
“Do we really need another book about women and Islam”? I asked myself as I prepared to review Anne Sofie Roald’s *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*. It would be perfectly understandable to conclude not, given the already well-saturated market, but I found that Roald’s book does fill several needs left open in the existing literature and for these reasons can be recommended as a very useful resource. First, Roald’s book is a unique interdisciplinary combination of Islamic textual research and contemporary sociological investigation. In addressing nearly every hot topic relating to Islam and gender, she presents in detail not only the relevant original Islamic source texts and a range of jurisprudential interpretations of these texts, but also couples this with her own sociological research reflecting how these issues are viewed by Islamists in the west — her selected group of study. Roald’s contribution is unique also for being an “insider’s” view, as Roald herself is a practicing Muslim and a member of the particular subset of Muslims that is her focus of study, a group rarely written about from an internal perspective. Roald remains conscious of this identity in her research, commenting on how this (and the identity of non-Muslim researchers) might affect interview responses, and in the end seeks to maintain a level of academic diligence that is rare in the existing literature about Islam and the west, whether authored by Muslims or non-Muslims. Finally, Roald is not afraid of the tough topics: she takes on everything from women’s political participation to female circumcision and almost everything in between — all in one book and with a continuing effort to maintain the same level of detail and discipline throughout. There are, in my opinion, a few areas for improvement, but overall, this work is an important contribution that, if it had taken its place on the shelf years ago, perhaps might have saved readers the frustration of sifting through other publications for only a fraction of the education that this book provides.

Roald’s goal in *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* is to study the “cultural encounter between Islam and the west with respect to gender attitudes among Arabic-speaking Islamists in Europe”, focusing also on mechanisms of change as Islam is lived in various times and places (p. viii). In large part, she succeeds. She dedicates a chapter each to seven controversial topics dominant in the discourse on Islam and women: (1) perceptions of women, (2) gender relations, (3) women’s political participation, (4) polygyny,
(5) divorce and child custody, (6) female circumcision, and (7) Islamic female dress. She also devotes a very useful chapter to “Reflections on sharia” in which she presents key concepts in Islamic jurisprudence, for example, the definition of *ijtibād* (jurisprudential interpretation) and whether or not its doors were closed, the distinction between *fiqāb* (jurists’ legal conclusions), *shari’ah* (the Law of God) and *qānūn* (temporal legislation), and jurisprudential tools such as *qiyyās* (analogical reasoning), *ijmā’* (consensus), and *‘urf* (custom). As a result, this chapter serves well as background for any reader wishing to follow Muslim debates that turn on questions of Islamic jurisprudential interpretation — as, indeed, is the case with most issues regarding women.

In each of the subject-specific chapters, Roald quite exhaustively presents the relevant texts from the Qur’ān and/or *Hadīth*(including linguistic analyses and full citations to their original sources), then summarizes the dominant interpretations of these texts among both classical and contemporary Islamic scholars, and finishes off her analysis by presenting results from her own empirical study of how these topics are understood by her focus group of Muslims living in Europe today. In these chapters, Roald’s book exhibits several attributes that make it a rare find among the reams of literature on Islam, the west, and women. First, she is meticulous in her citation of sources: virtually every *hadīth*, Qur’ānic verse, and scholarly opinion is footnoted to its original text, including Arabic sources. In fact, she makes a point of distinguishing her work in this way, complaining that she has often “been upset by the way serious Islamic scholars and Islamists tend to . . . [mention] *hadīths* . . . without any reference to precise sources where they can be located . . . even appeal[ing] to *hadīths* with weak narrator chains in arguing for their particular points of view” (p. xiv). This last frustration Roald tries to eliminate for her readers by pointing out the weaknesses of some *hadīths* that are quoted on the question of women, especially drawing attention where they are used as key parts of a jurisprudential argument. So, for example, we learn that although al-Zuḥaylī attributes to the Abū [Dāwūd] Dā’ūd’s collection of *ahadīth* about angels cursing women who leave without their husband’s permission, Roald’s research has not been able to uncover this *hadīth* in Abu Dā’ūd, nor in fact in *any* of the other five acknowledged *hadīth* collections (p. 146). Similarly, in describing al-Zuḥaylī’s position that women should remain indoors, she mentions his reliance on a *hadīth* known to be weak, and specifically points out that he fails to mention this fact (p. 146). She also takes the opportunity to correct overstatements by various authors, such as Maha

