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PROFILE
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Veteran journalist emphasizes the life-enhancing encounters that can chip away at racism

Veiled meanings

Scholar explores the worldwide resurgence of wearing hijab

By MARIAM WILLIAMS

LOUISVILLE, KY · "Writing a book involves a process of researching and gathering facts, facts that cast new light on a subject when one is struggling to understand and that often also challenge one's assumptions and, cumulatively, work quietly to transform one's entire understanding of the subject. This certainly happened to me over the course of working on this book," Leila Ahmed told an audience of about 200 people gathered in Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's Caldwell Chapel on April 10.

They were there to hear her deliver a lecture on her book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America*, for which she received the 2013 Grawemeyer Award in Religion. The University of Louisville awards Grawemeyer prizes annually to

in the fields of music, political science, psychology, education and, jointly with Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, religion. This year's recipients received $100,000 each.

A Quiet Revolution answers the question, "What does the veil, or hijab, mean today?" In her lecture, Ahmed, the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, gave details of some of her findings regarding changing and growing Muslim feminist activism in the U.S. She concluded with a few thoughts on world developments since she completed the book, which was published by Yale University Press in 2011.

Ahmed said she began her research on the hijab's resurgence because she "was troubled by its growing commonness in America." She thought the trend signaled the spread of a form of Islam detrimental and oppressive to women. By the time she finished her research, she found the veil's meanings for Muslim women today are as individual as the women who wear it and as diverse as the countries they reside in.

Ahmed's upbringing and early scholarship influenced her assumptions. Born in 1940 in Cairo to an Egyptian father and Turkish mother, she rarely saw women in hijab. The movement to "unveil" had swept Egypt in the first decade of the 20th century simultaneously with the expansion of women's rights. Unveiling followed Western imperialist insistence that Egypt prove it was civilized by allowing its women to dress more like European women.

Wearing hijab was neither a religious requirement nor a reflection of devout spirituality. Ahmed's grandmother, mother and aunts did not wear a veil — they were appalled at its later resurgence — and weren't learned scholars, but they taught her Islam as an oral tradition and demonstrated how to practice its norms of kindness and thoughtfulness.

Ahmed became interested in studying women in Islam during the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s, when she first saw women voluntarily wearing the veil.

After obtaining her doctorate from the University of Cambridge in

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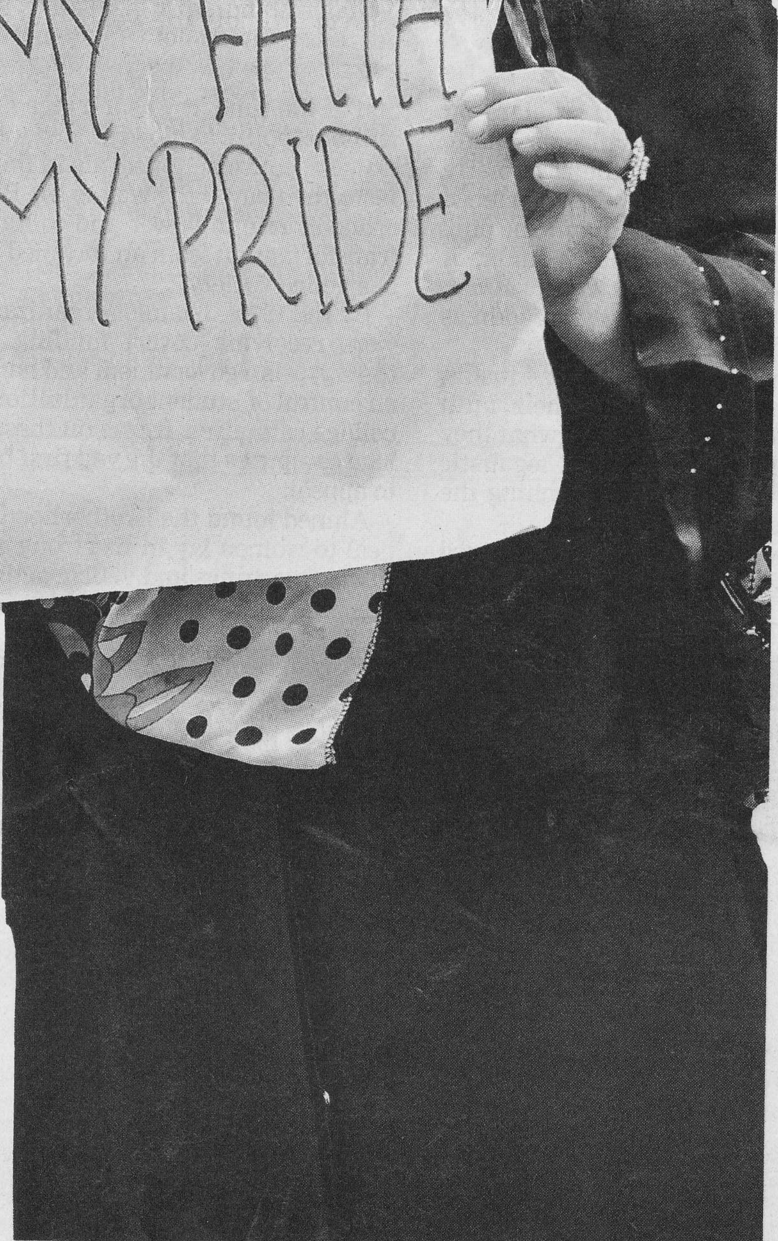

—Getty Images/AFP Photo/Farooq Naeem

A woman from the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan marches at a rally in Islamabad on Sept. 4, 2012, to mark World Hijab Day.

VEIL: PRACTICING FEMINISM WITHIN ISLAM

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1971 and serving in various professor and government advisory positions in England and the United Arab Emirates, Ahmed applied for teaching positions in the United States to be with scholars and at universities in the forefront of women's studies. Ahmed's first appointment in the U.S. was in 1981, as an assistant professor in women's studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

While writing her first book, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, published in 1992, she noticed that the top scholars on women in Islam were all men, many of them Western, and their scholarly work wasn't true to her experience growing up Muslim in Egypt. She published her 1999 personal memoir, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America — A Woman's Journey*, to address the discrepancies.

Men who didn't know how Muslim women felt or practiced their faith were "used to telling people what they should believe. It's a very legalistic approach instead of approaching the spirit of Islam," Ahmed said.

When writing her memoir, Ahmed also thought about groups we now refer to as Islamist, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Restrictions they were putting on women, such as not allowing them to attend school, "didn't sound very Islamic" to Ahmed.

She was surprised, then, to find Islamist American and Canadian women, or those influenced by Islamism, driving Muslim feminist activism in post-9/11 America.

To understand how this happened, Ahmed first had to look back at Egypt. She explains in her book that in the mid-20th century, only the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt saw the hijab as an essential religious requirement, and at the time, it was a fringe group without political power. Various social and political upheavals in the late 1960s then paved the way to the Brotherhood's rise to power and to Egypt's transformation from an unveiled back to a veiled society.

By the 1970s, Islamist organizations were receiving covert funding from the Egyptian government and had taken control of student organizations on college campuses. It was on these college campuses that the veil first began to appear.

Ahmed found the Brotherhood's appeal to women lay in its strong social justice teachings and visible activism. Its members served the poor, built schools, and provided medical care and disaster relief. Their charitable work made their religious message more attractive to women, and they required women who wanted to participate to wear hijab.

Women also found that wearing a veil signaled they would make a quality wife and allowed them to walk throughout cities free of harassment.

The trend spread to the U.S. when Islamist men arrived in the 1960s as students and established mosques, prayer spaces and religious schools for themselves and their families. In 1963, such students started the Muslim Student Association, one of the most influential Muslim organizations in North America today. More Muslims arrived when immigration laws became more open in 1965.

The 1960s ushered in a wave of African-American converts to Islam, increasing the need for mosques and schools to cater to the growing non-student Muslim population. Currently the largest and most influential Muslim association in America, the Islamic Society of North America was started in the '60s to address those needs.

In North America, Muslim women of diverse backgrounds — white women, converts from Catholicism, African-Americans, Egyptian immigrants, black women from South Africa — all practice feminism within Islam. These women work against domestic violence. They've challenged patriarchal readings of the Quran by publishing their own translations of it. Some, like Ingrid Mattson, have shattered the global glass ceiling for women in leadership roles in Islam. Mattson became the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America in 2006.

Ahmed noted she uses the term *feminism* regarding American Muslim women activists to describe activism that "challenges or rejects hierarchical and discriminatory rules and practices based in gender." Not all the activists, however, would describe themselves as feminists, Ahmed said.

Muslim women's rights activists see prejudice on the basis of religion as a

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Indonesian university students distribute veils to women at the National Monument in Jakarta on Feb. 10 during a campaign to promote the wearing of hijab.

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Muslim women's rights activists see prejudice on the basis of religion as a critical factor in their lives and sometimes differentiate themselves from feminists, she said.

—Steve Gilbert

Leila Ahmed

She cautioned that the wearing of hijab cannot be a feminist act in countries where the law dictates women wear it. Additionally, recent spikes in violence against women and Christians in Egypt distress her, she said, but women's activism there keeps her optimistic.

Ahmed has found that among American Muslim women's rights activists, feminism and Islam are inseparable because of the same factor that attracted collegiate women to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1970s: social justice. Islamism teaches that social justice activism is required of Muslims. In North America today, Ahmed explained, activists understand that social justice, by definition, is inclusive of women (and increasingly of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons). The Islamist obligation to pursue social justice means to pursue rights for women, and the generations of Muslims born in the U.S. see American ideals of freedom and equality just as central to their identity as they see the Quran.

[Mariam Williams is a freelance writer in Louisville, Ky.]