

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

April 5, 2017

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:**  
**chancellor@OleMiss.edu**

Mr. Jeffrey Vitter  
Chancellor  
University of Mississippi  
P.O. Box 1848  
University, MS 38677

Re: Athletic coach promoting religion

Dear Chancellor Vitter:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a serious constitutional concern over religious promotion by the University of Mississippi. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing over 27,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

A concerned citizen reported to FFRF that University of Mississippi head football coach Hugh Freeze regularly promotes religion on his Twitter page. Recently, Freeze has tweeted statements such as “Lead us by your truth and teach us 2day, for you are the God who saves us! All day long I put my hope in you. Ps 25:5 - be a blessing 2day” and “Here’s the best news ever, your eternal standing with God doesn’t depend on the your goodness, but on God’s unshakable faithfulness” via his twitter handle @CoachHughFreeze.

Though we respect Freeze’s right to tweet as a private citizen, he may not promote his personal religious beliefs while acting in his capacity as a University employee. The @CoachHughFreeze Twitter handle appears to be an official account used in his capacity as head coach, given the account name and that the University publicizes Freeze’s tweets.<sup>1</sup> In publishing the Coach’s twitter account on the official Ole Miss sports website, Ole Miss creates the appearance that the University endorses Freeze’s tweets and the religious promotion therein.

The official Ole Miss Football webpage also regularly displays Coach Maurice Harris’s tweets, which are similarly religious in nature. Most recently the University published this tweet by Coach Harris, “God’s comfort soothes us perfectly. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. Isaiah 66:13.”

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<sup>1</sup> Tweets from @CoachHughFreeze are regularly posted on the University’s official football webpage: [www.olemisssports.com/sports/m-footbl/ole-m-footbl-body.html](http://www.olemisssports.com/sports/m-footbl/ole-m-footbl-body.html).

As a state-run institution, the University of Mississippi is bound by the Constitution's Establishment Clause, which "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968). Ole Miss violates that constitutional mandate when it promotes religious statements or allows its employees to promote their personal religious beliefs while acting in their official capacities.

The Fifth Circuit, the controlling Court of Appeals in Mississippi, has already held that public school coaches may not promote religion to student athletes. *See Doe v. Duncanville Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 70 F.3d 402 (5th Cir. 1995) (declaring basketball coach's participation in student prayer circles an unconstitutional endorsement of religion). The University's coaches must be made aware that they cannot promote religion to their players or to the public at large while acting in their official capacities.

The University of Mississippi should be particularly sensitive to respecting the rights and conscience of the nonreligious and religious minorities, given that the University serves the least religious population in the country: 1-in-3 college-aged Americans (18–29) are not religious and about 43% are non-Christian.<sup>2</sup> We imagine that the percentage of non-Christians among the university's foreign students is even higher. Remaining neutral on matters of religion creates a welcoming environment for all students without alienating anyone.

FFRF asks that the University of Mississippi take immediate action to ensure that Coach Freeze, Coach Harris, and the rest of the University's athletic department are made aware that they cannot promote religion while acting as University employees. This prohibition on religious endorsement extends to social media messages. If Coach Freeze and Coach Harris elect to promote religion on personal social media accounts, their messages may not be published on the official Ole Miss sports website. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to protect the right of conscience of the University's minority religious and nonreligious students.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover  
Staff Attorney

STG:kak

cc: Mr. Lee Tyner, Office of General Counsel *via* ltyner@olemiss.edu

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<sup>2</sup> *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/).