* For this *hadīth* see Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭaylīlī, *Musnad Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭaylīlī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah, n.d.), 1: 263. The Abū Dāwūd to whom al-Zuḥaylī refers is not Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, whose work, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* is one of the six *ṣiḥāḥ* works of *hadīth* [Islamic Studies].
Azzam’s assertion that Qur’an 33:59 refers only to the Prophet’s wives whereas, as Roald puts it, the verse “explicitly states ... ‘... and the women of the believers’”. (p. 259) There are certainly areas where she does not provide this second layer of information, but the comprehensiveness of her source citations serves at least to put the interested reader well on the road to tracking this information for himself/herself.

There is one significant organizational problem that detracts from the otherwise important impact of Roald’s comprehensive work: she waits too long to get to it. That is, these eight important chapters do not appear until more than ninety pages into the work, following a four-chapter “Part One” titled “Theoretical and Methodological Reflections”, providing essentially background information for her larger project. Specifically, one of these chapters summarizes the nature of existing research on Muslims, and two others detail her method of research and investigate theoretical concepts of social change. The chapter titled “Arab Muslims in Europe” provides a quite handy summary of modern Islamic movements (viz. Salafi, al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, Hizb al-Taahir, Sufi groups, as well as her own category of “post-Ikhwan” Muslims) and their impact in the west, including brief references to their attitudes towards women and gender. This chapter is especially commendable for concisely distilling out the essential elements and methodologies of contemporary Islamic movements into one very readable piece. However, this and the other chapters in this section tend to distract the reader with details extraneous to Roald’s primary mission. Their location at the front end of Roald’s book is unfortunate because they do not fulfil the important role of drawing Roald’s reader into the broader subject at hand. One is left with the impression that they would all do much better as separate publications, perhaps as more in-depth articles devoted to the specific question presented. And I suggest that her third chapter, “Defining the Area of Research”, be attached as an appendix to this work. They could then be incorporated by reference in this book, instead of serving as a rather large speedbump for readers interested in Roald’s substantial research and analysis on Islam and gender in the west.

Turning back to the book’s strengths, Roald’s summaries of jurisprudential interpretations are refreshing in their diversity. On nearly every topic addressed, she presents a variety of jurisprudential opinions on the governing Islamic rule, running the gamut from classical to contemporary. The names she references make a long impressive list. Roald cites a whole lot of scholars from Ibn Kathir, Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Jaṣṣās and al-Shawkāni to Muhammad ‘Abduh, Ḥasan al-Turābī, Jamāl Badawi and Amina Wadud, and many more. For example, we learn that al-Ṭabarī had no restriction against
women judges (p. 141), that Râshid al-Ghannoushi believes that “ma'rûf” means “that which is common to customs” (p. 174) and that Zainab al-Ghazzâlî al-Jubailî authored the only existing complete commentary (tafsîr) of the Qur’ân by a woman (p. 43). Western authors are not short-changed in her research either: we see names such as Foucoult, Wittgenstein, Edward Said, Schacht, Margoliouth and others nested within her analyses. In Roald’s own words: “I represent various points of view in these chapters since I consider it important to demonstrate the diversity of ideas rather than presenting one point of view as ‘the only truth’” (p. xii). While this may frustrate some readers wanting to know definitively Roald's own position on, for example, female circumcision or women’s political participation, her effort not to present her own opinions illustrates a major strength and uniqueness of this book. There is already plenty of literature strongly advocating for a particular position on some issues regarding Islam and women, usually presenting it as the only one, alongside other directly-opposing views seeking to do the same thing. Roald’s approach, on the other hand, empowers the reader in a way these texts do not. By giving them the raw materials (the Qur’ân and Ḥadîth texts), and a view of the breadth of the intellectual playing field on these topics, Roald’s readers are enabled to evaluate assertions within the discourse for themselves, rather than remain dependant upon those assertions for their primary information.

