



January 15, 2023

*Bismillah Al Rahman Al Raheem, in the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful*

Muslims for Progressive Values encourages Hamline University's Administration to reverse its decision to break with Erika López Prater, Professor of Art History, to renew her contract, and to reach out to Professor Prater and repair relations. We also ask Hamline University's Muslim Students Association (MSA) to consider their goals in the aftermath of this incident and to support the renewal of Professor Prater's contract as an example of the best of *Akhlaq* or good character.

By now, the details of this incident are well known as reactions on both media and social media have been extensive; an adjunct World Art History professor presented a lecture in a series on the Byzantine Iconoclastic movement and issues of visual representation in several religious traditions. She showed two reverent medieval paintings done by Muslim artists, commissioned by Muslim rulers that visually represented the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) in the Cave of Hira receiving revelations through the Archangel Gabriel. She contextualized and discussed the two pieces of art in relation to similar debates within the other religious traditions.

Acknowledging that there exists a range of opinions about the appropriateness of such representation among Muslims, across both sects and theological beliefs, the professor gave ample notice in the syllabus that art representing prophets and religious figures from these traditions would be seen, and that any student having issues with this could talk with her about accommodations. After she gave the lecture, a student complained, which went to the University's Office of Inclusive Excellence, and, after an investigation, the Hamline Administration concluded that the content in the Professor's lecture was "Islamophobic", and her contract was ultimately not renewed.

In reflecting on this incident and the aftermath there are lessons for us to take away, particularly when it comes to the life changing consequences that have presented themselves in the aftermath of what was intended as a practice in critical thinking and educational enrichment.



Some thoughts about these lessons follow:

1. Islamophobia is a real thing. It has historically been related to racism and the neo-imperialist "Clash of Civilizations" narrative. While the term has some issues, at present it is the accepted descriptive phrase, so will continue to be used for the foreseeable future. Evidently a number of MSA members at Hamline voiced the oppression they had experienced as Muslims and/or Black students in unrelated incidents on campus.
2. This is something that the Hamline community can, and should, continue to address. However, the behavior of the teacher, and the content of the class, were not Islamophobic in any meaningful sense of the word. The teacher's approach was in fact the opposite of that.
3. To fight Islamophobia, people need to know Muslim values. A fuller understanding of how the Muslim Ummah has varied over the course of history and geographical locations, and how it continues to evolve today, is the best antidote. Unfortunately, Islamophobes tend to look at the most narrow and closed-minded examples of our tradition, and say "You see? These are the real Muslims!". They ignore our rich intellectual, artistic, and philosophical traditions - how we have often tolerated debate and differing opinions. It is this tradition of debate and the pursuit of intellect that resulted in the contributions Muslims have made in the sciences and architecture, namely , the founding of the world's first university by a Muslim woman. Our younger generation, especially, needs to have a deeper understanding of our history, because, to misuse the term Islamophobia in this way, trivializes the term, and makes it more difficult to gain support when it is truly warranted, which it unfortunately so often is.
4. The issue of representational art in Islam is worthy of serious study. It is not a cut and dry issue, as some of our imams, politicians, and religious teachers would have us believe. Like most other issues in Islamic jurisprudence, there is a range of opinions whose contexts and intentions vary but which are highly relevant. To better understand the perspective from experts of Islamic art history, reading Doctors Silvia Naef and Christiane Gruber, is an instructive practice. From the



jurisprudential side, reading the Fatwa from the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), given by Taha Al Alwani, regarding the explicit representation of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), on the frieze in the Supreme Court of the United States building, is fascinating. After considering the possible objections to such imagery, Al Alwani concludes “My answer to this question is as follows: What I have seen in the Supreme Courtroom deserves nothing but appreciation and gratitude from American Muslims. This is a positive gesture toward Islam... God willing it will help to ameliorate some of the unfortunate misinformation that has surrounded Islam and Muslims in this country.” Ironically, the FCNA traces its origins to the Religious Affairs Committee of the Muslim Student Association.

5. When someone claims to speak for all Muslims, and relegates the rest of us to the fringe, it is wise to be very skeptical. One of the beauties of Islam is that we do not have a central authority that tells us what to think or how to practice our faith. Rather, we are enjoined by the Holy Qur’an, the highest authority on the practice of Islam, to seek knowledge and to study. When there is *ikhtilaf*, or a difference of opinion among scholars, this is actually seen as a *rahma*, or mercy, from Allah (SWT) that encourages us to exercise our critical thinking.
6. Islam is an American religion, brought here by the first West African slaves, and nourished by successive waves of immigrants from all over the world, and increased, thanks to an increasing number of converts. As has been the case when the religion spread to other places away from the Arabian peninsula, an adaptation to new circumstances and new cultures takes place. American Muslims are in the process of doing that now. There are things we have to work out, but this is something that we have to do amongst ourselves. Having secular or governmental institutions involving themselves as arbitrators in what are basically theological disputes does not help and indeed is incredibly troublesome to a community that for far too long has been plagued by government suspicion and oversight.
7. As progressives and inclusivists, we appreciate what Hamline University is trying to do. Bringing in and supporting diverse students from marginalized



communities should be part of the mission of every institution of education in this country. However, it should also be part of your mission to maintain a community of thinkers who are not afraid to challenge each other in a spirit of respectful and considerate dialogue and to support your professors as they teach the approved content of the course in an inclusive and transparent manner. This especially applies to the adjunct professors who do not have tenure or any other form of job security and work at the administration's whim, which often results in their exploitation. Whether intended or not, Hamline has now entered into a debate with national repercussions. It has not looked good for either Muslims nor for offices of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in universities across the country. This is your chance to step back and try to make things right with Professor Prater and to show the American public that caring about justice and inclusion does not mean silencing sincere academic discourse. To be somewhat blunt, it doesn't work and the public backlash and perception that social justice is just performative is harmful to the very problems we are all trying to ameliorate.

8. To our fellow Muslims, we must all take this time to reflect on some of the core ethical principles of our religion and look at the behavior of our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) and the early followers of Islam. Our *Deen* is not one of identity, offense, outrage, and retaliation. Let us not be influenced by the current society we live in under the constant toxic and polarizing influence of social media. Although when under attack we should defend ourselves, whenever possible we should practice *rahma* - mercy and forgiveness. There are numerous examples from the Qur'an and the Hadith of how Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) forgave even those who insulted him in accordance with his character as a humble and compassionate man. Qur'an 41:34 counsels us, "Repel that which is evil with that which is better". We believe that it is by *nia* or intention that actions will be judged. We believe in *Husn Al Dhunn*, that we should try to give others the benefit of the doubt and attribute good intentions to those we interact with. It is in this spirit that we ask that the Hamline MSA think deeply about where we are going as a society and where we want to be, and to see if it is in their hearts to make amends with Professor Prater. And perhaps our well intentioned Progressive allies at Hamline could learn something from our tradition and example.

And Allah (SWT) knows best.