Muslim Women—we just can’t seem to catch a break. We’re oppressed, submissive, and forced into arranged marriages by big-bearded men.

Oh, and let’s not forget—we’re also all hiding explosives under our clothes.

The truth is—like most women—we’re independent and opinionated. And the only things hiding under our clothes are hearts yearning for love.

Everyone seems to have an opinion about Muslim women, even those—especially those—who have never met one.


INTRODUCTION

What Is Veiling?

Islam did not invent veiling, nor is veiling a practice specific to Muslims. Rather, veiling is a tradition that has existed for thousands of years, both in and far beyond the Middle East, and well before Islam came into being in the early seventh century. Throughout history and around the world, veiling has been a custom associated with “women, men, and sacred places, and objects.”

Few Muslims and non-Muslims realize that Islam took on veiling practices already in place at the dawn of the seventh century around the Mediterranean Basin. Islam inherited them from the major empires and societies of the time along with many other customs and patriarchal traditions related to the status of women. To understand the meaning of veiling in Islam today, one must recognize the important yet neglected history of veiling practices in the pre-Islamic period and appreciate the continuities and similarities among cultures and religious traditions.

Given that veiling has been practiced during the past two millennia by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim women, why does the veil continue to be associated primarily with Muslims, and how did it become one of the most visible signs of Islam as a religion? Why is it that when Mus-
lim women wear a veil, many non-Muslims and some secular Muslims tend to assume that someone coerced these women to dress in that way? Why do many people believe that veiled Muslim women are oppressed, ignorant, extremely pious, or politically militant? Why not view Muslim women in neutral terms, as women who choose or just happen to wear a headscarf? How did this piece of clothing become so emotionally and politically charged for both Muslims and non-Muslims?

My goal in What Is Veiling? is to offer an overview and an appreciation of the complex history and meanings of Muslim veiling. Addressing the questions posed above from the multiple perspectives necessary for understanding veiling will lead us to see that the practice has never had a singular meaning for all Muslims.

Throughout this book, I also aim to give voice to veiled Muslim women and to illuminate the variety of Muslim veiling practices in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies. I examine the main reasons why so many Muslim women choose to veil today and why others, in a handful of nations and only recently, have been forced to adopt a particular style of dress. Above all, my goal in What Is Veiling? is to show that, even though veiling is one of the most visible signs of Islam, it is also its most debated and least understood practice.

VEILING AND ISLAM

“Veiling” today is not simply a descriptive or neutral term. It is also a judgmental term, especially when associated with Islam. Muslim veiling is a notion that often evokes fear, anxiety, and a rising sense of threat, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, the onset of the war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Veiling is a practice that foments heated debates among ordinary citizens and policy makers in North America and in Europe, as well as in many Muslim-majority societies around the world. It has become a surprisingly powerful symbol.

The veil may symbolize any number of perceived threats. For some, the veil represents the rise of fundamentalist Islam worldwide, a constant reminder of the Iranian Revolution, and the plight of women in Afghanistan. For others, it demonstrates Muslim women’s subordination to Muslim men and the impossibility of assimilating Muslim immigrants into Euro-American secular societies. Others still view the veil as a threat to national security, a potential cover-up for suicide bombers, and a troublesome reminder that the world is not safe at the turn of the
new millennium. The veil’s appearance in most public spaces has been taken as proof that Islam is quintessentially opposed to women’s rights. The veil has even come to stand in for the ultimate otherness and inferiority of Islam.

Considering the intensity of the emotions that arise in discussions of veiling, however, the obsession with Muslim women’s veiling practices is a relatively recent phenomenon. Only since the nineteenth century has it been an integral part of Euro-American discourses on Islam and the Middle East.

VEILING SINCE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Euro-American fascination with the Muslim veil coincided with European military incursions into Muslim-majority societies and with colonial expansions. It was then that the veil first became viewed as a symbol of Muslim women’s alleged subordination to Muslim men and as a justification, at least in part, for the Western civilizing mission.²

Yet while today many perceive the Muslim veil as a sign of possible militancy and religious extremism, in the nineteenth-century it carried an exotic, erotic connotation.³ In colonial literature, arts, music, and films of the period, veiled Muslim women were consistently depicted as available, eager, and acquiescent sexual partners in Western sexual fantasies. They were imagined to be locked up in harems, where they eagerly awaited their rescue from brown men by white men. Rather than protect women’s modesty, the veil in effect heightened white men’s sexual desire, and thus became more of an erotic accessory than a piece of material culture with a history of its own (see chapter 4).

Liberating veiled Muslim women became a leitmotif of nineteenth-century European discussions about Muslim societies, and a key component of what has come to be known as the White Man’s Burden. Some of the same ideas were perpetuated in paintings. Art museums around the world, large and small, boast collections of what has been dubbed “orientalist art,” that is, nineteenth-century paintings depicting the way Europeans and Americans imagined Middle Eastern Muslim women. The Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the more specialized Dahesh Museum of Art in Greenwich, Connecticut, and many university art museums hold important orientalist art collections. In most of these works, Muslim women are seen lounging in luxurious harems, wearing titillating clothes (by nineteenth-century
Victorian standards), and looking invitingly toward the viewer. These Muslim women were understood as sexually available, having purposefully cast their veils beside them. They were ready to fulfill men’s sexual fantasies while also awaiting their rescue by these same European and American men.

During the twentieth century, the Hollywood film industry played a crucial role in perpetuating the image of the harem beauty saved by a Western hero in the image of Rudolph Valentino and in films such as The Sheik (1921) or The Thief of Bagdad (1924). In these movies, women seem to exist only as part of a harem and are consistently portrayed wearing transparent clothes and veils. They also always appear prepared for a sexual encounter or their rescue.

The desire to “save” Muslim women, veiled ones in particular, remains a recurring motif in many of today’s popular and political debates both in the United States and in Europe. Contemporary Muslim women continue to be viewed as subservient objects to male authority and subject to manipulation by fathers, brothers, and fundamentalist regimes. In this view, contemporary veiled Muslim women too await their liberation by Western forces, who are known today as the spreaders of democracy. Laura Bush famously called for the “liberation” of Afghan women as part of the Bush administration’s justification of the American war in Afghanistan.

An obsession with the Muslim veil is not just a Euro-American phenomenon. Muslims themselves, especially in Muslim-majority societies, have also focused on the significance and symbolism of veiled women. At least since the nineteenth century, the sight of unveiled European women had impressed both male and female upper-class Muslims, who were fascinated by European women's status in society, in particular by their good education and by their less pronounced segregation from men. Such elite Muslims came to view the veil as the key symbol of Muslim women’s oppression and as the principal stumbling block to their quest for modernity. They thus adopted European views of the veil as they sought to modernize and reform their own societies. By the early twentieth century, unveiling Muslim women and uncovering their heads became the single clearest indicator of modernity in Muslim-majority societies and one of the earliest mandates of Arab feminists (see chapter 7).

In the nineteenth century, and in some secular and liberal circles still today, the Muslim veil is inextricably associated with discussions of de-
velopment, reform, and progress, and women’s garb is the key measure by which to judge a society’s modernity. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, modernizing a Muslim-majority society became equivalent to unveiling its women; keeping women veiled was the quintessential sign of a society’s backwardness and oppressive mores.

Because the very notions and measures of modernity and progress had been first introduced by European colonialists, some Muslims have viewed them with suspicion at times. These Muslims condemned early Arab and Middle Eastern feminists and secularists who had readily assimilated to Western ideas of civilizational worth and progress and called for the unveiling of Muslim women. So while for some Muslims, unveiling Muslim women meant liberation and progress, for others, it meant the exact opposite—the loss of cultural identity and surrender to Western domination. For the latter group, fighting against colonial and neocolonial impositions meant holding onto the veil as a symbol of cultural authenticity, pride, and political resistance.

