

Old Main, Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A. (28 April 2013). Photo by McGhievers. National Register of Historic Places in the United States of America, reference number 77000767.



Note on this Case Study:

Religious literacy requires attention to not only sources like beliefs, texts, and practices, but also images and objects big and small, or what scholars sometimes call visual and material culture. This includes everything from visual art to billboards and protest signs, from architectural landmarks to mundane household objects. By studying creation, possession, interaction, theft, and destruction of material culture, we can better understand how religions shape and respond to the physical world, and the role that power plays in these dynamic relationships. As always, when thinking about religion and material culture, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

Hamline University Art Teacher Shows Images of Prophet Muhammad and Creates Controversy

In the fall of 2022, Hamline University in Minnesota became the center of national attention in a controversy that brought the academic study of Islamic art into conflict with a devotional perspective of Islam. Adjunct art history professor Erika Lopez-Prater lost her job at Hamline after a Sudanese-American Muslim student, Aram Wedatalla, complained to administrators that the professor had shown images of the Prophet Muhammad in her World Art class. The images—a 14th-century Persian manuscript painting, *The Prophet Muhammad Receiving Revelation from The Angel Gabriel*, and an 18th-century Mughal painting, *Muhammad Shown with a Veiled Face and Halo, at Mount Hiro*—are masterpieces created by Muslim artists for elite Muslim patrons and used for private devotion. Before showing the images, Dr. Lopez-Prater gave a “trigger warning” and acknowledged that though “many Islamic cultures strongly frown on this practice, I would like to remind you that there is no one, monothetic Islamic culture.”¹

Dr. Lopez-Prater’s approach was consistent with the academic study of religion, which recognizes multiple sources of authentic religious perspectives. While the Qur’an does not explicitly prohibit visual images, some interpretations over time have considered them forbidden, especially images of Muhammad. Ms. Wedatalla felt showing the images

in class was disrespectful to her and her religion.² Supporting Wedatalla and other Muslim students, the Vice President for Inclusive Excellence, David Everett, characterized Prof. Lopez-Prater’s actions in class as “undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful, and Islamophobic.”³

¹ Kimia Kowsari, “WHO BELONGS?,” *The Oracle*, December 6, 2022, <https://hamlineoracle.com/10750/news/who-belongs/>.

² Fox 9 Minneapolis-St.Paul, “CAIR-MN on Hamline University professor showing paintings of Muhammad,” YouTube, January 13, 2023, video, 40:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF43_aYEP4s.

³ American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “Academic Freedom and Tenure: Hamline University (Minnesota),” [www.aaup.org](https://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-tenure-hamline-university-minnesota), May 17, 2023, <https://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-tenure-hamline-university-minnesota>.

Over the next several weeks, the situation at Hamline snowballed as the college president, Dr. Fayneese Miller (Hamline's first Black female leader), and Dr. Everett issued a joint statement to all employees saying, “respect for observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom.”⁴ This statement ignited a firestorm from academics outraged by Hamline’s administrators, and many wrote in support of Lopez-Prater’s actions and academic freedom. Academic freedom is the right of scholars to produce knowledge, teach, and study free from external political, religious, or public pressure—but grounded in disciplinary standards and the professional scrutiny of their peers. Historian Amna Khalid wrote that as a Muslim, she was offended because the administration “flattened the rich history and diversity of Islamic thought” and was “reinforcing a monolithic image of Muslims propounded by the cult of authentic Islam”⁵—which by some definitions would be a characteristic of Islamophobia.⁶

Muslim organizations weighed in, too. The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) issued a statement rejecting Lopez-Prater’s actions as Islamophobic and called for her reinstatement.⁷ In contrast, the Executive Director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations of Minnesota (CAIR-MN), Jeylani Hussein, convened a press conference with Ms. Wedatalla, local imams, and faith-based advocates. He called the showing of the images “sacrilegious and hate speech.” He also placed the campus incident in the context of recent student experiences on campus, Islamophobic attacks on Muslims and mosques in the city, and anti-Black racism against the leadership of President Miller for her support of Muslim students.⁸ Two days later, the national organization of CAIR issued a more nuanced statement about how the term “Islamophobia” should not be used lightly but must consider intent, actions, and circumstances. While acknowledging the impact of the classroom incident on students, subsequent online abuse, and their coming of age in the context of two decades of anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States, CAIR’s statement unequivocally supported Dr. Lopez-Prater's actions and academic freedom.⁹

Meanwhile, Lopez-Pater filed a lawsuit against Hamline and a grievance with the American Association for University Professors (AAUP)—an academic faculty solidarity group with a strong focus on academic freedom. By January 2023, Hamline’s full-time

⁴ AAUP, “Academic Freedom and Tenure.”

⁵ Amna Khalid, “Most of All, I am Offended as a Muslim,” *Banished* (blog), December 29, 2022, <https://banished.substack.com/p/most-of-all-i-am-offended-as-a-muslim>.

⁶ The Runnymede Trust, “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All,” [runnymedetrust.org](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-a-challenge-for-us-all), 1997, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-a-challenge-for-us-all>.

⁷ Muslim Public Affairs Council, “Statement: Support for Art Professor Fired from Hamline University,” [mpac.org](https://www.mpac.org), last modified July 21, 2023, https://www.mpac.org/statement/statement-of-support-for-art-professor-fired-from-hamline-university/?mc_cid=0dc10449e9.

⁸ Fox 9 Minneapolis-St. Paul, “CAIR-MN on Hamline University.”

⁹ Ismail Allison, “CAIR Announces Official Position on Hamline University Controversy, Islamophobia Debate,” January 13, 2023, https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-announces-official-position-on-hamline-university-controversy-islamophobia-debate/.

faculty voted 71-12, urging President Miller to resign over her mismanagement of the incident. Consequently, Dr. Miller announced her retirement in April 2023.

Less frequently discussed by academics was how Islam is racialized in the U.S. and at Hamline—a predominately white institution with a United Methodist affiliation. In a statement to the school newspaper, Aram Wedatalla commented, “As a Muslim, and a Black person, I don’t feel like I belong, and I don’t think I’ll ever belong in a community where they don’t value me as a member, and they don’t show the same respect that I show them.”¹⁰ Scholars Kayla Renée Wheeler and Edward E. Curtis suggested that the racialized context and embodied experience of being Black and Muslim at Hamline are crucial to understanding why students might feel that disrespectful treatment of the Prophet Muhammad is also an attack on their dignity.¹¹ To be BIPOC and Muslim at Hamline is to be doubly marked as one navigates the challenges of belonging in institutions that, on the one hand, need to attract diverse community members and, on the other, ask them to bracket parts of their identity as they get an education.

Anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism are genuine problems, and according to an AAUP report, the Hamline administration made critical errors by mischaracterizing Lopez-Prater’s actions as Islamophobic, ending her contract, and unskillfully communicating with all stakeholders.¹² Hamline’s leadership needed to support the rights, well-being, and voices of Black Muslim students while also protecting and supporting the pedagogical expertise of Dr. Lopez-Prater to teach about Islamic images and different Muslim perspectives. But in characterizing the images of the Prophet Muhammad as inappropriate and disrespectful, administrators unwittingly privileged a devotional religious stance and ironically—some might argue—were Islamophobic.

¹⁰ Kowsari, “WHO BELONGS?”

¹¹ Kayla Renee Wheeler and Edward E. Curtis IV, “The role of Blackness in the Hamline Islamic art controversy,” Religion News Service, January 12, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/01/12/the-role-of-blackness-in-the-hamline-islamic-art-controversy/>.

¹² AAUP, “Academic Freedom and Tenure.”

Additional Resources

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Discussion Questions

- How can teachers help students grapple with internal tensions between religious ways of knowing and secular approaches to knowledge?
- Identify the different levels of power relations operating in this situation and discuss how power was used, misused, or misinterpreted. To what degree do the roles and intersectional identities of the teacher, student, and administrators matter?
- Compare the news conference organized by Jeylani Hussein of CAIR-MN with the press release from the national organization CAIR. What are the key differences in how each views Islamophobia? What accounts for these differences?
- Consider the articles in Hamline's student paper, *The Oracle*, about belonging and the lack of available Halal food on campus. What do you make of the claims of anti-black and anti-Muslim racism?
- How would you assess the religious literacy of Hamline's DEI administrators? How would a deeper understanding of internal diversity within Islam and multiple authentic perspectives of figural representation in Islamic art have enabled administrators to handle the situation more effectively?
- Are academic institutions like Hamline University existentially "white" and Christian in terms of embedded scholarly and cultural norms or do they transcend identity? How does the intersection of race and religion impact the experiences of some Black Muslim students in predominantly white institutions, such as Hamline University?
- Why do you think so much commentary by academics about this situation pits DEI's efforts to support the rights of students against the academic freedom of faculty? Do you think that championing secular values of academic freedom runs the risk of

minimizing the long history of universities as sites of exclusion for non-Christians and Black and Brown-embodied people? Why or why not?