

Some unasked questions in Hamline University Mohammed's portrait brouhaha



by Lev Tsitrin

In the torrent of indignation and ridicule that followed Hamline University's firing of an art instructor for showing

in her class a slide of a 14-century Persian miniature that depicted Mohammed, a great opportunity was lost to have a “teaching moment,” to borrow a phrase from Mr. Obama.

I first read about the brouhaha on these pages, in [the piece by Bruce Bawer](#). The *New York Times* soon followed suit, [with a story](#) based on interviews with the participants. The bare-bones outline is this: the art instructor, Erika López Prater, showed in her class a slide of what is considered, according to Christiane Gruber, a professor of Islamic art at the University of Michigan, “a masterpiece of Persian manuscript painting.” As is often the case with masterpieces (in the late 15th-century Florence, at the height of Italian Renaissance, Savonarola piled not a few of those into his “bonfires of vanities,” and as recently as 1930s, Hitler stuck a huge number of them into a “degenerate art” show), the masterpiece shown by Ms. López Prater was not to the liking of some in the audience, causing one student, Aram Wedatalla, “a business major and president of the university’s Muslim Student Association” a paroxysm of holy revulsion: the Persian miniature showed – perish the thought! – Mohammed!

After the class, Ms. Wedatalla communicated to the instructor her horror and rage at this, modern and ancient, sacrilege (Ms. López Prater forewarned the class, but Ms. Wedatalla was not paying attention – art was not her major after all, and at the time of the warning she may have been too sleepy, or playing with her phone, or doing assignment for another class, or looking at her watch to see when this boring class would finally be over – the possibilities are infinite and only God and Ms. Wedatalla know exactly how she managed to miss the warning) – and, to follow up, Ms. Wedatalla “reached out to administrators.”

Those latter, in turn, not only fired Ms. López Prater, but indeed used the occasion as Obama’s “teaching moment,” organizing a town hall meeting in which an “invited Muslim speaker [one “Jaylani Hussein, the executive director of the

Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim civil rights group"] compared showing the images to teaching that Hitler was good."

Though apparently there were some questions asked while Mr. Hussein enlightened the professors on what was, and what wasn't permitted while discussing Islam in a classroom (notably, "Mark Berkson, a religion professor at Hamline, raised his hand. "When you say 'trust Muslims on Islamophobia,'" Dr. Berkson asked, "what does one do when the Islamic community itself is divided on an issue? Because there are many Muslim scholars and experts and art historians who do not believe that this was Islamophobic." Mr. Hussein responded that there were marginal and extremist voices on any issue. "You can teach a whole class about why Hitler was good," Mr. Hussein said. During the exchange, Ms. Baker, the department head, and Dr. Everett, the administrator, separately walked up to the religion professor, put their hands on his shoulders and said this was not the time to raise these concerns, Dr. Berkson said in an interview"), a great many more – and more pertinent – questions could and should have been asked – of Ms. Wedatalla, Mr. Hussein, and the "administrators" who are headed by "Hamline's president, Fayneese S. Miller."

Let's start with Ms. Wedatalla. Since, according to the *Times*, "The prohibition [on depicting Mohammed] stems from the belief that an image of Muhammad could lead to worshiping the prophet rather than the god he served" it would be very interesting to know whether she indeed felt an irresistible desire to worship that image. If she did, that would serve as a further proof of the wisdom of the prohibition. (If not, then why forbid it? – and why complain?)

(To be sure, she talked about her feelings at that dreadful moment, but in a rather inarticulate way, and in the terms of offended identity rather than in religious terms – "I'm like, 'This can't be real.' 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."... Ms. Wedatalla declined an interview request and did not explain why she had not raised concerns before the image was shown. But in an email statement, she said images of Prophet Muhammad should never be displayed, and that Dr. López Prater gave a trigger warning precisely because she knew such images were offensive to many Muslims." Clearly, her response was all about commonplace grievance politics, "disrespecting and offending your religion," as Ms. Wedatalla put it, but it did not lead to exploring the subconscious and illicit religious attractions. Wouldn't it be interesting for the students of religion to learn that, upon seeing the image of Mohammed, Ms. Wedatalla instantly fell into a deeply emotional religious ecstasy of love and worship (like that depicted by Bernini in his [magnificent St. Teresa](#)) – while her rational mind told her that this object was unworthy, being mere picture of Mohammed, and that her worshipful feeling of such burning intensity should really be reserved for God alone – so she was torn between her passionate feelings of love for the image, and dictates of her reason – and that she still could not get herself together after this shock of seeing the picture of Mohammed, and longed for more and more of it, while knowing that doing so would be a great sin? Alas, what an exciting possibility to add to the instances of "the varieties of religious experience" as William James put it – and that possibility was lost!)

Then, there are questions for Jaylani Hussein of CAIR. Firstly, how can he know whether Mohammed was a prophet? (I am always surprised that, when interviewing representatives of the Iranian clerical regime, Western journalists ask about their rejection of the Holocaust – an event that is extremely well-documented – but not about their acceptance of their ability to know whether Mohammed was a prophet, that is not documentable at all; any two-step communication between three parties being inherently unreliable – and the putative

transfer of information from God to Mohammed, and from Mohammed to the rest of humanity being of precisely this, two-step, unreliable nature.) So, Mr. Hussein, even assuming that a prophet cannot be depicted, why can't Mohammed be depicted, given that he was merely a self-proclaimed "prophet," with no soundly empirical proof of his alleged communication with God being physically obtainable? If another self-declared prophet arises (and I came across followers of several of those, in fact), is it permissible to photograph him? And should old works of art depicting Mohammed be destroyed, or just not looked at – and is there a difference between the two? (I briefly touched on the subject some fifteen years ago, in a blog post titled "[Reflections on eighteenth-century Mohammed cartoon](#)" that discusses a work by James Sayers from the golden age of English caricature, of which the most prominent figure was [James Gillray](#) and which contrasts noble declarations by European philosophers about dignity accorded to the fair sex in Moslem countries with the realities of harem life – the cartoon showing a dreamy Western philosopher – with unmistakable features of Edmund Burke – who sits under the bust labelled "Mohammed," that bust smiling at a scene of a distress of a yet another buxom maiden brought into the embraces of a visibly pleased Eastern potentate.) And another question for Mr. Hussein should be asked, given that he equated showing depictions of Mohammed to praising Hitler: does Mr. Hussein realize that Hitler was routinely praised in Germany of his time, that this is how he became its dictator, and that he kept being praised while he ruled over it – and that failure to teach this historical fact would be a gross dereliction of a history professor's duty to teach facts? So likewise, the fact that there were times and places when images of Mohammed were considered fine and dandy by the most pious, and commissioned *en masse*, many examples surviving into the present, should also be taught as a historical – and artistic – fact?

And finally, a question for Hamline administrators: who is

teaching who at Hamline? Do students attend the college to learn, or, as Ms. Wedatalla apparently thinks, to teach?

Those questions were not asked – which is a shame, given that Hamline is (or at least pretends to be) an institution of higher learning. We would have learned a great deal about history, art, and religion from the answers.

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