Of course, veiling is not solely a reaction to Euro-American views. It is also a sign of piety, of obedience to God’s mandates, and at times of adherence to a political form of Islam. The new Islamic revival movements that have characterized Middle Eastern societies since the 1980s are also partly responsible for the increase in veiling practices we see today.

The more research I do on veiling, the more I realize that veiling is not and has never been a neutral phenomenon. It has never been simply a personal, religious, or cultural practice. Veiling has always had a multiplicity of competing meanings and motivations at different times and in different places. To fully understand Muslim veiling practices, it is important to take a step back and learn about the larger history of veiling in the world before the establishment of Islam.

VEILING BEFORE ISLAM (1200 BCE TO 610 CE)

Scholars have dated the first reference to veiling to a thirteenth-century BCE Assyrian legal text. The Assyrians were one of the earliest urban civilizations in Mesopotamia—the region roughly corresponding to today’s Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Southeastern Turkey—that traced their ancestry back to the Sumerians and Akkadians. In Assyrian society, veiling (and female segregation) were well-established practices codified in law.

Clause 40 of the Assyrian laws linked women’s social status and
sexual availability to their dress, and it set specific penal regulations for infractions. Married women and concubines accompanying their mistresses were required to veil their heads when going out in public. On the other hand, slaves and prostitutes (except married hierodules, former sacred prostitutes) were prohibited from veiling and could incur punishment if they did.\(^5\)

Clause 41 in the Assyrian laws also addressed the question of veiling. If a man wanted to marry his concubine, he needed to summon five or six witnesses, veil her in front of them, and say “she is my wife.” Veiling in this case meant to become legally married.\(^6\)

Heir to the Assyrians, the Persian Empire—from the Achaemenid through the Sassanid dynasties—upheld the social meaning of the veil. As during Assyrian rule, veiling under the Sassanids distinguished upper-class women. A veiled woman signaled an aristocratic lady who did not need to go out to work, unlike peasant women or slaves.

In addition to requiring the veiling of aristocratic women, the Iranian Sassanids introduced further restrictions on women, which led to a general decline in their social position. Under the Sassanids, women could no longer serve as witnesses; they could engage only in limited legal transactions, and their numbers rose significantly in harems. The harem of Khusrau, the Sassanid king who ruled on the eve of the Muslim conquest (640 CE), is estimated to have included some twelve thousand women. The Iranian King’s harem thus was three hundred times the size

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of an Assyrian harem in the twelfth century BCE, which numbered approximately forty women. While some may contest the authenticity of these numbers, they still give us a sense of greater control over women throughout history.

Similarly, in all ancient Mesopotamian Mediterranean cultures around 3000 BCE—among them the Canaanites, ancient Greeks, and Romans—upper-class women were secluded, wore a shawl that could be drawn over their heads as a hood, and covered their hair in public. Veiling distinguished aristocratic women from prostitutes, slaves, and women of ill repute more generally. This is likely why on ancient statuettes, vases, and other vessels, we often see upper-class women wearing ornate head covers.

The political and cultural dominance of Greece and then Rome in the Mediterranean meant that the entire region inherited the Hellenic traditions of veiling and androcentric hierarchies. Eventually, these patriarchal mores and sartorial practices were assimilated by peoples converting to Judaism, Christianity, and later to Islam.

Early Jewish societies placed a variety of restrictions on women, and Judaism, as it spread, perpetuated those restrictions. Jewish laws limited women’s access to divorce, their right to inherit property, and permitted polygamy. Jewish women were also required to dress modestly, covering their bodies from the neck to the knee, exposing only the face and hands. Married Jewish women were expected to cover their hair, considered a sign of beauty and a private asset that could not be shown in public.

