

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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VKW publishes new WEA book on secularism in Buddhist and Hindu countries

(Bonn, 18.08.2025) Below, we publish a commentary by Bruce Barron on the new book 'Finding God in a Secular World' and its author, Bruce Nicholls.

Commentary by Bruce Baron

The growth of secularism is the greatest threat to the progress of the Christian gospel. But secularism takes many forms. There is Western secularism, Chinese secularism, even Hindu and Buddhist secularism.

Western methods won't work in Asian cultures. If we fail to understand the context with which we wish to engage, we will fail miserably.

I just enjoyed reading a newly published book on this topic, 'Finding God in a Secular World' (available free online) by Bruce Nicholls, one of my esteemed forebears. A first-rate scholar of enormous historical and theological breadth, Nicholls committed himself 50 years ago to enhancing the credibility of evangelical scholarship. As part of this endeavor, he founded the World Evangelical Alliance's Theological Commission and, in 1977, the *Evangelical Review of Theology*, which he edited for 20 years. (I had the privilege of serving as this journal's editor from 2018 through 2024.)

Nicholls doesn't know how to quit serving God. He is 98 years old and still writing. In 2023, just short of age 96, he participated in a five-mile run in his hometown of Auckland, New Zealand. Even in his nineties, he has continued to travel to India (where he served for 39 years), Nepal, and other Asian nations on preaching and mission trips.

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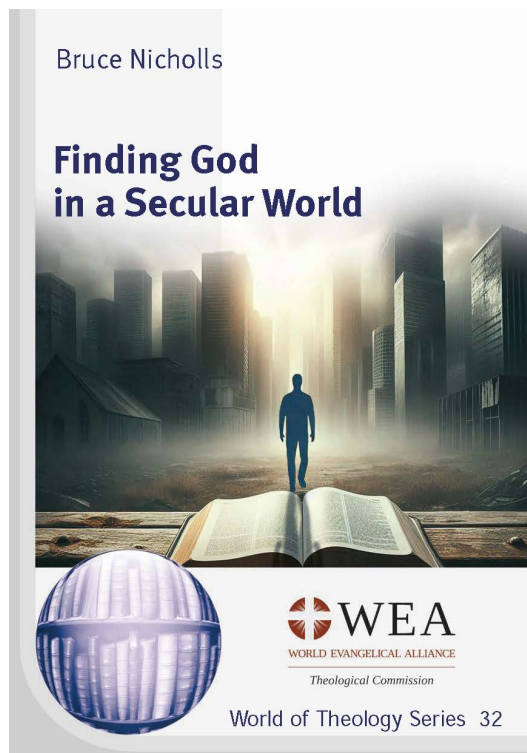
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In barely 120 pages, Nicholls takes the reader on a sweeping historical tour of both Western and Asian civilization, showing that secularism has been with us for a long time. He defines secularism as “the belief that a satisfying and secular life is not dependent upon any belief in the transcendence of a personal and eternal creator God.” Nicholls shows how that ideology has manifested itself in influential thinkers from Socrates and Plato to the Enlightenment and modern thought. He then turns from the West to Asia and does the same for Hinduism, Buddhism, China, and Japan.

Hindu and Buddhist secularism? Well, yes. “Hinduism is thoroughly secular as Asians understand the term,” Nicholls writes. Whereas Western secularism insists explicitly on the separation of religion from daily life, Hinduism embraces all beliefs and practices, undermining any emphasis on a relationship with God. Its core conviction is that a good moral life and renunciation of self can eventually lead to liberation from the endless cycle of death and re-birth and to eternal peace.

Hinduism has plenty of gods and goddesses, but they are not central to the structure of the Hindu belief system or to the search for deliverance. Nicholls highlights this point in describing Buddha’s departure from Hinduism: “He did not need the help of a transcendent God or any of the Hindu gods and goddesses in his quest for nirvana. It was a topic he never chose to debate. In reality, he was a practising atheist.”



Thomas and Christine Schirmacher visit Bruce Nicholls in his retirement home in 2020 © BQ/Martin Warnecke

Since Western and Asian secularisms are so different, we must present the gospel differently in these two realms. Nicholls feels that Western missionaries have often failed to understand this distinction, making them ineffective in Asian contexts. Here is one of his most striking passages: “Western missionaries emphasize the biblical concept of sin and guilt, while most Asians live their lives practising the concept of honour and shame, the ruling principle of their ethical behaviour. To offer a Burmese Buddhist eternal life horrifies him. His goal is to end all life, as nirvana teaches.”

Nicholls offers clear recommendations for Christian evangelism. He encourages emphasizing commonalities as a starting point, citing as one example a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* that illustrates awareness of the need for confession of sins. For

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Nicholls, dialogue is a positive concept, since God calls us to “build relationships of respect and openness” with non-Christians.

One provocative suggestion is that whereas evangelists like Billy Graham stressed *believing* in Jesus first and *belonging* (i.e., becoming integrated into the local church) second, evangelism to today’s secular culture needs to put belonging before believing. Where the broader culture is not already receptive to Christian thinking, Nicholls argues, we need to reach people on a secular level, through such outreaches as arts programs, recreational activities, or teaching English, to build bridges between the church and the secular world.

Nicholls’s writing style is digressive at times, but I think we can forgive a 98-year-old author for that. Spending an hour or two with this short but sweeping work by one of the true giants of contemporary global evangelicalism is a worthy time investment.

Bibliographical information

- Bruce Nicholls. *Finding God in a Secular World*. World of Theology Series. Vol. 32. Bonn: Culture and Science Publ. (VKW), 2025. 138 pp. ISBN 978-3-86269-309-2. 18 Euro.

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo:** Thomas and Christine Schirmacher visit Bruce Nicholls in his retirement home in 2020 © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- PDF-Download of ‘Finding God in a Secular World’:
<https://theology.worlddea.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/978-3-86269-309-2.pdf>
- The last book by Bruce Nicholls, VKW published for WEA was Bruce Nichols, ‘From Groaning to Liberation’:
https://theology.worlddea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/WEA-GIS_23-Nicholls-Hope-for-Planet-Earth-WEB.pdf
- Bruce Nichols is also featured in another VKW book ‘Discerning the Obedience of Faith’:
https://theology.worlddea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WoT_03-David_Parker-Discerning_the_Obedience_of_Faith.pdf
- Subscription to Bruce Barron’s regular newsletter:
<https://brucebarron.substack.com/about>
- Possibility to order the printed version of ‘Finding God in a Secular World’:
<https://vkwonline.com/Finding-God-in-a-Secular-World>

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