Khaldoun Sweis Interview

Khaldoun A. Sweis was formerly Chair of and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy at Olive-Harvey College in Chicago, and serves as a Tutor in philosophy with Oxford University in the U.K.

A well-known public lecturer and blogger on Christian apologetics, Dr. Sweis [pronounced "Sway-ss"] has published three books: [Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources](#) (with Chad V. Meister; Zondervan, 2012); [Debating Christian Theism](#) (with J.P. Moreland and Chad Meister; Oxford UP, 2013), and [Killing God: Addressing the Seven Most Common Objections from the New Atheists](#) (CreateSpace, 2016).

In addition to his work on apologetics, Dr. Sweis has published on the philosophy of mind in Think: A Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, as well as other venues. You can learn more about Khaldoun Sweis's philosophical and apologetic activities by visiting his [personal website](#).

KHALDOUN SWEIS INTERVIEW

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Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in an interview with TheBestSchools.org.

We would like to begin — as we do with all our interviewees — by asking you about your background. When and where were you born? What did your parents do for a living? What religious faith was practiced in your home? Where were you educated? Where have you taught? Anything you would like to share with our readers to give them a better understanding of your personal journey.

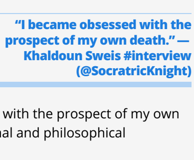
Khaldoun Sweis

Thank you for the opportunity to do this interview! It is an honor.

I was born in 1972 in Amman, Jordan. My parents were from a small minority of Christians in the Middle East. My mother was a homemaker and my father was an entrepreneur who opened grocery stores and restaurants. He started cleaning toilets when he first came to the USA. Both my parents were very hard workers. We moved to Hollywood, California, where my brother was born. Then to Chicago for business reasons.

"I became obsessed with the prospect of my own death." — Khaldoun Sweis #interview (@SocratricKnight)

At the age of fifteen, I had become what psychologists call an introverted child. Compared to the average teenager. I had apparently thought too much. After the death of my grandfather Moses (at 107), it dawned on me that I will one day die, too. My childhood dreams stopped. Even at a young age, I saw graveyards as truly unnatural, no matter what my elders said. "Are we all meant for this?" was the echo that enshrined my heart as I looked with dread upon the gravestones. I became obsessed with the prospect of my own death. My parents were nominal Christians, so when I became of an age to ask the personal and philosophical questions, they were not equipped to address them.



I hated life because of the lingering shadow of death that would be the inevitable victor. I wished that the whole world would just disappear. As if on a dark, rainy night, silhouettes of rain drops covered my head while I stared out at the dark, empty sky — which was nothing next to the emptiness inside my own soul.

Was there a god? My studies in philosophy and science just drove me deeper into despair. At that time, I could not have recited a biblical verse if you'd paid me. The glint of stainless steel fit in my fifteen-year-old hand quite well. It was a survival knife, and now I wanted to use it for something opposite its name: I wanted to die.

"At that time, I could not have recited a biblical verse if you'd paid me." — Khaldoun Sweis (@SocratricKnight)

In desperation, I cried out to Him, the one I dreaded the most, and was most afraid really did exist… God. The radio in my room began to echo voices of a preacher. I was annoyed, but listened anyway. The man spoke about God's Son, a cross, and my opportunity to become really alive. He reminded me that if I did take my life, my so-called pain would not end there!

The words of the Scriptures pierced into my darkened heart:

> **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**
> **— Hebrews 10:31**

Slowly, tears overflowed my eyes, and somehow I knew he was telling the truth and suicide would bring me into the hands of the Living God with nothing but this sin on my soul. The knife hit the floor and my knees followed. I experienced what some scholars call a theophany, and accepted Him whom I did not deserve.

"I knew then and there that God had forgiven me and promised me eternal life." — Khaldoun Sweis (@SocratricKnight)

I admitted that I was a sinner on his way to hell who needed a Savior. I don't know how to explain this, but out of my tears came the most peaceful feeling I have ever felt. I knew then and there that God had forgiven me and promised me eternal life. Much later, I was baptized again (the first time was when I was an infant in Jordan, but this time it was at my choice). What once was a darkness at the end of my tunnel of life was now a person surrounded by peace who said,

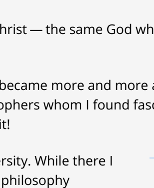
> **I will never leave you nor forsake you.**
> **— Hebrews 13:5**

I had found meaning in my life in the person of God the Son Christ — the same God who died on a cross over 2,000 years earlier.

As I moved into my high school and college years, philosophy became more and more attractive to me. I was introduced to Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Alvin Plantinga, and other philosophers whom I found fascinating. I found I could actually major — and find a career — in philosophy, getting paid to do it!

I developed strong friendships with atheists and skeptics in my philosophy department who, unknown to them, were instrumental in helping me think more deeply about my faith.

Thus I completed my BA in philosophy at Eastern Illinois University. While there I developed strong friendships with atheists and skeptics in my philosophy department who, unknown to them, were instrumental in helping me think more deeply about my faith. That is also when I discovered apologetics in the writings of such authors as Ravi Zacharias, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton (right), and Peter Kreeft.



I then went on to Trinity International University, where I completed my MA in Christian Thought, with an emphasis in Philosophy of Religion. A few years later, I was able to complete my PhD in Philosophy of the Mind at Hull University in the U.K.

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You have taught at Oxford University and you now teach at an inner-city community college in a tough neighborhood of Chicago. Would you care to comment on the special challenges of teaching philosophy and religion to inner-city kids?

Khaldoun Sweis

Most of my students in Chicago come from economically disadvantaged and socially challenging districts.

Yes, the difference is striking! Many of my students in Chicago come from economically disadvantaged and socially challenging districts. Many do not even know their own fathers or have bad relationships with them. So, due to their educational level and interests, they struggle with subjects like philosophy or intellectual history, though there are of course exceptions to this. Many of my students in Chicago are some of the most hard-working and passionate people you will ever meet. My job has become one where I aim to make the subject of philosophy interesting and relevant to their lives using social media, movies, comic books, TV shows, and everyday life experiences, the better to showcase the ideas and philosophies of authors like Aristotle and Descartes, and to compare them with ideas contained in Batman, the Matrix, and the Avengers. I am proud to have my destiny intersecting with theirs. In fact, they have enriched my life in ways I cannot express with words alone!

"It is a different world at Oxford." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

It is a different world at Oxford where the interest is already there and I am challenged to present the material in an academic and robust fashion. I feel like I am teaching chimerically, where I am in flux between making philosophy relevant and interesting and getting deeper and more theoretical into the discipline itself. In 2013, I was humbled and happy to receive the Phi Theta Honor Society "Distinguished Faculty" award!

In teaching for the past decade, I have found that a student often thinks she knows something until she is forced to articulate it. The Socratic method reveals to the student her ignorance (if she is ignorant of the topic on hand), and helps her form, build, and strengthen her ideas and bring them under the submission of God, the Lord of logic and reason. It is my hope that this philosophy of teaching will last beyond the classroom.

Secondly, I aim to be a disciplined teacher in order to provide an articulate and substantial education for my students as a role model. The Book of Proverbs tells us that

> **Poverty and shame [will come] to him who neglects discipline,**
> **But he who regards reproof will be honored.**
> **— Proverbs 13:18**

In a similar vein, the theologian Richard S. Taylor once penned these words regarding the contrast between the disciplined and the undisciplined mind:[1]

> **In the battle of ideas the disciplined mind has the advantage over the scatterbrain.**
>
> **A trained mind can evaluate evidence, think logically, select ends, and devise means; it can concentrate on essentials and discard the irrelevant. A trained mind can think more rapidly and also more accurately. At the same time the man with the ready mind is more apt to express himself coherently and persuasively. Consequently the man whose mind is undisciplined will soon be outclassed and outdistanced by others in whatever field he enters…. The undisciplined mind is always an easy prey for the demagogue and the charlatan. Out of such mass intellectual dullness and inertia dictatorships are spawned.**

Taylor goes on to say that[2]

> **… many a young person would like to be a doctor or a top-flight scientist but never will, simply because he will not buckle down to the demanding years of hard study. Many young people would like to achieve artistry and mastery in music but they never will, simply because they will not face the long hours of monotonous practice year after year…. The world is full of naturally brilliant people who never rise above mediocrity because they will not make the sacrifice which superiority requires.**

With the Socratic method and by infusing my own life with discipline, I hope to influence my students' lives for the better.

Thus, with the Socratic method and by infusing my own life with discipline, I hope to influence my students' lives for the better.

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Do you have a philosophy of teaching?

Khaldoun Sweis

Well, it seems I already answered this in a way, but my personal teaching philosophy (online and off-line) can be summed up in two words: enthusiasm and duty.

This formula comes from an article entitled "Three Kinds of Men" by C.S. Lewis (right).[3]

The first kind of man lives only for enthusiasm.

The second kind acknowledges that there are morals and rules in life to live by and tries to do what pleases him without compromising those categorical imperatives (as Kant would say). His time in life is divided like a soldier who is "on duty" and "off duty." He sees his world as a time for "duty or work" and a time for "pleasure." This is the predominant view of work in the West today, if not the world.

The third kind of man sees his responsibility and pleasure as one. He does not dread to "wake up Monday and go to work," he looks forward to it.

Teaching is not only a duty — it is also something I am enthusiastically passionate about. — @SocratricKnight

I am convinced that if one's enthusiasm and duty in life are not homogeneous, they will leave one unfulfilled and ultimately will eradicate the productivity out of their jobs and leave them grappling with a life of unyielding monotony. Because I know that philosophy will encourage individual intellectual growth among my students, it becomes my duty to train them in it and to enjoy coming along for the ride as they realize their fallacies and new insights. A leader who has this confidence duplicates this contagious attitude in the classroom. My point is that if a teacher sees enthusiasm and duty as one, the students will pick up on that and hopefully learn from it. Teaching is not only a duty for me as an occupation, it is also something I am enthusiastically passionate about.

Thus, I see the role of a professor at a college (as anywhere else) as that of influencing, motivating, and providing a positive role model for students as they seek their own goals and dreams in life.

Regarding my particular subject area, philosophy, I take my view from Socrates and Jesus, in particular what is known as the "Socratic method" — a technique where the teacher gently forces the student to critique his or her own beliefs by the method of questions and answers. After my students have researched their assigned topics, I then apply this method of teaching to encourage individual thought and reflection on their part.

The Socratic method encourages students to discover knowledge though questioning their own beliefs and convictions.

According to Socrates, there are two ways to come to knowledge: through discovery and by being taught. The Socratic method encourages students to discover knowledge though questioning their own beliefs and convictions, in addition to reading and being taught by others.

Jesus taught like this many times and in many ways. He asked "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29) or "Why do you call me good?" (Luke 18:19) to force his questioners to dig deeply into their own beliefs about the questions they are asking him.

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As a philosopher, you wear mainly two hats: that of philosopher of mind and that of philosopher of religion. Let's start with the former.

At the heart of the philosophy of mind, of course, is the venerable "mind-body problem" — that is, What is the connection between the mind and the body? We understand that you support a version of "substance dualism." Is that correct? If so, could you briefly explain to our readers what that means? What are the main reasons you consider yourself to be a substance dualist?

Khaldoun Sweis

Sure. Substance dualism is the view that there are two substances, or things, that make up what it means to be human: the spiritual and the physical. René Descartes (right) was the most famous philosopher to articulate this view.

Without much objection from their peers, the ancient and medieval philosophers before Descartes's time, like Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, all held that intellect or mind was apart from the body and was immortal. Most religions of the world believe we are more than our body, and recent studies on the minds of children show that substance dualism is the default position.[4]

Most religions of the world believe we are more than our body, and recent studies on the minds of children show that substance dualism is the default position.

However, when we think more deeply on this issue, we see that the soul is an incomplete person without its body. On the other hand, Descartes and modern thinkers like Richard Swinburne and J.P. Moreland believe the soul (or mind) is the person — in fact, the essence of the person.

I am somewhat agreement with them—but not fully! The evidence leads me to hold to a nuanced substance dualism that takes our body seriously as part of our essence —of course as Aquinas argued, we can exist, temporary without it for a time in the intermediate state between death and resurrection. I recommend John Cooper's book *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting* (Apollos, 2001) for more details on this.

But why can't we just be very sophisticated physical beings? It is because of our mental properties like the following, are not physical or just emergent properties and thus they give us reason to believe we are more than our bodies:

- Sensations
- Thoughts
- Beliefs
- Desires
- Acts of free will

These properties are not physical because they do not take up space or volume:

- Thoughts are not physical (brain states are)
- Thoughts are true or false (this would be incoherent for brain states)
- Conscious states have a "what it is like" quality, while brains do not (this is what scholars call "*qualia*"[5])

I recommend the work of J.P. Moreland for more on these insights.

But although I sympathize with the Cartesian account of taking seriously the mind (or the soul) of the person as a concrete entity, I must part ways with it for a number of reasons. I embrace it — but not as a complete account.

One of the main problems many find with the Cartesian system is its lack of attention to the importance of the human body as a necessary element in what a person is.

One of the main problems many find with the Cartesian system is its lack of attention to the importance of the human body as a necessary element in what a person is. We err when we choose any one part of us — whether it is our mind, our brain, our heart, or, in modern terms, our sexuality — and conclude that it is the essential part.

This is like choosing an element out of the earth to claim it is the essential part of the earth. Without the whole, it is not truly itself. It is the same as taking a quote from a novel out of context.

Similarly, when we choose only one part of what makes us human — the mind in Descartes's case — we take it out of its context. I think that the role of the body in making a person is ignored at the peril of over-spiritualizing the embodied human being. A human person is necessarily one who is born with a body.

Although Descartes (Plato, too) claimed that the connection of the body and the person is more than that of a mere pilot in a ship, his view seems to reach just such a conclusion: the person is the mind or soul, which is a pilot in a ship. Moreover, if a person only resides in a body (even if it is connected to her), then when the body breaks down the person should not be affected (although her ability to express herself may be affected). But the evidence from medical science conflicts with this notion.

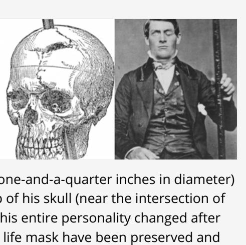
"The person is a psychosomatic unity." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

The person is a psychosomatic unity.

For example, a person whose body suffers from a severe neurological disorder, such as Down syndrome, resulting in manifold disabilities, might not be able to think or understand complex thoughts. Traumatic brain injuries (TBI) can even contribute to drastic changes in personality — that is, in the development of the person — according to the [Brain Injury Association of America](#).

There are many cases where human persons are not able to fully express their personhood, such as, but not limited to, people with severe mental diseases that damage the cerebral cortex of the brain (especially, the frontal lobes) and people in comas and persistent vegetative states (PVS) — and in such cases, this psychosomatic unity becomes very evident.

One real-life example is the famous Phineas Gage (right), a documented case reported in 1848.[6]



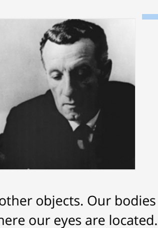
Gage was a railroad construction foreman, who suffered a critical brain injury on the job that should have killed any normal man. However, Gage survived. What happened is this:

During the construction of the Rutland & Burlington Railroad, an accidental explosion occurred which pushed a rod (reported to be about three feet long and one-and-a-quarter inches in diameter) through Gage's skull. The rod entered through his left cheek and exited out the top of his skull (near the intersection of the sagittal and coronal sutures). Against all expectation, Gage survived. However, his entire personality changed after the event, causing his friends say "it was no longer Gage." Phineas Gage's skull and life mask have been preserved and are held today at the Harvard Medical School's [Warren Anatomical Museum](#) in Boston.

"These and other examples make me doubt the old Cartesian system." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

It is reported that with time Gage recovered from some of the personality changes caused by the accident. However, for a time, at least, this man's entire inner life was drastically altered by massive neurological damage to his brain. These and other examples make me doubt the old Cartesian system.

I also learn from the French philosopher [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#) (right) that we are our bodies. In the same way, I would argue: We are our mental selves. Our body is not just another experience of the world; rather, it is the vehicle through which we experience everything else.



Moreover, we have proprioception, which is the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself. We are aware of our body without necessarily perceiving it as with other objects. Our bodies have spatially coincident perceptions; our orientation of space is from our bodies and where our eyes are located. This is what Merleau-Ponty called "the lived body." This is much different from either modern materialistic or Cartesian views of the body.

The implications of the fact that we are more than pilots in a ship — *we are* our bodies — come out very clearly in the case of pain and bodily dysfunction. We not only *have* pain, we are *in* the pain. If we have a breakdown in our brain's neural structure, we will experience a memory lapse. And so on.

Even our emotional lives have connections to our brain states — for example, depression. Current research on the prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala shows profound physical factors that may alter not only a person's ability to the function, but his or her very view of life.

This of course can be accounted for via causal correlations with the soul. It does not require identity. Martha J. Farah and Paul Root Wolpe have written much on this topic.[7]

"We are em-bodied minds, but we are also em-minded bodies." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

Thus, we are em-bodied minds, but we are also em-minded bodies.

We are born, live, drink, eat, get married, and die with our flesh and blood body. The immaterialists are wrong in assuming that we are only a mental substance, and equally wrong are the materialistic naturalists who think we are only material substances. We need a balanced view.

The soul and body are both critical to the nature of what it means to be human, let alone a human person.

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In your instructive and charming philosophical dialogue entitled "Consciousness or Qualia," you make your character representing Daniel C. Dennett say the following:[8]

> **Qualia are self-created illusions; next to God, I think they may be the greatest delusion we have ever deceived ourselves into believing.**

Now, Dan Dennett is a bright guy (he even wants to reserve the term "bright" for hard-headed atheists like himself!). Would he really go so far as to claim that the scarlet color of a rose in bloom does not exist — not just that it does not exist in the rose itself, but that it does not exist even in my mind as I look at it?

In short, how do you think it is possible for people like Dennett to say such ridiculous things with a straight face?

Khaldoun Sweis

Hahaha… I suppose I have wondered that more times than I can count. In the book of Ephesians 4:18 it says,

> **They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.**

And in Romans 1:21 it says,

> **For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.**

So, first let me say that these verses mean very little if there is no God and He did not inspire the Bible. But I believe He does and did.

When a person divorces himself from the Divine One, it is inevitable that they will embrace the most absurd of notions to make sense of reality!

So, when a person divorces himself from the Divine One, it is inevitable that they will embrace the most absurd of notions to make sense of reality! As G.K. Chesterton is often alleged to have said,[9]

> **When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't then believe in nothing; he believes anything.**

And people, especially professors, become *very* creative about what they believe and why!

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Now, let's talk about the other philosophical hat you wear, which is that of a philosopher of religion, in general, and a proponent of Christian apologetics, in particular.

First, could you talk about how philosophy of religion and Christian apologetics are related to each other? Perhaps it might not be a bad idea to remind our readers of what the word "apologetics" means in this context, as well.

Khaldoun Sweis

The word "apologetics" derives from a Greek word, *apologia*, meaning the speech on behalf of the defense in a legal case [as in Plato's *Apology* — eds.].

The Bible commands every Christian to be ready to give a reason (*apologia*) for the hope that is in him (1 Pet. 3:15). Apologetics, primarily, aims to show that Christianity is true for everyone, not just for Christians! An "apologist" is someone who is well-prepared to defend the message against criticism and distortion, and to give evidences of its credibility — when asked. Let me emphasize:

#Apologetics aims to show that Christianity is true for everyone — not just for Christians! — @SocratricKnight

Will you allow me to illustrate? I was in Bucharest, Romania, for an apologetics conference I was speaking at, when I stopped to ask directions of a sales lady. Noticing my American accent, she literately held me there, trying to sell me a fingernail polisher. Fingernail polisher! I neither wanted it nor needed it. But she kept insisting that I did. It took a great deal of composure to walk away with a "no-thank-you-smile."

Defending our faith may seem like that to some people — either people who are just not interested, or, from a spiritual perspective, those whom God has yet not taken to a place in their lives where they have realized the finality of life and the depth of their own sin or the necessity of the Divine.

Unfortunately, today the term "apologetics" has unpleasant connotations for many people. On a superficial level, it sounds as if we are being asked to apologize for having faith. At a deeper level, it may suggest an aggressive or opportunistic kind of person who resorts to fair means or foul in order to get people to accept his point of view.

The secular world does not want it and thinks they don't need people to defend their views, since they have an egalitarian view of ideas. They think all views are equal — at least that is what many in the secular world claim. But give them a few minutes and you will find them going back and contradicting themselves. Bring up the area of sexuality and you will see the fire begin to rise in the nose of the dragon. At that point, you will notice that they have no problem doing apologetics for their own views of life, sexuality, and the universe!

Philosophy of religion, on the other hand, is a branch of philosophy that aims to facilitate participants in thinking clearly about the questions that many in religion, in general, take for granted, such as, "What, if anything, is it that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are agreeing about when they join in claiming that there is a God?; and 'What, if any, prospects are there for rationally defending or attacking this claim?'; and 'If there is a God, what reasons do we have to believe He exists?'"

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You have edited two extremely interesting anthologies in this field: [Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources](#) (with Chad V. Meister; Zondervan, 2012); and [Debating Christian Theism](#) (with J.P. Moreland and Chad Meister; Oxford University Press, 2013). The latter volume contains some challenging material and is clearly aimed primarily at an academic audience; however, the former book is pretty accessible and would be of interest to many non-specialist readers. Both books are superbly well done, and we recommend them both highly.

You also just released a book, [Killing God: Addressing the Seven Most Common Objections from the New Atheists](#) (CreateSpace, 2016). Would you tell us about that?

Khaldoun Sweis

The book [Debating Christian Theism](#), which Oxford University Press printed (which was a high honor), comprises groundbreaking dialogues by many of the most prominent scholars in Christian apologetics and the philosophy of religion. This volume offers a definitive treatment of central questions of Christian faith focused on a non-Christian audience.

We have featured lucid and up-to-date material designed to engage readers in contemporary theistic and Christian issues. Beginning with dialogues about God's existence and the coherence of theism and then moving beyond generic theism to address significant debates over such specifically Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus, [Debating Christian Theism](#) provides an ideal starting point for anyone seeking to understand the current debates in Christian theology.

I also wanted to write a piece on truth but my colleagues — much wiser than I — thought I needed more time in the field before I jumped in with my own contribution. In any case, it was an honor to work with Chad Meister and J.P Moreland on this!

A regret with it is that we really wanted to include a back-to-back debate style with the contributors in the book, but Oxford thought it would be "too much."

The other volume, *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, is a book I wish I'd had when I was learning about apologetics. Zondervan picked it up. In it, we make available over 50 primary source selections that address various challenges to Christian faith in the history of Christian apologetics. The compilation represents a broad Christian spectrum, ranging from early writers, like Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, to Saint Teresa of Avila and Blaise Pascal, to more recent and present-day apologists such as C. S. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, and Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger). Insightful introductions, black-and-white images, concise section headings, and discussion questions guide readers toward a clearer understanding of classical defenses of Christianity. Annotated reading lists, a bibliography, and author and subject indices contribute to the suitability of this anthology as a textbook or supplemental reader. It is especially useful as a supplemental textbook for students, allowing them to read great apologists and thinkers in their own words.

One regret I have with it is that we were not able to include much of a reformed, or Calvinist, approach to the problem of evil, from a scholar such as John Feinberg or Gordon Clark.

In regard to *Killing God*, I needed a catchy title with atheism is on the rise and getting to be popular among younger people and professionals. I wanted to provide my students and others with ways to address and understand atheism with academic rigor that even a high school student could understand and appreciate! The book was intended to help people to know the major arguments used by the new atheists, and — not necessarily what to say in response — but better, how to respond logically and respectfully, and to understand the psychological objections people have to God, in general.

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You have expressed a concern for the state of modern culture — not just for its moral anarchy (the normalization of abortion, sexual promiscuity and perversion, illegitimacy, pornography, marijuana, etc., etc.), but also for its spiritual emptiness. We share your concern and are appalled by such indicators of mass aimlessness and despair as the so-called "heroin epidemic" (as though one "caught" a heroin habit like one catches cold) and the recent doubling of the homicide rate in some of our inner cities.

Arguably, the decline of religious faith and practice in this country is one of the main reasons for this spiritual emptiness.

But the question — as Lenin (and Chernyshevsky before him) said — is: What is to be done? What are the best approaches to this enormous problem, in your judgment?

Khaldoun Sweis

We live in world of weapons of mass distraction: Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Vine, Snapchat, YouTube, Netflix, Sports, and on and on. Man has, in Aldous Huxley's phrase, "an infinite appetite for distraction."[10] And Pascal told us that:[11]

The secular world lives with distractions & they don't want to be bothered with ultimate questions. — @SocratricKnight

> **… the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.**

The secular world lives with these distractions and they don't want to be bothered with ultimate questions. And when we try to give the gospel to them, they look at us like we have two spinning heads on wheels!

Os Guinness said it well in his recent book *Fool's Talk*:[12]

> **Most of our evangelism and apologetics assumes a high degree of interest, or openness, or need… The challenge is to speak to people most of the time when they are not interested, not open and not needy.**

I recommend Guinness's book, which is an exceptional analysis of current trends in culture and of how to communicate with those involved with them.

Now, let's talk about demographics.

The share of Americans in general who identify as "nones" (not the inhabitants of convents, but those who check "none" when asked what religion they are!) has roughly doubled in the past several years according to a Pew Research Center study from 2011–2014. In Chicago alone, "nones" were up 86 percent between 2000 and 2010.

The most recent British Social Attitudes data show that "no religion" is now by far the largest single identification in England and Wales. It is very nearly half the adult population, and more than twice the proportion who self-identify as Anglican. It is four times the Catholic population, and more than five times the total identifying with non-Christian faiths.

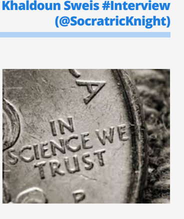
The same pattern is seen all across Europe, and increasingly in the U.S., too, where the first chair for the Study of Atheism been endowed at the University of Miami in Florida.

It is important for me to note that this trend is not the case in Africa, in Latin America, or in the Muslim world in general, where passionate Pentecostal Christianity and Islamism are growing at rapid rates.

Meanwhile, the seculars have their own gospel and set of assumptions.

"The seculars have their own gospel and set of assumptions." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

The secular world assumes that there is nothing that is sacred, nothing that is absolutely true, nothing that is universally wrong. They don't necessarily deny that there is a God or that Jesus is the way to heaven — they just don't care.



They want to stand up against oppression of minorities by religious "bigots," as they call them. This is evident in our mainstream media, in Hollywood movies, and most of all in the academic world, where I live and work daily.

Let's take this apart. The same people who tell us there are no universal rights or wrongs and preach that everything is relative, also tell us it is universally wrong to discriminate against transgendered people! The people who tell us that it is unacceptable to tell them that nothing or no one made God, are the same people who bow their knees in awe when Stephen Hawking tells them that the universe created itself from nothing.

It is very important to expose the unstable foundations and inconsistencies of the secular worldview. But that must be secondary, since Jesus told us to love our enemies and our neighbors. As the eminent theologian Miroslav Volf reminds us, we cannot reach the secular world unless we understand deeply that we must approach it with charity. Otherwise,[13]

"It's very important to expose the unstable foundations & inconsistencies of the secular worldview." — @SocratricKnight

> **Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners.**

You cannot effectively meet people where they are at in life without reaching into their way of seeing the world. The Postmodernists tell us perception is everything. That is insane because if that were true, then I would have hair and be a billionaire! 🙂

But comic notions aside, there is some truth to this. The skeptic, or secular thinker, who is indifferent is the hardest person to reach. He would rather watch the football game or drink a few beers, watch Netflix, or really do anything to avoid thinking or dealing with his own nagging emptiness. For that person, you need to engage him or her where it hurts.

I was reading the book of John, where the Lord tells us (John 15:18–19):

> **If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.**

So, we are to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. But more so, we are never to forget that Christians are sent *into* the world, as it has been God's design all along, to make the Kingdom of Heaven in the hearts of men and woman, boys and girls, starting with our own hearts first.

With that said, it is very difficult to get into the secular fortress with a sign of John 3:16. They will leave the drawbridge closed with guards armed to the teeth. But if we see that their garden is damaged and their people are starving, we can offer to help grow that garden, and then they may open the drawbridge and let us in!

Once we are in, we can bring real life into their garden and feed their people. This is the move of classical Christianity that shaped the modern world by means of everything from education, to humanitarianism to medical work for 2,000-plus years. Recently, this was written about by such authors as Tim Keller, D.A. Carson, James Davidson Hunter, Miroslav Volf, and Os Guinness.

When we take care of that rotten garden, then, at that point, we can get a hearing where they will be open to listen about the first gardener, and about true meaning and significance of life.

We tend to forget that when the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, many will walk away and others will take their anger out on the messengers — us. There will be some still standing whom God had planned for us to reach before we even started! They are the sheep who hear his voice (John 10:27).

Sometimes, with apologetics we fall into the mindset of Dale Carnegie — and the result may not be winning friends and influencing people! I had to learn that the hard way. I am slowly learning better ways to do this, in a place where I cannot walk the halls without tripping over a "none" in one shape or another.

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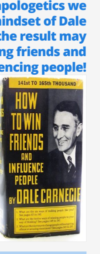

Either way, whether my secular friends accept my truth or convictions or not, I am called to love them nevertheless.

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You have a strong interest in using popular culture and what you have termed "modern mythologies" to help young people find their way back to a clearer perception of the eternal moral order, if not to Christianity itself. Could you please elaborate on this?

Khaldoun Sweis

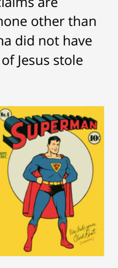
I have always, since I can remember, been a fan of superheroes. They are a mythology similar to a theology, but not as complex — though, in some ways, they are. Chesterton said that:[14]

> **Theology is simply that part of religion that requires brains.**

And I would add that modern Marvel and DC comics have really grown some brains in their works.

But the question that hangs in the air is: "What is the difference between Jesus Christ and the theology behind him, and the mythology of other messianic figures like Superman and the pantheon of gods and superheroes?"

Did Christians steal from or borrow from the myths of Balder or Horus? Popular books that make such claims are making their way around.[15] However, leaving aside that many of these books have been debunked by none other than the Skeptic Society for their gross inaccuracies (for example, Jesus was not born on December 25; Buddha did not have 12 disciples; Horus's mother was not a virgin), there is simply no evidence showing that the biographers of Jesus stole anything. Indeed, the idea that they did so is preposterous, for many reasons.



However, it is understandable that people who are not experts might believe that the gospel narratives are "based on" earlier myths. After all, they do embody a theme that runs through all the great stories or myths of the world! We should not try to run away from this fact or try to cover it up. Many of the world's great masterpieces have messiah-like saviors. This is recognized by the greatest of Christian writers, such as Dante, Milton, G.K. Chesterton, and J.R.R Tolkien. There is a dying-and-rising god in the myths of Osiris, of Ishtar, and even of Superman!

The pagan poets wrote stories that flowed from the deepest hearts of men. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that God spoke to the world in three ways: through our conscience; through the Jewish people (to whom alone he spoke directly); and through the "good dreams" of the pagans, by which Lewis meant,[16]

"The pagan poets wrote stories that flowed from the deepest hearts of men." — Khaldoun Sweis (@SocratricKnight) #story

> **… those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.**

We might also include cultural prophets of the past like the highest, most noble poets and philosophers of the ancient Greco-Roman world, including (but not limited to) Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil — all saw a shadow of the truth of the incarnation of the holy in myths, legends, tragedies, and epics.

Even in the great mythologies and religions of the world, they all acknowledge good and evil and a source of all life in the gods. And these gods have a source in something higher than them — a God-with-a-capital-G. Even the All-Father in the Norse mythology is not all-powerful.

Today, these old prophet-poets have been replaced by our contemporary pop celebrities, and now myth is commonly believed to refer solely to a "false belief or idea."

Myth is commonly believed to refer solely to a "false belief or idea."

However, for academics like J.R.R. Tolkien, the idea of myth and mythology was only tangentially related to falsehood. Thankfully, the *Oxford English Dictionary* still keeps their number-one definition of myth as something both Lewis and Tolkien would have understood:

> **Myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.**

What makes Christ Jesus any different? Because he took on flesh; he really did walk this earth; and we have historical evidence for him and his miracles that we do not have for superheroes or other mythologies.

"Jesus was the myth that became real." — Khaldoun Sweis #Interview (@SocratricKnight)

Jesus was the myth that became real. If I might rephrase C.S. Lewis's "God in the Dock,"[17] I would say the following:

> **Yahweh or Jehovah is *more* than a pagan god, not less; Christ is *more* than Superman or Galactus, not less.**

We Christian apologists have tried to minimize these parallels. But I would argue that we should not be scared of the mythical radiance resting on our theology. We should not be nervous about "parallels" in mythology of messianic figures like Thor, Hercules, Balder, Mithras — or even Superman, Silver Surfer, Wonder Woman, the Matrix, etc.

The parallels ought to be there — it would be a stumbling block if they weren't! We must not, in a superior attitude of false spirituality, withhold our imaginative creativity, for God is the most creative being there is and he left seeds and kernels of his truth though all the religions and cultures and mythologies and legions in all of history.

God is the most creative being there is and he left seeds and kernels of his truth though all the religions and cultures and mythologies and legions in all of history.