This book also does a good job of putting various legal interpretations within their own jurisprudential contexts. That is, Roald often explains a particular legal opinion in terms of the methodological outlook of its legal school. She mentions, for example, that the Ḥanâfî school is less dependent on Ḥadîth than the Malîki and Ḥanbalî schools (p. 105), that different measures of authenticity will weigh hadîths differently for different schools (p. 252 f), that the same verse can take on very different meanings depending upon how literalist one is (pp. 118, 178), and how the notion of “returning to the pure sources” motivates the Ṣalāfî movement and what impact this has on legal interpretation (pp. 106, 274). An especially good exploration of the impact of the Ṣalâfî methodology, for example, her analysis of the Ḥadîth scholar al-Albânî’s interpretation of a hadîth regarding female circumcision. She points out that “as a Ṣalâfî he cannot condemn female circumcision because . . . salaf is rarely understand hadiths in their context but tend to interpret them literally”, so instead he is forced to the creative conclusion that female circumcision actually heightens the sexual response of women (p. 252). Unfortunately, however, she does not make these methodological connections often enough, and in some places the omission is glaring. For example, she makes several references to Ibn Ḥazm and his legal positions, but never mentions his Ţâhîrî
methodology and the impact that its emphasis on literalism would have on his conclusions. For example, Roald notes his view that women can occupy every position of leadership except that of caliph (p. 196), but leaves open the obvious question of how a literalist interpretation of the texts might drive such a conclusion.

Especially contributing to the unique usefulness of Roald’s book is the sociological research with which she supplements her academic jurisprudential summaries. Having conducted interviews and questionnaires in Muslim populations in all sorts of places — Malaysia, Switzerland, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Scandinavia, Sudan, Holland, France and Belgium — she is able to follow technical summaries of law with specific examples of how actual “Arabic-speaking Islamist” Muslims understand these rules in their own contemporary lives, comparing European residents with their counterparts in Muslim countries. For example, we learn that most mainstream Islamists consider the rationale behind the “qiwāma” of men over women to be due to their economic support obligations, that the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (d. 1996) believes this to apply only within a family context rather than extending male superiority over women into the public sphere, and finally, as Amina Wadud suggests, where socio-economic systems change, there is room for more liberal reinterpretation of these roles even within the family (pp. 145, 162, 188). We also hear of the rather negative reaction that most Islamists have to the work of non-Islamist “Islamic feminists” (such as Fatima Mernissi because of her “disrespect towards Islamic historical personalities”), with Roald significantly noting that Islamic feminist arguments are in fact addressed by Islamists and thus have to some extent impacted the nature of Islamist discourse (p. 187).

Each chapter includes substantial sociological information, laying out details drawn from Roald’s own empirical research. It is clear that she has a firm handle on the key players in contemporary Islamist discourse, having personally interviewed notables such as Zainab al-Ghazzālī in Egypt, Jamāl Badawi in Canada, Rashid al-Ghannoushi and Shaykh Darsh in Britain, and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī in Qatar, as well as a good deal of educated lay Muslims who follow their scholarship. Thus, there is much persuasive force to her sociological conclusions such as that most European Salafists regard polygamy as the original Islamic model (p. 208) and that many Arab Islamists stress a wife’s obedience to her husband, even if not based strictly on textual sources (p. 173). She also makes clear some useful distinctions between various motivations for Islamic dress. For example, following a commandment is separate and distinct from socio-political consequences Islamist women attest to, such as empowerment in the public space. Roald further points out how the reasons
given may vary depending upon the person asking the question (p. 258). It is perhaps because of her otherwise thorough treatment that some omissions are quite confusing. In her summary of various interpretations of a wife’s obedience, for example, one expects to see at least a reference to Amina Wadud’s understanding of “tā’ah” as obedience not to a husband but to God; yet no mention is made of this view, despite Roald’s numerous other references to Wadud’s work (p. 173). It is also disappointing that her chapter on “Islamic Female Dress” (arguably the most popular subject within the field of Islam and women), is spent almost exclusively on the debate over the face-veil. She explains this focus by pointing out that, among Islamists, there is consensus that a headcover is Islamically required and that the only area of debate for them is the face-veil (p. 262). Her resulting focus on the face-veil discourse is thus apparently a logical consequence of the narrow selection of Islamists as her focus of study, but — setting aside the question of whether even the Islamist discourse on the face-veil warrants over forty pages of attention — one is left feeling disappointed with her strict adherence to this selected group, as there certainly is ample debate on the headcovering requirement itself among practicing Muslims in the west, even if they are not “Islamists”. Given her interest in the process of change as Islam is practiced in the west, is it not relevant to investigate whether and how this non-Islamist debate has impacted the perspectives of Islamist’s both scholars and lay citizens, on the subject of dress?

