention to, how they make decisions, which institutions they prefer, and how much they innovate. In this case [of the Protestant Reformation], by driving up literacy, culture induced more analytic thinking and longer memories while spurring formal schooling, book production, and knowledge dissemination. Thus, *so/a scriptura* likely energized innovation and laid the groundwork for standardizing laws, broadening the voting franchise, and establishing constitutional governments.

4. Literacy [after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the 1450s] provides our first example of how Westerners became psychologically unusual [which seems to imply that the literacy of ancient and medieval Westerners was not psychologically unusual – compared, say, to certain other Westerners who were not literate or, say, to non-Westerners who were not literate]. Of course, with the diffusion of Christianity and European institutions (like primary schools) around the world, many populations have recently become highly literate. However, if you'd surveyed the world in 1900, people from western Europe would have looked rather peculiar, with their thicker corpus callosa and poorer facial recognition. (pp. 16-17)

As I have indicated by my bracketed comments in Henrich's fourth statement, I have to question here about literacy. To what extent, if any, did the historical development of silent reading in the Middle Ages contribute to the qualities of literacy that Henrich, drawing on Dehaene's work, emphasizes? For a discussion of the historical emergence of silent reading in the Middle Ages, see Paul Saenger's 1997 book *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*.

In any event, Henrich's account of modernity in these four points seems to make Roman Catholics second-class citizens, figuratively speaking, in modernity – even though Roman Catholics often had parallel developments in their own ranks. It would not be hard to find popes who denounced certain historical developments in modernity because they associated those developments with Protestantism. Indeed, the lay American Catholic historian Philip Gleason titles his account of twentieth-century American Catholic higher education *Contending with Modernity* (1995). The Roman Catholic sense of contending with modernity was tempered a bit by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), most notably by its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (also known by its Latin tag name as *Gaudium et Spes*), its Declaration on Religious Freedom (also known as *Dignitatis Humanae*), and its Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religion (also known as *Nostra Aetate*).

The enormity of the Holocaust prompted Vatican II to issue *Nostra Aetate*. For a comprehensive discussion of it and of other Vatican II documents, see the new 2023 800-page book *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli. Because all of Vatican II's documents were obviously written documents (and subsequently printed), their reception by practicing Catholics (and other interested people) required the ability to read (i.e., literacy). The Nigerian Jesuit theologian A. E. Oraboro adverts to this explicitly in his selection: Chapter 40: "The Impact, Reception, and Implementation of Vatican II in Africa" ((pp. 657-675).

Now, concerning decision making, mentioned by Henrich, I would call attention here to Ong's article "'A.M.D.G.' [Abbreviation for the Jesuit motto in Latin "Ad maiorem Dei gloriam"/ For the greater glory of God]: Dedication or Directive?" in the now-defunct Jesuit-sponsored journal

Review for Religious (1952). It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 1-8). In this essay Ong contends that the Spanish Renaissance mystic and founder of the Jesuit order St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) understood the expression *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* as a directive to direct one's discernment and decision making. Does the orientation of Jesuit spirituality to discernment and decision making make Jesuits WEIRD (in Henrich's terminology)?

For a history of early Jesuit education, see the late American Jesuit historian John W. O'Malley's 1993 book *The First Jesuits*. Unfortunately, Henrich refers in an endnote to "monastic orders like the Jesuits" (p. 511), but the Jesuits were not a monastic order – that is, they did not live in monasteries.

For a history of memory training in Western culture, see Frances A. Yates' 1966 book *The Art of Memory*. Ong celebrates her book in Chapter 4: "Memory as Art" in his 1971 book *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (pp. 104-112).

Pioneering studies of the print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s include (1) Ong's massively researched *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]* (1958); (2) Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962); (3) Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957); (4) Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, translated by David Gerard; edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (1976; orig. French ed., 1958); and (5) Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Square: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (1989; orig. German ed., 1962) – none of which are mentioned in Henrich's 2020 book. Scholarly studies of print culture and book history in various modern languages are so numerous today that I have referred to the five books I just mentioned as pioneering studies of print culture.

Regarding scholarly studies of medieval literacy in various modern languages, see Marco Mostert's categorized bibliography titled *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication* (2012).

I have mentioned that Henrich makes significant use of Dehaene's various works on literacy. However, Henrich otherwise writes about literacy as though he is a pioneer in exploring literacy – which he definitely is not. Is it expecting too much of a Harvard University professor that he at least figure out how to gracefully acknowledge that he is taking up the study of literacy that many more scholars than just Dehaene and his various collaborators have taken up? For specific page references to Henrich's discussion of literacy, see the "Index" (p. 668).

