

[THEME MUSIC]

**CATHY WURZER:** Hamline University in St. Paul is in the midst of a public relations firestorm over academic freedom and what's considered Islamophobic. The student and instructor at the center of the controversy spoke out publicly and to MPR News yesterday about their perspectives. Nina Moini spoke with them and has this story.

**NINA MOINI:** 23-year-old Aram Wedatalla says she was blindsided by an image of the prophet Muhammad in an art class at Hamline last fall.

**ARAM WEDATALLA:** It just breaks my heart that I have to stand here to tell people that something is Islamophobic and that's something actually hurts all of us, not only me.

**NINA MOINI:** It was an online learning day. And she said despite a trigger warning from the instructor, she didn't have the chance to turn away. Many Muslims, like her, find images of the prophet Muhammad blasphemous. So she believes the image should never have been shown. She was very emotional Wednesday as she described receiving hateful backlash.

**ARAM WEDATALLA:** And it's just so sad to, like, see my parents being worried for me to go to school.

**NINA MOINI:** But she also expressed gratitude for the support she received from Hamline administrators who allowed the instructor to finish the semester but did not ask her back for the spring semester after this incident. Wedatalla said, academic freedom should not come at the expense of harming students and that she had never seen a picture of the prophet Muhammad in her entire life before that day in adjunct professor Erika Lopez Prater's class. Lopez Prater says she wasn't trying to harm anyone and doesn't believe this was Islamophobic.

**ERIKA LOPEZ PRATER:** You can't erase history. And I think that it is actually important that we teach and demonstrate the internal diversity within the history of Islam, which is a very, in my opinion, underrepresented and misunderstood religion.

**NINA MOINI:** Lopez Prater provided MPR News with a copy of her syllabus, which she says shows she informs students from day one that they would be viewing the artwork. We read it and found a portion that says students would be viewing, quote, "representational and non-representational depictions of holy figures," for example, the prophet Muhammad, Jesus Christ, and the Buddha.

Her issue is that she says the administration never reached out to her to discuss her side and then sent a campus-wide email calling her actions Islamophobic, which she says could be devastating to her career and safety. Lopez Prater says she was also in talks to teach again this coming spring at Hamline. But after this incident, she was told her services wouldn't be needed. Instead, she says she'll be teaching at Macalester College just a couple of miles away in St. Paul.

**ERIKA LOPEZ PRATER:** We can build bridges and open up more really deep thought and conversation rather than shutting down dialogue. Lopez Prater has hired an attorney and says she's exploring legal options. Hamline University has not responded to MPR News questions about the incident. Muslims and Islamic scholars have weighed in on the issue debating whether Lopez Prater should have shown the artwork and whether an Islamophobic act requires an intent to harm. Those issues will likely continue to be discussed as spring semester picks up later this month. Nina Moini, MPR News.

**CATHY WURZER:** And Nina's on the line with us right now with some more context. Thanks for being here.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure. Thanks, Cathy.

**CATHY WURZER:** The Council on American-Islamic relations held a news conference yesterday on this issue. Tell us what folks had to say there.

**NINA MOINI:** Well, we've heard from a lot of scholars on different sides of the issue, many of whom are Muslim, that have come out in support of the professor here and saying this was an issue of academic freedom. But at yesterday's news conference, Cathy, there were a few Muslim professors there who have taught in Minnesota that said the depiction of the prophet Muhammad should never have been shown because it's against the faith of many Muslims even if it's not all Muslims around the world.

And Care Minnesota's Executive Director Jaylani Hussein said no classroom can really be considered inclusive if certain students are asked to leave or turn away from part of it.

**JAYLANI HUSSEIN:** Universities have the right to restrict speech that promotes hate or discrimination. In fact, that happens every day in institutions across this nation.

**CATHY WURZER:** Now, Hamline, as you said, has been mum on this whole controversy for days until yesterday, I understand. What did the school's president have to say?

**NINA MOINI:** Well, Dr. Fayneese Miller, Hamline's President, released a lengthy statement, two pages yesterday defending the University's handling of the situation, Cathy. She says basically, that students don't relinquish their faith in the classroom. And in one of her statements recently she said, quote, "Questions about how best to discuss Islamic art have been raised by many academics and is certainly an issue worthy of debate and discussion. For those of us who have been entrusted with the responsibility of educating the next generation of leaders and engage citizens, it was important that our Muslim students, as well as other students, feel safe, supported, and respected both in and out of the classroom." So they've not changed their stance. And they really doubled down on their assessment that this was harmful.

**CATHY WURZER:** You mentioned other scholars. What have they had to say about this?

**NINA MOINI:** Right. Well, we've heard from a range of scholars on this incident, from those who study history to Islam and other religions to art history scholars, and there is a wide range of opinions on the usefulness or need and reasoning behind this instructor's decision to show the historic artwork that depicted the prophet Muhammad. Some feel it was a good decision, that a warning was given. And others we've heard from say that this shouldn't have been shown, that it was disrespectful, even if it was a devotional work, not a mocking type of work.

And this debate really is likely to continue on campus and beyond. In fact, professor Lopez Prater told me she's going to be participating in a series of forums on academic freedom and what happened in her classroom. And Care Minnesota says they're going to have upcoming community forums to discuss why this was not OK. And they consider it to be Islamophobic to have shown it in class.

**CATHY** So I understand that you were able to access some footage from Hamline's Town Hall meeting, which occurred  
**WURZER:** after the incident. What did you hear? What types of stories did you hear? What was under the surface of the Muslim students for this incident?

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. So this happened a while ago, shortly after the incident. There was a panel of students, including a Aram Wedatalla. And they were all Black Muslim women. They were all Somali. And he said it doesn't help that there aren't many people like them on campus. They said they often feel otherwise, or they feel like they have to represent their entire culture in the classroom.

They were saying they feel like they have to overperform to keep up with other students. They said they feel like when they do raise concerns that those concerns are often minimized when they bring them up. And so they said they wish the community, their peers, and professors would learn more about Islam in general and that there are so many diverse cultures within that religion. And interestingly enough, that's exactly what Professor Lopez Prater said she was aiming to achieve by showing the historical artwork in question. So these students definitely did not feel like this was the way to do that.

**CATHY** So as you say, this story has been going on, really, for many months. There's been a lot of media coverage.  
**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Mm-hmm.

**CATHY** So let's talk about the whole story here. I mean, is it religious rights versus academic freedom or something else?  
**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Well, you know, I think everyone's coming at it from their own perspective and experiences. And there are obviously real people-- these two women at the center of this story who have been very much impacted by this and continue to be as well as the entire Hamline community. And it seems like there are multiple considerations-- the issue of depictions of the prophet in Islamic arts, the sort of precarious position of what it means to be an adjunct faculty member and not have as much job security, the background of some of these students at Hamline that are marginalized as Black, African, and Muslim. And again, Islam versus freedom of speech or academic freedom is really an incomplete way of framing this, and that's why this is elicited so much emotion and backlash.

**CATHY** All right, Nina, good job in the reporting. Thanks so much.  
**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Thank you, Cathy.

**CATHY** That's Nina Moini, one of our reporters.  
**WURZER:**