Polygamists arrested for first time in Canada: Arrests raise questions of religious liberty

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Two top leaders of a fundamentalist plural-marriage sect living in a commune-style compound called Bountiful in British Columbia have been arrested and charged with practicing polygamy. The criminal charges against the men are a first in Canada.

Canadian laws banning polygamy date back decades, though no one has previously been prosecuted for breaking them. Winston Blackmore, 52, and James Oler, 44, leaders of rival factions in the sectarian community, were arrested and charged January 7 with one count each of practicing polygamy.

Legal experts say the case promises to pit Canada's antipolygamy law against the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees freedom of religious expression.

The Bountiful community, composed of members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), is Canada's sole polygamous sect.

The sect is an offshoot of the better-known Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which renounced polygamy more than a century ago.

The Canadian branch is part of the breakaway sect led by jailed U.S. polygamist leader Warren Jeffs, who was sentenced in 2007 to ten-years-to-life imprisonment.

About 800 men, women and children live in Bountiful, which was first established in the 1940s in southeastern British Columbia. The FLDS group lived in seclusion and had little contact with the outside world until about 25 years ago.

British Columbia attorney general Wally Oppal said Blackmore is alleged to be married to 20 women, while Oler is accused of being married to two.

"This has been a very complex issue," Oppal told the *Canadian Press*. "It's been with us for well over 20 years. The problem has always been the defense of religion has always been raised." Oppal said he "always disagreed" with the argument that religious freedoms trump laws banning polygamy.

If convicted, the men face a maximum penalty of five years in prison. –RNS