An image of the late Georgia Congressman and civil rights pioneer U.S. Rep. John Lewis is projected July 22 on the pedestal of the statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. *AP*

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Have Confederate statues become idols?

Statue controversies have a long history in America and around the world

Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

The current discussion about the removal or destruction of monuments remains in the news. This is not a new issue in American history, or even in world religious history. In 1776, following a public reading of the Declaration of Independence, a mob pulled down the equestrian statue of King George III. The metal was melted and used to make bullets for the Revolutionary War effort.

It is not necessary to preserve that statue of King George for us to remember the Declaration of Independence or the American Revolution that followed. The tearing down of the statue is also history. Please don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating mob actions of tearing down statues, nor am I in favor of another violent revolution. But I do believe we need to think clearly about the proper role of statues and monuments in the telling of our history.

One of the earliest pre-Revolution Anglican churches was King's Chapel in Boston. Even though its members and clergy pledged their allegiance to the King of England, it is not necessary to tear down the church; but neither is it necessary to erect a monument to the king in order for that bit of history to be remembered.

But I do believe the status of honored memorials needs re-evaluation given current issues in our society. That said, we have forums and settings where that can be debated and decisions made on what is in the best interest for our society and for proper remembrance of our history.

Thomas S. Kidd, the Vardaman Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University, discussed this in a recent article in the magazine Christianity Today. He notes monuments were created at a particular time and for a certain purpose. The university in which he teaches was named for Judge R.E.B. Baylor, a Baptist leader, Southern politician and slaveholder. The university has appointed a commission to discuss and recommend on how that history is to be remembered, including the future of a statue on campus honoring the founder.

Kidd's article also discussed a 7-foot monument in Selma, Alabama, not erected until 2000, to honor a Confederate general, Nathan Bedford Forrest. While supposing to honor a general for his war efforts, the inscription does not mention that he was also responsible for the massacre of African American troops in Tennessee, and later was a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. The inscription reads, "This monument stands as a testament of our perpetual devotion and respect for Lt. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest CSA 1821-1877, one of the South's finest heroes." It is not hard to imagine the message sent to the Black community living in proximity to the monument. I doubt that it enhances their historical understanding.

Professor Kidd concludes, "Removing monuments to figures such as Forrest should be an easy call for Americans, especially for Christians. ... He committed racial atrocities in the name of a rebellion against the United States. If standing on public land, such monuments should be removed and at most be displayed in a museum, not in a place of honor."

It gets more complicated when it is a Confederate general who didn't own slaves, or a Founding Father who played a major role in the creation of our nation but did own slaves. Kidd continues, "Deciding not to give someone a place of symbolic honor is hardly the same thing as erasing history. If all you know about Lincoln comes from viewing a statue of him, you don't know much about Lincoln anyway. Libraries hold thousands of books on Washington, Lincoln and even figures such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, and that should not change. What we're talking about with monuments is publicly celebrating historical figures."

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The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich made the distinction between signs and symbols. Signs, he said, are arbitrary and provide information such as a street or stop sign, or a sign identifying a business or historical place of interest. For Tillich, symbols participate in what it is that they signify, such as a flag, the cross for Christians or the Star of David for Jews. While seeking to point to that which is sacred, they can become almost sacred in themselves. It is idolatry when the symbol itself becomes worshiped, rather than just pointing to or symbolizing the sacred.

In our current discussions, I wonder if the monuments under consideration have gone beyond providing historical information, but have become objects representing a reality that has been lost, a memory that verges on worship of a bygone era. Why would there be over 1,700 confederate monuments put up some 50 years after the end of the Confederacy? Was it to provide historical information or was it to symbolize a mindset of what the Confederacy represented, including slavery? Was it seeking to keep alive an idea that refused to be totally defeated? And when do such monuments and other symbols such as flags take on a symbolic meaning that tries to create a reality that becomes almost sacred?

The religious traditions on this matter are also instructive. The Hebrew Scriptures set forth the Ten Commandments in both Exodus and repeated in Deuteronomy, including the prohibition: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image." (Exodus 20:4) The warning against idols appears over 100 times in the Bible.

Islam also has strong injunctions against idolatry, traditionally prohibiting any picture or sculpture depicting the prophet Mohammad or any living person or animal.

Remembering our history is important, but we must be mindful that statues that become monuments can also become symbols that verge on the sacred and run the danger of leading to idolatry. Our faith traditions, as well as our good sense should warn us against such misuse.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

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