One minor criticism of her sociological data might be made: I noticed a few elements in the drafting of some of her questionnaires that appear to have slanted her results. For example, her questionnaire on the meaning of “obedience” was stated as ‘How do you understand the Islamic concept of “a wife’s obedience to her husband” (p. 174). It does not take much critical analysis to see that she has built into this question an assumption that “obedience to a husband” is in fact “an Islamic concept”, thus obviously deterring answers indicating an alternative understanding of Qur’anic references to obedience. And in her divorce questionnaire, she substitutes the word “should” for “can” in the last of a series of options — a substitution that significantly changes the choices available. Specifically, options 1-4 are worded in the format: “the husband can only divorce his wife if [xyz condition is met]...” but option 5 is: “the husband should not divorce his wife . . . [without good reason and after discussing it with her first]”. To my reading, the word “should” makes option 5 a description of the moral thing to do, but not necessarily the limit of what he has a right to do under the law, which is indicated by “can”. It appears that this word choice significantly skewed her results because she notes that a surprising majority chose option 5, but Roald
mistakenly analyzes these answers as illustrating the surprising reality that these educated Islamists would hold beliefs “not in conformity with the legal understanding of a man’s right to divorce” (p. 226).

Despite these technical flaws, Roald’s emphasis on empirical research indicates an attention to the social reality of Muslim lives that lends significant weight to her comments on the impact of custom on the practice of Islam across time and place. These comments are insightful, even though they are a bit underdeveloped. Roald helpfully explains how misunderstandings in terminology by both Muslims and non-Muslims have unnecessarily weighted the question of change and Islamic law. The idea of a uniform adherence to God’s law, she points out, is translated inaccurately into the rhetoric of a “uniform shariah”, and is posited in contrast to those arguing for a “change in shariah”. This confusion of terminology, she continues, creates misunderstandings that obstruct change. In Roald’s words, “some well-educated Muslims and Islamists within fields other than Islamic law tend to talk in terms of changes to sharia when what they really mean is changes to fiqh and qanun (which, scholars acknowledge, do change according to circumstances), and Islamic scholars respond by refusing to contemplate change, as sharia in their view is unchangeable” (p. 104). Having made this important point, Roald repeatedly undertakes, in each chapter, the question of custom and the impact of custom on Islamic norms in the west today, as compared to their classical Arabic manifestations. Roald points out that identified and verbalized custom is actually an accepted source of lawmaking for some Islamic schools of law (i.e. the Maliki and Hanafi), whereas for others, non-verbalized customs influenced the way texts were interpreted but on a largely subconscious level. She suggests that it is because of this internalization of non-verbalized custom that, for example, female circumcision became part of the local expressions of sharia in some areas where it existed before Islam, but not in other areas where it was not common (including some predominantly Shafi’i areas, despite the fact that Shafi’i law promotes the practice) (p. 113). Similarly, fundamental ideas of women have changed over the course of history, affecting the interpretations of qiwamah of Qur’an 4:34 which vary from male superiority over women in all affairs, to superiority only in economic prowess, in physical strength, or in financial responsibility for the family, or even suggesting superiority of women (because of their right to such support) (p. 150).

