

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**PATRICIA DELEEUW** is professor emerita of Theology at Boston College and the former vice provost of faculties. She spoke with Boisi Center Director Mark Massa and Boisi Center Graduate Research Assistant Jack Nuelle about the religious valence of public monuments. The following interview has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

**MASSA:** On the topic of religious art, I wanted to ask you about how things like the statue of Robert E. Lee represent religious art from the standpoint of civic religion and why that might be an important way to approach this. How are the statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville and statues like it religious art? What role does that play in generating the kind of emotion and energy that we have seen in all of this?

**DELEEUW:** The distinction between civic and religious is useful and necessary but insufficient for our understanding of what those statues mean. Taking them down is a kind of iconoclasm, right? These are icons. These are holy objects whether they're civil or religious. The answer of course is both, especially in the United States, where the notion of American civil religion as a sociological notion goes back hundreds of years.

I think it is a very meaningful notion, especially for the American South. There was that "War of Northern Aggression" in the middle of the 19th century. It was a "lost cause." But the Robert E. Lees and Jefferson Davises – and even more the Confederate soldiers who are often depicted in those statues – those are the martyrs in that "lost cause." And the "South shall rise again." All of that – the trappings of civil religion are meaningful in the South.

I've thought as well, we Catholics have statues in our churches – inside the churches, outside the churches, and on the churches. We put the Blessed Virgin



Mary in the half-shell on our front lawns. Protestant churches don't have statues. They were taken out in the 16th century. You might find a tablet with the Ten Commandments, or you might find some biblical text in the stained glass. But their heroes aren't in the churches. Their heroes are in the parks. I think those heroes are as meaningful as Saint Francis or the Blessed Virgin Mary in the half-shell. When you take the statue

down, you've ripped something from the hearts of people, because those heroes are the people about whom we tell stories, the people who we try to emulate. They are a part of our past, and they should be there where they always are.

One of my favorite stories about the taking down of the statues is told by a guy named Edward Norman, who wrote a book called *The House of God* that I used to use as a textbook in my Christian architecture course. It's about a village in England where, in the 20th century, women who came into the church would curtsy before a blank wall and then take their seats. Every woman who came in curtsied, went and took her seat. When asked why they were curtsying to a blank wall, the women said "I have no idea, but my mother did it and I'm going to make sure, of course, that my daughter does it, because it is what we do."

Well, with 20th century – 21st century now – conservation techniques, you can take the whitewash off a wall and reveal what's behind the whitewash. And when the whitewash was taken off the wall, what was revealed was a painting of the Blessed Virgin that was covered over in the 16th century with whitewash. 400 years later, 500 years later, women are still curtsying before that blank wall. I suspect that the plinth on which those statues – if the plinth remains – even the

plinth itself will be considered a kind of a sacred object.

**MASSA:** A good friend of mine wrote a book about the “lost cause.” The “lost cause” is the invention of a southern civil religion 30 years after the end of the Civil War, in which the “lost cause” was basically that the South lost, but they were the side of the good against the aggressive, secular North, and Robert E. Lee was the savior figure. In a sense, Robert E. Lee becomes the Jesus figure of this cult of the civil religion of the “lost cause.” The removal, and even the discussion of the removal of that statue, generates the same kind of energy that was unleashed in England in the 16th century.

**DELEEUW:** Exactly. England in the 16th century as an example is a very interesting one. The 16th century Protestant reformation largely worked in England. It was largely successful.

**MASSA:** But it took a long time.

**DELEEUW:** It took a long time, and it was on-again, off-again, depending on who was in power. There may be something peculiar about the English. I think about this a lot as I think about the 16th century Protestant Reformation in England as an example of an iconoclasm that gradually, over time, worked. The English go along and get along.

**MASSA:** Civility is high on their list.

**DELEEUW:** Civility, keep calm and carry on. There wasn't as much dissent; it wasn't widespread. There weren't very many martyrs. By and large, the statues came down because they had, in many places at least, lost the significance that they had once had. So there are successful iconoclasm.

**MASSA:** Those statues are replaced by the king's arms, so in place of the Virgin, over the high altar was the king's escutcheon.

**DELEEUW:** Exactly. In Protestant churches, where they don't have statues, they have scripture instead of the statue, after

accepting the notion of Sola Scriptura. The Protestant Reformation in England, like any analogy, limps, but is an example of a successful iconoclasm over time, because the people were generally brought along and came to see the new ways, including scripture in English, the liturgy in English, and had more of a say in the activities in their own parish. I'm hoping that this iconoclasm in the 21st century in the American South – and to some extent the American North – is

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as successful, but a lot of education has to go on to convince people that those statues are more harmful than helpful.

**MASSA:** What do you think was smart or not about the public discussion about Robert E. Lee and the statue in New Orleans and other places? What have we included that's obviously pertinent to understanding what's going on, and what have we left out that is problematic in terms of understanding the energy?

**DELEEUW:** I think, especially in this Catholic university – we have more of a tendency to be sympathetic and respectful of the religiosity of human sensibility. In public discussion, we are respectful of the special and sacred nature of civic objects, so I think we're doing a good job, but we are talking to each other. What now has to happen is that people in the South, and maybe universities in the South, need to conduct the kinds of conversations we're having here. I think it's important that the statues survive. I think those statues need to go into a museum, with plenty of wall text that

explains why they're important and why they could be hurtful.

**MASSA:** When the statues were removed, a lot of the villagers stole the statues and kept them in their houses.

**DELEEUW:** They created little shrines or, especially for the sacred vessels, took them and melted them down. There were a lot of shrines, I think, in people's houses. That's OK too, if you want to have your shrine to Robert E. Lee.

**MASSA:** Would you say it's appropriate to consider removing them to another situation but it's inappropriate to destroy them outright?

**DELEEUW:** I think it's inappropriate. It's hurtful. It's counterproductive, I think, because then the notion of martyrdom becomes really reified. Not only are the Confederate soldiers martyrs, but they're martyred again now by these Northerners. Or the response is that the federal government is swooping in here and breaking our statues. We've seen scenes of earnest undergraduate students yanking the statues down, which is not helpful. It has to be done, but it has to be done with a lot of conversation.

**MASSA:** Do you think a museum of Southern monuments is the way to go?

**DELEEUW:** I wouldn't put it in its own museum of Southern monuments, but I would certainly put it in a museum of our heritage, because that's an important part of our history.

**MASSA:** One thing that struck me in the National Gallery in Washington DC, among its many fine features, is that there is the original cast for the Shaw Memorial, which is very powerful. It's in a room by itself. What struck me is that it was almost like you were in a church. There was one wall that had the Augustus Saint-Gaudens' original cast of the Shaw monument on Boston Common. People were hushed like they were in front of an altar.

**DELEEUW:** There's a perfect example. People are hushed. We attach religious meaning to all kinds of things. There was a traveling show from the Victoria and Albert Museum that had many artifacts, including a dress that was worn by Princess Diana. There was the dress on a mannequin. Next to the dress, there was a photograph of Diana wearing it. A little cluster of women gathered around the dress – and it was only women. We stood around. We didn't say a thing. There was hush. You could hear a sniffle occasionally. And then people moved on. But it was like being in a church. We were visiting a shrine. We need to appreciate the fact that this is important, and all of this meaning attaches to those statues.

**MASSA:** Yes, which is unfortunate. I think you're right that a place like Boston College affords us the ability to take religion into the mix and say there are religious overtones here that are strangely absent from the larger discussion in *The New York Times* and other conversations.

