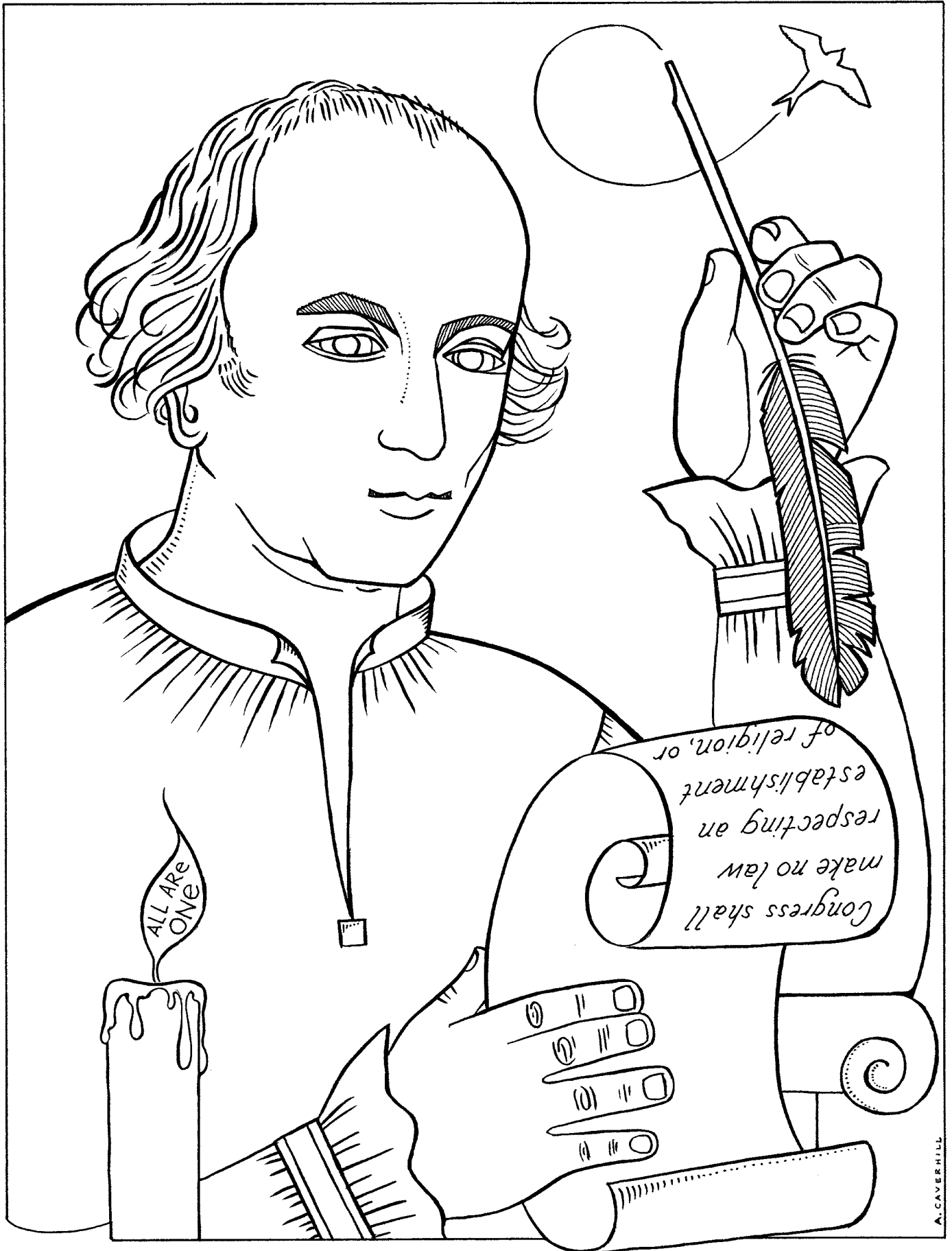




Diana L. Paxson  
illustrations by April Caverhill

# American ancestors

**Invoking the  
Founding Fathers  
to guard our  
religious freedoms**



**I**t is late on a July evening in New York City, 1789. The war for American independence has been won, but the fate of the new nation still hangs in the balance. The candles in the silver candelabra gutter as a little wind off the river stirs the curtains of the opened window, but the humid air still holds the heat of the day. The man who sits writing at the table is in his shirt-sleeves, tie-wig set aside and stock draped across a chair. The scratch of quill pen on paper and the ticking of a clock are the only sounds in the quiet room.

James Madison is thirty-six years old, though the stress of the War years make him look older. With neither the stature of Washington nor Thomas Jefferson's flamboyant hair, his best feature is his intelligent dark eyes. He rubs them, feeling the fatigue, but knowing that before morning he must get this done. The states have accepted the newly created Constitution only on condition that the rights of the people be explicitly safeguarded. The bonds that hold this new nation together are still fragile, and if Congress cannot come up with an acceptable Bill of Rights, the Union may revert to a collection of squabbling states.

Notes cover the table. The nation will judge, but in the end it comes down to this man, in this room, who must find the words by which the nation will live. The Virginia Declaration of Rights has given him a starting point — "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion..." Now that concept must be made into law. He begins —

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Other rights will follow — freedom to speak, write, and assemble; freedom to claim those rights when they are denied. But it is the very first one that protects the right to worship as we choose.

Liberty is a plant that requires constant tending. When times are hard, people tend to seek security in a more rigid identity, to redefine the past to support their position, and to see a threat in any diversity. There is a paranoid fear that a jealous tribal god will smite the nation with disaster if He is not worshipped by all. The Veteran's Administration denies a Wiccan soldier's right to a pentacle on his memorial stone. Paganism is given as grounds for refusal of parental custody. As followers of a non-mainstream religion, we American Pagans cannot afford to take our freedom of worship for granted.

For the past decade, the Religious Right has been making a concerted effort to reshape America in its own image, using prayer as a tactic to influence the American psyche, perhaps forgetting that the law that protects their faith is only strong because it protects the faith of others as well. The rights guaranteed by the First Amendment have been redefined as the right to practice *their* religion, speak and write *their* party line, and assemble to support *their* faith. This is the belief of only a minority of Christians, but one which has influenced the consciousness of the nation.



**We often imagine ourselves on the fringes of America, but the United States was never meant to be a "Christian nation."**

I contend that, as Pagans, we have a "spiritual technology" which is surely the equal of the tools of the Christian Right. It is time for those of us who understand the technology of visualization and affirmation to use our skills to return this country but to a balanced center, dominated by neither Left nor Right.

As Pagans we often imagine ourselves on the fringes of America, but the United States was never meant to be a "Christian nation." Rather than thinking of ourselves as rebels, we can be more properly seen as conservatives, striving to restore America to Her original ideals. I propose that we identify those figures and images from American history that will help us in the quest to strengthen religious liberty and use our magical energy to strengthen them as well. Let us call on our American ancestors.

### A little history

In 1789, against all odds, the American Revolution had succeeded in separating the thirteen colonies from Great Britain, but though the war was won, these colonies were not yet a nation. The nations of the Old World waited for what they saw as an insane experiment in self-government to fail, just biding their time to pick up the juicy North American pieces. In the decade that followed the war this outcome seemed all too likely. During the war, the political struggles of the Continental Congress had been scarcely less vicious than the Army's battles against the British, and the deficiencies of a system without a strong executive were clear. But how were the rights of the individual to be protected? Throughout the summer of 1787 the Convention struggled to create a Constitution that the States would ratify, and then, for two years they fought to get it ratified. Only the promise that the document would be amended to include a Bill of Rights convinced states such as New York and Virginia to sign on.

Seventeen amendments were eventually added. The first guaranteed the rights belonging to the people, and of these, the first provision was for freedom of the spirit — the right of each person to practice the faith of their choice.

The English Civil War and the sectarian wars that had wracked Europe ever since the Reformation were fresh in memory. Colonies like Massachusetts and Maryland were established to ensure religious freedom for those that founded them. But too often, freedom for one religion meant persecution of all others, a situation that could not be tolerated when the colonies were united into a nation. In the 18th century, new ideas were stirring. People sought a faith expressed not in words but in actions, based on freedom, equality, and natural law.

## The Revolutionary Response

Today, many like to point to the authors of the Constitution as models of Christian virtue. However a closer look at the biographies of these same “fathers” shows that most of them were not sectarian in their belief systems. They included Deists, free-thinkers, and even Freemasons, who believed in the God of Nature and the brotherhood of man.

• **George Washington and the Light of Reason** As president, George Washington was careful to speak only of “Providence” with no sectarian references.

In a letter to the Quakers he wrote —

*While men perform their social duties faithfully, they do all that society or the state can with propriety demand or expect; and remain responsible only to their Maker for the religion, or modes of faith, which they may prefer or profess.<sup>1</sup>*

While writing to a Jewish congregation, he said, “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship ... 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...”

