



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on June 12, 2009

## Home Bible Study Threatened in Bonito, Calif.

Reporting on this, The Washington Times writes:

For five years, the Rev. David Jones and his wife Mary have held Bible studies at their home in Bonita, Calif. With the impeccable timing of a soulless bureaucrat, on Good Friday morning, a San Diego County Code Enforcement officer appeared at the Jones residence, taking photographs and subjecting Mrs. Jones to a sharp interrogation. Did they sing at their meetings? Did they say amen and “praise the Lord”? After Mary responded in the affirmative, the officer declared that these were illegal religious gatherings which must stop immediately.



On April 14, the Joneses received a citation warning them to “cease/stop religious assembly on parcel or obtain a major use permit.” Obtaining the permit could cost tens of thousands of dollars, and failure to do so would result in fines starting at \$100 and escalating to \$1,000. After that, the county official reportedly had warned, “it will get ugly.”

How much uglier it could get without going full Chinese I’m not sure, as the bureaucrat actually subjected the family to a full line of questioning. Can you imagine asking, “Do you say, ‘Praise the Lord’?” It much reminds me of a Gestapo official in 1940 asking “Are you a Jew?” or the second-century Romans asking Justin the Martyr at his trial, “Are you a Christian?”

Given that the very first sentence of the First Amendment reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .,” we have to wonder if these bureaucrats have ever read our founding document. Perhaps they never got past the preamble.

Yet, just to be precise and consistent, an accurate interpretation of the establishment clause informs that it restricts Congress, the legislature of the federal government, not state and local governments. However, the courts have ruled that the restrictions in the First Amendment apply not only to Congress but to the states, based on their interpretation of the 14th Amendment. Now, let me be clear, I think their legal theory, which is known as the “Incorporation Doctrine,” is bunk; it is a legal rationalization that serves as a pretext for increasing federal court control over the states, which have their own state constitutions and protections against the abuse of basic rights. But today it is applied to parts of the Bill of Rights and largely unquestioned, and it has been used to denude the public square of historically present religious sentiments and symbols on the basis that localities may not “establish” religion. Thus, it certainly follows that localities may not prohibit the free exercise thereof.

Regardless, the Bonita case has a somewhat happy ending. After all the media attention focused on the event, the county backed off and said they would no longer require the Joneses to obtain the major use



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permit. Yet I call it a somewhat happy ending for good reason. Where is the accountability? The transgressing bureaucrat should be identified, shamed and punished, not allowed to simply slink away and live to oppress another day. Moreover, if this apparent anti-Christian attitude exists within the local government, we have to wonder, is this really the first time it tried to stifle religious practice? Or is it just the first time it was exposed?

This case also illustrates the cowardice and absence of principle that characterizes militant secularists. If the county's actions against the Joneses were legal and just, why did they back down in the face of media pressure? It's a rhetorical question, of course, as it's hard to believe this government intrusion was motivated by anything but anti-Christian bias. After all, will San Diego County apply their standard to other gatherings? As the Joneses' lawyer Dean Broyles pointed out, "If the county thinks they can shut down groups of 10 or 15 Christians meeting in a home, what about people who meet regularly at home for poker night? What about people who meet for Tupperware parties? What about people who are meeting to watch baseball games on a regular basis and support the Chargers?" Well, I don't know about the Chargers. But if it were the Raiders, it might evoke feelings approaching those the bureaucrats felt upon hearing about Bible study.

However happy you consider the ending of this story, the big picture doesn't appear to be one of living happily ever after. Faith has been under assault for quite some time now, and we have transitioned from Nietzsche's "God is dead" to Nero's God is dangerous. Incidentally, one of the accusations the Romans hurled at Christians was that they were "haters of humanity." Sound familiar? And, of course, it isn't only anti-Christian sentiments that our secularists share with those ancient pagans, but also what attends them: a desire to persecute.

The Bonita case is just another ill wind in the gathering storm against Christianity. And in the not-too-distant future, we just may find that government control of business isn't the only area in which we will surpass China.



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