



## The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition

**E. Christian Kopff**

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Many people are taking a critical look at American society today and are vehemently complaining that it is falling apart at the seams: crime is high, morality is low; test scores are dropping across the board despite classrooms getting the best of everything from the newest in educational programs to state-of-the-art computers; the country no longer has a strong lead-or, in certain fields, no lead at all-in the cutting edge technologies and sciences that gave the United States its prestige; the government is out of control.

On and on the complaints come, along with myriad theories for how and why this happened to a people known for their intelligence, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. Suggestions to remedy one area or another are abundant, but of those contemporaries who have looked at the moral and political decay in America as a whole, a classicist at the University of Colorado (Boulder), Professor E. Christian Kopff, is the first to take a provocative, analytical view of the situation and offer a workable prescription.

In his eloquent and engaging new work, *The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition*, Kopff argues successfully against the popular belief that simple innovation will lead us into a better, and brighter future and that the past has nothing to offer. In supporting his argument for the need to return, instead, to the classical traditions of the past, Kopff discusses the development of traditions and their importance in learning and creativity, how and why traditions are a necessary and vital part of human existence and positive progress, and what specific steps can be taken in the educational system to reverse the country's downward slide toward self-destruction. Within these discussions, the health and vitality of America's classical traditions are examined and the condition of the country's experiment in limited self-government is assessed; analyses which bring to light how much the American people have not been told by those in power politically and within academia.

What has not been told, according to Kopff, are the reasons why America has so many cracks in her once solid foundation. Once the classical education for all students (one based on the learning of Greek, Latin, and mathematics) was replaced with other models, the country began to lose touch with its traditions by no longer being able to understand them. As more of the secular traditions like science, history, and self-rule are dismissed or ignored, the country loses more and more of its competitive edge by depleting American creativity through the removal of stimuli found in knowledge of past events and developments. This results in more foreigners filling positions Americans no longer have the training and skills to handle, creating increases in unemployment which in turn results in higher crime rates and increases in alcohol, drug and physical abuses. By pushing religious traditions away-moral beliefs upon which the Founding Fathers based laws and individual rights-America is slowly becoming a crime-ridden morass, which the once-strong institutions of marriage, church and the government are crumbling into from lack of support.

Why keep this information from public view if it is, indeed, true? Kopff dedicates several chapters criticizing the political and educational powers that be and their agendas, revealing with startling clarity that the real reason is simple greed. Kopff declares: "We are not dealing just with drugs, but with incontinence, not just with unemployment, but with ignorance and, sometimes disloyalty. Behind the statistics a war is going on to replace a way of life rooted in tradition with one which privileges the material over the spiritual, quantity over quality, the economic bottom line over the flourishing variety of a way of life." Those in power have given up tradition. What is morally right or wrong does not matter to them, just how much they can own and make use of in their own lifetime. That they are selling out the

American people and the American way of life down the road a generation or two is of no consequence to them as long as no one finds out the truth about what is happening.

What does all of this mean, then, to the individual American? Kopff prays fervently that all of his discussions will mean quite a lot; with the hoped-for results that Americans will demand a return of their rights as the Founding Fathers meant them to be and a return to the classical tradition in education. He has even prepared a workable, well-thought-out solution as to how to return to a classical education, including explanations for all of the suggestions his plan entails and sources with which to get started. Kopff admits it will be hard work to return to the right road, but the restoration of order and creativity will be well worth the trouble. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, "if in our wandering we discover that we have taken the wrong path, the progressive thing to do is to turn around and go back to where we went astray."

The Devil Knows Latin has appeal for anyone who is tired of seeing the direction in which the country has been heading. Though it seems a heavy subject to tackle, it is written in laymen's terms and is extremely interesting in its scope—from the mention of the ancient philosophers to discussion of modern cinematography. Kopff has definitely given the public quite a challenge, but if America is up to it, returning to the classical education, which has already proven itself, may be just what the doctor ordered to cure what ails her. (December)

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NELLY HEITMAN (January / February 1999)

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