

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 3, 2025

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: officeofthepresident@ou.edu

President Joseph Harroz, Jr.
Office of the President
The University of Oklahoma
660 Parrington Oval, Room 110
Norman, OK 73019

Re: Concern over university response to baseless religious discrimination allegation

Dear President Harroz:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to express concern regarding the University of Oklahoma's response to a student's unfounded claim of religious discrimination in a psychology course. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that Samantha Fulnecky, a junior at the University of Oklahoma, submitted an essay that was supposed to discuss "how people are perceived based on societal expectations of gender," but instead wrote an essay based purely on her own personal religious beliefs against the notion that there are multiple genders, which she referred to as "demonic." Her essay is available online¹ and shows that she did not address the assigned article, did not cite or engage with the research, contradicted herself, and relied entirely on personal religious assertions rather than academic reasoning. The assignment required students to demonstrate that they had read the article, grappled with its content, and offered a critical response grounded in empirical reasoning—the basic expectations of any university-level psychology course.

Instead, Fulnecky's essay devolved into a Christian sermon:

Overall, reading articles such as this one encourage me to one day raise my children knowing that they have a Heavenly Father who loves them and cherishes them deeply and that having their identity firmly rooted in who He is will give them the satisfaction and acceptance that the world can never provide for them. My prayer for the world and specifically for American society and youth is that they would not believe the lies being spread from Satan that make them believe they are better off as another gender than what God made them. I pray that they feel God's love and acceptance as who He originally created them to be.

¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qxnVi_yaJ-Fb9u1-A1Vy2vQT3Aiw8Nix/view.

We understand that a graduate teaching assistant graded the assignment in accordance with the published rubric and provided detailed, respectful feedback explaining the grade. Importantly, the instructor explicitly stated that the grade was not based on her religious beliefs, but on her failure to complete the assignment's academic requirements. We also understand that the course's instructor, Megan Waldron, concurred with the instructor's grade on the assignment,² noting, "This paper should not be considered as a completion of the assignment." Waldron further explained that the course asks students to support their ideas with "empirical evidence and higher-level reasoning." Despite this fair grade based on established academic criteria, the university has placed the instructor on administrative leave and initiated an investigation.

This response from the university sends a chilling message: that academic standards may be suspended when a student invokes personal religious belief, and that instructors may face punishment for applying those standards even-handedly when it results in a bad grade for a religious person.

The University of Oklahoma is a public university, not a religious one. It is bound by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which not only prohibits the university from endorsing or favoring religion, but also from privileging religious viewpoints. Public universities may, and indeed must, require students to meet academic expectations even when students cite religious views as the basis for noncompliance. The First Amendment does not entitle students to ignore academic standards, nor does it compel faculty to accept religious assertions in lieu of scholarly analysis.

The student in this case was not graded down for her religious beliefs. She was graded down for submitting a sermon in place of an academic response paper. Placing the instructor on leave for enforcing academic standards not only undermines academic freedom within the institution, it unjustly casts aspersions on the instructor, who has already faced online harassment,³ for simply doing their job. It also sets a precedent that will discourage faculty and graduate instructors from upholding academic expectations in subjects where political and religious pressure campaigns are increasingly common.

Such a precedent harms all students, including religious students, by weakening the integrity and rigor of the university's academic mission. Religious freedom protects a student's right to hold and express religious views; it does not exempt a student from academic requirements nor insulate them from receiving an appropriate grade. If the university's response were applied consistently, students could claim religious discrimination every time they receive a low grade for failing to follow assignment instructions when they've mentioned a religious belief in an assignment, rendering the learning process meaningless.

FFRF respectfully requests that the University of Oklahoma reinstate the graduate instructor without delay, acknowledging that they acted appropriately and professionally, affirm publicly that academic standards will not be overridden by religious or political pressure, and clarify to

² <https://bit.ly/4oDSAk1>.

³ *Id.*

students, faculty, and the public that religious belief does not exempt anyone from meeting course requirements.

The University of Oklahoma no doubt considers itself a serious academic institution committed to intellectual rigor and freedom of inquiry. Yielding to pressure from political actors or ideological groups acting in bad faith jeopardizes that commitment.

We ask that the university reaffirm that its classrooms remain places of learning, not arenas for political gamesmanship or religious privilege.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation