

Classical Education and Why It Matters

Book Review by John Attarian

The controversy over what schools and colleges should teach is one of the most important questions in any society. The outcome has enormous influence over what the young will know and how they will view reality, themselves and their society, and thus over the path their society will take in the future.

That leftists know this is revealed by their intense concern for course content. Propelled by a power-craving agenda of using schools to establish a new social order, John Dewey and his disciples gutted public school curricula of substance. More recently his followers have championed multiculturalism and political correctness at all levels from grade school through graduate school. As a result, far too many younger Americans are ignorant of their own country and its culture and tradition, yet despise them as racist, oppressive, sexist, and “ethnocentric,” and support the policies of national suicide: open immigration, affirmative action, unlimited tolerance, globalization, and more.

Unfortunately, due to the politicization of education, immigration-driven “diversity,” and the growing preoccupation over the last century or so with careerist “training,” many Americans no longer have any idea what a core education is, and the curriculum itself is an amorphous hodgepodge.

Time was when the curriculum had a compact core of Latin, Greek, mathematics and literature, which not only gave students an invaluable rigorous training in attentive reading, thinking and expression (as opposed to

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mere political fashions or “career skills”), but steeped them in their culture’s greatest works, which held up models for emulation.

In this profoundly learned and wide-ranging book, University of Colorado (Boulder) classics professor E. Christian Kopff makes a vigorous case for the classical curriculum and the tradition it reflects. Kopff’s purpose is “to suggest that the permanent things embedded in tradition are good things for human life, and that they have not entirely vanished from the Western landscape.”

He argues the usefulness of tradition, exposes some of the lethal errors of America’s ruling elites, and provides cogent recommendations for restoring the culture.

Far from being an enslaving prison, as moderns have it, tradition, Kopff argues, is a saving source of inspiration and information on how to live as one ought. True creativity depends on mastering and assimilating one’s tradition, and then building on it.

Healthy cultures drew on their pasts for inspiration and instruction, and the Founding Fathers drew on the classics for guidance in crafting our Constitution.

As for the curriculum, Kopff agrees with the dictum that education must be practical — but adds that “nothing is more practical than the study of Latin.” Over half of all English words have Latin origins, and most of the rest are derived from Greek. A solid grounding in Latin and Greek facilitates mastery not only of English but of most European languages. More importantly, it keeps open lines of communication with our ancestors. The much-touted Great Books program did make the best ancient works accessible to a wider audience, albeit filtered imperfectly through translations. But it was, Kopff rightly observes, “civilization on the cheap.” Worse, as University of Chicago Professor Paul Shorey predicted in 1917, replacement of texts in the original languages

The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition

by E. Christian Kopff
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with translations was only the entering wedge for driving Western civilization from the curriculum.

The jettisoning of the classical curriculum reflected modernity's assiduous pursuit of the Enlightenment project of overturning the Western tradition. One consequence of the Enlightenment, Kopff shows, is an increasing preoccupation with supposedly universally-applicable abstract ideas rather than realities, well illustrated by the dominion of abstractions in economics.

As he rightly observes, mainstream economics is stubbornly loyal to free trade, which works well in economic theory's tidy never-never land and is therefore deemed valid under all circumstances, and hang the complications of the messier real world.

As the tradition the Enlightenment project hated was inspired by Christianity, it stands to reason that modernity's war on tradition will be especially relentless against religion. Kopff lists numerous efforts by federal courts to suppress free exercise of religion by Americans, their communities, and the states, such as forbidding prayer in schools and at commencements. His solution? "Simple — repeal the Fourteenth Amendment. Religion will flourish, and so will the republic."

Kopff devotes much effort to criticizing postmoderns, but British classicists Sir James Fraser and Gilbert Murray get stern scrutiny too. They made brilliant contributions, but their works reflect an anti-Christian standpoint. They spread the idea that thinking people could get along without Christianity for their ethics — but recanted when the horrors of the Twentieth Century exploded this facile optimism. The lesson Kopff draws is that classicists are not immune to error about major issues of the human condition and the nature of reality; they need to absorb the lessons of Christianity. Greek and Roman classics are necessary, but are not enough.

Turning to role models and popular culture, Kopff rightly lauds Russell Kirk and devotes much space to an intriguing investigation and evaluation of American movies. He concludes by sensibly recommending that we revamp the elementary school curriculum to focus on English, Greek, Latin, history and mathematics, and break the education schools' monopoly on teacher certification.

Moreover, churches should teach the "Sacred Tongues": Latin, Greek, Hebrew and German. Kopff provides guidance for persons wanting to learn Greek and Latin on their own.

All this is meritorious and valuable. Kopff's case for the classical tradition is articulate and persuasive. His criticisms of the postmoderns and others are equally so. The one flaw in this powerful and welcome book is that Kopff does not address the threat to the classical tradition from a diverse population.

He does provide, in passing, evidence of massive immigration's corrosive cultural role. In 1960, Clifton Fadiman presented the Great Books program in his *Lifetime Reading Plan*, and unabashedly explained that the Great Books were Western because "We are Western men," and until recently "our minds were molded by Western ideas and

images." In 1997, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* by John S. Major explained that because America, "a nation of immigrants," has been "enriched" recently by immigrants from diverse cultures, "our country is now more profoundly multicultural than ever before." Hence the new, multicultural Great Books list would include many non-Western works.

Major is in effect citing immigration as a pretext for destroying the Western focus of the Great Books. Once America contains a substantial non-Western population, intellectuals hostile to the "ethnocentric" Western tradition that informs American culture and education can argue, as they have, that this tradition is no longer relevant to or representative of the new composition of the country, and demand that it be made more "diverse" and "inclusive." The continuity of a nation's culture depends heavily on the continuity of the ethnic and racial composition of its population. A tradition's survival depends on the continued presence of a population adhering to it. As long as the group practicing that tradition dominates the national population, that tradition will continue to inform and guide the national life. Should that majority group ever be displaced, however, that tradition's loss of dominion will necessarily follow.

Likewise, repeal of the Fourteenth Amendment, though desirable, will not suffice to restore "religion" —

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by which Kopff means, specifically, *Christianity* — to the public square, given our increasingly multiracial, which inescapably means multireligious, population. When virtually all pupils were descended from European and African-American Christians, prayer in public schools was viable. But what do we do when a growing share of the pupils hails from Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu homes? The choice becomes either a vacuous prayer to a generic deity (which could only confuse Christian children and undermine their faith), or nothing. The use of chaplains in legislatures, commencement prayers, creches in public places, and so on becomes

equally problematic. Religious traditions are practiced *by peoples*, and the continuity of the one depends on the continuity of the other. While massive Third World immigration continues, America's religious tradition will remain vulnerable. Demography has cultural consequences, which defenders of the Western tradition must address.

Nevertheless, *The Devil Knows Latin*, both learned and commonsensical, is a valuable and timely contribution to the struggle to preserve the Western classical tradition. Traditionalists looking for intellectual ammunition should start here.

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