

BEWARE OF "A PART OF"!

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It seems innocent enough, that familiar phrase "a part of." The metaphoric base is simple & obvious. You take a piece from a pie & say "This is a piece of pie," by which you mean--to be specific--"This is a piece of *that* or *this* pie." But then, if you're in an analytic mode & philosophical mood, it will occur to you that what you have said so specifically is wrong. So then you get it right: "This *was* a piece of...." Then if you sink even deeper into learned sense or absurdity, you may wonder which word is more fitting, "piece" or "part." It's obvious that when you take the piece away from the pie, it's no longer a part of the pie; but is it still a piece? And who cares, & why? what difference does it make, or any of this make?

1 A **culture**, the world in which a given group of humans lives, is a weave of nature & metaphor. Nature is friend & enemy, & metaphor seeks to load the equation in favor of the former. When cultures clash, the (as it were) soldier ants of each culture are its metaphors. (That's the deepest reason why religious wars are an honor to religion, whose metaphors are central to each culture.) When a culture's central metaphors lose energy, as is now true in the West, the culture faces (a) dissolution or (b) migration or (c) renewal. A clue to a culture's current location in its life-story is how "a part of" is being used.

2 In THE COURAGE TO BE, Tillich assesses the volitional factor in his triPARTite division: the courage to be (the existential dimension), the courage to be apart (the individual dimension), & the courage to be a part (the societal or communal dimension). In the third, he's preaching that it takes courage to enter into, to make yourself "a part of," society, (to overextend my metaphor, above) to insert yourself as a slice or piece into the social pie. True enough, but this Thinksheet is about...

3 ...the ontological meaning of being "a part of," & the implications some draw from the ontological assumption. Exempla:

1 Here on Cape Cod, some 17th-c. gravestones display wings on a skull or skull & crossbones: those Pilgrims-Puritans were making a life-over-death resurrectional statement (made also by the corpse's facing east). Misreading, an expert modernizes to this: "For them, death was a part of life." As though they accepted it as natural (ie, ontological), which they most certainly did not! They were conscious of many evils, including three we experience far less of today: death by plague, death by sea, & infant-&-child mortality. (Yesterday, I saw the little chair in which Ms. Phinney's seven children sat before she buried them one by one after burying her husband, after which she lived alone for 30 years: death was very present, but not a part of life. It was unnatural, a violation of the Creator's prelapsarian order. Death was not papered over or prettified, as it was at the later time. Life was good, to be affirmed, & ultimately victorious: death was evil & accepted as inevitable. Joy from the former, peace from the latter. Do those who now accept death as natural have as much joy & peace? And they wrested pragma out of death, as in the frequent inscription "As I am now, so you must be.")

2 Also here on Cape Cod (as well as many elsewhere in America & elsewhere), the aboriginal Amerinds are, modernizingly, said to have seen themselves as "a part of" **nature**. The proleptic fallacy here is underremarked. To see itself as "a part of" the ocean, a fish would have to imagine what it'd be like to be not so, & philosophical enough to ask whether it is so. Even an excellent scholar like Catherine L. Albenese, in NATURE RELIGION IN AMERICA: FROM THE ALGONKIAN INDIANS TO THE NEW AGE (U. of Chicago/90), can commit this reading of modernity into Amerind consciousness. From their being, in contrast to the 1620 Pilgrims, in a familiar environment, she concludes, by a leap of theory, that they saw themselves as "a part of nature," & unfairly contrasts this with the Pilgrims' fears of the unfamiliar wilderness. (On the contrary, the Pilgrims had their own way of incorporating nature, & did so successfully--in contrast to the Amerinds, who'd largely died off from disease before the Pilgrims arrived.)

