



Association for
**Iranian
Studies**

January 16, 2023

AIS-CAF Letter Regarding Dr. Erika López Prater, Adjunct Professor at Hamline University

We write on behalf the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) to express our outrage over the violation of academic freedom in the decision made by Hamline University to terminate the teaching of its adjunct professor, Dr. Erika López Prater. We believe this judgement to be an unequivocal case of censorship, which threatens the very foundations of critical thinking at the university.

According to [several reliable reports](#), Dr. López Prater's lessons in her global art history course showed a 14th-century Persian illustration depicting the Prophet Muhammad. This painting, widely regarded as a milestone of Islamic art, comes from an illustrated manuscript of *Rashid al-Din Fazallah's Jami' al-Tavarikh* – considered one of the oldest known Persian world histories and a work of cultural relevance to the Perso-Turkic world. Commissioned and produced by Muslim painters, this illustration represents the rich, diverse, and complex history of Islamic civilization preserved in artistic form.

Mindful of possible religious sensitivities, Dr. López Prater responsibly prepared students with warnings before showing the image. She advised students that they did not have to attend the session and could leave the class if they wished. In addition, she carefully offered cultural context for this painting to her students. However, one student complained to the university that she was 'blindsided' and claimed that this image depicting the Angel Gabriel delivering the Prophet's first revelation was both inauthentic and offensive. Although the chair of the religious studies program at Hamline University supported this painting's value and inclusion in the class, the university's response was unjustifiably punitive in its assertion that the showing of this image amounted to Islamophobia, and in terminating Dr. López Prater's teaching contract for the following academic semester.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in historical works such as this – and as approached by scholars of Islamic Studies – do not convey Islamophobia. Rather, terminating the teaching contract of an instructor for showing such an image – created and appraised by Muslims – demonstrates unfamiliarity with the diversity and richness of Islamic and Persian art history, and indeed with the long tradition of producing such images. We believe firmly that universities have the responsibility to create a space for critical thinking; to teach the diversity of religious and

cultural interpretations; and to reflect upon the many aspects of people's lived religious experiences in different historical contexts.

AIS is a private, non-profit academic society founded in 1967 to support and promote scholarship and research on Iran and the Persianate world at the international level. An independent, non-partisan, non-political, and multidisciplinary international community, the association publishes *Iranian Studies*, the principal journal in the field. AIS membership includes scholars, students, and academic and professional researchers. We are committed to encouraging the free exchange of ideas and freedom of speech, both within and beyond the geographical boundaries of Iran.

We recognize that various forms of xenophobia, racialization of the 'other,' and the Orientalist discourse of Islamophobia compromise principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion in the academy and oppose such forms of cultural chauvinism. Equally problematic, however, is jeopardizing academic freedom, critical thinking, and freedom of expression in the name of religious, cultural, or other forms of nativism. Targeting professors (and/or students) – especially untenured and adjunct professors – through cultural particularism goes against the very principle of the university as an independent institution promoting critical analysis, including of controversial topics.

The Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) stand firmly against censorship and remain deeply committed to preserving academic freedom and the freedom of expression. We support the idea of the university as a site of independent critical thinking for students and professors alike. Our universities can and should contribute to informed and open dialogue on contentious topics. We therefore call on the officials of Hamline University to issue a formal, public apology to Dr. Erika López Prater; to reinstate immediately – with dignity and respect – her teaching responsibilities; and to provide the intellectual space for academic thinking and debate about Islam and its diverse religious and cultural traditions.