Respect

In republics, the great danger is, that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority.
—James Madison, 4th President of the United States

To be one, to be united is a great thing.
But to respect the right to be different is maybe even greater.
—Paul Hewson (Bono), Irish singer

The Bigger Picture

Overview
In this lesson, students evaluate their understanding of respect as applied to religious liberty. Drawing lessons from the Founders concerning the role of religion in government and in the public sphere, students create a bill of rights for the fictional country of Paridad. In doing so, they grapple with questions such as: How do you reconcile diversity of individuals’ belief systems with the American ideal of respecting all religions under the law? What does it mean to have true respect when it comes to religious beliefs? Are liberty and respect mutually exclusive?

Objectives
Students will be able to:
• analyze the First Amendment and selected writings of the Founders about religion
• synthesize the Founders’ positions on religious freedom, toleration, and respect
• evaluate contradictory points of view concerning religious liberty
• apply their understanding of respect to the formulation of a constitutional provision regarding treatment of religion
• appreciate the value of respecting other people’s religious traditions

Standards
CCE: (9–12) I.B4, II.B1, II.B4, II.C2, V.B1, V.D4
NCHS: (5–12) Era III: 3A, 3B
NCTE: 1, 3, 5, 7
CEP Principles: 1, 2, 5, 6, 7
NCSS Strands: 5, 6, 9

Materials
Required:
Student Handouts
A. Religious Liberty
B. Respect Quotes
C. Reading Selections: Founders’ Views About Respect for Religious Beliefs
D. Paridad: Religious Liberty in a New Land

Teacher Keys
Focus Questions
Answer Key

Optional:
Historical Narratives
• William Penn: Faith, Not Force
• Madalyn Murray O’Hair: Freedom Not to Believe

Recommended Time
One 90-minute class block or two 45-minute class periods. Additional time as needed for background and homework.
Lesson Plan

I. Background/Homework [10–15 minutes the day before]
   A. Distribute Handout A—Religious Liberty. For homework, have the students read the selections and answer the accompanying questions.
   B. Optional: Assign one or both of the historical narratives and accompanying questions.

II. Warm-Up [15 minutes]
   A. Review the students’ answers from the previous night’s homework.
   B. Give students Handout B—Respect Quotes. Ask them to choose one and write a response, focusing on their understanding of what it means to act with respect.
   C. Using the provided Focus Questions, continue the discussion about respect and reach class consensus about the best definition, listing class contributions on the board or overhead.

III. The Founders, Religion, and Paridad [35–45 minutes]
   A. Distribute Handout C—Selected Readings: Founders’ Views About Respect for Religious Beliefs.
   B. Divide the students into groups of four or five. (Optional: Students can work individually or in pairs depending on your assessment of their learning styles and needs.) Have the students read the excerpts and answer the questions. Review the responses with the entire class.
   C. Explain to the students that they are now going to use what they have learned about the Founders’ views on respect for religious beliefs as well as their own ideas to help them create a government policy about religion in the fictional country of Paridad.
   D. Distribute Handout D—Paridad: Religious Liberty in a New Land and review the directions with them. Remind students that they should keep in mind the views of the Founders about respect for other people’s religion, their own ideas about respect for religion, and the religious practices of the people of Paridad while drafting this provision.
   E. As groups complete their statements, they should write them on the board, on poster paper, or on transparencies so that all the suggestions can be seen and read by all during the discussion that follows.
IV. Wrap-Up Discussion [10–15 minutes]
Suggested questions:
A. Which proposals respect all religions? If so, how? If not, why not?
B. Which proposals respect individual religious liberty? How? Which ones do not?
C. In your proposals, did the law respect all religions but still allow individuals the liberty to profess a belief that they think is superior to others? If so, how? If not, why not?
D. Is it possible for a government to respect all religions under the law? Should it? Why or why not?
E. Are religious liberty and respect for religion mutually exclusive? Can you only have one but not the other?

