



Shalom & Eirene: The Full Framework for Health Care

Apolos Landa^a

^a MD, MSc CHDC of LSHTM , MTh Regional Coordinator for South America, Luke Society, Moyobamba, PERU

Our present world and society longs for meaning and wholeness. A major contributor to this state is the dualistic worldview legacy of modern Western culture. Rich and poor, male and female, white and black are asked at every corner to choose between different dimensions of human life as if the lines of these dimensions did not intersect at one point: the person.

Body and soul, health and disease, individual and community, order and freedom, power and love, God and the world, subject and object, fact and value, science and religion and so on, are viewed as if these were irreconcilable opposites.¹

Cradled in this context, the mentality of the church and Christianity has not given enough centrality to wholeness and harmony in all spheres of human life, especially in its temporal and physical conditions and relationships. Thus health, equity, and justice, as key conditions for reconciling humanity and the world into wholeness, tend to be neglected.

Western theology did not escape that tendency and became profoundly influenced by Greek speculative philosophy. A dualistic distinction was drawn between what is considered the eternal, spiritual, and unchanging reality and what is the temporal, material, and changing world. Within that view, the end purpose of being truly human belongs only to the eternal and spiritual and not to the body, the organic, communal, and ecological relationships. Furthermore, the human, as an immortal essence, does not depend on the material and temporal dimensions of existence. Therefore, it is left implied that the ultimate need of a human being is the salvation of his immortal 'soul.'

This has biased the scope of mission and health care. Consequently, mission's duty, in traditional theological terms, is to save humans,

either collectively or soul by soul, from hell to heaven. Thus, any other temporal concern for status or relationship is viewed only as a preparation for that ethereal destiny.¹ On the other hand, health care has become more concerned with the biological/organic, with its related technology and medical means and procedures, than with the total welfare of a person and community, in the search of common wellness and wholeness. We should not be surprised, therefore, by the tremendous human longing for wholeness and the no less tremendous search for holistic deliverance and healing that characterize the emerging post-modern society.

The Western influenced dualism of 'spirit' versus 'body,' in today's Christianity, is totally alien to the biblical view of the person. When God formed Adam's body from the dust of the ground and breathed life into it, he became a *Nefesh Haya* :נִפְשׁ חַיָּה (Genesis 2:7), that is, a 'living soul,' a living being. This Hebrew word for 'soul' indicates a human individual as a totality, in complete integration. And as God created male and female in his own image and likeness, "humanity bears the divine imprint, not just as disembodied soul, a spark of divinity locked up in the flesh, but as a person that, in every dimension of his being, relates to and reveals the glory of his creator in harmonious mode with the rest of his creation."¹ When Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5: 23 talks about "your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless," he is not talking of these as superimposed and separated realities or entities, but rather of a multidimensional, integrated totality as he began wishing that "the very God of peace [*shalom/eirene*] sanctify you *wholly*."

Jesus at the pool of Bethesda, in healing the crippled man, gives us a true picture of his perspective on wholeness for the human person. With his question, he exposes the cause of his physical condition beyond what was apparent or rationally explained. By asking "do you want to

get well?” or “wilt thou be made whole?” – as rendered in the King James Version – Jesus confronts the sick and disempowered man with the reality that his actual condition is the combined effect of his psychological hopelessness and low self-esteem, his social alienation and oppression, and his spiritual obstinacy and rebellion. His complete healing was made possible only when all these diseased dimensions, pulling apart his total person, were dealt with.²

The word that denotes this state of completeness, harmony, soundness, and well-being, is the Hebrew word *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם). From the way Gideon labelled the altar he built for the Eternal as “the LORD [is] *shalom*,” (‘שָׁלוֹם יְהוָה’ Judges 6:24) the Talmud (Shabbat 10b) recognizes *shalom* as one of the designations of God himself. This name of God derives from the perception of Gideon that peace and integrity emanate from his countenance as it is bestowed in the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:22-26). This is of the very nature of God, and that is what he is determined to establish in the whole realm of his creation.

According to the *Nuevo Diccionario Bíblico Español Certeza* (NDBC),⁶ the word is used in the Old Testament (OT) to bid welfare or express harmony and concord among people, also to indicate the wellness, material prosperity, physical safety, and peace of a person, city, country, or between two entities that relate to each other. It mainly denotes health, inner peace, and spiritual well-being. It is always found in association with righteousness and truth, but not with wickedness. The source of all *shalom* is God. When he harnessed chaos into order in creation, he bestowed *shalom* for the whole of it. In fact, he claims, “I make [*shalom*].” (Isaiah 45: 7 [KJV]) Therefore, John Goldingay concludes:

God is the maker of *shalom* ... [that] stands potentially for all forms of well being. It covers peace, but it is another positive term that embraces much more than the absence of conflict; it suggests a community enjoying fullness of life, prosperity, contentment, harmony, and happiness. Its antonym is *ra*, an all-purpose word for what is bad, both covering evil and adversity.⁴

This recognition has for centuries found place as a concluding declaration chanted in much Jewish liturgy (including the *birkat hamazon*, *kaddish*, and personal *amidah* prayers).⁵ The full sentence translates into English as “He who makes

peace in his heights, may he make peace upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen.” True *shalom*, then, is not the absence of conflict or the cessation of hostility, but a state achieved by bringing equilibrium to what is unbalanced, justice where there is inequity, integrity where there is unrighteousness, wholeness where there is disintegration, and healing and health where there is sickness and disease. It is in this regard that *shalom* has become another way of approaching the meaning of health, which poses great difficulty and challenge to articulate, as it also touches all dimensions of life inscribed in the human person.

Just as *shalom* is not a mere “element in the description of [human] essential nature... [health] is not a part of or a function of [him] as are blood circulation, metabolism, hearing, breathing.”⁶ Health, then, is not just the absence of disease or sickness but is “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.”⁷ It is also the harmonious and balanced relationship spanning from the spiritual nature of God to the economic life dimensions of a person, in harmony with its creator as well as with the rest of creation, the natural and transcending environment. Tillich says that “the multidimensional unity of life in man calls for a multidimensional concept of health, of disease, and of healing, but in such a way that it becomes obvious that in each dimension all the others are present.”⁸ Therefore, the wholeness of *shalom* includes health, and the quest for wholeness includes healing. Health is disease conquered and healed, as eternal *shalom* is *shalom* by conquering chaos and disharmony.

The NDBC³ also informs us that the corresponding Greek word for *shalom* in the New Testament (NT) is *eirene* (εἰρήνη). This word, despite its primarily negative force in classical Greek, by the way it is used in the Septuagint (LXX), ends up being used in the NT with the full meaning found in the OT. Likewise, it is used in greetings and benedictions. *Eirene*’s meaning links with other key words of the NT, such as grace, life, and righteousness, and its use is holistically applied to the total human person.

The multidimensionality of *shalom* exchanges easily for the multidimensionality of health, as both are related to the multidimensional nature of a human person. That is why, either *shalom* or *eirene* in biblical times had become **the** best greeting to greet one another. By saying “*shalom Aleichem*” or “peace be unto you (plural),” one wished for the most complete state of welfare and wholeness for persons.



The Greek translation of this greeting is mentioned in the Gospels, as this is the way Jesus often greeted people. Also, it is how he instructed his disciples to greet people when he sent them to proclaim the advent of the kingdom of God (Luke 10:5; 24:36). Similar connotations are found in how the apostle John greets Gaius, when he says, "I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." (3 John 1-2 [NIV])

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Correspondence: Dr. Apolos Landa. Luke Society, Moyobamba, PERU panluk@usa.net

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