

Most of All, I Am Offended as a Muslim

On Hamline University's shocking imposition of narrow religious orthodoxy in the classroom.



By *Amna Khalid*

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Something happened, right here in Minnesota, that I find deeply offensive. On October 6, during a class on Islamic art that was part of a global survey course in art history, a professor at Hamline University offered students an optional exercise: Analyze and discuss a 14th-century Islamic painting that depicts the Archangel Gabriel delivering to the Prophet Muhammad his first Quranic revelation.

Before showing a slide of the painting, the instructor issued a content warning and spent over two minutes providing context about the controversies surrounding depictions of Muhammad. “I am showing you this image for a reason,” the professor [explained](#). “There is this common thinking that Islam completely forbids, outright, any figurative depictions or any depictions of holy personages. While many Islamic cultures do strongly frown on this practice, I would like to remind you there is no one, monothetic Islamic culture.”

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A senior in the class, who is also president of the Muslim Student Association at Hamline, later [complained](#) that pictorial depictions of Muhammad offended her Muslim sensibilities: “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." In an email aimed at addressing the student's concerns, the professor reminded her: "I did not try to surprise students with this image, and I did my best to provide students with an out ... I am sorry that despite my attempt to prevent a negative reaction, you still viewed and were troubled by this image."

Explanation notwithstanding, the complaint set in motion the DEI bureaucracy on campus, and on November 7, David Everett, associate vice president for inclusive excellence, [called](#) the classroom exercise "undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful, and Islamophobic." Just days later, on November 11, Everett told the student newspaper in an interview that because of the incident, "it was decided it was best that this faculty member was no longer part of the Hamline community." By all [accounts](#), the professor was not given any opportunity to explain the rationale behind the class exercise.

On December 6, Mark Berkson, chair of Hamline's department of religion, published a [letter](#) in the student newspaper explaining the historical context of such images in the Islamic tradition and the importance of engaging with the images for academic inquiry. "In the context of an art-history classroom," Berkson wrote, "showing an Islamic representation of the Prophet Muhammad, a painting that was done to honor Muhammad and depict an important historical moment, is not an example of Islamophobia." Two days later, his letter was taken off the newspaper's website. Shortly thereafter, Hamline's president, Fayneese Miller, and David Everett sent a joint message stating that "an image forbidden for Muslims to look upon was projected on a screen and left for many minutes" in the class — and that "respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom."



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“Muhammad Receiving His First Revelation From the Angel Gabriel,” a 14th-century illustration from Persia. Hamline U. refused to renew the contract of an art-history professor who showed the painting in class, after Muslim students said it had offended them.

This case offends me on many levels:

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. The administration’s blatant disregard for and active suppression of the very thing an institution of higher learning is valued for — the specialized knowledge of its faculty — makes this [“one of the most egregious violations of academic freedom in recent memory,”](#) in the words of PEN America.

With leadership like Hamline's, who needs content-banning legislation to limit the scope of inquiry and teaching? It is the ultimate betrayal of the promise of education when institutions of higher learning begin endorsing ignorance. In the end, it is the students who pay the highest price for such limits on academic freedom.

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; this is the heart of the historian's craft. Barring a professor of art history from showing this painting, lest it harm observant Muslims in class, is just as absurd as asking a biology professor not to teach evolution because it may offend evangelical Protestants in the course.

And it will certainly have a chilling effect. As Audrey Truschke, an associate professor of South Asian studies at Rutgers University at Newark, [points out](#), Hamline's action "endangers lots of professors who show things in class from premodern Islamic art to Hindu images with swastikas to 'Piss Christ.'" Humanities professors may quietly drop primary sources and other materials that may offend, and professors in the natural sciences will be forced to think twice before teaching theories that contradict the religious beliefs of their students.

But most of all, I am offended as a Muslim. In choosing to label this image of Muhammad as Islamophobic, in endorsing the view that figurative representations of the Prophet are prohibited in Islam, Hamline has privileged a most extreme and conservative Muslim point of view. The administrators have flattened the rich history and diversity of Islamic thought. Their insistence that figurative representations of Muhammad are "forbidden for Muslims to look upon" runs counter to historical and contemporary evidence. As Christiane Gruber, a professor of Islamic art at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, [reminds us](#), Muslim artists since the 14th century have depicted Muhammad visually — images that were painted "by Muslim artists for Muslim patrons in respect for, and in exaltation of, Muhammad and the Quran." Such images were, "by definition, Islamophilic from their inception to their

reception.” Far from being forbidden, many Muslims, even today, appreciate such figurative representations. While more common among Shia Muslims, even Sunnis are known to have made such images. (In fact, the painting the professor showed was commissioned by a Sunni king in the 14th century.)

In dismissing the instructor for alleged “Islamophobia,” Hamline has revealed its reductive and simplistic view of Islam, Islamic societies, and Islamic art. In an age when administrators are eager for faculty members to decolonize their syllabi, Hamline’s position is a kind of arch-imperialism, reinforcing a monolithic image of Muslims propounded by the cult of authentic Islam. What administrators at Hamline fail to realize is that in privileging this particular version of Islam, which looks to theology for sanction, they have reinforced the very version that is the product of colonial codification.

As Ahoo Najafian, an assistant professor of Islamic studies at Macalester College, told me, “it is precisely to contest this mainstream narrow version of Islam, which is based only on theology, that we need to expose students to the richness and plurality within Islamic thought and culture. Excluding these images from discussions of Islamic art, and from courses on Islam more broadly, means giving our students an incomplete version of Islamic history.”

To add insult to injury: The push to silence and exclude alternative Muslim views at Hamline is driven by the office of inclusive excellence. So much for the role of the DEI apparatus in advancing real diversity on campus.

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OPINION

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