V. Homework Options
A. Choose one of the proposals about Paridad and write a five- to seven-paragraph essay explaining in detail the five reasons which make this the best plan for Paridad. Be certain to include good introductory and concluding paragraphs.
B. Find an article (print or Internet) about a contemporary issue which involves respect for religion. Write a one-paragraph summary of the article and a one-page analysis of the conflicting viewpoints discussed.

CD-ROM Interactive Activity

Extension

Research historic or contemporary examples of how one person’s religious practices might have infringed upon the religious beliefs or practices of another, or when the interests of a religious minority are challenged or limited by a religious majority. Write a two- to three-page paper in which you describe the conflict, analyze its elements, and recommend a resolution while keeping in mind the guarantees of the First Amendment. A good site to begin the research is the Religious Liberty section of the Freedom Forum website:

http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/index.aspx
Focus Questions

1. Where have you heard the word “respect” before?
   E.g., respect your elders, pay your last respects, respect yourself, and respect the environment.

2. How do we show people respect?
   We show respect through our actions, words, behaviors: not saying hurtful things—curses, slurs; being quiet when others are talking; practicing good manners; removing hats in buildings; wearing black to a funeral; being on time and prepared for class or work; shaking hands with the other team after a game; being truthful in our relationships—not cheating, lying; accepting other people and their different beliefs and customs.

3. Why do we respect certain people?
   We respect others for their actions, their achievements, or their ideas.

4. Who are some of the people that our society respects?
   Answers will vary, but students may mention some names like George Washington, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc.; any honorable person—those who do something brave; any selfless person—those who serve others. Students are also likely to respect members of their families.

5. Does our society respect people because they are famous or because they are rich? Is this true respect? Can you respect a dishonorable person because of their achievements? Answers will vary.

6. Should everyone respect each other’s rights? What rights should be respected?
   Yes, the rights of other people should be respected. These rights may include (but aren’t necessarily limited to) the following: right to vote, right to own property, right to equal opportunity, right to free speech, right to religious freedom, right to a fair trial, right to freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, right to privacy, etc.

7. Should you respect someone whose religious beliefs and practices are very different from your own?
   Yes, other people’s religious beliefs and practices should be respected as long as they do not infringe upon the safety, health, and general welfare of other members of society.

8. What happens when we fail to respect others?
   When we fail to respect others, they become ashamed, hurt, angry, disrespectful, hostile, and confrontational. The ties which bind a democratic society become frayed when individuals and groups are disrespectful toward each other.
**Directions:** Thoughtfully read each quote (using context clues to help you with unfamiliar words). In the space below each quote, write a one-sentence summary of the main idea.

**Selection 1**
When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, ’tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.
—Benjamin Franklin

**Selection 2**
... It is contrary to the principles of reason and justice that any should be compelled to contribute to the maintenance of a church with which their consciences will not permit them to join, and from which they can derive no benefit; for remedy whereof, and that equal liberty as well religious as civil, may be universally extended to all the good people of this commonwealth.
—George Mason

**Selection 3**
In matters of religion I have considered that its free exercise is placed by the Constitution independent of the powers of the General Government. I have therefore undertaken on no occasion to prescribe the religious exercises suited to it, but have left them, as the Constitution found them, under the direction and discipline of the church or state authorities acknowledged by the several religious societies.
—Thomas Jefferson

**Selection 4**
We have solved by fair experiment the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving every one to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason and the serious convictions of his own inquiries.
—Thomas Jefferson
Selection 5
I must admit moreover that it may not be easy, in every possible case, to trace the line of separation between the rights of religion and the Civil authority with such distinctness as to avoid collisions & doubts on unessential points. The tendency to a usurpation on one side or the other, or to a corrupting coalition or alliance between them, will be best guarded against by an entire abstinence of the Govt from interference in any way whatever, beyond the necessity of preserving public order, & protecting each sect against trespasses on its legal rights by others.
—James Madison

Selection 6
. . . I beg leave to remark that the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in RELIGION. Without this, there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.
—James Madison

Selection 7
Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.
—George Washington

Selection 8
We should begin by setting conscience free. When all men of all religions . . . shall enjoy equal liberty, property, and an equal chance for honors and power . . . we may expect that improvements will be made in the human character and the state of society.
—John Adams
In republics, the great danger is, that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority.

