**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**Cultural Zones in Context (Chapter 10)**

**SLIDE 10.1**

Historians have many categories to choose from when organizing the past. For the Third Wave Era, *Ways of the World* has chosen to concentrate on cultural zones. This chapter and the previous two have focused on three Afro-Eurasian zones in turn: the Chinese, the Islamic and the Christian. What can a comparison of these regions tell us about cultural zones more generally? And what are the advantages and drawbacks of cultural zones as categories of analysis?

**SLIDE 10.2 [Map: The Spread of Christianity and Buddhism]**

It is clear that Third Wave cultural zones defy easy generalization. The Chinese zone, for instance, was centered on a single core region, while the Christian cultural zone was multi-polar with distinct but related Christian traditions taking root in Byzantium and Western Europe. The Islamic cultural zone emerged and spread from the region where Islam first took root, while both the Chinese and Christian cultural zones incorporated faiths that emerged elsewhere.

**Slide 10.3 [Image: The Baptism of Prince Vladimir]**

Cultural zones frequently resist precise definition. Borders shifted through time and cultural mixing made firm boundaries virtually impossible to draw. While it is clear that over the Third Wave Period Japan became part of the Chinese cultural zone, East Africa part of the Islamic world, and Eastern Europe became fully integrated into the Christian zone, these were gradual processes without clear-cut beginning or ending points. Overlapping cultural zones provide a further complication. The Islamic zone in south and Southeast Asia for instance coexisted in many regions with Hindu and Buddhist cultural zones. And Islamic and Christian zones overlapped on the Iberian Peninsula and later in the Balkans.

**SLIDE 10.4 [Map: Religion and Commerce in the Afro-Eurasian World]**

Despite being difficult to generalize about, cultural zones remain an attractive category of analysis for world historians. Such zones facilitate examination of exchange networks and patterns of identity that shifted through time and were experienced differently depending on factors like location, gender, profession, or faith. They also encourage the exploration of complex relationships that reflect both shared elements and significant differences between communities. Comparison of Islam in southwest Asia and West Africa, for instance, reveals the variety of beliefs and practices that existed within the broader Islamic world, while at the same time recognizing distinctive developments in specific regions. Cultural zones also have an advantage over other organizational categories like states, because they tend to be longer lasting. The Chinese cultural zone endured even as the Han, Tang and Song dynasties rose and fell over the centuries.

Cultural zones can be problematic because they defy easy definition. But if we are to make large-scale comparisons at all, some categories are essential and the flexibility of cultural zones compared to alternatives make them attractive ways of thinking about the shape of societies and cultures. This is true especially of the Third Wave Era Afro-Eurasian world where long-distance networks of exchange were creating broad cultural zones unlike any seen in the past.

Historians are always making choices as they seek to bring the past into the present. A focus on cultural zones can provide the perspective needed to examine broad multi-faceted developments over long time-periods and broad geographic regions.