



**Middle
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Fayneese S. Miller
President, Hamline University
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Dear President Miller:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern over Hamline University's decision in October 2022 not to renew the teaching appointment of Dr. Erika López Prater, an adjunct instructor. Dr. López Prater was terminated because, as part of a lesson on Islamic art, she had shown the students in her global art history course an illustration from a fourteenth-century Persian manuscript depicting the Prophet Muhammad. This arbitrary and unjustified action contravenes Hamline University's avowed commitment to free expression and constitutes an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,400 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

According to media reports, Dr. López Prater took care to offer students who might be offended by the image ample time to opt out and provided substantial context for the image, which is by no means unique in the long and complex history of Islamic art. When a student in the class nonetheless complained to the university, she reached out to explain what she had done to avoid offending anyone. Nonetheless, Hamline officials publicly denounced Dr. López Prater's action as an instance of Islamophobia and soon thereafter informed her that she would not be rehired for the following semester, without giving her adequate opportunity to explain why she had shown the image in the context of a class exercise and despite the fact that the chair of Hamline's religious studies program defended her actions.

As a number of distinguished scholars of Islamic art and history have pointed out, the presumption that depicting the Prophet has always been prohibited in Islam is historically inaccurate and erases the diversity of Islamic practice, which has in many times and places included the commissioning and viewing of figurative depictions of Muhammad as a form of veneration. The image in question was in fact commissioned by a Muslim patron and produced by one or more Muslim artists for viewing by pious Muslims. It thus cannot reasonably be characterized as Islamophobic.

You are quoted as stating that “respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom.” It is not unreasonable for faculty to take students’ sensitivities into account, as Dr. López Prater clearly did, but students’ feelings should not be used as an excuse to suppress legitimate classroom inquiry or to override faculty expertise with regard to scholarship or pedagogy. Moreover, Hamline’s failure to conduct a full and fair investigation of the incident or to consult with scholars with deep knowledge in the field of Islamic art before deciding on a response to the student’s complaint is unacceptable.

Hamline University and other institutions of higher education have an obligation to vigorously uphold the academic freedom of their faculty, and this you have signally failed to do. We therefore call on you to immediately reinstate Dr. López Prater, to reaffirm Hamline’s commitment to academic freedom and free expression, and to foster at your institution a better understanding of the diversity of Islam past and present, including the many different ways in which Muslims have engaged with their faith through artistic expression.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California