

April 27, 2023

Dr. Lynn Mahoney  
President, San Francisco State University  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco, California 94132

Dear President Mahoney:

The American Historical Association expresses deep concern regarding San Francisco State University's "investigation" of Professor Maziar Behrooz for showing a drawing of the prophet Muhammad in his course on the history of the Islamic world between 500 and 1700. We do not understand what is to be "investigated." The facts are clear: Professor Behrooz showed the image in the class. The only issue is a matter of policy, and hence hardly a matter of "investigation."

Surely the university's policies include a commitment to the integrity of the disciplines in its curriculum. According to expert scholars in the field, the student's allegation that it is not permissible for a drawing of Muhammad to be shown in any shape or form is simply incorrect. Historical images of Muhammad are known to be shown in Islamic history classes at universities in Europe, Turkey, Iran, and the Arab world as well as in the US. Many Muslims, even today, appreciate such figurative representations. Indeed, drawings of the Prophet are widely available in markets and holy shrines in Iran and are displayed with reverence by many Shiite Muslims in their homes. While many Muslims, mainly Sunnis, would object to pictorial depiction of Muhammad, that is by no means a position that is uniformly held by all Muslims. Islamic traditions are diverse and Muslims are not a monolith by any means. Any attempt on SFSU's part to pass judgment on which images cannot be shown by professors in an Islamic history class will run counter to the goal of equipping students with knowledge of the diversity within the Islamic tradition. Indeed, academic freedom is important and necessary precisely so that students can learn about the rich diversity within the Islamic tradition including the traditions of minority sects within Islam.

Sanctioning Professor Behrooz for showing an image relevant to the course on grounds that it offended a student would constitute a serious breach of the professor's academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors' *Report on Freedom in the Classroom* specifically articulates the principle that instructors have the right to challenge even students' "most cherished beliefs":

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. Instruction cannot proceed in the atmosphere of fear that would be produced were a teacher to become subject to administrative sanction based upon the idiosyncratic reaction of one or more students.

The AHA would like to underscore that disciplining Professor Behrooz would also constitute an affront to the disciplinary norms pertaining to the inclusion of primary sources in history courses. Any attempts to ban the teaching of primary sources on the grounds that they offend religious sensibilities would mean that SFSU would be taking a position on a theological matter—one that is well beyond the purview of institutions of higher education. As the [recent case](#) at Hamline University made clear, it's inadvisable for any university to take a position in such matters. Furthermore, barring Professor Behrooz from using relevant materials in his teaching will run afoul of SFSU's [purported commitment](#) to offering "comprehensive, rigorous, and integrated academic programs that require students to engage in open-minded inquiry and reflection."

As the largest association of professional historians in the world, with more than 11,000 members, the AHA articulates and promotes professional standards that are cited frequently inside and outside the academy. Prominent among those standards is the right of historians to choose the materials they deem appropriate for their syllabi and classroom activities.

The AHA urges you to reconsider the decision to investigate Professor Behrooz and to recommit to academic freedom as a core value. We sincerely hope that you will heed our call to ensure that the teaching of history at SFSU meets the standards of the discipline formulated by the AHA.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James Grossman  
Executive Director