The tradition of modest dress and of covering the hair continues to be practiced by conservative, and especially Hasidic, Jewish women. The ultraorthodox (from Hungary, Ukraine, and Galicia) shave their heads, and wear wigs with or without a scarf (called a tikhl in Hebrew). Haredi women in Israel today cover their heads and bodies with veils, sometimes referred to as burqa. In fact, it is impossible to tell from pictures alone a Haredi Jewish woman from a Muslim woman wearing a black burqa.

Church Fathers went further in their restrictive attitudes toward women. Like the Jews, early Christians, both in the eastern and western Roman Empire, considered a woman’s hair an intrusion of materiality into the holy space of the church and hence banned its appearance in churches. Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians advises women to
enter the church and pray with their head covered (1 Cor. 11:5) and prohibits them from shaving their hair or cutting it. If for whatever reason a woman’s hair cannot be covered, it should be kept long, so that it may itself serve as a covering (1 Cor. 11:15).

Even today, particularly in conservative Catholic communities and in some Protestant denominations around the world, women wear hats when going to church; others keep their hair long to serve as a head

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cover. Moreover, most of the Catholic and Orthodox nuns throughout the Middle East wear the habit, though many nuns in the West dispensed with the practice in the 1960s. We should also not forget that early sculptures and paintings of the Virgin Mary regularly portray her with a veil covering her head and body.

When Islam arrived on the scene in early seventh-century Arabia, it came into a region with a long tradition of patriarchal authority, misogyny, and restrictions toward women in the public sphere. Islam developed in a world region in which Jewish and Christian women, like those who belonged to some of the polytheistic religions of the Mediterranean, were veiled, secluded, and in which few played important public roles.

As peoples from the various regions east and west of Arabia converted to Islam, and as new economic and political alliances were forged among them, some Islamic mores became similar to those of Judaism.
and Christianity. Rather than completely reject the traditions and practices of the societies that came under their rule, Muslims assimilated and adapted them. In this regard, veiling was not a radical Muslim innovation in the seventh century, but a legacy of Byzantine, Persian, Jewish, and Christian traditions.

This is not to say that Muslims adopted wholesale prevailing seventh-century attitudes toward women or that they did not challenge some of the period’s misogyny. They did, and at times significantly.

For example, Islam banned female infanticide and gave women the right to inherit half of a man’s share. Both were extraordinary propositions at the time. In addition, Islam sought to combat the well-established androcentrism of other religions by promulgating the spiritual equality of the sexes. Women are not inherently sinful in Islam, nor do they require an intermediary to relate to God. Muslim women and Muslim men are equal in terms of faith and in their relation to God.

Islam did not, however, bring about a radical change in women’s sartorial practices. In terms of women’s dress, Islam borrowed, adopted, and adapted existing social practices. In other words, Islam did not invent the veil and therefore cannot claim ownership of the tradition of the full-body and head covering. The Muslim veil is just one of the surviving legacies of earlier Hellenic and Abrahamic cultures.

**WHAT IS A VEIL?**

In English, the word “veil” refers to an item of clothing, made of cloth, that covers a woman’s hair, and at times most of her face. The online *Merriam-Webster* English dictionary lists the first meaning of the term “veil” as “a length of cloth worn by women as a covering for the head and shoulders and often, especially in Eastern countries, for the face.” While the dictionary definition goes on to mention specifically the nun’s headdress and the bride’s ornamental head cover as examples of veiling, do not most Euro-Americans typically think of veiling as an almost exclusively Islamic practice?

In reference to Islam, the veil takes on a particular connotation in the contemporary Euro-American popular imaginary. Veiling for non-Muslims in Europe and America is not often equated with the black or white liturgical or monastic headdress, or with the sheer bridal veil. Rather, it is fused with images of the black cloak (*chador*) covering Muslim women from head to toe in Iran—an image popularized in films such as...
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Not without My Daughter or Persepolis. The Muslim veil often also evokes the blue or white burqa that conceals the head, face, and body of Afghan women, an image that has circulated repeatedly on television and on the Internet, on the front pages of newspapers, and in magazines and books since the attacks of 9/11.