—James Madison, 4th President of the United States

I have learned to respect ideas, wherever they come from.

—Leo Burnett, American advertising executive

The most important phase of living with a person is respect for that person as an individual.

—Millicent Carey McIntosh, American educator

You don’t have to love them. You just have to respect their rights.

—Edward Koch, former mayor of New York City

To be one, to be united is a great thing.
But to respect the right to be different is maybe even greater.

—Paul Hewson (Bono), Irish singer

Respect your fellow human being, treat them fairly, disagree with them honestly, enjoy their friendship, explore your thoughts about one another candidly, work together for a common goal and help one another achieve it.
No destructive lies. No ridiculous fears. No debilitating anger.

—Bill Bradley, American basketball player and senator

Respect is not fear and awe; it . . . [is] the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality. Respect, thus, implies the absence of exploitation. I want the loved person to grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me.

—Erich Fromm, American psychologist

Respect—not tolerance—must be our goal if we would diminish prejudice in our time.

—Selma G. Hirsch, American scientist
Directions: Read the statements of the Founders’ views about respect for religious beliefs. Answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of paper, using context clues to help you understand the quotes.

Selection 1
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.
—First Amendment to the United States Constitution

Selection 2
. . . The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support . . .
—George Washington, excerpt from Reply to the Hebrew Congregation, 1790

Selection 3
. . . The Bill violates the equality which ought to be the basis of every law, and which is more indispensable, in proportion as the validity or expediency of any law is more liable to be impeached. If “all men are by nature equally free and independent,” all men are to be considered as entering into Society on equal conditions; as relinquishing no more, and therefore retaining no less, one than another, of their natural rights. Above all are they to be considered as retaining an “equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of Conscience.” Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, not against man: To God, therefore, not to man, must an account of it be rendered. As the Bill violates equality by subjecting some to peculiar burdens, so it violates the same principle, by granting to others peculiar exemptions. . . .
—James Madison, excerpt from Memorial and Remonstrance, 1785

Selection 4
. . . We may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion
and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.
—George Washington, excerpt from Proclamation: A National Thanksgiving, 1789

Selection 5
...[Americans might] call to mind our numerous offenses against the most high God, confess them before Him with the sincerest penitence, implore his pardoning mercy, through the Great Mediator and Redeemer, for our past transgression, and that through the grace of His Holy Spirit, we may be disposed and enabled to yield a more suitable obedience...
—John Adams, excerpt from Proclamation: Fasting, Prayer, and Thanksgiving, 1799

Selection 6
Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.
—Thomas Jefferson, excerpt from Letter to the Danbury Baptists, 1802

Questions
1. What does George Washington say about toleration in his letter to the Hebrew congregation?
2. In his Memorial and Remonstrance, does Madison seem to support the idea of religious toleration?
3. Why do you think that Madison fails to comment on the practices of non-believers or pagan religions, etc.?
4. If Washington believed that the United States as a nation had moved beyond mere toleration (Selection 1), why do you think he proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to God (Selection 4)?
5. How could Washington want government to practice “true religion” while at the same time believing the country had gone beyond toleration of religions?
6. Is John Adams’ call for a day of fasting and prayer inconsistent with the idea of respect for religious liberty as embodied in the First Amendment?
7. Why does Thomas Jefferson contemplate the First Amendment “with sovereign reverence”? Does Jefferson respect different religious beliefs?
It is the early 1800s. Newly independent Paridad, once part of the Spanish empire, has fought for and gained its independence from Spain. Paridad is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Because of its fine ports and harbors, Paridad is an international trading country and has a sizable number of people who practice other religions, all of whom were generally tolerated under Spanish rule. The proportion of various religions in Paridad is as follows:

- Spanish Catholics 35%
- Indian Catholics 15%
- German Lutherans 13%
- Indonesian Muslims 11%
- North African Jews 9%
- Chinese Buddhists 8%
- Deists 6%
- Atheists or other 3%

You and several others have been chosen to participate in the Paridad Constitutional Convention to produce a bill of rights for the new country. Your specific task is to create the provision which deals with religion (just as the First Amendment of the United States Bill of Rights concerns religion).