Through comparisons such as these, Roald seeks to illustrate her more general thesis that custom, whether verbalized or internalized, has played a fundamental part in the formation of all Islamic law, and moreover it is the unwritten and unverbalized customs which have survived change because
“these were deeply rooted in prevailing attitudes and consciousness of the people in society” (p. 114), whereas written and verbalized local customs, especially those existing before Islam, were much easier to reject as important to dissociate from the new world order of Islam. Furthermore, Roald explains, “[t]hroughout history many Islamic scholars have written commentaries on the Koran and interpreted it in view of hadith literature and individual analysis . . . [and these] various interpretations, particularly of social issues, are influenced by time, space, and the commentator’s specific approach and biography” (p. 109). Thus, differences among Islamic scholars depend not so much on “which texts exist, but which ones are selected, deliberately or undeliberately”. In her words, “[t]exts are present in their entirety in the body of religious literature, but one tends to choose and interpret texts, intentionally or unintentionally, according to what is compatible with one’s own attitude” (p. 119). There is also a direct interaction of one’s socio-historical circumstance and one’s jurisprudential methodology (e.g. under what criteria are hadiths evaluated for lawmaking purposes), an interaction that directly impacts the resulting laws derived. That is, as hadiths are important for contextualizing Qur’anic verses, Roald aptly points out that one’s understanding of the Qur’ān “can thus differ according to which hadiths one accepts and the degree of emphasis one puts on the various other legal concepts of Islamic law” (p. 109). She is quick to add that “this applies to androcentric interpretations as well as to feminist approaches to various religions” (p. 119), a comment that serves well to reinforce her intention to present an academic analysis of this phenomenon, rather than utilizing it as a deconstructive springboard for a specific reformist agenda.

All of this has particular significance, of course, to the encounter of Islam with the west — a change in both time and place from classical Islamic realities, and thus filled with potential for conscious and unconscious influences on interpretation of religious law. Indeed, most of the testimonials from Roald’s questionnaires and interviews illustrate how European cultural attitudes about gender may have influenced the beliefs, social ideas and practices of Islamists in Europe. But, lest the reader be too carried away with a sense of “reformed Islam” for the new century, she carefully reminds us that:

. . . the present discussion [among western Islamists of the role of Muslim women in Arabia in the seventh century] is not about an idea of a past ideal female role, but a discussion of a female role relevant to or compatible with contemporary society in light of the Islamic sources. In the process of interpretation, contemporary socio-cultural influences play a part, and this results in a contemporary Islam. In a similar way, traditional Islamic law reflects the society and culture of the Islamic Middle Ages, rather than depicting society and culture as it ‘really’ was at the time of the Prophet (p. 91).
With this insightful passage, Roald provides both the Muslim and non-Muslim reader with an invaluable tool with which to evaluate current and past Muslim discourses without making overbroad and simplistic conclusions. This is an important contribution especially now as more and more global debates centre on Islamic law. Roald’s comments remind us that “what many from both sides judge to be Islamic very often turns out to be the Islamic sources interpreted through cultural experiences” (p. 28).

Despite the impressive strength of these observations, Roald disappointingly fails to follow them through to their most powerful conclusions. That is, she stops short of answering how these cultural experiences and personal selectivity of source texts plays a determinative role in specific Muslim legal interpretations, or even in making up the methodology of a school of Islamic law. For example, in one place she notes that modern scholars have complained of the use of isolated hadiths (viz. those less than four chains of narration) in Islamic lawmaking and the formation of attitudes in Muslim society, some even rejecting such widespread use (p. 110).

Elsewhere, she critiques Islamic feminists such as Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud as tending to avoid extensive consideration of hadith literature, and asserts that the “hermeneutic approach” that Islamist scholars (Turabi, Ghazali and Qaradawi) take to hadith literature will have a “more penetrating force among Muslims in the present wave of social change than the approach of … Islamic feminists” (p. 113). But here she stops short, leaving the reader wishing she made some analytical conclusions as to why the feminists might reject hadith literature and why the Islamists take a hermeneutic approach, and offer specific examples illustrating the different results of these two methodological choices. Too often, Roald hints at possible connections, by calling them “noteworthy” but then fails to tie up the loose ends, such as: “. . . it is noteworthy that there is a correspondence in attitude between the classical scholars of early Islam and modern Islamists, whereas many established medieval scholars’ arguments tend to be dismissed in the modern debate” (p. 184). But what, we must ask, can one make of this “noteworthy” connection? Is it that classical arguments, being closer in time to the Prophet, have more credibility? With whom, and why? Or does this reveal the motivation behind the push to go back to the original sources? Or is it that the medieval jurisprudence is so filled with cultural norms of their time that the job of distilling the relevant rules for our time is too overwhelming?

