

Petition in Support of Dr. Erika López Prater [dismissed from Hamline University for having included in her class discussion a medieval Islamic painting of the Prophet Muhammad]

Thursday 12 January 2023, by [Petition / Sign-on Letter](#) (Date first published: 24 December 2022).

To: The Board of Trustees, Hamline University

We are an international group of scholars and students, Muslim and non-Muslim, specializing in Islamic History, Islamic Studies, History of Art, Islamic Art History, and allied fields in the arts and humanities writing to express our outrage that Dr. Erika López Prater was dismissed from her spring teaching at Hamline University for having included in her class discussion a medieval Islamic painting of the Prophet Muhammad receiving Qur'anic revelations, which is included in a manuscript copy of Rashid al-Din's "Compendium of Chronicles" made in Iran during the early 14th century.

This masterpiece of Persian illustrated book arts is considered an authentic, rare, and priceless work of global artistic patrimony. It is well studied and published, and professors often include its text and images in classroom discussions in order to teach Islamic history, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, the nature of Qur'anic revelations, and religious iconography, including how notions of the prophetic and divine are represented in various religious traditions across the centuries. Some of us also show the manuscript's paintings in our lectures in mosques, while others are tasked with displaying such paintings in museum galleries or preserving these types of paintings and manuscripts in libraries.

It is our understanding that Dr. López Prater noted in her syllabus that such images would be included in the course, that the visual exercise and discussion were optional, and that she gave verbal cues both before and after the image was shown in their online class. The student who complained about its inclusion in the course was thus given not one but several opportunities to not engage with the image (and it should be noted that a number of faculty do not include such warnings or options to disengage from historical evidence in their courses).

Without allowing Dr. López Prater a platform or forum to explain the classroom exercise, she was dismissed from her spring teaching. David Everett, Hamline's Associate Vice President for Inclusive Excellence, never spoke to her but nonetheless went on the record as stating: "It was decided it was best that this faculty member was no longer part of the Hamline community." Due process appears to have been entirely suspended, thus raising serious concerns about faculty governance and rights at Hamline University.

Additionally, Hamline's student newspaper The Oracle labeled the teaching of an Islamic painting of the Prophet Muhammad in the classroom an "incident of hate and discrimination." AVPIE Everett also sent an all-employee email describing the Islamic image and classroom exercise as "undeniably

inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic.”

Moreover, The Oracle subsequently published and, two days later, pulled down a scholarly essay explaining the incident and Islamic stances towards figural imagery written by Prof. Mark Berkson, Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion who teaches courses on Islam at Hamline University. A day after the censorship of Prof. Berkson’s Letter to The Oracle, Hamline President Fayneese Miller and AVPIE Everett declared in an email sent to all Hamline employees that “respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom.” The censorship of a professor’s scholarly essay and the declaration that academic freedom should be invalidated in deference to one particular group of individuals seriously undermine freedom of speech and academic freedom, both keystones of American and university life. They set a dangerous precedent should future students request that the university “ban” the teaching of other art historical materials—such as Byzantine icons of Jesus Christ, figural statues of the Buddha, Jewish depictions of Moses at Dura Europos, etc.—on campus. Beyond undermining diversity and inclusion, therefore, Hamline University is imperiling equity in education for all of its students, regardless of faith, creed, origin, and identity.

Additionally, among its diverse student population, a number of Muslim students on campus who wish to be taught the historical nuances and complexities of the Islamic faith and its various artistic legacies are now too fearful to speak up, lest they be accused of hate and discrimination as well. Their access to academically sound, non-partisan information has been robbed from them, their views on the subject marginalized and repudiated by two of Hamline’s top administrators. The university’s statements and actions in effect privilege a small group of individuals while silencing and possibly discriminating against many faculty, staff, and students, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Last but not least, the university’s position runs the risk of endangering rare and valuable Islamic paintings preserved in museums and libraries worldwide.

Since these events involve top administrators at Hamline University, above all President Miller, AVPIE Everett, and Dean Kostihova, we call upon its Board of Trustees to launch an independent, outside investigation into this series of incidents, above all the processes and mechanisms by which one of its faculty members was dismissed without access to due process. As these events also raise broader concerns related to freedom of speech and academic freedom, we also ask the Board to carefully assess the current state of faculty rights at the university.

December 24, 2022

Christiane Gruber initiated this pétition

P.S.

• Change.org. December 24, 2022:
<https://www.change.org/p/petition-in-support-of-dr-erika-l%C3%B3pez-prater-the-dismissed-hamline-instructor-wrongly-accused-of-islamophobia?signed=true>