

Atheists Target Gideon Bibles at Georgia State Park Cabins

A battle over Bibles is brewing in Georgia, where the governor said on Wednesday the books should be allowed to be placed in the bedside table drawers at state-owned vacation properties after an atheist's objection led to their removal.

Ed Buckner, an author and former president of a group called American Atheists, said he complained to state officials last month after finding nine Gideons Bibles in the three-bedroom, state-run lodge he was renting in North Georgia.

Gideons International, an evangelical Christian group based in Nashville, Tenn., says it has distributed nearly 2 billion Bibles worldwide since its founding more than a century ago.

Buckner, 67, of Atlanta, said on Wednesday that Georgia was violating the **First Amendment** of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits the government from establishing a religion.

Soon after Buckner complained on April 28, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources removed the books from lodge rooms and cabins at state parks in an effort to avoid litigation as it reviewed the issue, the governor's office said.

But on Wednesday, after consulting with the state's attorney general, Republican Gov. Nathan Deal ordered that the volumes be returned.

"The attorney general and I agree that the state is on firm legal footing as we move to return the Bibles to the rooms," Deal said in a statement.

"These Bibles are donated by outside groups, not paid for by the state, and I do not believe that a Bible in a bedside

table drawer constitutes a state establishment of religion," Deal said. "In fact, any group is free to donate literature."

Buckner said he may sue Georgia over the issue.

"I can very much imagine this turning into a lawsuit. ... It's outrageous that anybody thinks this is acceptable," he said.

Malcolm Arvin, a Gideons spokesman, said the group has provided Bibles for state lodges around the United States. He said he knew of no other state where the religious books have been challenged.

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