

COVERING-UP, UNCOVERED

The Veil's Revival

ONE EVENING in the late 1990s, Thomas professor of divinity Leila Ahmed saw a group of people gathered on Cambridge Common. All of the women were wearing hijab, the headscarf worn by some Muslim women but rarely seen at that time in the United States. Just the sight of hijab provoked a negative, “visceral” response in Ahmed, who was born and raised in Cairo in the 1940s, when even devout Muslim women of the middle and upper classes did not wear veils because they considered them old-fashioned. She took the appearance of veils in Cambridge, she explained recently, to mean that “there could be some fundamentalism taking root in America.”

That incident launched her on a 10-year

study of women and Islam and their choices about the veil, and led ultimately to her new book, *A Quiet Revolution* (Yale). It also led her “into studying the very lively, complicated politics and history that were critical to—and in fact were the driving forces behind—both the unveiling movement of the early twentieth century and, later, of the re-veiling move-

Wearing hijab, Muslim women from the United States and around the world meet in Manhattan in 2006 during the Women's Islamic Initiative: Spirituality and Equity conference to discuss the issues and problems they face.

ment in the closing decades of the century,” Ahmed says. In the process, she says, she re-examined her own prejudices and reached surprising new conclusions about hijab. (Among women who wear it today, Ahmed explains, “hijab” usually refers to a veil that



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