You have a number of options (or combinations of options):

- A single state-sponsored religion with no other religions allowed
- A single state-sponsored religion with toleration of other religions
- Religious freedom, where all religions are equally respected
- Complete separation of church and state, where all are equally permitted without government involvement in favor of or against any one religion
- No religion is allowed

Create a statement of no more than twenty-five words which clearly states the government policy on religion. You should have at least five good reasons why your plan is the best plan for religion in Paridad. Be prepared to explain and defend your position in class, and write a paper detailing your position as homework.
He was imprisoned—for life—in the Tower of London in December 1668, but William Penn was unrepentant. “My prison shall be my grave before I will budge a jot,” he said. “I owe my conscience to no mortal man.” Only twenty-four years old, Penn had crossed the wrong people. He had written and published a critique of England’s official church doctrines. Like thousands of religious separatists at the time, he had been “flung into Jail” and asked to publicly deny his beliefs. Instead, he held firm to his beliefs while his country, for a time, did everything it could to force citizens to follow one faith.

Fortunately for Penn, he was well-educated and well-connected. He spent only eight months in his small room at the Tower. He passed the time writing two more influential essays with nonconformist views. In 1669, a family friend (James, Duke of York, and later King James II) secured his release perhaps upon the urging of Penn’s father, a wealthy and respected admiral in the royal navy.

Sir William Penn was extremely familiar with, and not very happy about, his son’s tendency to flout tradition. After his son had been kicked out of Oxford at seventeen for expressing his religious views and for not attending required religious services, it was his father who sent him to study at a Protestant school in France, hoping to reform him. When that too failed, it was his father who called Penn back to England, put him in law school, and introduced him to the king’s court. He was well received.

Nevertheless, in 1666 at the age of twenty-two, Penn had joined the Religious Society of Friends, a new and radical religious group. They were known as “Quakers” (a derogatory term), and persecuted in England. Guided by his conscience and their teachings, Penn became an outspoken supporter and writer in search of mutual respect for varying religions. To anyone who would listen, he argued in defense of religious liberty, equality, and self-government.

Penn’s writings reflected the Friends’ teachings. All living things had an “Inner Light” of God. There was no need for established church rituals or for ordained ministers. Believers would hold meetings, and sit in silence until moved by the Spirit to speak. Both men and women could participate with equal respect. They did not swear oaths. They were pacifists. They advocated plain dress, plain speech, and respect for all people and living things. They used the informal “thee” instead of “you” regardless of social standing. They would not remove their hats in public places or in deference to superiors. They did not baptize nor take communion. In short, their views were considered heretical and controversial.

By the time his father passed away in 1670, Penn had published more essays, preached in the streets, and been arrested again. “I publicly confess myself to be a very hearty Dissenter from the established worship of these nations . . . “ he wrote that year. The Society of Friends continued to be persecuted, and he openly questioned the authority of the government to restrict by law the religious beliefs of man. “It enthrones Man as king over conscience,” he declared in his essay “The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience.”

Around the same time, Penn became increasingly interested in America—both as an economic activity and as an experiment in self-government and freedom of religion. He managed land in West New Jersey, and wrote, it is believed, its “Concessions and Agreements” in 1672. The document included a rare protection: “No Men . . . hath Power of authority to rule over Men’s Consciences and Religious matters.”

Uncertain about the future of religious toleration in England, in the years that followed Penn petitioned the king to begin a colony in America. In March 1681, he was given ownership of the “largest remaining piece of land,” nearly 45,000 square miles of sparsely settled forest sandwiched between New York and Maryland.
He wanted to call it “New Wales” or “Sylvania” but the king ordered it named after Penn’s father, “Penn’s Woods”—Pennsylvania.

