Wholistic or Holistic? Does It Matter?

Rei Towet Kesis

ABSTRACT – How innocent are these words wholistic and holistic? Could they be having any implication on the theology of the Seventh-day Adventist church? It is true that words can have more than one meaning, but what happens if the word originates from a philosophy that is theologically unacceptable, should it be ignored? Writing from a Christian Seventh-day Adventist perspective this paper seeks to find out the reason why Wholism would be preferable to holism among Adventists. The first question to be answered would be whether the word wholistic exists at all. The origin of holism will be presented and then an analysis of whether the two words are similar will be done. After showing the possible differences of the words, the last and most important question would be whether use of either matters to a Seventh-day Adventist.

Keywords: Wholism, holism, wholistic and holistic

I. Introduction

The word holistic seems to be quickly replacing the word wholistic, both in dictionaries and usage. In fact it becomes necessary to inquire if the word wholistic exists? If it does, where did the word holistic come from? Do these words, holistic and wholistic mean the same thing? If they mean the same thing, does it matter which one is used? Are the Seventh-day Adventist education and health care systems wholistic or holistic? To what extent can the dictionaries be
trusted to arbitrate this matter? This paper seeks to answer these questions and others.

II. Does the Word Wholistic Exist?

The word wholistic exists in some dictionaries, but many modern dictionaries, like the Oxford Advanced Learners, do not have it. The word wholistic seems to be in limited use compared to holistic. Chepkwony (2011, p. 45) uses “the term ‘wholistic’ to describe the way Africans perceive and deal with reality as a whole functioning system.”

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary has the word wholistic and presents it as a word influenced by the word whole and links it to holism and holistic (Gove, 1961, p. 2612). The Seventh-day Adventist Handbook of Theology uses the word wholistic and wholism several times (Dederen, pp. 317, 341). George Knight (1995, pp. 17-30) uses the word wholistic to show that it is the Adventist approach to world mission. Therefore it is right to conclude that the word wholistic exists and is in use.

III. Where Did the Word Holistic Come From?

The word holistic comes from holism. The term holism was coined in 1926 by Jan Christiaan Smuts (24 May 1870-11 September 1950) a prominent South African and British Commonwealth statesman, military leader and philosopher (Gove, 1961, p. 1080; Wikipedia, Holistic approach; Wikipedia, Holism and related academic work). Smuts wrote a book entitled Holism and Evolution: the Original Source of the Holistic Approach to Life. Smuts’ philosophy of life is developed and embodied in the two theories of Holism and Evolution.

Small units must develop into bigger wholes, and they in their turn again must grow into larger and ever-larger structures without cessation. Advancement lay along that path. Thus the unification of the four provinces in the Union of South Africa, the idea of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and, finally, the great whole resulting from the
combination of the peoples of the earth in a great league of nations (Wikipedia, Holism and related academic work).

Holist has also been associated with holism. A holist is “an advocate of holism or holistic principles” (Gove, 1961, p. 1080). Holism (from ὅλος holos, a Greek word meaning all, whole, entire, total) has developed into the idea that all the properties of a given system (physical, biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, linguistic, etc.) cannot be determined or explained by its component parts alone. Instead, the system as a whole determines in an important way how the parts behave (Wikipedia, Holistic approach).

It is important to observe that holism just like evolution, is more of a “religious” belief than a scientific concept. Holism has been associated with Logos, Panentheism and Pantheism. A holistic perspective is found in diverse intellectual, cultural traditions and disciplines throughout history, including Gestalt psychology, Chinese medicine, Buddhism, Daoism and other religious traditions. Holism is also associated with ancient Greek thinking that has influenced the world. Plato and Aristotle viewed the world and each being in the world as mutually interrelated and part of a teleologically organized whole. Aristotle stated it as, “the whole is more than the sum of its parts.” (Geisler, 1987, p. 79; New World Encyclopedia, Holism).

Scientists initially resisted the holism philosophy because of it being more “religious” than scientific. However the passage of time seems to have worked in favour of the philosophy.

Further resistance to holism has come from the long association of the concept with quackery and quantum mysticism. Scientists, who are not immune to peer pressure, were as a rule discouraged from doing any work which may perpetuate such deception. Recently, however, public understanding has grown over the realities of such concepts, and more scientists are beginning to accept serious research into the concept (New World Encyclopedia, Holism).

Albert Einstein may have been right when he predicted that “two mental constructs will direct human thinking in the next millennium, his own mental construct of relativity and Smuts' of holism” (Wikipedia, Holism and related academic work). The fulfillment of this prediction could be the reason why education and health products easily sell when they are presented as holistic. This also could be the
IV. Do the Words Wholistic and Holistic Mean the Same Thing?

Meaning is derived from usage. Holism as initiated by Smuts was presented as an approach to human life (Wikipedia, Holism and related academic work). We shall analyse the usage of both holistic and wholistic in reference to human life. We shall then draw an appropriate conclusion on whether they mean the same thing or not.

