Section 1

UNIVERSAL RELIGIONS AND COMMON CULTURES
The Rise of Universal Religions

• From 300 to 600CE the Afro-Eurasian world experienced a surge of religious ferment whereby spiritual concerns integrated scattered communities into shared faiths.

• Christianity and Buddhism aspire to universality.
  – Earlier religions were more localized.
  – These two prove adaptable to diverse populations and were promoted through missionary agents.
A New and Powerful Spirituality

- Christianity expands in Western Europe alongside the dying Western Roman Empire
- Christianity revives a Roman *imperium* at Byzantium
- Hinduism and Buddhism vie for preeminence in India
- In central Asia and China, Buddhism flourished
- The Bantu migrations created common cultural foundations across much of the western and southern African continent.
- The Mayan cultural center established political and cultural institutions across much of Mesoamerica.
El Castillo at Chichen Itza
The Impact of Religion on Societies

- Religion became more deeply influential in individuals’ lives as people began to view the world and society through a religious filter.
- Religion claimed to give clear answers about human nature, whom people should obey, and the degree to which they owed allegiance to other-worldly powers.
- Shared faith brought people together and helped them identify with people far and wide – especially Christianity, Buddhism, and later – Islam.
- Sharp distinctions between “right” and “wrong” inspired by these religious ideals also drew new lines between peoples. Belief in the absolute nature of religion drove a wedge and left little room for tolerance.
Missionary Activities

- Buddhist and Christian missionaries took their religious texts and traveled widely attempting to convert the peoples of the world.
- Christians from Persia traveled west as far as China.
- Buddhists journeyed into Afghanistan to the northwest and China to the northeast along the caravan routes.
  - Buddhist missionary Xuanzang carried back many Buddhist works that became the foundation of much of Chinese Buddhist tradition.
Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, c. 900CE
Questions

• What factors led to the rise of universal religions?
• What impact did the rise of universal religions have on societies and the world?
• What role did missionaries play in creating universal religions?