I believe we can use the mythology of superheroes to reach a new generation that finds its meaning in the stories they weave in much the same way the Greeks found them in their mythologies.

For example, I flew into New York a few months ago to be on a panel discussion with some of the creators of Marvel's hit Daredevil Netflix series. It was quite an adventure. We discussed the difference between a good and evil — between a super-villain and a superhero; between a "good person" and a dragon-like person; between vengeance and justice. These heroes are becoming the new archetypes for the new generation.

We are missing out if we do not engage them.

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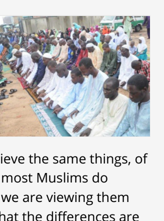
Next, a very personal question: What is it like to be an Arab in America today?

Khaldoun Sweis

Let me illustrate how it is for many of us when news breaks of another terrorist attack.

One time, I was at a cafe in Chicago, wearing a shirt that my mother got for me from Petra, one of the Seven Wonders of the World located in the land of my birth, Jordan. An older U.S. Army veteran was standing in line behind me. When he saw the T-shirt, he asked me: "Are you an Arab?" I said "Yes." He shot back: "You Arab terrorists are a threat to national security, you need to leave this country and take your Islamic trash with you!" I told him: "I am not a Muslim." He said: "It doesn't matter, you are all the same!"



Well, this is the stereotypical response that many Arabs — or anyone else looking Arab or South Asian — may find from the people in the West, especially after recent attacks that happened in Paris, in Nice, and in other places. It has generated its own word, "Islamophobia." Most of it is based on caricatures and inaccurate information from the media.

First of all, while most Arabs are Muslim, most Muslims are not Arab. Second, it is only some small percentage of Muslims that is perpetuating these terrorist stereotypes! Not all Muslims believe the same things, of course, just as not all Christians believe the same things. But there are some basic concepts that most Muslims do believe. Superficially, Muslims and Christians look like they believe the same about God because we are viewing them from a distance. But when you get off the plane and walk into the huts and homes, you will see that the differences are striking. However, Muslims are people, too; they are fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons. We need to treat them with love and respect.

On the other hand, it is true — at least in the past decade or so, and considered globally — that the majority of terrorists (those who target civilians to achieve political ends) have been Muslims. So, although the majority of Muslims are not terrorists, the majority of terrorists have been Muslims, at least in the past decade. To ignore that fact is to court ignorance and endanger the national security, as my Army friend said.

So, although the majority of Muslims are not terrorists, the majority of terrorists have been Muslims, at least in the past decade.

It is also important to keep in mind that many of these terrorists are committing atrocities against Muslim and non-Muslims alike.

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When wearing your Christian apologetic hat, what do you say to your Muslim brethren? How might sincere Christians and Muslims best enter into a fruitful dialogue that does not degenerate into either vapidity or recrimination?

Khaldoun Sweis

Keep in mind that opinions are things you hold on to, but convictions hold on to you! Islam holds on to Muslims in that way. For most Muslims, Islam is the centerpiece of their lives; it is not an extracurricular activity, like Christianity is for many Christians in the West who lack conviction. For many Muslims, when you talk about Islam, positively or negatively, they think you are talking about them.

The Western media thinks the same way! Criticism of Islam is seen similar to racism or criticism of homosexuality — they cannot seem to separate people's ideas and ways of life from their own identities.

This is one of the reasons why many liberals and Islamic apologists use terms like "Islamophobia" or "homophobia." But if they were consistent, then they would also use a word like "Christophobia" when discussing criticism of Christianity! But they do not, because in this case, they are able to separate the religion from the people who practice it.

Any critical words of Islamic doctrine is perceived as "hate speech" by many.

With that said, I must emphasize — so those who might misquote me can come back and read this — I am taking about the *religion of Islam*, **not** Muslim people. I love Muslim people. It is Islam, the ideology, that I will be talking about.

The central ethic of Christianity is love. Ravi Zacharias said it best:[18]

> **Yes, if truth is not undergirded by love, it makes the possessor of that truth obnoxious and the truth repulsive.**

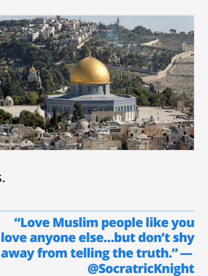
Islam is not just a religion; it is a political ideology and worldview. The word, *ʾislām*, means "submission." Islam is a whole system of thought and practice, everything from eating, praying, and bathing, to taxes, government, and jurisprudence. There are a multiplicity of divisions within Islam, such as *Sunnī*, *Shīʿa*, *Aḥmadiyya*, and *Ṣūfī*, as well as many sub-branches within these branches.

Islam is defined by the words and actions of Muhammad, called the *Sunnah*. The *Qur'ān* says 91 times that his words and actions are considered to be the divine pattern for humanity.[19]

In fact, the very first words a child hears whispered into his or her ears are those of the *Shahadah*:

> **لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله**
>
> ***lā ilāha ill'Allāh [wa] Muḥammad rasūl Allāh***
>
> **["There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God"]**

They are also the last words whispered into a person's ears upon death.



The problem when people try to say that Muslims and Christians worship the same God is that Islam denies the very foundations of the Christian faith. Islam is the only world religion founded on direct anti-Christian premises — the outright denial and rejection of the divinity and vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ.

Consider the fact that the second-holiest site in Islam is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is a shrine located on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was initially completed in 691 C.E. at the order of the Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Malik. An Arabic inscription on the outside of this shrine categorically denies the divinity of Jesus.

So, clearly Christians and Muslims do not share fundamentally the same beliefs, as it is sometimes claimed. Love Muslim people like you love anyone else, but at the same time, do not shy away from telling the truth. Arabs and other Muslims in general appreciate your not being politically correct about your convictions.

