

Hamline University retracts Islamophobia charge as instructor sues

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

January 19, 2023



Old Main at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. (Photo by Eion used under Creative Commons license)

Hamline University retracted its characterization of an adjunct professor as “Islamophobic” on Tuesday and has revised a previous statement about academic freedom.

The retraction comes in the wake of a firestorm of criticism after the St. Paul, Minnesota, university did not renew the contract of the adjunct, who showed a 14th-

century painting of the Prophet Muhammad in her online class last semester.

The change in the university's position came on the same day the adjunct professor sued the university in Minnesota district court, alleging religious discrimination and defamation.

In October, a student in the class who also serves as president of the university's Muslim Student Association complained to administrators that she was offended when the adjunct professor showed the prized painting because the student believed figural representation of the prophet is forbidden for Muslims to view.

The adjunct, Erika López Prater, gave students advanced warnings both in class and on her syllabus that she would show the image and allowed students who believe images of the prophet are forbidden not to participate.

A university administrator, however, described the showing of the painting as "undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic."

The new statement pulls back on that characterization.

"Based on all that we have learned, we have determined that our usage of the term 'Islamophobic' was therefore flawed," the chairwoman of the Hamline University board of trustees, Ellen Watters, wrote in a joint statement with its president.

López Prater's lawsuit claims she has not only lost income from her adjunct position, but has also suffered significant emotional distress from her treatment as well as damage to her professional reputation and her future employment prospects.

"Hamline engaged in conduct toward López Prater that was extreme and outrageous," the suit says.

The university also walked back Hamline President Fayneese Miller's statement that "respect, decency, and appreciation of religious and other differences should supersede academic freedom."

The new statement says: "It was never our intent to suggest that academic freedom is of lower concern or value than our students — care does not 'supersede' academic freedom, the two co-exist."

Last week, the national office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a civil rights organization, also walked back statements by its local chapter that the adjunct professor acted with bigoted intent by showing the painting.

“Based on what we know up to this point, we do not see evidence that the former Hamline University president Adjunct Professor Erika López Prater acted with Islamophobic intent or engaged in conduct that meets the definition of Islamophobia,” [the CAIR statement](#) said.

Although CAIR discourages teachers from showing paintings of the Prophet Muhammad because many Muslims consider it sacrilegious, it acknowledged that Muslim views on artistic representations of the prophet are not monolithic and that in fact, some Muslims have used images of the prophet as part of their devotional practices.

In its statement, the university also for the first time publicly noted Muslims are not all of one mind about artistic representation.

“We have come to more fully understand the differing opinions that exist on this matter within the Muslim community,” the statement from the university said. “And, we welcome the opportunity, along with our students and the broader community, to listen and learn more.” —Religion News Service