Penn advertised the colony, calling on “adventurers” from all nations and faiths to settle there. He promised them that they would be “governed by laws of your own making” and free to practice whatever religion they chose. In five years, Pennsylvania had six thousand settlers. Penn called it his “Holy Experiment.”

Pennsylvania could not be just be a haven for religious dissenters. Penn believed that respect for individual liberty would bring economic prosperity. He worked hard to recruit ambitious adventurers and affluent supporters. He carefully selected the location for Philadelphia (the City of Brotherly Love), so that it would become a bustling commercial center. He kept in mind the king’s charter and its goal: enlarge the English empire, make money, and convert “Natives” to Christianity. Penn would have unprecedented powers as governor, and would answer to the king.

Penn first arrived in the colony on a ship called the Welcome in 1682. He met with the settlers and presided over the first session of the House of Representatives. He presented his First Frame of Government, which included the provision: “That all persons living in this province, who . . . acknowledge the one Almighty and eternal God . . . and that hold themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and justly in civil society, shall, in no ways, be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion, or practice, in matters of faith and worship, nor . . . be compelled . . . to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place or ministry . . .”

He was the first colonial governor willing to put in place such radical protections. In the early years, the frame was amended, but respect for religious liberty remained. Penn stayed just long enough to build peaceful relationships with the Native Americans and oversaw early legislative efforts. He then returned to England, and spent most of his life there defending colonial interests.

The colony prospered. Although it would never become the ideal state he had imagined, 20,000 settlers were living there when Penn returned fifteen years later in 1699. They came from a wide variety of sects—Quakers, Lutherans, Reformed, Mennonites, Amish, German Baptist Brethren (“Dunkers”), Schwenkfelders, Presbyterians, and Moravians—and lived together respectfully and peacefully. (Catholics, Jews, and Methodists would follow in the early 1700s.)

Penn’s conviction that “no People can be truly happy, though under the greatest Enjoyment of Civil Liberties, if abridged of the Freedom of their Consciences” became the first provision of Pennsylvania’s new Charter of Privileges in 1701. William Penn believed that good government could not be coercive, force a faith, or require conformity. An abiding respect for individual beliefs and for self-government, he maintained, would bring peace and prosperity to Pennsylvania—and it did.

Questions

1. In what ways did William Penn demonstrate respect for himself and other people?

2. Why is respect for individual liberty—religious, political, or economic—critical for the success of government?

3. Penn believed that “no People can be truly happy, though under the greatest Enjoyment of Civil Liberties, if abridged of the Freedom of their Consciences.” In other words, if government does not respect “freedom of conscience” a nation (a People) cannot be happy. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

4. You are put in charge of a committee that is going to rewrite your school’s “Rights and Responsibilities Handbook” and establish a new form of student government. What provisions will you include to respect student, teacher, and community members’ rights?
She was dubbed “The Most Hated Woman in America.” Loud, outspoken, and blunt, Madalyn Murray O’Hair had an unmistakable presence. She became a household name, an activist known as the woman who “took prayer out of schools.” She was considered by many vulgar and offensive, but she demanded that the government respect the views of the minority, and separate church and state in the public schools.

In 1959, Murray O’Hair enrolled her son in a Baltimore, Maryland public high school. The school required a Bible reading or recitation of the Lord’s Prayer every morning. As atheists, the Murray O’Hairs objected to the practice, and thought it was coercive. Murray O’Hair discussed the issue with school officials, who suggested that her son stand in the hallway during this time of class. Concerned he would feel like an outcast, Murray O’Hair decided to fight the policy.

In Murray O’Hair’s view, the school board and employees of the school system were agents for the government. As such, they were restricted by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment as applied to the states, which reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” To Murray O’Hair, school was not the appropriate place to indoctrinate religious beliefs. She argued that the school must respect her son’s right to attend school without being subjected to religious instruction.

The school board held its ground, and the case, *Murray v. Curlett*, made its way to the Supreme Court in 1963. There, it was combined with a similar case, *Abington Township v. Schempp*. Both cases focused on respecting religion in public schools, specifically dealing with religious readings and prayers.