**DELEEUW:** Exactly. Maybe this is an example of an iconoclasm whose time has come. Maybe there won't be the kind of conversation or anxiety that we're hoping to allay to some extent with these kinds of conversations. Maybe the statues have already lost some of their meaning, as maybe some of the saints did in the 16th century. Time will tell, but that part of the history of the American South, of the American nation, really needs to be told because when you and I were in school, we learned that the Civil War was about states' rights. Now we know that the Civil War was about slavery. If it was about states' rights, as we, even in the North learned, then one can see that Robert E. Lee is a noble character. If the war in fact was about slavery, he becomes tainted. Either way, we need to tell the story of what happened to the extent we know, and we also need to tell the story of our understanding of what happened.

**MASSA:** The thing that strikes me about this whole event is that having a monu-



ment – Robert E. Lee on horseback – to the “lost cause” is fine. The problem is the meaning of the monument gets hijacked. In this case, the myth of the “lost cause” gets hijacked by people who have other purposes – and tied explicitly to a racist understanding. Statues don't have intrinsic meaning.

**DELEEUW:** These statues may belong to some mythic notion of the Civil War that people in 2017 have. But, in fact, they are about slavery.

**MASSA:** It's like the road that goes down to Cape Cod—the Grand Army of the Republic Highway. That road was built in the 1930s. It was not built in the 1870s, but at the same time as the Robert E. Lee statue. It takes long for us to come to grips with the meaning of the civil religion. It's only later – a half-century later – that the Daughters of the Confederacy, groups that we think of as emerging directly out of the Civil War are formed, and D. W. Griffith's film, *The Birth of a Nation* is produced. What was the meaning of that for us?

**DELEEUW:** Our understanding of the past changes. Archeology is giving us all kinds of new ways to think about this. I had never seen before films of the 1920s and '30s – the marches of the Ku Klux Klan in American cities. I didn't see that

stuff when I was in school. I assume you didn't either. Now we're seeing it.

**MASSA:** It's the use of history. The Robert E. Lee statue is representative of the uses of history by a later generation, just as the attempt to keep it there in 2017 is an even later use of history by a generation that was not involved in the erection of that statue.

**NUELLE:** We use the history of Nazi Germany and the way that the German people have really taken pains to make that history known. But what are the practical ways that we can start to reevaluate our history in ways that are lasting?

**DELEEUW:** The German example is very real. They have done a very good job, as I was saying of telling that story, making sure that German school children know the story. But even there, generations have different understandings. Germans of my generation just didn't want to hear about it at all. It was, “Oh, my God. How could that have happened?” Subsequent German generations are better able to say, “OK, it happened.” We have to come to terms because they're not so close to it. Generations have to pass before the story can appropriately be comprehended. The important part of your question and its answer is that we have to keep telling the story. Americans are not very good at this.



**MASSA:** Americans don't know their past at all.

**DELEEUW:** We don't know our own past. And this conversation – it's a really good, healthy thing for us.

**MASSA:** We should think about the new conversations around these monuments and the re-contextualizing of them as an essential part of this larger ongoing conversation. I also think that Americans don't understand how messy the project of writing history is, because they want just the facts served. Facts are hard things to uncover and therefore this discussion is a messy discussion in the present that makes some people uncomfortable. But I think, for a historian, who's used to digging up the past, you appreciate how messy it all was.

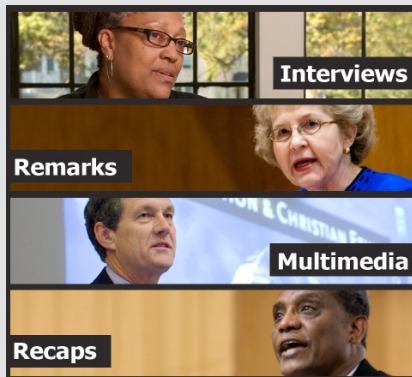
**DELEEUW:** It's messy. It's hard. It's very hard. It makes your brain tired to understand that two contradictory things can be true at the same time. For historians, we're quite used to thinking that. That statue has different meanings for different people, and they're all true.

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