But there are many different kinds of Muslim veils. Walking down the streets of any metropolitan city in either a Muslim-majority or a Muslim-minority society, or wandering through the aisles of any large neighborhood mall, one commonly sees Muslim women wearing a variety of head covers and veiling styles. We see women clad in black from head to toe, sometimes including a face veil, who are working, shopping, or enjoying an afternoon with family and friends. We also see women dressed in Westernized clothing who would not look any different from non-Muslim women if it were not for a carefully wrapped and color-matched scarf concealing the hair more or less fully. We of course also often see non-veiled Muslim women whom we tend to overlook because they look exactly like non-Muslims.

Most Common Types of Muslim Dress and Veils

Burqa  Face veil worn by some conservative Muslim women that usually covers the eyes. In Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, burqa is the term used for a garment worn by women covering the entire body and having a crocheted section for the eyes.

Chador  Iranian cloak, often black, that covers both the head and entire body and is held in place with one's hands.

Hijab  Umbrella term for what is considered appropriate Muslim dress. It refers both to the body cover and to all types of hair covers.

Niqab  Another term for the face veil that leaves the eyes uncovered.

Shalwar Qamis  While this is strictly not a veil, this outfit is often worn in lieu of hijab among many South Asians. The term refers to the traditional outfit of South Asian men and women, regardless of religious affiliation. It consists of a knee-length tunic and pants. Women often accompany their attire with a long transparent matching scarf (dupatta).

See the glossary for an expanded list of Muslim veils.
The only kind of Muslim attire that one almost never sees in Euro-American societies, or even in most Muslim-majority countries, is the full-body burqa with crocheted eyeholes—the type of veil worn by Afghan women living under the Taliban. All other styles of Muslim attires and veils have today become an increasingly common part of life in our interconnected, global world.

Despite the variety of veiling styles, popular Western discourse barely differentiates among them. In conversation, all head coverings are generally referred to by a small number of terms, most commonly chador or burqa, especially when speaking about the oppression of women in Iran or Afghanistan, and the generic “veil” or hijab in all other contexts. We also hear representatives of broadcast and print media in Euro-American societies using the singular “veil” indiscriminately to encompass styles from the least covering (a simple scarf) to the most covering (full-body and head dress).

Use of the singular word (veil) instead of the plural (veils) fosters the false sense of a uniform dress code, of one unique way of thinking about and donning the veil. The truth, as we will see, is that Muslim veiling practices range widely, as do other types of dress and fashion customs. The English word “veil” is, therefore, best thought of as an umbrella term that refers to all kinds of Muslim women’s veiling practices.

Precisely because of such variation in Muslim veiling practices, no one Arabic word exists for “veil.” Nor is there a direct equivalent for “veil” in the non-Arabic languages spoken in Muslim-majority societies. While the Arabic word hijab (or in Indo-Persian languages, purdah) is not a direct translation of the English word “veil,” it may be the closest equivalent.

Hijab, however, does not mean veil as in a piece of cloth, a scarf, or a specific kind of female attire. The term hijab comes from the Arabic root h-j-b, which means to screen, to separate, to hide from sight, to make invisible. It does not mean veiling as a female sartorial practice, and it certainly did not mean that in the early seventh century when Islam was established.

In fact, as we will see in chapter 1, the use of the word hijab in the Qur’an never refers to Muslim women’s clothing, nor is it ever used in the holy book of Muslims to prescribe a particular dress code for women. Over time, however, among Muslims, the word hijab has come to refer to the principle of women’s proper dress. Moreover, and unlike in English usage, the word hijab never refers to a face covering. Muslims
commonly distinguish between *hijab* and *niqab* (face veil), and the distinction will be maintained throughout this book.

Just as the words for any given female item of clothing are numerous in the West, so are the names for *hijab*. The diversity of veiling practices among Muslims is indeed reflected in the multiplicity of terms in Arabic and in the various languages spoken in Muslim-majority societies used to describe the different styles of modest dress, the variety of head coverings, and the various types of face covering that some Muslim women wear. The glossary at the end of the book gives a sense of the tremendous linguistic variation of the vocabulary related to veiling.