It is answers to these sorts of questions that would make her book a work of impressive weight. Yet even in explaining the choices of Islamist Muslims answering her questionnaires, Roald often fails to take up the challenge. For example, in answering her polygyny questionnaire, a significant number of
Muslims raised in Europe concluded that a man has full autonomy in the decision to marry a second wife (even without the first wife’s permission). But rather than seeking a cultural, sociological or methodological explanation for these answers, Roald merely concludes that “in this area, opinions are very divergent and it was difficult to find any correspondence between views on this matter and views on other issues which were raised in the questionnaire” (p. 210). After her significant insights into cultural and sociological influences on interpretation, we know that she can do better than this. What is it about this topic that might lead even western Muslims to answer the question in this way? Are there perhaps less original source texts on this issue than on others such that the question is more open to divergence of opinion? Or is there sufficient text, but of a type only conclusive for some methodologies and not others? Specially is it predominantly Qur’an or hadith, and hadith of what level of strength? Was it a subject of classical interpretation or later jurisprudential accretion? How did cultural norms (including patriarchy) affect each? And what can one discern from the nature of the influences on the lives of these European Muslims themselves that would explain their perspective? Roald leaves all this unanswered.

There can be yet another, more general, criticism of Roald’s analytical structure: she falls into a simplistic and rather stereotypical “east-vs.-west” paradigm. In fact, this polarity is the primary tool by which she analyzes all her material. She explains it this way: “In order to evaluate whether western cultural attitudes play a part in immigrants’ reconception of the Islamic family pattern, I applied a model with two poles which might be understood in terms of opposing ideals – ‘Arab culture’ and ‘western culture’” (p. xiii). She later elaborates that the “Arab cultural base pattern” is one of patriarchy, and the “western cultural base pattern” one of equality, and that “the process of interpretation of social issues in the Islamic sources takes place between these two poles” (p. 295). Even allowing for her adjustments for “local variations”, this dichotomy of Arab patriarchy versus western equality is problematic on several levels. First, surely “equality” is not a quintessential western value. Indeed, “equality” for women has become a social norm in the west only in the past half century (and is believed by many to be a goal still unfulfilled). Was Victorian England not patriarchal? Conversely, were there not matriarchal societies in Africa? And one might posit that colonialism injected a level of western patriarchy into Arab and other Muslim societies not theretofore predominant, and that these Muslim societies somehow retained these norms while Europe moved beyond them into what we know today as contemporary “western” standards of equality and freedom. Thus, it is surprising to find Roald describing wifely obedience as something “linked to
hierarchical systems rejected by many Europeans” (p. 297), whereas it is well-known even in the west that this rejection is only a phenomenon of approximately the last fifty years. A wife’s obedience to her husband has been a part of western law, culture and even marriage vows for centuries before that. The same is true of restrictions on women’s education, but here again we find Roald oversimplifying matters, comparing western values of women’s education to a stereotypical Arab pattern “where few women were entitled to an education up to as late as the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 176). In fact, it is the very argument of Muslims from a variety of methodologies that Muslims (including Arabs) possessed standards of gender equality that far outshone those in the west for most of their parallel histories. The categorization of a culture as equality- or patriarchy-based, then, has been rather fluid over time and place, and is therefore a misleading (if not irrelevant) paradigm for Roald to use in the present analysis.