*We have abundant reason to rejoice that in this Land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that every person here may worship God according to the dictates of his own heart. In this enlightened age and in this Land of equal liberty it is our boast that a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest Offices that are known in the United States.<sup>2</sup>*

• **Thomas Jefferson: Protector of the Mahometan.** Thomas Jefferson, who at one point revised the New Testament to include only what he believed to be Jesus’ actual

teaching, wrote even more explicitly than Washington on the subject in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

*“The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god ... It is error alone that needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself...”<sup>3</sup>*

In 1786 Jefferson drafted Virginia’s Statute for Religious Freedom, which became the model for such statutes in many other states. When some in the Virginia General Assembly wished to substitute the name “Jesus Christ” for

the phrase “author of our religion”, the new wording was rejected. Jefferson took this as proof that “... they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.”<sup>4</sup>

Inscribed on the wall of the Jefferson memorial in Washington D. C. are these words, “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”<sup>5</sup>

• **James Madison: Freedom to Profess, to Embrace, and to Observe Religion.**

James Madison, who in addition to drafting the Bill of Rights also served as president, most completely defended the separation of Church and State when he opposed a move to provide state support for Protestant sects in the state of Virginia, writing,

*“Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects? ...*

*While 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 ... the equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his religion according to the dictates of conscience is held by the same tenure with all our other rights.”<sup>6</sup>*

President John Adams, in the Treaty of Tripoli, signed in 1797, included these words, “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded upon the Christian religion.”<sup>7</sup>

The Founding Fathers are our natural allies in the fight to preserve religious freedom. Pagan ideals of free choice and diversity, far from being counter-cultural, are part of America’s spiritual mainstream. Law, political philosophy, and national symbolism provide all the elements needed to create a spiritual focus, deeply rooted in American culture and history, with which to strengthen and empower protection for our liberties and work upon the collective consciousness of the people of this land.

## Our Mighty Dead

Most traditional societies understand that their community includes both the living and the dead. In ancient Greece, people made pilgrimages to leave offerings at the tombs of the heroes, and when the heroes helped them, concluded that they must have been the offspring of a god. In early Denmark, offerings were made at the mounds of Frodhi and other famous kings in whose reigns the harvests had been good, and eventually they were identified as aspects of Freyr. Modern Wicca continues to honor the Mighty Dead every Samhain.

This desire to honor the dead seems to be instinctive. Spontaneous roadside altars spring up where someone has been killed and when the deceased is famous, or the event notorious — as in London when Princess Diana died and in New York City after 9/11 — the shrine building activity often assumes major proportions. This practice is rarely conscious. Another example is Westminster Abbey, which, although ostensibly a Christian church, has become a shrine to the Group-Soul of Great Britain and a temple of the Mighty Dead of that land. Everyone whom the British feel to be representative of the best in their country — soldiers, poets, musicians, politicians — is buried or has a memorial plaque there. It is here that the most important national ceremonies take place, and each day hundreds of people make their way deosil around the church, pausing to read the memorial stones and in the process bring to mind the people they honor and energise the ideals they served.

If, as many cultures believe, the soul has several parts, it is possible simultaneously for the dead to reincarnate, dwell with the gods, and watch over their descendants. I personally believe that the gods create us, but we also create them, or rather, we create the forms in which we perceive the gods. When posterity invests energy in the personality/identity of an ancestor, it can become the template for a demi-god.

Godforms can be invented, but they are more powerful and easier to invoke when there is something to

## Not Just the Red, White & Blue

The United States, of course, is not the only country to offer legal protections to minority religions. We've compiled a short summary of relevant provisions in the law of several major English-speaking countries. Each has expressed a commitment to protecting religious freedom, but the structures they use to that end vary a great deal.

- **AUSTRALIA** has no bill of rights in its constitution and repeated efforts to create one have failed. Workplace religious discrimination is prohibited under Article 18 of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act. Australia is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1980), which protects the rights of religious minorities.

For more information, see the Australian Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission at [www.humanrights.gov.au/human\\_rights/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/index.html) or write to: The Attorney General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, BARTON ACT 2600, Australia.

- **CANADA** enshrines the divine with the line, "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law," in the Canadian Charter of Rights. But it also declares that freedom of conscience and religion are "Fundamental Freedoms." In Quebec *le droit civil* (the Civil Code) and the Quebec Human Rights Commission protect "*les libertés de conscience, de religion, d'opinion, d'expression, de réunion pacifique et d'association.*" To find out more, see the Canadian Human Rights Commission/Commission canadienne des droits de la personne website at [www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca), write to: Canadian Human Rights Commission, 344 Slater Street, 8th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1E1, Canada.