3 I can only mention the Christian heresy of seeing oneself, as Matt.

Fox & other panentheists do, as "a part of God." I take that back: I must do more than mention it, & right now! What's the harm in that? Manifold, but here I'll limit myself to the rest of this page....The oceanic shift from theism (we are extra-divine creatures) to panentheism (we are intra-divine emergents) falsely appears minuscule when, as does Fox, the biblical language is used to sanction unbiblical & even antibiblical notions. Martin Luther King Jr., in his partly plagiarized PhD dissertation, attacks this heresy as it appears in Tillich & Wieman. Because its philosophical mold is German idealism, Tillich's construct is less available to American understanding than is Wieman's very American progress-process model, in which God is "the process of person-making." Long dreary ecstatic passages in Fox's oeuvre remind me of Wieman's lectures of a half-century ago. (The lectures dreary? No way! W. was as much an ecstatic as is F. F. is dreary because I've been there before & know the event, the outcomes, of this philosophy--whether you call it "naturalistic theism," as W. did, or "creation spirituality," as F. does.)....I'd like to say that one outcome is adultery, as T. & W. were adulterers, but two considerations stop me: (1) K. was an adulterer, & (2) F., as far as I know, isn't....And if F. is, as monk, a celibate, as Thoreau was, what happens when we ask, in the oeuvre of each, as to *Naturgefühl*, each's feeling for "nature"? Well, here each reminds me of the other. Living totally, including sexually, with a person of the other sex is the simplest, most obvious, & paradoxically the most dramatic form of nature-affirmation. Presumably, Thoreau & Fox chose to avoid this: they could have found themselves spouses. I'm not interested in why their avoidance, I'm very interested in what effects their choice may have made on how they view "nature." Both decry dualism, yet refuse the monism of marriage. Both want us to believe that nature is real (as in Aristotle), yet both speak of nature as through a romantic gauze, the greater reality being in & behind their own eyeballs (as in Plato). Each proclaims himself "a part of" nature, yet neither seems really to believe it; or perhaps it's more accurate to say that both use the word "nature" idiosyncratically, loading it with the contents of its two linguistic antonyms, viz humanity & deity, thus making it mystical-holophrastic. OK as poetry, but both claim to be writing prose.

Fox is what Paul was accused of being, a "spermologos" (Ac.17.18, collector of seed-ideas), giving to whatever he writes a patina of scholarly authority by scattering quotations liberally throughout. Paul corralled every thought into Christ (2Cor.10.5): Fox regales us with quotations (much from his PhD research?) led captive to "creation spirituality," though many are peripheral to their authors' tonic of thought. He's no more to be trusted in his handling of those sources than he is in the case of Scripture (on which see his acrobatics on "compassion" in the Bible, in his A SPIRITUALITY NAMED COMPASSION AND THE HEALING OF THE GLOBAL VILLAGE, HUMPTY DUMPTY AND US [Winston Press/79]).

Is Fox a Buddhist in Christian garb? Christian & Buddhist monks have much in common, so I'm not surprised when some Christian monks sound like Buddhists. Merton & Fox, eg. So I wasn't surprised to find Fox's COMPASSION opening with this Merton quote (from a lecture M. gave, in a Buddhist monastery, two hours before a bare fan-wire killed him): "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another." Yep, "part of." Need I mention that the biblical basis of compassion is radically other than that? (Till very recently, Roman Catholic scholars were not well trained in Scripture, & were taught to rely primarily on the extrabiblical authority of the magisterium. Some of them now tend to replace the magisterium with some other authority also in tension with Scripture. In some of these, eg Teilhard, God merges into nature/cosmos.)

All New Age thinking condemns what it calls "dualism," esp. the God/nature duality. Fox's condemnation of theism (which he contrast with panentheism, eg p.45 of COMPASSION) makes him a darling of New Age, which is biophilous (LIFE-loving) rather than theophilous (GOD-loving). Love that "wholeness and holiness are one" (p.244 of COMPASSION, with his neologism "holness")!

Fox loves Buckly Fuller & his "God is a verb" (p.268 of COMPASSION; see p.266). So "soul is not a noun but a verb" (ibid). OkOk, but I grow weary of Fox's mystical-osmotic **mushimindedness**, everything (including God!) flowing into & out of everything endlessly. In God's name, I refuse to be "a part of" it!