The Post-Classical Period, 600-1450
Scope

- Studies of Western Civilizations refer to this as the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period; however, when studying from a world history perspective, the term post-classical is a more neutral term.
- Unlike the earlier periods, the study of this period does not have the convenience of three or four centers. There are many.
Scope

- The period saw the spread of three world religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam
- Hundred of thousands of people from Ireland to Japan, Sweden to the Swahili coast changed religions.
Scope

• The pace and impact of international trade accelerated.

• The Indian Ocean was the key artery for trade; however, it was supplemented by north-south trade routes from Africa and Europe.
Scope

• Dramatic innovations in religion and trade set the tone for the period.

• In the process, world history gradually changed from an emphasis on the separate development of key societies (divergence) to the interaction and frequent deliberate imitation among key societies (convergence)
The year 1000 CE can be taken as the basic dividing line. Developments later in the period, particularly the brief but decisive establishment of the Mongol empires, enhanced the pattern of convergence.
I. The post-classical world is dated 600 CE to 1450 CE

A. This span is one of the periods that has been reshaped extensively by work in the field of world history; it was once viewed as a somewhat confusing stage in human experience.

1. One reason for this confusion is that the geographical territory organized into civilizations in this period expanded greatly, as did the number of separate civilizations.

2. A second explanation stems from the European history term for this period, the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period, which somehow implies an awkward, stagnant stretch of experience in Europe between the grandeur of Greece and Rome and the glories of the Renaissance.

3. From a world history perspective, the postclassical period was a time of great dynamism, with many innovations and extremely vigorous societies. Medieval Europe would be only a small part of this larger experience.
B. In trying to define the postclassical world, we are using a key analytical tool of historians, periodization. The introduction of a new period in world history means that the framework that had described a human experience previously is no longer central.

C. In introducing a new period in history, we must address three points.

1. First, we need to prove that the themes of the previous period are no longer dominant.

2. Second, we need to say when the new period comes into play and when it stops being salient.

3. Finally, we need to articulate what the new themes are to which most major societies will have to react.
II. The first point in this instance is easily established.

A. With the fall of the great classical empires, we no longer see the processes of expansion in China, India, and the Mediterranean and the development of integration devices in these societies to hold their expanded territories together.

B. At the end of the classical period, China and India are essentially established.

C. We certainly do not see continued expansion and integration in the classical Mediterranean because that civilization has burst apart.
III. The second point we must address in introducing a new period relates to chronological boundaries.

A. The beginning of the postclassical period is marked by the fall of Han China, Gupta India, and the Roman Empire.

B. This period also marked by the emergence of the Arabs and Islam as a new force in world history, beginning around 600. In this period, Arab-Islamic civilization becomes the first world-class civilization that we have dealt.

C. The end of the postclassical period is described primarily in terms of Arab political determination but also changes in Arab cultural and economic roles. This reduction would be followed by perhaps two centuries of experimentation, resulting in some intermediate systems that take us up to 1450.
IV. The postclassical period saw the emergence of a larger number of civilization centers and a larger geographical range for civilization than had been true in the classical period.

A. The Mediterranean world split apart and three related but distinct civilizations emerged from the wreckage of the Roman experiment.
   1. Middle East and North Africa, which became the heartland of Islam and the Arab world.
   2. Byzantine Empire, which influenced E. Europe.
   3. Western European society.

B. New territories entered the civilization game, including Japan, Russia, northwestern Europe, northern Germany, the British Isles, Scandinavia, additional parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas.

C. The splitting of the Mediterranean world and the geographical expansion of civilizations brought with them new challenges in defining the number of civilizations in our study.
V. Two themes serve as primary focal points for the postclassical period.

A. The first theme involves the spread of world religions, which showed the capacity to pour across political and cultural boundaries without necessarily erasing those boundaries.

1. Christianity, Buddhism and Islam would push so far into the civilized regions of Afro-Eurasia as to touch literally every major society.

2. The postclassical period is partly defined by the immense surge of missionary religions, mainly originating in the Middle East or India, but spreading from these places to other parts of Asia, much of Africa, and ultimately, almost all of Europe.

3. This focus on cultural development helps explain why the postclassical period is not defined by overarching political themes. Churches, networks of Islamic centers of law and scholarship, and Buddhist temples become the focus.
B. The second theme involves the emergence of a “world network.” In this period, systematic exchanges begin to predominate much of the Afro-Eurasian world.

1. A basic commercial artery emerges, running from the Middle East across the Indian Ocean to India and Sri Lanka, reaching SE Asia, stretching into the Pacific, touching the Philippines, and to the coast of China.

2. The east-west artery was embellished by a series of feeder routes that ran north to south—linking China, Africa, Scandinavia and northwest Europe to the Arab world.

3. The routes were maintained by new technologies—naval devices and improved map making.
VI. One other mechanism useful for interpreting this period is a categorization of the new and old centers of civilization into one of three economic and contact zones based on their relationship to new patterns of interregional trade.

A. The first of these zones is focused on the Arab world, the Byzantine Empire, India, and China. In the language of today, this zone would be the developed world—the areas that built most clearly on the achievements of the classical civilizations.

1. These areas had the most sophisticated manufacturing systems, the largest cities, the most sophisticated, upper-class and artistic styles of life, and the most elaborate political structures.

2. These areas traded actively with and influenced one another.
B. Around these centers emerged a host of societies in which civilization was a relatively new form of human organization-including Japan, parts of Southwest Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Russia, and northwestern Europe.

1. These societies forged trading connections with the more developed nations.

2. Deliberate imitation enabled these second-tier societies to develop cultural and economic apparatuses more quickly than they would have otherwise.
C. A third significant region of civilized experience, which we’ll discuss later lectures, also developed in this period but had not effective contact with either of the first two zones.
VII. The two major themes of this period raise some final points.

A. The spread of world religions involved new kinds of contact, rivalry and suspicions that would become durable parts of the world history environment.

B. At this same time, many world historians would claim that the new trade connections and that would become durable parts of the world history environment.

C. One world historian has said that round the year 1000 CE, the human experience reached a crucial divide.
   1. Before this, human experience was shaped by local and regional factors, with more focus on separate factors.
   2. After 1000 CE the balance shifts, with a focus on convergence than divergence. The beginning of a pattern of interaction, a thirst for contact, and a willingness to imitate that transcend the divisions and local identities that had been emphasized earlier.