

## BOOK REVIEW

of

J. Budziszewski,

*What We Can't Not Know,*

Spence Publishing Company, 2003.

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In the lead-in pages of this book, eight publication periodicals (*Claremont Review of Books*, *Boundless* webzine, *Booklist*, *First Things*, *Religion & Liberty*, *Weekly Standard*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *National Catholic Register*) and eight individuals (Chuck Colson, Phillip Johnson, Richard John Neuhaus, Robert George, David Novak, Michael Novak, Russell Hittinger, and Michael Cromartie) endorse this book. No doubt others would be happy to endorse this book as well. I mention these endorsements because to many the idea that there are things we can't not know is probably absurd. Yet, the idea is far from new and is one of Budziszewski's clarion calls in several of his books. Are there such things as innate ideas? Plato thought so. Do we have an innate knowledge of God? Calvin taught it, and more importantly so does the Bible. Calvin wrote near the opening of his *Institutes*: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy . . . God Himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of His divine majesty". The rise of modernity took men's thoughts away from such ideas to some extent, but that doesn't mean that such things are incorrect. Budziszewski believes that such things can not only be intellectually defended, but that they are also common sense.

Professor J. Budziszewski holds a joint appointment in government and philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, where he has taught since 1981. When he joined the faculty there he was an atheist. He was also a nihilist. That is, he was significantly under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher, and did not believe there was any basis for knowledge, truth or morality. He started his academic career at the University of Texas, fresh out of graduate school, holding two basic principles: (1) human beings decide what is good and evil, and (2) individuals are not responsible for what they do. His long-term plans were to build ethical and political theory on these two principles. He now considers such thinking as indefensible and foolish. It is clear to him, now, that he had started with atheism and nihilism, and "cooked up arguments only to rationalize" his position; it was

not cogent arguments that led him to it. Budziszewski confesses "It was . . . agony. You cannot imagine . . . what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. . . . I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, not exactly a feeling of shame, just horror: an overpowering true intuition that my condition was terribly wrong." This brought him back to the Faith he had abandoned in his youth. "The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic where I had been for a long time, but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners." He repudiated his own Ph.D. dissertation and his earlier two basic principles above, and reoriented his thinking on ethical and political matters along Christian teachings.

After a Preface, Acknowledgments, and an Introduction, the book is divided into four Parts: The Lost World, Explaining the Lost World, How the Lost World was Lost, and Recovering the Lost World. Part I has three chapters: Things We Can't Not Know, What It Is That We Can't Not Know, and Could We Get By Knowing Less? Part II has three chapters: The First and Second Witness, The Third and Fourth Witness, and Some Objections. Part III has two chapters: Denial, and Eclipse. Part IV has three chapters: The Public Relations of Moral Wrong, The Public Relations of Moral Right, and Possible Futures.

In the Preface, Budziszewski describes his purpose in writing the book: "In this book I hope to achieve two things. The first is bolster the confidence of plain people in the rational foundations of their common moral sense. . . . The second goal is to present the explanation in such a way that all of the people who think and write about the common truths can achieve a firmer alliance in their defense."

In the Introduction, titled The Moral Common Ground, Budziszewski writes "The common moral truths are no less plain to us today than they ever were. Our problem is not that there isn't a common moral ground, but that we would rather stand somewhere else. We are not in Dante's inferno, where even the sinners acknowledge the law which they have violated. We are in some other hell. The

denizens of our hell say that they don't know the law – or that there is no law – or that each makes the law for himself. And they all know better.”

In Chapter 1, Budziszewski writes “our common moral knowledge is as real as arithmetic, and probably just as plain. Paradoxically, maddeningly, we appeal to it even to justify wrongdoing; rationalization is the homage paid by sin to guilty knowledge.” Near the end of the chapter, Budziszewski writes “Clear vision of the moral law is crushing. Why is that? Because the first thing that an honest man sees with this clear vision is a debt which exceeds anything he can pay.”

In Chapter 4, Budziszewski describes his “First Witness” as “Deep Conscience.” He writes “Deep conscience is the reason why even a man who tells himself there is no right and wrong may shrink from committing murder; why even a man who murders may suffer the pangs of remorse; and why even a man who has deadened himself to remorse shows other symptoms of deep-buried guilty knowledge.” The “Second Witness” is “Design.” He writes: “a presupposition of regarding deep conscience as a witness – as we all, deep down, know it is – is that it has been designed to tell us truth by someone wise enough to do so.” He quotes the Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicist Fred Hoyle as follows: “A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.” Budziszewski continues: “The mere recognition of design does three things for our moral knowledge. First, it vindicates deep conscience. . . . Second, it confirms that we have duties not only to neighbor but to God Himself. . . . Third, it informs us that just as deep conscience is designed, so the rest of us is designed; we are a canvass for His purposes.”

In Chapter 7, Budziszewski quotes G.K. Chesterton on the consequences of denying common morality: “Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes down and down.” Then Budziszewski continues: “Pursued by the Five Furies, a man becomes both more wicked and more stupid: more wicked because his behavior becomes worse, more stupid because he tells himself more lies.” Budziszewski, as does the Bible, links belief and conduct with knowledge: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7, wisdom in Psalm 111:10).

In Chapter 8, Budziszewski identifies the postmodernism of our day with Sophism of old, and then has some of the most devastating comments about a university education I have ever seen in print. In essence he says that the modern university undermines true education. Remember, he is a university professor. He claims that the modern university “is operationally Sophist” and that “people who have not spent time on college campuses find it difficult to believe just how thoroughly they subvert the mind and how little they train it.” The idea of a common moral law may be lacking on most campuses, but that is due to the prevailing philosophical commitment of modern society, not due to sound arguments. Where do we today find sound arguments? In the Church of Jesus Christ!

This review doesn't do justice to Budziszewski's book. His thoughts may take a little mulling over since they are not common in our society. But, in my opinion, our society could benefit greatly from his thoughts. Hopefully, this review may inspire you to read the book!