

Questioning the Veil – Open Letters to Muslim Women by Marnia Lazreg.  
Princeton University Press 2009.

As the French prepare to legislate against the wearing of the veil in public places, deeming it to be contrary to the secular nature of their republic, *Questioning the Veil* makes for timely reading.

Marnia Lazreg is a Professor of Sociology at New York's City University, an expert on women in the Middle East, and most pertinently an Algerian born woman who grew up in a Muslim family many of whose female members wore the veil.

Lazreg recounts a seminal experience for her with regard to the development of later attitudes to veiling, when at the age of 7 she was being teased by a neighbour's son who was pulling her hair in the family garden and her cries for help brought her mother to the front door. However, because she was not veiled she would not leave the house to rescue her daughter, resorting instead to the throwing of one of her shoes at the boy. Unfortunately, her aim was poor and the shoe hit Marnia on the head leaving her with a half inch scar that she still carries. Lazreg notes that a mere twenty feet separated her from her mother, but due to the latter's acculturation to the wearing of the veil whenever she went outside she felt unable to rush unveiled to her daughter's rescue.

Lazreg lays her cards on the table early on: she believes that the increasing tendency to adopt the veil, even by prepubescent girls, is "misguided and limits women's capacity for self-determination in their bodies as part of their *human* development...and thus detrimental to women's advancement". (p.3)

The book is cast in the form of five open letters: Modesty, Sexual Harassment, Cultural Identity, Conviction and Piety, Why Women Should Not Wear the Veil. Although Lazreg makes her own opinions quite clear, she nevertheless comes across as scrupulously fair in her assessment of the veil from the first four standpoints, allowing opposing arguments to her own fair rein, at least to start with.

*Questioning the Veil* is an excellent examination of an extremely controversial and divisive piece of clothing, written with unimpeachable authority, and a valuable source of information for anyone seeking to achieve an informed perspective on the subject.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh