

3-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Wolf, Thom and Baumgartner, Erich (2018) "A "Different Kind" of Christian," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 12: No. 1, 18-25.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol12/iss1/4>

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INTERVIEW WITH THOM WOLF A “DIFFERENT KIND” OF CHRISTIAN

Dr. Erich Baumgartner teaches leadership and intercultural communication and directs the Ph.D. in Leadership Program at Andrews University. He combines his interest in Intercultural Communication with his passion to develop organizational leaders. This is reflected in the two core courses he teaches on leadership theory and diversity and culture. In the course Issues in Leadership Theory, he introduces experienced leadership professionals to the universe of theory. His seminar on Diversity, Leadership, and Culture brings participants face-to-face with the realities of our global workplace. Most of his recent time, however, has been spent working with doctoral students on their dissertation research and serving as senior editor of the Journal of Applied Christian Leadership.

Thom Wolf is president and professor of global studies of University Institute, New Delhi, India. Additionally, he lectures as an adjunct professor of sociology at Charleston Southern University. He has earned his B.A. in Sociology from Baylor University; M.A. in Cross-cultural Studies from Fuller School of Intercultural Studies; D.Lit. (Hon.), in Humanities from Grand Canyon University; and Ph.D. in Global Leadership from Andrews University.

As a social entrepreneur and leadership educator, Wolf has designed Master of Arts degree programs for four different universities in the United States of America. He has lectured at universities across the world and has published several works, including India Progress-Prone, Buddhism and the Contemporary World, and Savitribai and India's Conversation on Education. Wolf currently resides in New Delhi, India with his wife, Linda.

Erich Baumgartner, on behalf of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*:

You were a leader in the Los Angeles community for quite a few years. Then, suddenly, you decided to leave America and move to Asia, in a time when we often see migration in the other direction. What prompted you to go, first to Thailand for three years, and then to New Delhi, India for the last twelve years?

Thom Wolf: I was always attracted by the words of Jesus, that the Good News should be preached to the poor. In fact, that concept captured me early in my life. At that time, the opportunity came to serve among the poor in East Los Angeles, which was something that resonated deeply within my spirit. As a result, my wife and I served among the poor for 25 years, both in the community and in a local church.

JACL: When you speak of the time of your call to East Los Angeles, you are referring to a time when the first famous riots were occurring, correct?

TW: Yes. This was in the 1970s, when there were riots in Los Angeles. There were other things that happened in East LA that were very disturbing to our community, as well. At that time, I had just arrived in LA; it was in my first year, and I was 24 years old. During this time, I myself got beaten in the streets and had to receive 14 stitches. However, because I knew that I was where I was supposed to be, this experience only expanded my love, my engagement, and my thrill to be where God wanted me to be.

During our time in LA, my wife and I operated with the mindset that things had shifted in American culture; the place of engagement was not necessarily the worship space, but the workplace. Therefore, the leadership dynamic in our work was not from the *ordained*, but from the *ordinary*. This really clarified that our function was to equip those leaders for their work of engagement, which is a concept directly supported in the New Testament.

As such, my main function as an ordained person was not simply to focus on people under the shadow of the church, or in the presence of my ordained realm. For me as an ordained minister, my job was to equip those people so that they could then become leaders in their circle of influence. My whole function was to equip other leaders so that they could function dynamically.

Linda and I felt that God was ultimately calling us overseas, and during our time in East LA, we always told people we were simply passing through. We weren't expecting to stay there forever, but we were there as long as God wanted us to be. So we made a 20-year commitment, starting at the age of 24. When I started in East LA, I told people at the time that if I came, I'm going to be here for 20 years. They said, "No, we're in a poor area. There are other things in life. You'll advance or go other places." But I said, "No, I'll just be here," and that's what we did.

JACL: What prompted you to shift your attention to Asia?

TW: This was not a shift necessarily, but more a change in trajectory. My wife and I had agreed that when I finished my Master's degree, we would go to a place that we considered a "distant culture."

So, when I finished my degree, we considered our options. Quite frankly, we looked at Africa, we looked at China, and we looked at India. The most unengaged with the voice of Jesus were those in India. Africa is not in that sense a Christian continent, but it is engaged with Christianity to some degree. In China, there is an emerging wave of underground churches.

However, there was still very much a muted voice in India. And thus, we settled in on India.

When we first got to India, people would ask, "Are you missionaries?" I said, "No, I am on a tenured business visa. I'm facilitating learning experiences for US universities and US leadership groups that come from communities, churches, and organizations."

People would also ask me, "Who are you?" I would respond, "I'm a spiritual American. That means that I'm not like an ordinary American. I don't drink, I don't curse, and your wife or your daughters are safe with me."

JACL: Isn't that interesting how you defined "spiritual" by saying what you *don't* do?

TW: Oh yes! On the streets in India, if you are an American, you will be offered brandy, whiskey, liquor, or a beer; however, I didn't partake in any of those. When someone would offer me whiskey, and I would say, "No thank you. I'll take a Coke or a Fanta instead." Or, "I'll take a chai tea or a cup of coffee, but no, I don't drink alcohol."

Once I was with a good friend, a Muslim professor of economics at Jamia Millia Islamia, the largest Muslim university in India. We were at the University of Kashmir, where I was preparing to do a lecture in the school of business, and my friend had come along to make contact with the faculty and the administration.

This area of India is near the Pakistan border and looks like Switzerland with lots of lakes. As such, my friend and I were on a houseboat. One morning, we came out and the vendors were coming out on their boats. The vendors saw us and noticed that I was German-American. One man stood up and called out to me, "Budweiser!" He was a ways away from us—maybe 30 yards away—but he was paddling our way. I said, "No, no, thank you." Then he said, "Heineken!" He had several options with him. Then he came in a little further and said, "Jack Daniels," as if to give me a whiskey option.

All of these I declined. As the vendor got closer, my Indian friend, the Muslim professor of economics, said in Urdu, "No, no, no. He's a different kind of American. He's a Christian. He doesn't drink."

Then the man said, "Fanta. Coca Cola. I have options; this American needs to buy something." We couldn't help but laugh, because this man was willing to do whatever he could to make the sale.

When I asked my friend what he had told the vendor, he said, "I told him you're a different kind of American."

Yes, we are constantly being shaped by our culture, our family, and our

country, but we need to be a “different kind.” That’s what being holy means. That God is the different God. He’s not like the idol gods. He’s the true God.

JACL: So as you reflect on this transition to India, what did you feel your mission was there?

TW: My training has primarily been in sociology and anthropology. In that sense, I’m a different sociologist, because not many sociologists have had the opportunity to be a pastor in one place for 25 years.

JACL: A sociologist and pastor is an unusual combination, but it seems to emphasize one of the things you were really trying to do: understand the people that you felt God had placed you among. You sought to gain an understanding of how people live, and the dynamics that make society work. In your work, it wasn’t only about the individual, but about community.

TW: I suppose you could say I’ve always had a double major. I’ve had a double major of Bible and sociology, or theology and anthropology. This has always driven me. I have desired to know God and to make Him known, to

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engage people where they are, and for them to see the benefit of knowing Him, as well.

One time, I was in a bar in central India because I had participated in a rally for the sake of a woman who had been treated unjustly. She had been elected to office. She had been an outcast but then was bribed by people of a higher caste. However, she rejected the bribery. Those from the higher caste beat her, stripped her naked, and paraded her naked through her village for three hours. Because of this injustice, I joined with some Indian friends to protest this injustice, as the living God calls us to justice.

That night after the rally, I was at the bar. A Hindu leader asked, “Why did you participate in this rally? You endangered your passport. You might be ejected from the nation because of this.”

I asked him, “Wouldn’t it be an honorable thing for my three sons or for my granddaughter to say that ‘Papa Thom’ was not allowed to go back to India? That I was rejected because I stood up on behalf of a woman—a woman who

had done the right thing by rejecting a bribe, but was then stripped naked, beaten, and paraded in her village for three hours? Wouldn't it be an honorable thing if that were the reason I couldn't go back to India?"

The Hindu leader said to me, "It's good. It's darn good." You know, I think the man was trying to say amen. But he didn't know the living God. He had never been in a Christian church, and I was likely the first Christian leader to whom he has ever spoken.

JACL: What you're saying is that, in a sense, you became a window into the church; you showed him what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

TW: Yes! And so at that bar, where he was drinking liquor, I (the foreigner, the American) was the only one sitting around not drinking an alcoholic drink. It reminded me of someone else who got invited to parties— Jesus.

The Hindi leader asked me, "So why did you do it?"

I told him, "It's a spiritual reason."

He responded, "What is it?"

I said, "It's about Jesus."

And so he said, "Well, tell us."

I explained, "My great-great-great-grandfather lived in the Black Forest of Germany. One day, a man came on the farm and told him about Jesus. On that day, my great-great-great-grandfather turned to Jesus, and it changed my grandfather and my family. Because this has blessed our family, I have come to share the good news with others."

I learned the value of family by listening to people in India. Sometimes, if a person was of a backward caste, they came from a very oppressed background. However, this made me realize that I had a story of my own; I just never told it. I had never connected my great-great-great-grandfather's conversion and the change it made in our family. However, this story served as a witness to others.