For the sake of discussion, let us imagine that Henrich does not gracefully acknowledge the scholars other than Dehaene and his collaborators who have published their account of literacy and of print culture because he thinks that all of them have been discredited – including Ong. However, if he were to think that this is indeed the case, then it might inspire him to wonder if his own accounts of literacy and/or print culture will also be discredited. Or

does he simply expect this to happen as a matter of course?

However, I admit that literacy is only one theme that Henrich discusses in his wide-ranging 2020 book. Monotheistic religion is another theme in Henrich's wide-ranging 2020 book – with special attention to the Western Church (the Roman Catholic Church) and Protestantism, but without ignoring the Eastern Orthodox Church (for specific page references, see the "Index").

Now, without making any explicit claims about literacy and/or print culture, the American scholar Rodney Stark has explored the history of Christianity, broadly conceived, with reference to certain themes that interest Henrich in the following five wide-ranging scholarly histories: (1) *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (2001); (2) *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (2003); (3) *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Science* (2005); (4) *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (2006); and (5) *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (2007).

Now, in Ong's massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]*, he traces the formal study of logic from Aristotle down to the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572) and beyond. In it, Ong's includes Chapter IV: "The Distant Background: Scholasticism and the quantification of Thought" (pp. 53-91). In Ong's 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (Macmillan), he says the following about the quantification of thought in medieval logic:

In this historical perspective, medieval scholastic logic appears as a kind of pre-mathematics, a subtle and unwitting preparation for the large-scale operations in quantitative modes of thinking which will characterize the modern world. In assessing the meaning of [medieval] scholasticism, one must keep in mind an important and astounding fact: in the whole history of the human mind, mathematics and mathematical physics come into their own, in a way which has changed the face of the earth and promises or threatens to change it even more, at only one place and time, that is, in Western Europe immediately after the [medieval] scholastic experience [in short, in print culture]. Elsewhere, no matter how advanced the culture on other scores, and even along mathematical lines, as in the case of the Babylonian, nothing like a real mathematical transformation of thinking takes place – not among the ancient Egyptians or Assyrians or Greeks or Romans, not among the peoples of India nor the Chinese nor the Japanese, not among the Aztecs or Mayas, not in Islam despite the promising beginnings there, any more than among the Tartars or the Avars or the Turks. These people can all now share the common scientific knowledge, but the scientific tradition itself which they share is not a merging of various parallel discoveries made by their various civilizations. **It represents a new state of mind.** However great contributions other civilizations may hereafter make to the tradition, our scientific world traces its origins back always to seventeenth and sixteenth century Europe [in short, to Copernicus and Galileo], to the place where for some three centuries and more the [medieval] arts course taught in universities and para-university schools had pounded into the heads of youth a study program consisting almost exclusively of a highly quantified

logic and a companion physics, both taught on a scale and with an enthusiasm never approximated or even dreamt of in ancient academies (p. 72; boldface emphasis here added by me).

No doubt that new state of mind contributed to the emergence of modern capitalism and modern science in the print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s. No doubt that new state of mind in Western culture also contributed much later to Henrich's own state of mind as manifested in his way of proceeding in his research in his 2020 book.

Now, in fairness to Henrich, I also want to quote at length four important points that he explicitly cautions us to keep in mind in Chapter 1: "WEIRD Psychology" (pp. 11-58) in his 2020 book:

1. We should celebrate human diversity, including psychological diversity. By highlighting the peculiarities of WEIRD people [captured in his subtitle's wording "Psychologically Peculiar"], I'm not denigrating these populations or any others. My aim is to explore the origins of psychological diversity and the roots of the modern world.
2. Do not set up a WEIRD vs. non-WEIRD dichotomy in your mind! As we'll see in many maps and charts, global psychological variation is both continuous and multidimensional.
3. Psychological variation emerges at all levels, not merely among nations. I'm sometimes stuck comparing country averages, because that's the available data. Nevertheless, throughout the book, we'll often examine psychological differences within countries – between regions, provinces, and villages, and even among second generation immigrants with diverse backgrounds. Even though WEIRD populations typically cluster at one end of global distributions, we'll explore and explain the interesting and important variation within Europe, 'the West,' and the industrialized world.
4. None of the population-level differences we observe should be thought of as fixed, essential, or immutable features of nations, tribes, or ethnic groups. To the contrary, this book is about how and why our psychology has changed over history and will continue to evolve. (p. 31)

Wow! The use of the term literate invites the use of the contradictory term illiterate, rather than the more neutral terms pre-literate or oral. Similarly, Henrich's use of the term WEIRD invites the use of the contradictory term non-WEIRD, which sets up the very dichotomy that he here cautions us against.

Now, I want to suggest here that Henrich's way of proceeding to construct his wide-ranging account of our Western cultural history and of how we in the West today are "The WEIRDest People in the World" resembles what Ong himself refers to as his relationist way of proceeding.

