**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

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

**Making Sense of it all: Categories of Beliefs (Chapter 4)**

**SLIDE 4.1**

There are some real benefits to looking at the development of wisdom traditions across Eurasia during the Second Wave Period in a single chapter. However, by this point you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number and variety of these traditions. With this in mind, let’s explore whether categorizing them can help and what pitfalls accompany such an exercise. First, let’s consider a possible set of categories.

**SLIDE 4.2 [Image: Filial Piety]**

One subset of wisdom traditions could be grouped together under the heading philosophical traditions. These rely on human reason, not divine revelation, to order the universe and human society. They also provide pathways for living the good life that remain firmly within the human realm. Rarely do they address a life after this one, instead focusing on how to live this life. In this category one might place Chinese Confucian and Legalist thought and Greek Rationalism. Early forms of Buddhism, which rejected the supernatural and urged intense self-effort, might also fall in this category.

**SLIDE 4.3 [Image: Hindu Ascetics]**

A second subset of wisdom traditions might be described as those based on a belief in a pervasive life force that animates and sustains all life and being. These traditions have a tendency to encourage one to commune or live in harmony with this primal unitary energy or divine reality. In this category you might place Chinese Daoism and particular elements within philosophical Hinduism (the notion of Brahman, for example) and within Therava(soft A)da Buddhism (for instance, concepts of “emptiness”, “nirvana”, or “Buddha nature.”).

**SLIDE 4.4 [Image: Zoroastrian Fire Altar]**

The monotheistic religions which originated in Southwest Asia are a possible third subset of wisdom traditions. These traditions were predicated on the idea of a single, transcendent God capable of relationships with humans. Faiths in this category share an emphasis on living in accordance with the laws or expectations of God and all ultimately develop concepts of an afterlife. This tradition includes Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and later, Islam.

**SLIDE 4.5 [Image: China’s Cultural Traditions]**

While general categories like these can be useful for organizing our thinking, they can obscure how these wisdom traditions were experienced. Not all individuals subscribed to a single wisdom tradition or category of belief. Elite Chinese, for instance, regularly adhered to Confucian values while also embracing Daoist beliefs and practices. Christian thinkers often drew on Greek Rationalist thought to explore the teachings of their faith. Buddhists embrace many elements of Hindu belief.

Another condition to keep in mind is that wisdom traditions evolve through time. In its Mahayana form, Buddhism became more conventionally religious, with various supernatural beings available to assist struggling humans. Christianity evolved in several directions; toward a greater concern with doctrinal correctness, toward a more negative view of women, and toward monastic and mystical practices.

As a result of these changes, each of these cultural traditions developed an internal richness and complexity that makes firm categorization problematic. It is difficult to squeeze Buddhism into just one of these categories. Hinduism venerates many gods even while affirming that “there is no multiplicity.” There are legalistic as well as mystical elements to many traditions. But if we are to make comparisons at all, some categories are essential. So we need to be sensitive to the tensions within major traditions as well as the comparisons among them.

It is perhaps this “slipperiness” of wisdom traditions—their resistance to being nailed down—that makes their study so fascinating. For they speak to what is deepest and most meaningful in human experience, and such matters are always hard to express in ordinary language.