

Clemson coach says players aren't coerced by religion

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GREENVILLE, S.C. (RNS) Clemson head football coach Dabo Swinney has responded to complaints from the Freedom From Religion Foundation expressing “constitutional concerns about how the public university’s football program is entangled with religion.”

According to the Wisconsin-based foundation, Swinney has promoted a culture in the program that promotes Christianity and violates constitutional guidelines of the separation of church and state.

In a statement released by the university, Swinney asserted that religious activity is not a requirement of his program.

“Over the past week or two, there has been a lot of discussion of my faith,” he said. “We have three rules in our program that everybody must follow: (1) players must go to class, (2) they must give a good effort and (3) they must be good citizens. It is as simple as that.

“I have recruited and coached players of many different faiths. Players of any faith or no faith at all are welcome in our program. All we require in the recruitment of any player is that he must be a great player at his position, meet the academic requirements, and have good character.”

Swinney did not address the specific allegations from the FFRF directly. In a letter sent to Clemson officials on April 10, the group alleged that Swinney has organized religious activities for players while also acting as an official state employee.

The FFRF also alleged that Swinney hand-picked chaplain James Trapp, which violates the university’s policy on team chaplains, which specifies that student athletes should select their own chaplain. The FFRF also contended that Trapp has used his office to proselytize.

The foundation has recommended the elimination of the chaplaincy position. Swinney did not address Trapp’s status and did not address how often he or his staff members discuss or promote their faith with current players.

Swinney did address how the topic of his faith is broached during recruiting visits with prospective athletes even though the FFRF did not submit a specific complaint about Swinney’s recruiting practices.

“Recruiting is very personal,” Swinney said. “Recruits and their families want—and deserve—to know who you are as a person, not just what kind of coach you are. I try to be a good example to others, and I work hard to live my life according to my faith.”

In a statement posted online Wednesday (April 24), the FFRF said Swinney was dodging the issue.

“His religion is not the issue; it is his proselytizing in a public university football program,” the group said. “It is a bedrock constitutional principle that government employees cannot abuse their position to advance their religion.”