Just as there are many different types of veils, there are many different types of *hijab*. As we will see in the following chapters, each type of *hijab* is the result of a complex interplay between factors such as religious interpretation, customs, fashion, race, ethnicity, geographic location, and the political system in place at a given time. Within each society, within each subgroup within that society, the term *hijab* refers to a different set of clothing.

I myself had never realized there were so many different types of *hijab* until I was an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College in the early 1980s. Born in Egypt and having grown up in France, I had always thought that all Muslim women veiled in the same way. I thought that if they veiled, they would wear a *hijab* that looked like the one I had seen on my grandmothers and aunts (at that time, very few women wore *hijab* in Egypt or in France, except when praying): an opaque scarf covering every strand of hair, accompanied by clothing with long sleeves and hemlines.

That was my understanding until I met fellow Muslim students from South Asia, from India and Pakistan especially. I was shocked to see that, when praying, Indian and Pakistani students simply loosely pulled their *dupattas* (long scarves, often transparent) over their hair, letting their bangs hang on their foreheads, and they did not seek to cover up their arms protruding from the short-sleeved tunic of their *shalwar qamis*. “That is not *hijab*,” I remember thinking. I was not sure what it was, but I knew it could not be *hijab*, not the *hijab* I was familiar with. First, the scarf was transparent; second, some hair was showing, and third, they wore short sleeves. *For me, that was definitely not hijab!* After many lively conversations about whether my new friends were wearing *hijab* or not, and about what exactly *hijab* meant, I began to acknowledge that *hijab* was not one thing, but that it could take many different forms depending on more factors than I had ever considered.
I also began to recognize that *hijab* was not just a religious prescription but was also shaped by culture and geography and had no universal meaning. I realized then that it was essential to acknowledge the variety of veiling practices across the Muslim world. Part of my education, therefore, has been to learn to look more closely and openly at human cultures. Doing otherwise leads one to dangerously misleading conclusions about great varieties of peoples and to a biased approach to understanding our world.

My experience is not unique. The heterogeneity of Muslim veiling practices is a phenomenon that remains insufficiently acknowledged by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many Muslims living in, for example, North Africa, often know very little about veiling practices in other parts of the world, such as in China, or in the remote villages of Senegal or Mali. They often assume that all Muslims dress similarly and that concepts of female modesty are universal.

Similarly, many Muslims and non-Muslims are familiar with a few of the many veiling practices—those they see in the media, or those that their neighbors wear. Many assume that the more conservative types of veils in the darkest colors are the more “authentic” kinds, thereby blending and reducing the range of meanings that the veil has for Muslim women.

Many non-Muslims (and some Muslims) also assume that all Muslims are Arabs and that Arabs therefore have a more authentic understanding of Islam and follow more accurate practices of veiling. These assumptions are not borne out by the facts. Only one quarter of all Muslims in the world are Arabs. The majority of Muslims live in Indonesia and in South Asia. Muslim-majority countries span the world from northern Nigeria to Uzbekistan, from Great Britain to Indonesia, and from North America to China. There are Muslims on every continent except Antarctica.

It should be emphasized that Arabs are no better Muslims than other ethnic groups, and that their dress is no more authentic than that adopted by other Muslims. In reality, Muslim women veil differently depending on their particular situations, on whether they are at home, at work, in the neighborhood, or attending a party. Vast variation in Muslim dress truly is the norm.

*What Is Veiling?* explains variations in veiling practices among Muslims and demonstrates that Muslim veiling practice—or, in Arabic, *hijab*—has no fixed or predetermined meaning and certainly no singular
World Distribution of Muslim Population

This ‘weighted’ map of the world shows each country’s relative size based on its Muslim population. Figures are rounded to the nearest million.

patterns, colors, or characteristics. Veiling means and has always meant differently at different times for different people in different locations.

