

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 14, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL: patrick.orourke@colorado.edu

Patrick T. O'Rourke
Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer
University of Colorado Boulder
90 UCB
Boulder, CO 80309

Re: Ongoing unconstitutional religious coercion in football program

Dear Executive Vice Chancellor O'Rourke:

I am again writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding ongoing constitutional concerns with football coach Deion Sanders' promotion of religion and religious coercion through the football program.

Since our September 2024 letter Coach Sanders continues to infuse the University's football program with his personal religion. In a March 21, 2025 video posted to the official University of Colorado Buffaloes Instagram account (@cubuffsfootball), Coach Sanders is seen lecturing student-athletes and telling them that "God separated you and chose you for us."¹ In a separate video also posted on the Buffaloes' Instagram account on March 21, Coach Sanders is shown giving a speech to players in which he makes repeated references to God and religion. He tells players, among other things, "When you can't tell what time it really is, it's time to let go and let God direct your path."²

In pre-game footage posted to the Buffaloes' Instagram account on April 8, Coach Sanders once again sermonized while acting in his official capacity as a University employee and coach:

Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. See, we need to say that sometimes without proceeding asking for something. Thank you, Lord, just because. Thank you, Lord, because you are who you said you are. Thank you, Lord, just on the strength of. Let's thank God because he is who he says he is in this world of lies and misrepresentation. God is consistent. God is present.

God is everything and all things. What he's not, he is not a genie in the bottle, awaiting to grant your wishes and your commands. He don't get down like that. But what he is, he's relational and he's love. Let me say that again. Thank you, Lord. Let's thank God because he is who he says he is in this world of lies and misrepresentation. God is consistent. God is present and God is everything and all things. He is not a genie in a bottle awaiting to grant your wishes in your command. God is relational and God is love. Let's go get it today. Thank God just because. I'm the strength. Try not to ask for something every once in a while.³

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHe9B5ZNyQG/?igsh=MXh4ZzdmNmN1dzlvcg%3D%3D>.

² <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHdsEVW08hv/?igsh=MXV2bjA2OXB1YTFjcQ%3D%3D>.

³ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIMFfZNu5Kl/?igsh=eTh6OXcxNG4wMDl2>.

Coach Sanders apparently has not heeded the previous training that the University gave him in 2023 regarding respecting student-athletes' First Amendment rights and compliance with non-discrimination policies. We urge the University to step in and prevent Coach Sanders from continuing to entangle the public university football program with Christianity.

As Coach Sanders is aware, school-sponsored proselytizing is unconstitutional. *See, e.g. Abington Township Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) (declaring unconstitutional devotional Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring prayers in public schools unconstitutional); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992) (ruling prayers at public school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Sante Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (striking down a school policy that authorized students to vote on whether to hold a prayer at high school football games). Some federal appellate courts have explicitly extended the scope of the above Establishment Clause cases to college-aged students when institutions create a coercive religious environment. *See Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355 (4th Cir. 2003) (holding that mealtime prayer at a state military college was an unconstitutional violation of the Establishment Clause given the coercive atmosphere).

Coach Sanders' authority over the Buffaloes' players similarly creates an environment ripe for unconstitutional coercion. Coach Sanders is in a position to closely monitor, direct, and criticize players' conduct both on and off the field. Buffaloes' players who wish to stay in Coach Sanders' good graces will no doubt feel they must submit to Sanders' religious commands—"When you can't tell what time it really is, it's time to let go and let God direct your path"—in order to receive the recognition, playing time, and positions they desire. Additionally, many college football players receive athletic scholarships, and the athletic criteria they must meet to be recruited and remain on the team are largely up to the football program and the discretion of the coaching staff at each school. Any student-athlete that speaks out against Coach Sanders' custom and practice of infusing the football program with Christianity could be risking their spot on the team and an incredibly valuable scholarship. For all these reasons, Coach Sanders' actions continue to amount to unconstitutional religious coercion in violation of players' First Amendment rights.

We again urge the University of Colorado to take action to protect students' First Amendment rights. Coach Sanders must focus on coaching football, not convincing his players to believe in, worship, or pray to a god. Coach Sanders must stop using the university football program to coerce students to conform to his religion. Please respond in writing with the steps the University is taking to address this ongoing issue. Thank you again for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" and last name "Lawrence" clearly legible.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

CC: Laura Portis, CORA Compliance Administrator *via* Laura.Portis@cu.edu;
Elvie Henson, Senior Assistant University Counsel *via* Katie.Gleeson@cu.edu