Moreover, as a primary lens for her research, this Arab-patriarchy vs. western-equality model inevitably leads her to unfulfilling and often simplistic conclusions. For example, when a research subject answers a question in such a way that seems to promote equality for women, Roald invariably comments in her book that this person has been influenced by the “western cultural base pattern,” and, conversely, by the “Arab cultural base pattern” where a patriarchal perspective is exhibited. But why must the influence of the “western cultural base pattern” be the reason, for example, that “Islamists from areas where female circumcision is not practiced . . . strongly condemn female circumcision in all its forms”? (p. 252). Why does she assume that there is nothing in these areas’ own cultural base patterns that disapproves of the practice? In a similarly simplistic fashion, Roald asserts that Ghannoushi’s support of women’s political participation (p. 194), Shaykh Darsh’s willingness to consider non-traditional custody rules for mothers (p. 299), and Muhammad Asad’s interpretation of the “one soul” of the beginning of creation to be not necessarily a reference to Adam (p. 204), can all be attributed to the western nature of these scholars’ education and residency. This generalization is resisted not only by some of her subjects themselves (p. 235) but also by empirical facts. It does not explain why some Islamists living in Europe answer questions in a patriarchal way, and why some living in Arab countries have taken an equality-based approach to her questions. For instance, why does Shaykh Darsh in London understand “qiwāmah” according to the traditional concept of the man as head of household (p. 157)? Roald herself comments that “although many Islamists living in Europe are influenced by western concepts of gender relations and thus the western cultural base pattern, some still cling to the Arab cultural base pattern notions
of the relationship between men and women” (p. 162). But Roald fails to explain why this is the case. She eventually supplements her intial profile (i.e. living in the west for at least five years) with other factors such as Islamic movement affiliation (e.g. Salafī, Ikhwān, post-Ikhwān), amount of interaction with the “real world” mainstream western society and even whether one is “open-minded or closed to external influences” (pp. 228, 235). But even her supplemented list does not cover all the factors that influence individual conclusions on Islamic questions. My own observations of Muslims in the United States suggest just a few: (1) family background and whether or not this has a continuing influence on ideology, (2) peer influences (especially during formative university years), (3) socio-economic status, (4) family history of hardship in the name of Islam (e.g. domestic violence, divorce, child custody), (5) ideology of marriage partner, and (6) career choice and years of service within it. These and many others have a profound influence on an individual’s Islamic life and opinions, and moreover, even these influences change over one’s lifetime.

Rather than appreciate this subtlety, however, Roald seems to weave more and more complicated and untenable culturally-focused explanations for the results of her empirical study. For example, about halfway through the book, she adds a third cultural base pattern – African – to explain the perspectives of Sudanese Islamists (pp. 153, 223), yet never defines the nature of this African cultural base pattern (is it patriarchal equality-focused or perhaps even matriarchal?), nor exactly how the African cultural base pattern (in competition with the Arab and western patterns) impacts the ideologies of these Sudanese scholars. Her separating out African identity is actually quite interesting, and might have been useful if she had paid more attention to some of her earlier research on Islamic jurisprudential methodologies. This is specifically because African Muslims are predominantly Mālikī, and she has elsewhere in her book acknowledged that the Mālikī school of Islamic law tends to have progressive laws in gender-related issues. Is it not possible, then, that it is the Mālikī background of Sudanese Islamists that have influenced their equality-prone answers? Unfortunately, Roald leaves us short again, not touching upon this sort of analysis at all.

Finally, Roald’s east-west polarity lens seems to totally disintegrate with her explanation for why some Arab-world Islamists (such as Abū Shaqqah, al-Ghazālī and al-Qarāḏāwī) answer some of her questions with a pro-equality predisposition. These answers, she explains, can be attributed to the “general globalization process of western local thought” (pp. 169 200, 293). But if western values have, through globalization, affected Muslims everywhere, does this not undermine her entire framework of empirical study? Why then
separate out Islamists living in the west at all? Why not talk about western influences on Islam globally? And, is this a one-way street or have Arab and Muslim cultural norms affected the west as well (keeping in mind that interaction between the cultures is not a phenomenon limited to the last 100 years)? In the end, it seems apparent that there is not one monolithic culture constituting “west” or “Arab” such that one can label one “equal” and the other “patriarchal”. People, religion, and legal interpretation are all much more complicated than that, such that any effort to simplify them too much risks hollow analyses based on generalities and stereotypes. This, I believe, is what has not only repeatedly forced Roald to one-line conclusions (e.g. “this shows the influence of the western cultural paradigm”) to otherwise complex discussions, but has also led her to make rather strange asides, such as: “[w]orth noting is Ibn Ḥazm’s current importance in the Islamist debate. As Ibn Ḥazm was actually a European, this becomes even more significant” (p. 143). But Ibn Ḥazm, of course, was not a “European” in any sense consistent with the rest of her book. He was a central figure of Islamic Spain, which may today be geographically located within the boundaries of Europe, but at the time was squarely within the Arab Muslim world (and thus, Arab Muslim cultural paradigm). Moreover, “western Europe” at Ibn Ḥazm’s time was far from a culture where “equality” was the norm. Roald’s blunder here unfortunately makes her appear enamoured with an idealized concept of what it is to be “western”; distracting her focus from the more complicated reality of changing norms and fluid lines between all societies and all times. This is actually rather surprising to find coming from Roald who, elsewhere in this book, as discussed above, so well undertakes the subtle details of jurisprudential methodologies, as well as the complicated implications of custom on Islamic norms over time, coming to some very useful and insightful conclusions. One is left with the hope that perhaps in a revised edition she will take these ideas to their fuller potential.

Roald’s conclusion is very interesting, but again leaves so many questions unanswered. In the final chapter, Roald repeatedly comments on an emerging new set of Islamic norms for western Muslims: “. . . the cultural encounter between Islam and ‘the west’ has caused a change in attitudes which might produce changes in actual Islamic legislation” (p. 295). Further, she clearly suggests that attitudes about women are moving more toward an equality-based perspective, and that serious scholarship needs to be undertaken to engage the Islamic source texts with contemporary values (pp. 301–02). But, significantly, she never offers any specific suggestions from her research on just what this new “Islamic legislation” (p. 295) will look like. With no central lawmaking authority, how is a Muslim minority to create such “legislation”? 
Not only does she skirt the practical question of where such law will be located, but she also avoids making specific suggestions as to what these laws might be. Her conclusion (and of the whole book) would be so much more powerful if she used it to present a specific list of the likely majority European Islamist opinions on the issues addressed in her seven subject-specific chapters. For example, would these Muslims choose not to automatically force divorced women to relinquish child custody upon remarriage? Would they likely outlaw female circumcision and polygyny? Given her research data, such a list of potential European Muslim “minority fiqh” would presumably not be hard to compile, and would make the conclusion to her book extremely powerful and marketable and have significantly more impact. Perhaps she will take this up in a second edition.

In the end, Roald should be highly commended for this work. Not many since Ibn Khaldùn have taken a long look at Islam from the perspective of the sociological mores of society. Roald adds to this an extremely thorough treatment of the jurisprudential beginnings of the social debates. She is not afraid of the controversial topics, and engages them not with an agenda of attacking or defending a particular practice, but rather with academic honesty, with exhaustive references to the key scholars, their books, their rulings and methodologies, as well as a window into some internal Muslim perspectives on these topics at a level of detail and sincerity that other texts, usually authored by “outsiders”, are not likely to achieve. Perhaps her project is rather too ambitious as she shortchanges her analysis with, for example, an overarching paradigm of Arab culture as patriarchal and western culture as gender-equal, and using this as the lens by which to analyze the ideologies of her subjects. This paradigm in the end proves just too simplistic to be a reliable tool for Roald’s project. (Incidentally, the cover design of the paperback version unfortunately exploits the east-west polarity even further. It depicts two head-scarved young women poised on bicycles just as a woman clothed in a t-shirt and biking shorts jogs past them on the path. This photograph inaccurately gives the impression that Roald’s book is a study of the oppositionality of these two worlds, rather than a study of their integration). There are also some organizational improvements and elaboration of underdeveloped ideas that could be made in her next edition, but these should not detract from the overall important contribution Roald has made. Readers of Women in Islam: The Western Experience will come away enriched with a thorough exposure to the inner workings of the Islamic discourse on the crucial controversies relating to Islam and women today.

Asifa Quraishi