



January 1, 2023

Dear President Miller,

The Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA) is a coalition of faculty members from across the country and across the ideological spectrum who are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and professorial free speech.

We are concerned about Hamline University's handling of complaints involving a class session of a course on the global history of art. As has been [publicly reported](#), on October 6, 2022, an instructor in a class session on Islamic art showed an image of a well-known medieval Islamic painting of the Prophet Muhammad. The painting in question is widely regarded as an important work of art in the Persian and Islamic traditions, and it is regularly exhibited and taught in classrooms across the globe. A video of the class session reportedly indicates that the professor took care to give a "content warning" and provide necessary context before the image was shown to the class. The class itself was apparently virtual, and the instructor gave students an opportunity to turn off their own video feed to avoid viewing the image.

Some students in the class complained that they felt disrespected by the showing of an image of Muhammad which some devout Muslims regard as unacceptable. As scholars on your [own campus](#) and [beyond](#) have emphasized, this and similar works are part of an important tradition within the Islamic world. Nonetheless, your associate vice president for inclusive excellence [denounced](#) the instructor's actions as "inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic" and "unacceptable" in a Hamline classroom. You then [announced](#) to the campus community that academic freedom "should not and cannot be used to excuse away behavior that harms others." The putatively harmful behavior in this context was showing to students in a college class a famous work of Islamic art. Nonetheless, you concluded that "respect, decency, and appreciation of religious and other differences should supersede" academic freedom. University officials subsequently informed the students that "It was decided it was best that this faculty member was no longer part of the Hamline community." All this was apparently done with little due process afforded the instructor in question and without meaningful faculty participation in assessing these concerns about the curriculum and the instructor. (Since the instructor in question has not yet been publicly identified, we have likewise not made mention of that individual's name here.)

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to express our firm view that the university's action in dismissing the instructor in charge of the course is an egregious violation of academic freedom.



Hamline University's actions in this matter go to the very heart of the academic and scholarly enterprise. If a professor of art history cannot show college students significant works of art for fear that offended students or members of the community could get that professor fired for doing so, then there simply is no serious commitment to academic freedom at that institution – and indeed no serious commitment to higher education.

Hamline University has made a contractual commitment to its faculty to respect and protect their academic freedom. The Hamline University Faculty Handbook as approved by the Board of Trustees in 2021 is clear. Hamline adopted without reservation the 1940 statement on academic freedom endorsed by the American Association of University Professors and the American Association of Colleges. Section 3.1.2 of the Handbook guarantees that “all faculty members are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.” The guarantee extends to every individual at Hamline who is working in an instructional capacity regardless of whether they enjoy the protections of tenure. There is simply no question that introducing students to an important piece of Islamic art in a global art history class is covered by this principle of academic freedom. Hamline's own stated commitment to academic freedom is unqualified. There is no exception for students who feel offended or disrespected by materials they encounter in the course of their college education.

As the American Association of University Professors has elaborated on the implications of this freedom to teach, it has repeatedly emphasized that classroom discussions of the type at issue here are well within the bounds of the principles of academic freedom that are generally accepted within the profession. The AAUP's [1994 report on freedom of expression](#) firmly insisted that “on a campus that is free and open, no idea can be banned or forbidden. No viewpoint or message may be deemed so hateful or disturbing that it may not be expressed.” A serious college classroom will sometimes require professors and students to grapple with materials “that arouse the strongest passions” and that “may seem to many wrong, distasteful, or offensive. Such is the nature of freedom to sift and winnow ideas.” Likewise, the AAUP's [2007 report on freedom in the classroom](#) emphasized that “ideas that are germane to a subject under discussion in a classroom cannot be censored because a student with particular religious or political beliefs might be offended.” It would be “inimical to the free and vigorous exchange of ideas necessary for teaching and learning in higher education” if professors could be sanctioned because of the reaction of one or more students to the words and ideas being discussed.

In your message to campus, you noted that “Hamline University is composed of people with diverse views, expectations, and interactions.” Indeed it is, but the implication that you apparently have drawn from this fact is untenable. Art frequently offends. It was not long ago that Catholics were deeply offended by the exhibition of Andres Serrano's “Immersion (Piss



Christ)” and Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary,” which portrayed the Virgin Mary with pornographic images and elephant dung. Prosecutors once attempted to shut down a museum exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs, and censors long suppressed the distribution of classic works of twentieth century literature like D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Only months ago, the celebrated novelist Salman Rushdie was nearly killed in a violent assault stemming from a religious extremist’s condemnation of his depiction of Muhammad. Conservative Christian students at the University of North Carolina attempted to prohibit the assignment of passages of the Quran as disrespectful of their religious beliefs, and conservative Christian students at Duke University demanded that Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun House* not be assigned because “Jesus forbids his followers from exposing themselves to anything pornographic.” If every student at Hamline University has the ability not only to veto offensive classroom content but to terminate professors for introducing such material into their classroom, then a vast swath of literature and art will be off-limits to the students and faculty there.

For Hamline University to sanction a member of its faculty for making relevant instructional use in a class session of materials that some students found offensive would violate the university’s obligations under its own Faculty Handbook and would send a chilling message to members of the faculty who must discuss difficult and controversial material as part of their teaching duties. The Academic Freedom Alliance stands firmly behind this instructor in this matter and calls on Hamline University to adhere to its academic principles and to immediately and without prejudice reinstate the instructor. Unfortunately, by your actions in this matter you have severely damaged the intellectual climate at Hamline University and told every scholar who sets foot on your campus that free and open inquiry is circumscribed by the sensibilities and sensitivities of the students. It will take real work to reestablish trust that academic freedom will actually be honored and protected on your campus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KW", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Keith Whittington
Member, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University*

**Affiliation for identification purposes*

cc. Catherine Wassberg, Vice President and General Counsel
David Everett, Associate Vice President of Inclusive Excellence



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