**GOALS OF WHAT IS VEILING?**

My primary goal in the following chapters is to give an overview of the multiplicity of meanings and the complex history of veiling practices in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies, and to provide a richer and more balanced understanding of veiling practices among Muslims in the world today. Most studies of veiling focus on only one element of the topic, or are highly specialized. They do not provide the bird’s eye view of veiling throughout history that *What Is Veiling?* offers.

I aim to show that the meaning of the veil extends well beyond the religious and political accounts often considered the totality of any discussion of veiling. While religion and politics certainly help explain why some Muslim women veil, they are insufficient by themselves to elucidate the ebb and flow of veiling practices over time, or the role that fashion, the economy, or individual circumstances play in determining whether a woman will veil or not. They also fail to account for the much more complicated meaning of veiling in Muslim-majority and Euro-American societies today. And they even deafen us to Muslim women’s own voices of resistance and to their struggles both to combat stereotypes of the “veiled Muslim woman” and to resist the forces of political manipulation by conservative Islamist regimes in Muslim-majority societies.

To be an informed “reader of the Muslim veil,” it is necessary to take into consideration the multiple facets of veiling—yes, the religious and political discourses, but also, and as important, the changing contexts of its appearance, its socioeconomic ramifications, and the multiple challenges brought by progressive religious scholars and artists to conservative readings of Islam and to women’s proper attire. In the following chapters, I will explore veiling practices among Muslims around the world from this multiplicity of perspectives.

*What Is Veiling?* is organized around three main topics. First, it lays out the historical and geographical background of the institution of veiling and examines the core Islamic discourses that conservative Muslims believe dictate a dress code for Muslim women. A summary of the debates about the interpretation of these texts and attention to the nu-
merous regional variations in veiling practices across Muslim-majority societies will give a sense of the tenuous relationship between the religious discourse of Islam and the contemporary Islamist political injunctions about veiling.

Second, *What Is Veiling?* reviews the contemporary debates about the veil in Euro-American societies, debates best understood, I believe, when contextualized within their nineteenth-century colonial lineage. I will assess the recent intensification of anxieties surrounding veiling and Islam in Europe and in the United States, as well as the legislative actions that bear on what Muslim women are allowed to wear in public.

Third, *What Is Veiling?* considers the various meanings that the veil has had for Muslim women during the past century and recounts female resistance to stereotypical images of the veil disseminated by both Euro-American media and fundamentalist Islamist discourses. The reasons for wearing the veil are extremely diverse and, we will see, Muslim women cannot be reduced to the common stereotypes depicted in Euro-American popular and political discourses or in extremist Islamist clerical pronouncements.

Each of the chapters in *What Is Veiling?* focuses on an aspect of Muslim veiling: history, religion, conservative and progressive interpretations, politics and regionality, society and economics, feminism, fashion, and art. As a whole, the book offers a deeper understanding of veiling and a more complex appreciation of the range of perspectives on the veil.

*What Is Veiling?* intends to show the complexity of elements that must be taken into account when examining the topic of veiling. I want to demonstrate that Muslim sartorial traditions cannot be homogenized or oversimplified, as they often tend to be. As I hope will become clear, I am neither defending nor criticizing the Muslim practice of veiling, nor Muslim women themselves and their decisions about how to dress. My aim is to listen to and amplify the diverse voices of Muslim women who struggle to be heard and who, veiled or not, demand their right to live spiritual, personal, and public lives in dignity and peace.

The exploration of the meaning of veiling that I invite you to undertake with me in this book is enriched by my personal experiences as a Muslim woman who wore the veil for one year from 1983 to 1984 while living in Egypt and in the United States. My firsthand knowledge of the religious, social, and political stakes involved in what often appears to
be simply a personal decision complements the multiple interviews I have conducted with Muslim women, veiled and unveiled, during the past twenty years, as well as my friendships with Muslim women of all ages and from around the world. I wish to thank all of them for sharing with me their stories, their challenges, and their hopes for the future.