In the "Preface" to Ong's 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Cornell University Press, pp. 9-13), he says the following in the first sentence: "The present volume carries forward work in two earlier volumes by the same author, *The Presence of the Word* (1967) and *Rhetoric Romance, and Technology* (1971)." He

then discusses these two earlier volumes.

Then he says, “The thesis of these two earlier works is sweeping, but it is not reductionist, as reviewers and commentators, so far as I know, have all generously recognized: the works do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explain 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).

Thus, Ong himself claims (1) that his thesis is “sweeping” but (2) that the shifts do not “cause or explain everything in human culture and consciousness” and (3) that the shifts are related to “major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness.”

Major cultural developments include the rise of modern science, the rise of modern capitalism, the rise of representative democracy, the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the Romantic Movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts.

Hmm. If I were to follow Henrich’s example of capitalizing certain terms, I have just enumerated what he refers to as Rich (“Particularly Prosperous” in his book’s subtitle), Democratic, and Industrialized. Well, good for him. Because Ong was a Jesuit priest, I should also mention here that the Jesuit order played a significant role in advancing formal education in print culture – Henrich’s Educated. Of course, print culture and the increased demand for formal education took place in Western culture after the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-1450s – Henrich capitalized W in WEIRD.

In effect, Ong implicitly works with this relationist thesis that he got around to stating explicitly in his “Preface” to his 1977 book in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]* (Harvard University Press) – his major exploration of the influence of the Gutenberg printing press that emerged in the mid-1450s.

Next in Ong’s 1977 “Preface,” he explains certain lines of investigation that he further develops in *Interfaces of the Word*. Then he says, “At a few points, I refer in passing to the work of French and other European structuralists – variously psychoanalytic, phenomenological, linguistic, or anthropological in cast” (p. 10). Ong liked to characterize his own thought as phenomenological and personalist in cast.

Now, consider Ong’s own modesty in the subtitle of his 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Yale University Press), the expanded published version of Ong’s 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University. His wording “Some Prolegomena” clearly acknowledges that he does not explicitly claim that his thesis as he formulated it in his 1977 “Preface” does “explain everything in human culture and consciousness” – or every cause -- but that the shifts he points out are “sweeping.”

Now, please note just how careful and cagey Ong’s wording is when he says that his account of the evolution of certain changes does not “explain everything in human culture and consciousness” – or every cause.

On the one hand, Ong's terminology about primary oral culture (and primary orality, for short; and his earlier terminology about primarily oral culture) is sweeping inasmuch as it refers to all of our pre-historic human ancestors.

On the other hand, his cagey remark about sorting out cause and effect does not automatically rule out the possibility that certain changes somehow contributed to the eventual historical development of writing systems and specifically phonetic alphabetic writing (= literacy) as well as to the historical development of human settlement in agriculture (or agrarian) societies and economies.

Now, this brings me to my proposed metaphoric use of the technical term Bergner uses: anosognosia. As he explains, it means "the state of being too sick, too far beyond reason, to recognize one own mental illness. It's a diagnosis worth much debate, because it can be applied to anyone who doesn't agree with a psychiatrist's finding and can result in people being denied any real say in their own care."

In my 2022 *OEN* article "Daniel Bergner on Hearing Voices," mentioned above, I invoked the Swiss psychiatrist and psychological theorist C. G. Jung's concept of our collective unconscious in our psyches. Ah, but Jung argues that material in our collective unconscious is usually not readily available to our personalized ego-consciousness. But why not? Because, metaphorically speaking, something like anosognosia usually operates to prevent our personalized ego-conscious from accessing our collective unconscious.

Under most circumstances, it is dangerous for our personalized ego-consciousness to access material from our collective unconscious. Indeed, by definition, when our collective unconscious overwhelms our personalized ego-consciousness, we experience a psychotic break. When Bergner writes about antipsychotic medications, he is referring to powerful mind-altering and body-chemistry-altering medications that are meant to prevent a psychotic break.

In conclusion, you should note that I have carefully sidestepped many particular points that Henrich makes in his nearly 700-page 2020 book. To what extent, if any, are the patterns he discusses accurate and relevant accounts of our Western cultural history? I have not attempted to answer this key question. Instead, I have suggested that we can use the technical term anosognosia from the field of mental illness metaphorically to describe how our "Psychologically Peculiar" WEIRD state of mind may be preventing us from critically examining our distinctively Western vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy that Ong (1958; 1962; 1967; 1971; 1977; 1982), McLuhan (1962), Havelock (1963, 1978; 1982), Goody (1986, 1987, 2000, 2010), and now Henrich (2020) examine for us.

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