JACL: What a beautiful way of testifying! What else did you learn in India that might be of help for leaders around the world?

TW: We engaged with both the top and bottom of society. We interacted both with top leadership in government, in the community, and with educational leadership, and we also engaged with those at the very economic bottom of India.

I had a teacher once that said, "The present belongs to the powerful, but the future belongs to the poor." I believe that's a proper expression for the mindset of the Lord Jesus—that this Good News will be distributed and

received among the poor.

I, myself, was raised poor. My father did not finish American high school and neither did my mother. I was the first person in that generation of my family to graduate from university. On my graduation day, my father cried. He knew my degree would be a great advantage.

My father used to tell me, “Remember son, there are many men who don’t read, but they can read you.” Intelligence is not synonymous with education. Education is a pathway, comprised of experiences that you have had.

I have had some very beautiful experiences during my time in India. They usually happen in the evening, even late at night, when conversations and food converge. That’s one of the things I tell people: if you live cross-culturally, you need to change your tongue, your tummy, and your time.

JACL: What do you mean by changing your tongue, your tummy, and your time?

TW: By “tongue,” I mean that you need to learn the language. “Tummy” refers to choosing three things in the diet that you like to eat. In almost any culture you go to, it’s rare that people eat everything within their own culture. Because of this, there are some social rules that allow you to not eat everything. Just find two to three things you like.

The other thing to change is your “time.” The American schedule is typically to eat the evening meal at 5:00 or 5:30; yet in India, dinner is served at around 8:30 or 9:00 - even 10:00 is not too late. If you like to have supper at 5:30 or 6:00, you’ll find that you’re eating alone. You’ll be eating when other people are having chai (4:30 or 5:00 is chai time for Indians, not dinner time). Yet if you will change your time schedule and adapt to a different schedule, all kinds of opportunities will open to you.

I knew an academic professor with an appointment in Belgium who was a

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native Indian. Once when he was back in New Delhi for a visit, we tried to work out a time to meet, but we just couldn’t do it. Finally around 10:15 one night, I said, “Well, I could come over now, or you could come over to my place.” He said, “I could come now?” I replied, “Well sure, it’s only 10:15.” His response was, “Oh, but you’re a foreigner. For me as an Indian, this would be fine, but foreigners do not usually think in this way.”

I told him it would be fine, so he came over; he got to my house by 10:45 and we talked till 2:00 a.m. It was a very Indian thing to do, but it wouldn’t have been an American thing to do. We had a wonderful discussion, simply

by adapting to a different timetable.

Another time, I was conducting a late-night meeting with the use of a translator. The men I was meeting with told the translator regarding their interactions with me, "He's not like other Americans. He listens to us, and he respects us." I never went in and said, "I will listen to you." I never explicitly said, "Hello, I respect you." But I took that advice from my father, an uneducated man, and allowed them to "read" me. Through our interactions, they could tell that they were valued and heard.

JACL: Now, there is a tension though, because you also said that you went to work among the poor in India. This brings up the question, Why is it that this great civilization of India is still where it is today? Have you ever had the impression that Christianity could make a difference in the culture as a whole? What would be the benefit for India to see Jesus in a clear way?

TW: This is actually a topic that has become very significant in my thinking. First of all, in thinking about development as a sociologist, I have dealt with this in my lectures, research, and publications; bringing change and development is a common goal. However, when you talk about development, it generally refers to economic development.

However, in India, there is also the issue of culture—specifically within the caste system. You have the high caste, as well as the low caste/backward caste, but you have an extra problem in India: about 20-25% of India do not belong to a caste. As a result, they don't have their humanity affirmed, because they're outcasts. Your caste gives you your position and humanity, but those without a caste are not even positioned as humanity.

This is a very hard concept—especially if you have not lived in India, or been related to India, like I have for 15 years. If you have not talked with leaders and listened on the grassroots, it's very hard to grasp or understand this.

The caste system in India is a system of inequality, causing people to be restrained. However, once Indians are outside of India, they have more of an equality system. This equality is so refreshing and liberating that they have a greater hunger, and they prosper enormously.

JACL: Has there ever been a major attempt by someone respected in Indian society to wrestle with this issue? You are bringing insight, but it's an outsider insight. Has there ever been a voice from within that you would see resonates with what you are saying?

TW: I actually think this issue was clarified for me by reading Indian authors and interacting with Indian leadership. There is a recognition that it does not have to be this way. There are alternative models.

Through these simple methods, we see an example of servant leadership. On one hand, you have sovereign leadership, and on the other hand is servant leadership. Around the world, there are continental difficulties, such as is seen in Africa, South Asia, China, and other countries, where authoritative leaders or sovereign leaders exist. But Jesus' example is truly contrary to that. He was a true servant leader.