"Love Muslim people like you love anyone else…but don't shy away from telling the truth." — @SocratricKnight

Don't attack Muhammad, but at the same time don't be wishy-washy. Tell the truth, but be informed. Read Muslim books, and ask questions of your Muslim neighbors. They may not even agree with many of the things you have read about them. Most of all, love them and share the good news of Christ with them, first by your actions, and secondarily by your words.

For Muslims, I recommend that you read what is considered by Muslims themselves to be the most authoritative source on the life of Muhammad: the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*.[20] I promise you will find things in there you never thought were possible!

But first, get to know who Jesus is, whom Muhammad talks about. Read the works of Jesus by those closest to him in time: the authors of the Gospels — and no, the Gospels were not corrupted!

The person behind the Gospels changed my life — and I am sure, if you let him, he will do that for you, too.

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If you don't mind our asking — we can't help but be curious — did your parents have the great traveler, historian, and philosopher, Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), in mind when they named you?

Khaldoun Sweis

Yes! I have already mentioned my grandfather, Moses. When my other grandfather, Ibrahim, found out I was to be named after him, he insisted that my name be changed to Khaldoun. I did not know that Ibn Khaldūn was a famous philosopher until after I had chosen philosophy as my career!

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Finally, what are your plans for the future? Are there any more books in the works?

Khaldoun Sweis

First of all, I am a full-time father to my precious two children, Daniel Zacharias, and AnaKaterina. I am working on being there for them and helping to mature them into whatever God calls them into.

Zacharias, who is six years old now (he was named after Ravi Zacharias), is into gymnastics, judo, swimming, and piano. AnaKaterina is seven years old, and participates in ballet, swimming, music, and judo, as well as playing the Snowflake in the 2016 production of the *Nutcracker* by the world-class Joffrey Ballet in Chicago. Oh, and I forgot to say, they are both mastering chess!

Then, in my spare time, I am teaching a full load — six classes at Olive-Harvey College — and currently am also writing on superheroes and other areas of engaging the secular world, as well as books on the cultivation of character and virtue. In addition, my speaking requests have picked up, and I am starting to speak at more and more venues worldwide.

These are very humbling and serendipitous times in my life. I pray that I can faithfully navigate them by making the world around me better, one life at a time.

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Thank you very much for your time and for a most interesting interview!

Notes:

1. R.S. Taylor, *The Disciplined Life*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2002; p. 21. (Originally published in 1962.)
2. *Ibid.*; p. 27.
3. C.S. Lewis, "Three Kinds of Men," in *Present Concerns: Essays by C.S. Lewis*. London: Collins, 1986. (Originally printed in the *Sunday Times* for March 21, 1943.)
4. Interview with Paul Bloom, "Natural-Born Dualists" (Edge website, 2004).
5. "*Qualia*" (note that the word is plural; the singular form is *quale*) is a philosophical term of art for the qualitative contents of particular experiences, such as the color scarlet, the sound of a violin playing C#, the taste of pineapple, the odor of a struck match, or the feel of silk — eds.
6. The recently deceased psychiatrist and best-selling author Oliver Sacks discussed Phineas Gage in his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Knopf, 1995; pp. 59ff). Sacks recounted similar stories of cases of catastrophic brain damage in several of his other books, notably *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Summit Books, 1985).
7. M.J. Farah, P.R. Wolpe, and A. Caplan, "Brain Research and Neuroethics" [PDF] (University of Pennsylvania, 2003).
8. K.A. Sweis, "Consciousness or Qualia: What a Conversation from Leading Thinkers in the Field May Sound Like," *Think: A Journal of the Royal Institute for Philosophy*, 2009, **8**(23): 45–53.
9. It appears that the attribution of this well-known aphorism to Chesterton is in fact apocryphal — eds.
10. A. Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.
11. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, A.J. Krailsheimer. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; p. 37.(Originally published posthumously in 1670.) [The line cited occurs in pensée #136 of the Penguin translation, or pensée #139 of the standard Brunschvicg edition — eds.]
12. O. Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015.
13. M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.
14. G.K. Chesterton, *Platitudes Undone*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997. (The original handwritten notes published in this volume date to around 1911.)
15. See, for example, K. Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors; Or, Christianity Before Christ* (CreateSpace, 2013; originally published in 1875); Acharya S. [D.M. Murdock], *The Christ Conspiracy* (Kempton, IL: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999) and *Suns of God: Krishna, Buddha and Christ Unveiled* (Kempton, IL: Adventures Unlimited Press, 2004); and Peter Joseph and D.M. Murdock, *The Zeitgeist Sourcebook: The Greatest Story Ever Told* (Seattle: Stellar House Publishing, 2011).
16. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, revised and enlarged edition. New York: HarperOne, 2015. (Originally published in 1952; based on radio talks given during 1941–1944.)
17. C.S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," in *idem*, *God in the Dock*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. (Originally published in 1970.)
18. R. Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000.
19. The three principal sources of Islamic belief are the *Qur'ān*, the *ḥadīth*, and the *sīra*:

    • The *Qur'ān* is of course the holiest book of Islam, which Muslims believe to be the revealed word of God.

    • A *ḥadīth* is a traditional report about what Muhammad did or said. There are many collections of *ḥadīth* — in fact, there are volumes of them — but the most authoritative are those by Muḥammad al-Bukhārī and Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, both of whom lived in the ninth century C.E., about 200 years after Muhammad.

    • A *sīra* is a compilation of reports which gives a consecutive account of the life of Muhammad. The most authoritative *sīra* is the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* [*Life of the Messenger of God*], compiled by Ibn Isḥāq in the eighth century C.E., about 100 years after Muhammad.

    Together, the *Qur'ān*, the *ḥadīth*, and the *sīra* comprise the foundation and totality of Islam.
20. See the previous Note. For an English translation of the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, see A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.