Supporters of school prayer made their case. They argued that the schools in no way were “establishing” religion by reading a Bible passage or offering a prayer. In fact, the schools had created an alternative for students who did not wish to participate. The majority of people in the United States believed in some form of God; only three percent denied the existence of a supreme being. In a democracy, some maintained, the majority rules. If the majority of parents and students wanted prayer in schools, to prohibit it would deny the majority’s right to free exercise of religion under the same constitutional amendment. Nevertheless, Murray O’Hair’s lawyers claimed that the school caused harm by associating moral values with religious values, which were foreign to atheist children.

The case captivated and angered the American public. How could the Court respect the rights of all of the parties involved? Finally, the Court ruled on June 17, 1963. In an 8–1 decision, they declared: “In the relationship between man and religion, the State is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.” Public schools would have to limit Bible reading to non-devotional events. They would have to avoid school-led prayer altogether.

By doing so, the public schools would respect student beliefs and the constitutional protection against establishment of religion. It was a landmark ruling. According to the Court, “When government . . . allies itself with one particular form of religion, the inevitable result is that it incurs ‘the hatred, disrespect and even contempt of those who held contrary beliefs.’”

For many years following the *Abington* decision, Murray O’Hair continued to shine a spotlight on atheistic views. As a result, she suffered because of her unpopular beliefs. She and her family received numerous death threats. She told *Life* magazine in 1963, “These death threats are no picnic. . . . But as long as I’m still round I’m going to keep on being a squeaking wheel.” Over the years, they moved from Maryland to Hawaii to escape the ongoing harassment. They settled in Austin, Texas, where she founded the American Atheists, Inc., an organization dedicated
to promoting atheism and the complete separation of church and state.

Murray O’Hair continued to fight for respect of non-believers’ views and complete separation of church and state. She brought suit, for example, to challenge tax exemptions for churches. In 1978, she also sued the United States government for its use of the motto “In God We Trust” on American currency. The case, however, did not make it past the District Court of Appeals in west Texas. Without hesitation, the court found that the motto served a secular and ceremonial purpose, and did nothing to “establish” religion.

Murray O’Hair did not give up. A decade later, her son testified before Congress over the inclusion of “In God We Trust” on proposed bicentennial coins. He argued that atheists should not be required by government to “present” a view counter to their beliefs every time they used American money. Doing so, he argued, failed to respect the atheist’s right to free exercise under the First Amendment.

Even though these efforts to effect change failed, animosity toward Murray O’Hair was so great that her work as an advocate for religious liberty was overshadowed by the story of her mysterious disappearance in August 1995. She and two of her adult children left their home in Austin to picket a visit from the Pope in New York. The family never arrived and never returned. Some suspected that her enemies murdered them. Others believed she embezzled money from the American Atheists and fled the country. In January 2001, the mystery was solved. Police learned that the family had been kidnapped by a small group led by a former employee with a criminal record. The kidnappers forced them to withdraw American Atheists funds and then murdered the family. The bodies were found, and the rumors were finally laid to rest.

In the wake of her death, the organization she founded has lived on, continuing to advocate her causes. Whether her abrasive and forthright style won her admirers or detractors, Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s unpopular views were heard and debated, and accepted or rejected, in the public arena. For thirty-six years, she fought for freedom of religion. Though her writings, lobbying, activism, and lawsuits, she challenged the government and the majority of the American public to protect—and respect—her freedom not to believe.

Questions

1. In what ways did Madalyn Murray O’Hair fight for respect of even the most unpopular religious beliefs?

2. President James Madison once wrote, “In republics, the great danger is, that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority.” How, if at all, does this view apply in Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s case?

3. Why is it important to respect—or respectfully disagree with—the religious views of other people rather than trying to prevent the expression of those beliefs?

4. Are there any times when you should not respect another person’s religious beliefs? Another person’s religious practices? When and why?
RESOURCES

RESPECT

William Penn

Madalyn Murray O’Hair