- **GREAT BRITAIN** passed legislation (The Employment Equality — Religion or Belief — Regulations) in 2003 to make it illegal to discriminate in employment or vocational training on the basis of religion and beliefs. Britain is also a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, which states in Article 9 that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others." More information at the International Association for Religious Freedom (United Kingdom), International Secretariat, 2 Market Street, Oxford OX1 3EF, UK, tel. 44-1865-202-744 or see [www.iarf.net](http://www.iarf.net). Another group of interest is the Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom, 8A Lower Grosvenor Place, London SW1W 0EN, UK. website: [www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk).

- **IRELAND's** constitution (Article 44) "recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens" while giving an official nod to a few other religious denominations. However Section 44.2 guarantees freedom of conscience and the free practice of religion, albeit "subject to public order and morality." The Equality Authority can be reached at 2 Clonmel Street, Dublin 2, Ireland or see [www.equality.ie](http://www.equality.ie).

- **NEW ZEALAND's** Bill of Rights II:2:13 and II:2:15 state "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief," and protects the right to "manifest that person's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching, either individually or in community with others, and either in public or in private." For more information, see the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, Auckland Office, PO Box 6751, Wellesley Street, Auckland 1141, or phone 09 309 0874 Fax: 09 377 3593. Website at: [www.hrc.co.nz](http://www.hrc.co.nz). *Kenaz Filan*.



## Deists and Deities

But before we blithely start invoking George Washington in our circles, we should remember that the Founding Fathers were real human beings and not assume that just because they would respect our beliefs they would share them as well.

Many of the “Founding Fathers” were, in fact, practicing Christians, though few were devout in the triumphal and exclusive sense trumpeted by the Christian Right. Many considered themselves Deists; Deist ideas and philosophy are clearly visible in the language of the Declaration of independence and other foundational documents.

However, Deism, as a philosophy, was perhaps more antithetical to Paganism than to Christianity. Make no mistake — most 18<sup>th</sup> century Deists would consider Neo-Pagan magical rituals the height of superstition. Where Deism comes closest to Pagan belief (other than in a disenchantment with standard-brand Christianity) is in its belief in “Nature’s God.” This Deity was believed to be revealed by Reason rather than Revelation, and could be found in the world around us rather than in tradition. Often referred to as “Providence”, Deism’s deity was imagined rather like the “Higher Power” of 12-Step programs today.

Men such as Jefferson would probably agree that Nature shows a divine plan, and that we can use reason to learn what that plan is. Another idea most Pagans and Deist would agree on is that everyone has equal worth and that each person should be free to find his or her own spiritual path.

What I am proposing here is, in one sense, a “cult” of the Founding Fathers, but to make them into idols insult their memories.

Instead, we must approach them as friends and allies, seeking to understand and relate to them as free, equal, and reasonable beings who hope to continue the evolution of the United States towards the realization of the ideals they served. None of these men could have seriously imagined Paganism as a competitive faith in America. But all were vividly aware of the dangers in allowing any single sect or religion to become identified with the State, and recognized that only laws that protected all religions could be depended upon to guard their own.

Connecting with ancestors from a very different time and culture is a kind of astral interfaith work, in which we appreciate and respect our differences and rejoice in those beliefs we can share. A creative tension between disparate opinions has always been both the weakness and strength of our system. “*E Pluribus Unum* — From the Many, One”, is the motto they chose for our national Seal. Our nation was founded on the principle that there is value in diversity.

build on. For instance, many modern Pagans have found in Lady Liberty an American goddess who can be invoked to protect the rights and freedoms which people seek in this land.

In *Applied Magic*, Dion Fortune states:

*In religions where the gods or the saints are freely represented in pictorial form, the imaginations of the worshippers are accustomed to picturing them as they have seen them represented. When a number of devout worshippers are gathered together, their emotions concentrated and exalted by ritual, and all holding the same image in imagination, the outpoured force of all present is formed into an astral simulacrum of the being thus intensely pictured. When this process has been repeated regularly over considerable periods, the images that have been built up remain on the astral. Consequently subsequent worshippers need be at no great pains to formulate the simulacrum; they have only to think of the god and they feel his power.<sup>6</sup>*

This is the process that has transformed the Statue of Liberty from the personification of a virtue to a focus of energy. If what began as only a statue can become the image of a goddess, then surely the figures of the Founding Fathers, who were once living persons in their own right, with ideas and personalities, and which already possess “shrines” in Washington D. C. and elsewhere and even national are honored by national holidays, may be seen as Powers on whom we can call.

**Before we blithely start invoking George Washington in our circles, we should remember that the Founding Fathers were real human beings and not assume they would share our beliefs.**

## Heroes and Holidays

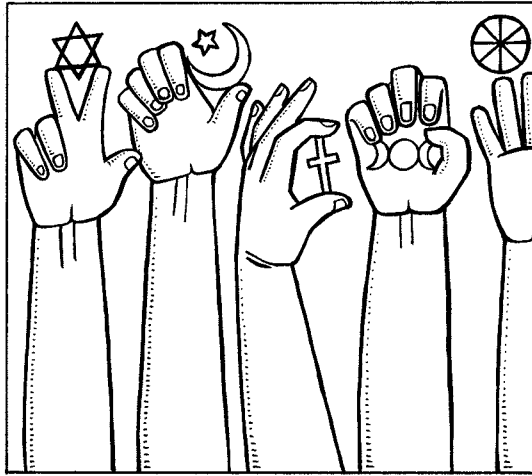
The United States possesses a calendar full of holidays that we can use to honor the ancestors. Memorial Day, Flag Day and the 4th of July are just three of the most obvious national holidays on which we can remember them as a group and reinforce the ideals for which they stand. Presidents' Day offers an opportunity to honor George Washington and other Revolutionary presidents — Jefferson, Madison and Adams — as well as those who continued the fight for human liberty, including Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (who stated that the second of his Four Freedoms was that "... of every person to worship God in his own way — everywhere in the world.")<sup>7</sup> We can also remember them on their birthdays. Nor should we forget the Founding Mothers, who provided the inspiration, support, and in some cases, the ideas, that these men expressed.

An American altar can provide an excellent focus for ritual or meditation. My American altar includes a white damask cloth, an American flag, facsimiles of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, and postcards with portraits of the ancestors I am honoring. For the elements I have a pewter platter and cup with images of the national monuments, a letter opener in the shape of a Revolutionary War sabre and a quill pen. I also have a statue of Lady Liberty.

I begin my simple American ancestor ritual with some moments of contemplation in which to consider the symbols on the altar and their meaning, followed by a reading of the First Amendment and/or the words of one of the Founders. Then I close my eyes and visualize the ancestor I am seeking, bringing up in memory our current political environment and asking his help in safeguarding the protections he fought for. Then there are a few moments of quiet, when I wait to see if any counsel or insights will come through. When I am done, I fill the cup with wine or brandy and drink to the Founder's memory.

If you have the opportunity to visit Washington D.C. make a pilgrimage to the Founders' shrines. Beginning at the Jefferson Memorial, you can walk or drive to the FDR memorial and the Lincoln memorial, finishing at the Washington Monument. Take a flask of brandy or wine, and at each site, discreetly pour a little out at the roots of a shrub or tree and make your toast. From the Washington Monument you can see both the White House and the Capitol. Call on George Washington and mentally open the way for his wisdom to reach both places.

In Boston, you may make a similar pilgrimage to sites associated with the New England Founders; Benjamin



**The men and women who created America risked everything to establish a nation in which all could find their own path. The least we can do is carry on the work that they began.**

Franklin's shrines are in Philadelphia. The homes or graves of most of those who signed the Declaration of Independence are marked. Some, such as Monticello and Mount Vernon, have been preserved as national monuments.

The people who created this country were pioneers and rebels, risking their "lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor," to establish a nation in which everyone was free to find his or her own path. The least we can do, especially when it is so much to our own advantage, is to carry on the work that they began.

### Backnotes

<sup>1</sup>Forrest Church, editor, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, p. 108

<sup>2</sup>Church, *The Separation of Church and State*, p.110.

<sup>3</sup>Church, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, pp. 51-53.

<sup>4</sup>Church, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup>National Park Service website located at [www.nps.gov/archive/thje/memorial/memorial.htm#](http://www.nps.gov/archive/thje/memorial/memorial.htm#). Reference taken on 9/4/07.

<sup>6</sup>Church, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, p. 123

<sup>7</sup>Church, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, p. 63

### Useful Resources

Forrest Church, editor, *The Separation of Church and State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. *A collection of writings relating to religious freedom from the period of the Revolutionary War. Available in the gift store at the Jefferson Memorial.*

Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1953. *Chapter 1, Part 4 of this book provides a description and analysis of the process by which the dead become ancestral deities.*

Dion Fortune, *Applied Magic*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1962. *Chapter III, "The Group Mind" explores the theory behind artificial elements and god-forms.*

Vincent Wilson, Jr., *The Book of the Founding Fathers*, Brookeville, MD, American History Research Associates, 1974. Includes biographies and birthdays.

— Diana L. Paxson is a loremistress, priestess and author, most recently of the book *Taking Up the Runes*, published by Red Wheel Weiser in 2006. She makes her home in Berkeley, California.