

A Quiet Revolution – The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America
by Leila Ahmed.
Yale University Press 2011.

There are many in the West who, since the terrorists attacks on the United States of September 2001, are deeply anxious about Islam and Muslims; for some this anxiety remains just that, for others it hovers close to, or crosses over the line into anger and, because of the bars on certain modes of self-expression they vent their frustrations and hostility on issues and doctrines rather than Muslims themselves.

No easier target exists than the veil, in whatever version that item of female garb may take. Since 9/11 there has been a huge upsurge of interest in Islam and Islamic history, and among the tidal wave of books that have deluged the literary world on Islam and related subjects have been several about the veil.

A Quiet Revolution is the latest of these veil-focused works, and it is certainly the best of those that I have read so far. Leila Ahmed, the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, traces the trends in veil wearing from the past to the present in two sections: the first is entitled The Islamic Resurgence and the Veil: from Emergence to Migration and the second After 9/11: New Pathways in America.

The picture that she presents is far from being as straightforward as some anti-Muslim polemicists might think, for the increase in veil wearing among Muslim women in recent years is not so much the result of oppression as personal choice and the use of a specific symbol of religious affiliation at a time when their faith is more embattled than it has been at any time in its history since the Crusades.

The secularising tendencies of some of the regimes in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, caused the veil to disappear almost completely from major cities as men and women embraced Western styles of dress, and where there was emigration to countries where Muslims were firmly in the minority the veil was a rare sight indeed.

However, what makes A Quiet Revolution so fascinating is the story it tells of Muslim women in the United States, and the road they have travelled in terms of expressing their religious identity; Ahmed, who has lived in the States for many years has researched extensively, not least among the Muslim organisations in America and the women who belong to them and in some cases have risen to high office within them, something that could not happen at present in the Arab world.

The picture that emerges is of a dynamic interface between feminist ideas and Islam, as well as the development of more 'progressive' impulses that will be familiar to Progressive Jewish readers.

A Quiet Revolution informs and educates in equal measure, and for the thinking person provides a powerful explanation of the true importance and symbolism of the veil to many of the women who choose to wear it, belying the polemical spin that is put upon it by Islam's many detractors.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh