

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 18, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL
president@uconn.edu

Dr. Susan Herbst
President
University of Connecticut
352 Mansfield Road, Unit 1048
Storrs, CT 06269-1048

Re: Unconstitutional professor-mandated prayer

Dear President Herbst:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring at the University of Connecticut. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members nationwide, including over 300 members in Connecticut. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

National media recently reported that a now-retired University of Connecticut biology professor at a UConn satellite campus in Hartford—Dr. Felix Coe—required students to recite an Islamic religious phrase before entering his office.¹ Coe taped two signs outside of his office, one of which informed students to say “Bismillah,” Arabic for “in the name of Allah.” This phrase is a typical first line of Islamic prayers.² The professor is quoted by a student as having said “I’m a Muslim. You don’t come into my office with dirty shoes. That’s a curse” and as having told the student to “get the hell out” and “I don’t want to see you” in response to the student wearing shoes inside his office.

If this reporting is accurate, which a UConn spokesperson appears to have confirmed,³ it is unconstitutional and outrageous that the school allowed a professor to require students to utter a religious phrase and follow a religious custom before entering his office. This conduct should never have been allowed. Even though Dr. Coe is now

¹ Caleb Park, *Professor required students to praise Allah, remove shoes before entering office*, FOX NEWS (June 18, 2018), available at www.foxnews.com/us/2018/06/18/professor-required-students-to-praise-allah-remove-shoes-before-entering-office.html.

² See, e.g., muslimconverts.com/prayer/how_to_pray.htm (“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem,” meaning “In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful,” as the first verse of the “Start of Morning Prayer”).

³ Park, *Professor required students to praise Allah, remove shoes before entering office* (UConn spokesperson, Stephanie Reitz, told Fox News that Coe retired since the video was taken and the signs were quickly taken down . . .”).

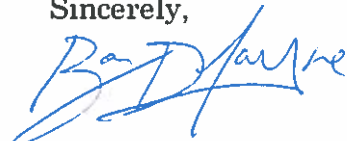
retired, FFRF requests written assurances that the University will take appropriate action to educate UConn staff on this issue to ensure that similar constitutional violations will not reoccur in the future.

Public school teachers, including public university professors, may not require students to engage in religious exercises or otherwise endorse religion to students. It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See generally Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Conditioning access to a professor's office on students engaging in religious exercises violates the principle that "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589).

Requiring students to voice their support for a professor's god, and telling dissenting students to "get the hell out," sends an exclusionary message to students who do not share the professor's personal religion, including the 23% of American adults who identify as nonreligious.⁴ This is unacceptable conduct for a public university professor and should never have been allowed. It is alarming that Dr. Coe continued this practice until his retirement.

Please respond at your earliest convenience with the steps taken to ensure that current staff are educated on this issue and understand that they may not condition access to their office with any sort of religious activity, nor may they otherwise endorse or promote religion to students while acting in their official capacity as University employees. We look forward to your written response.

Sincerely,



Ryan Jayne
Staff Attorney

RDJ:bsp

⁴ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.