Historical Period 3 Socratic Seminar:
Conditions of Women during the Post-Classical Era

Directions: Use the general info reading below as background information for understanding the essential question objective for our in-class Socratic seminar.

Prompt: Compared to the patriarchal systems of classical civilizations, were women’s conditions improved by the impact of world religions, or further hindered due to new religious concepts?

Excerpts taken from *Conditions of Women in Islam, Byzantine Christianity and Western Christianity*
By: Peter Sterns, World History in Documents (1998)

The major religions were at pains to deal with conditions for women, through their treatments of family law and in more general discussions of women’s roles in human society. Both Christianity and Islam faced a major tension in principle: they granted women souls and the chance of salvation, but they regarded women as inferior, more prone to evil (both relied on the same biblical account of Adam and Eve and God’s creation). Neither religion undermined patriarchy: by emphasizing the story of Eve as the first sinner, they enhanced it culturally, and leading religious roles were reversed for men. But both religions granted women opportunities for religious expression: they could go on pilgrimages, for example. Both Muhammad and some early Christian leaders believed they were giving women important, new opportunities through family law and religious prescriptions.

Elements of this tension between inferiority and equality clearly played out rules concerning both families and public testimony. Women were given some rights in families – they could not be treated as mere property – but their rights were inferior to those of men. In the public sphere, women’s rights were far more circumscribed, though ironically, favored upper-class women (in Byzantium, for example) might individually enjoy great opportunities. On what, besides upper-class birth, did these opportunities depend?

Primary document excerpts for this Socratic Seminar come from laws and commentary from the Byzantine Empire; the center of Orthodox Christianity; from Catholic Western Europe; and from Islam. There are many similarities in the complex statements of patriarchy in all three religions, and these should be the first points to identify. Are there also differences? Use these documents when preparing for your Socratic stance and questions to pose to the class.
More than purely religious factors were involved. Of the three societies compared here, Western Europe was for a long time the most disorderly. Many historians believe that women’s power vis-à-vis men’s is greatest (at least until very recent times) when governments are weak, because then the informal authority they can wield in families count for more. Germanic tribal traditions, arising among a hunting-and-gathering peoples, may also have affected women’s conditions in Western Europe. But it is generally agreed also that, with time and as Western Europe became better organized, women’s position deteriorated somewhat, and cultural scorn increased. The religious tension definitely existed in this civilization. Women’s sinfulness was often emphasized: men alone could be priests; obedience was urged on women in religious marriage. But female figures, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and many women saints, were often greatly venerated, because they seemed more accessible, milder, than the male religious influence through their ideas and their piety.

The Byzantine Empire obviously shared Christianity with Western Europe, through its Orthodox institutions were separate. Orthodox Christianity continued to allow priest to marry, which may have signaled less fear about sexuality and contamination through contact with women than arose in the West. Because the Byzantine Empire preserved Roman laws and political institutions, it might also have offered some extra protections for women – Rome had been rather careful to combine patriarchy with legal conditions.

Islam poses some obvious problems for interpretation, both in the postclassical period and today. Arab peoples before Islam had a strongly patriarchal society in which women’s family rights were not well established. Muhammad believed he added important protections for women – allowing them divorce, for example, which was simply not possible in Christianity. On the other hand, Islam did not make women equal; they even prayed separately from men. Furthermore, traditions in the Middle East that were not officially part of Islam added to the complexity. The practice of veiling women in public, so that they would be kept separate from the freer interactions available to men, predated Islam, but it spread increasingly during the postclassical period, saved for some peasant women. Historians debate whether Islamic women were clearly more disadvantaged than their Christian sisters in the postclassical period. They seem to have been freer from male control in certain circumstances, such as religious pilgrimages. Individual women, if well placed, could possess political power as in most patriarchal societies – an important complexity. On the other hand, Muhammad countenanced polygamy, in regulated circumstances that restricted earlier Arab practices; is this a definite sign that Islam downplayed women’s considerations (even though the majority of Muslim men could afford only one wife)? Some Muslims continue the debate today, arguing that feminism is less necessary in Islam than in Christian cultures, because women’s right were more carefully protected in the religion itself. Are there bases for this argument in the materials derived from religious history?