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Professor Fired, Students Upset, Controversy Explodes at Hamline University

BY HANIE FARAH

THE WINDS OF controversy have found a new home at Hamline University. A professor showed an image of the Prophet Muhammed in class. At the end of the fall semester last year, Erika López Prater, an adjunct professor of Art History, was let go from her position after students lodged complaints against her. They felt it was Islamophobic to show images of the Prophet Muhammad. Since being let go, she has sued the school on grounds of religious discrimination and defamation.

Hamline University's president, Dr. Miller, made a statement shortly after the controversy began: "To look upon an image of the Prophet Muhammad, for many Muslims, is against their faith," Dr. Miller continued to say, "It was important that our Muslim students, as well as all other students, feel safe, supported, and respected both in and out of classrooms."

Dr. López was well aware of the contentious nature of showing an image of the Prophet Muhammed. Therefore, she took extra precautions to make her students feel comfortable. She let them know ahead of time that they do not have to participate in class that day. It was in the syllabus. And as a final warning, before she showed the image, she gave her students one final chance to walk away from the picture. Shortly after this, Dr. López was asked not to return for the upcoming semester by the Hamline administration.

The main student spearheading the call for Islamophobia is Aram Wedatalla, the president of the Muslim Student Association. Shortly after the lecture and seeing the image of the Prophet Muhammad, Ms. Wedatalla went to the administration to lodge a complaint. In a December interview with the Hamline school newspaper, Ms. Wedatalla said: "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 me the same respect that I show them." Many Muslim students on campus agree with Ms. Wedatalla and showcased their support.

Hamline University has taken a strong stance since this incident occurred. In a university-wide email, Dr. Miller stated that respect for Muslim students "should have superseded academic freedom." This stance has set the nation aflame with debate and disagreement. The university has since taken back this stance when the heat of controversy became too much.

In the New York Times, Vimal Patel writes: "Hamline University officials made an about-face on Tuesday in its treatment of a lecturer who showed an image of the Prophet Muhammad in an art history class, walking back one of their most controversial statements — that showing the image was Islamophobic. They also said that respect for Muslim students should not have superseded academic freedom. University officials changed their stance after the lecturer, who lost her teaching job, sued the small Minnesota school for religious discrimination and defamation."

The image at the heart of this controversy is a 14th-century painting by Rashid-al-Din. The image portrays Prophet Muhammad receiving the first Quranic revelations from the angel Gabriel. The image was made by a Muslim for other Muslims. This debate about whether or not the Prophet Muhammad's image should be shown is centuries long. Some Muslims claim that showing the image of the Prophet Muhammad is always wrong because it leads to idolatry, while other Muslims don't share this view.

The controversy at Hamline University grew because claims were made about Islamophobia. However, these sentiments of whether or not it is Islamophobic are not shared by all Muslims. A Muslim professor, Anna Khalid, shared her thoughts on the matter: "As a professor, I am appalled by the senior administration's decision to dismiss the instructor and pander to the students who claim to have been 'harmed.' This kind of inclusive excellence permits DEI administrators to ride roughshod over faculty knowledge. . .As a historian, I am shocked that Hamline's administration cannot appreciate that the image is a primary source and that a class on art history, by definition, necessitates engaging with primary sources." On January 24th, the Hamline faculty voted to ask President Fayneese Miller to step down because of the incident.



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