Holism is presented as the “belief that the nature of humans consists of an ultimately divisible union of components such as body, soul and spirit” (emphasis is mine, Wikipedia, Holistic approach). This understanding of human life as presented by holism puts it in the ranks of dualism. Plato’s dualism is shared and also found in Eastern and Western religious tradition. In dualism the body and soul are seen as making up human life but they are distinct and separate. In holistic language they are parts of the whole. The soul is seen as immortal and trapped in the human mortal body (Howard, Stanford online Encyclopedia). Death therefore separates the mortal body and the immortal soul. These are the sentiments of Nirvana in Buddhism, Reincarnation in Hinduism, Ancestor worship through libation in African Traditional Religion (Nyaundi, 2004, p. 293), prayers for the dead in some protestant and non-protestant churches and the key thought behind witchcraft and western horror movies.

Wholism on the other hand presents human life as made of parts but never divisible, not even at the time of death. Though the human being is made of body, soul and spirit, he is mortal entirely. “The Bible maintains a wholistic understanding of human nature, death does not divide the body from soul so as to permit the soul to continue existing (soul immortality). Rather, death brings the whole life to a complete end. No function of human life survives death” (Dederen, 2000, p. 317).

The formula for human life, clearly expressed throughout the Bible, leads to a wholistic understanding of human nature. ‘The Hebrew conceived man as an animated body and not as an incarnate soul’ (Robinson 70). Human nature, whether in illness or health, at birth or at death, does not constitute a composite of parts, each of which can be viewed
or treated separately from any other part. The contemporary expressions ‘psychosomatic illness’ and ‘whole-person care’ represent recognition of this understanding of human nature, that a human being is a single whole and must be treated as such. The biblical terminology of human nature corresponds consistently to this wholistic view (Dederen, 2000, p. 317).

Usage of holistic and wholistic reveals that they do not mean the same thing and they have religious implications. Holism views the human life as made of parts that are ultimately divisible and sees the human soul as unconditionally immortal. Wholism on the other hand views human life as made of parts that are not divisible and perceives the human soul as mortal and conditionally immortal.

V. Wholistic or Holistic? Does it matter?

The religious connotations and implications carried by these two words, is what makes our choice of either to matter. Wholistic or holistic is a question of a preferred worldview. Wholism views the world and particularly human life as made of parts that are united and inseparable.

This wholistic understanding of human nature holds great importance for health care, social services, education, and other services provided for those in need. It means that when attempting to cure or care for a particular problem, the entire person must be considered. Physical and psychological ailments are intertwined. Mind, heart, and body must be considered in true education. Spiritual and mental disorders must be addressed together. In short, the biblical understanding of human nature holds wide-reaching consequences for critical issues facing our society (ibid.).

“The wholistic understanding of human development, eventually brought about Seventh-day Adventist commitment to health care and education” (Dederen, 2000, p. 341). Adventists therefore offer a wholistic education and health care as opposed to a holistic education and health care.

Seventh-day Adventists have neither subscribed to holism nor evolution. “The wholistic understanding of human nature, coupled
with the teaching of conditional immortality, has been advocated consistently from the pulpit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since its founding, at times in the face of opposition from other Christian and secular traditions” (ibid.).

**A. New Age Movement and Holism**

The opposition to wholism as faced by Seventh-day Adventists from within and outside is from holists. Holists find a vehicle to sell their theory in the New Age Movement. “New age motifs are openly embraced by some liberal Christians, while the New Age Movement is also sucking up many of the more familiar doctrines and orthodoxies, religious and political, of the liberal churches” (Chandler, 1993, p. 20). As expressed in the following quote, the New Age Movement is identified by its holistic worldview.

The New Age movement is a Western spiritual movement that developed in the second half of the 20th century. Its central precepts have been described as "drawing on both Eastern and Western spiritual and metaphysical traditions and then infusing them with influences from self-help and motivational psychology, holistic health, parapsychology, consciousness research and quantum physics "It aims to create "a spirituality without borders or confining dogmas" that is inclusive and pluralistic. Another of its primary traits is holding to "a holistic worldview," thereby emphasizing that the Mind, Body and Spirit are interrelated\(^{[1]}\) and that there is a form of Monism and unity throughout the universe. It further attempts to create "a worldview that includes both science and spirituality" and thereby embraces a number of forms of science and pseudoscience” (emphasis mine, Wikipedia, New Age-Holistic health).

We note a significant similarity of purpose in the New Age Movement, ecumenical movement and Smuts’ intention that holism will unite the people of the world. However the main concern overriding all other concerns in the New Age Movement is human spirituality (Jones, 1992, p. 11). “The New Age movement is understood to be a broad coalition of various networking organizations that (a) believe in a new world religion (pantheism), (b) are working for a new world order, and (c) expect a New Age Christ” (Miyayo, 1995, p. 4).
VI. Conclusion

Holism is the parent to the New Age Movement and is opposed to the biblical worldview. The use of either wholism or holism matters. These are opposing worldviews. As Miyayo (1995, p. 3) puts it, “the New Age movement is diametrically opposed to Judeo-Christian theism.” Seventh-day Adventist teaching and practice is not holistic and is opposed to holism.

Seventh-day Adventists view their lifestyle, education and healthcare systems as being wholistic, in spite of dictionary changes. Dictionaries are not a source of Christian doctrine. Dictionaries can therefore not arbitrate the matter between wholistic and holistic. Dictionaries, for example, have changed their views of what and when the Sabbath is, yet the biblical position remains unaltered. Wholistic or holistic? Does it matter? Yes it matters.

References


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