Josef Pieper on the Festival in Light of Culture
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The festival is an essential component of human cultural life. Amidst the emerging scholarship over the past century on the festival, we find that Josef Pieper provides a philosophical account of the festival accompanied by a sound account of the human person. This essay both reaffirms Pieper’s account of the festival and reintegrates his account within a larger context of culture. Fundamental to Pieper’s treatment is the human person’s power to love and be open to transcendence, without which true festivity is lost. In reintegrating Pieper’s account of festivity in light of a Dawsonian vision of culture, we find that the festival flows from the common vision of a people, that the change in a religious vision of culture results in the change of the festival, and that not just any shared vision of a people will engender a genuine festival.

While the particular festival celebrated may vary, we find festivals celebrated in all cultures from time immemorial. It is therefore assumed in this analysis that the festival occupies a fixed place in human social life. Extensive scholarship over the past century has analyzed the festival, particularly from the perspective of sociology. While examination of the festival as a social institution is valuable, Josef Pieper provides elements essential to a full understanding of festival by making a philosophical approach to the subject of festivals. In his account, Pieper argues that the essence of festivity is the expression of the affirmation of the goodness of the world in social celebration; the ritual festival is the most festive festival; and the refusal to worship the Creator destroys festivity.¹

The central aim of this essay is threefold: to present and reaffirm Josef Pieper’s account of the nature of the festival; to place the concept of the festival within a philosophy of culture; and to integrate Pieper’s account of the nature of the festival into a cultural approach to the festival. It is my contention that festivals are truly beneficial to the human subject and to the culture as a whole to the extent that the religious vision of a culture is integrally open to the transcendent—to the worship of the Creator. The first premise leading to this conclusion is Josef Pieper’s account of festivity, in which he argues that love is the substance of festivity, and consequently rooted in human nature. Secondly, since the festival is a social and cultural institution, the culture reveals itself and its religious vision through the celebration of festivals. The genuine festival will therefore flow from the

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religious vision of a people that is truly festive, as understood in Pieper’s account of festivity. Pieper’s theory is framed initially in light of its place within historical scholarship on the festival. The philosophical account on the festival is broken down into two components parts: the social event of the festival and the nature of festivity. Pieper’s theory is then contrasted with an analysis of the festival and a common vision of culture in light of the work of Christopher Dawson. The investigation closes with a reintegration of Pieper’s theory within the context of human culture.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PIEPER’S THEORY OF THE FESTIVAL

Pieper’s philosophical treatment of the festival follows a period of extensive scholarly treatment of the festival. Josef Pieper (1904–1997) was a German Catholic philosopher writing within the budding revival of the Thomistic tradition in the twentieth century. Known generally for his work on the virtues and for his classic, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, little attention has been directed towards his work on festivity. Before the emergence of Pieper’s account of the festival, studies of festivals were generally observed from an anthropological and sociological perspective. Such approaches, as characterized by the work of Alessandro Falassi, generally followed a path similar to that taken by Durkheim regarding religion: seeing the festival as a social function of preservation and continuity. This similarity is arguably due to the originally inextricable relationship between religion and the festival. A festival is certainly a social institution and the consideration of both religion and festivals as social institutions have produced profitable results in sociology. Other authors, including Mircea Eliade and Josef Pieper, argue that something sacred or transcendent is present in the religious festival; the social institution of the festival has a meaning more exalted than a mere gathering of persons would suggest.

Following the concept of the “numinous” in Otto’s *Idea of the Holy*, Eliade’s account of the phenomenon of the sacred is brilliant and illuminative, particularly in reference to the religious festivals and practices of ancient cultures. Eliade’s approach, as evidenced in his famous work *The Sacred and the Profane*, is one of comparative religion. In his examination of the variety of archaic cultures, Eliade argues that religious festival consisted in the manifestation of the sacred in the present, wherein the festival participant was purified by contact with the sacral. A significant limitation, however, is Eliade’s philosophical anthropology, which at times slips into relativism. Eliade’s work nonetheless marks a return to a serious con-
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consideration of spirituality in human experience, theessentiality of religion, and the import of the ritual festival in cultures.

Written a decade after Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*, Pieper’s *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, offers a philosophy of the festival. Pieper seeks to grasp what is the essential character of the festival and festivity. He observes that one must move beyond external appearances and empirical observations to understand the festival. He integrates the social event of the festival with human nature. Proceeding from a teleological account of human nature, Pieper argues that the object and manner of celebration ought to correspond to what is genuinely good for the human person. In consequence, Pieper sources festivity in the human person and the person’s ordination to the transcendent—the end of the human person. Such an approach is a significant contribution to the study of festivals, both in their nature and in their relationship to culture.

**PIEPER’S ACCOUNT OF THE FESTIVAL AS THE SOCIAL EXPRESSION OF FESTIVITY**

Although Pieper sharply criticizes the reduction of the festival to mere sociological fact, this critique does not eliminate the social aspect of the festival from Pieper’s account. Both the social element of festival time and the essential quality of festivity are present in Pieper’s definition of the meaning of the festival: “To celebrate a festival means to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole.” The festival is therefore a social event expressing the festivity of the community. Ultimately, Pieper roots the festival in the “universal assent to the world,” distinguishing his from other theories of the festival. The affirmative spirit of festivity is found in the person and community who love and are open to the transcendent through worship. The absence of genuine festivity in any celebration leads to what Pieper calls the *pseudo-festival*—the simulacrum of festivity. The reaffirmation of Pieper’s philosophy of the festival therefore includes his account of the social and internal aspects of the festival.

**Pieper on the Social Qualities of Festivals:**

**Necessary Conditionals to Festivals**

The first dimension of Pieper’s definition of festival—“to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner”—is primarily concerned with the festival as an objective, social event. Pieper therefore integrates the social qualities of the festival within his definition of the festival. In his account, Pieper identifies a number of social qualities necessary to festival
time and offers us a link to his account of festivity. The festival must be, in Pieper’s view: a public event; a time away from work; a special occasion; a manifestation of a ritual tradition; and an expression that uses the medium of the arts. Without these qualities, there is no festival.

The Festival as a Social Activity

Pieper affirms the festival is in essence a public act. The festival is a social reality bringing together the people of a community to celebrate. Under this line of thought, Pieper interprets the festival not only as a communal event, but also as an expression of the community and its way of life: “After all, festivals are public by nature; they are affairs of the community, in fact its ‘self-portrait,’ and consequently visible, ‘objective’ events.” In Pieper’s account, the festival is a public act reflecting the identity of the celebrating community.

The Festival Involves Abstaining From Work

Not only does the festival occur during a non-working time, the festival itself is something outside the realm of everyday working life; there is a qualitative distinction between festival time and the time spent in work. Pieper points to the phenomena of sacrifice and offering, originally connected to festal days, as an indicator of this qualitative difference. This is particularly seen in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Seventh Day, yet even the pre-Christian Romans understood the sacrifice and offering of festival time as “the exclusive property of the gods.” So we see during festival time not only the absence of work and labor, but also the celebrating community offering what could have been gained for some higher reality. The time away from work in the festival is therefore not merely for the sake of being refreshed for more work, but for the sake of some meaningful reality.

The Object of Festal Celebration Is Meaningful to the Celebrating Community

The special occasion celebrated during festal time is not just anything, but something particularly important and connected to the life of the community. Whether this is the “rite of passage” for a member of the community, a marriage, a harvest, or a liturgy, the community recognizes this special occasion as something different, meriting a response outside the ordinary. The modern notion of creating “holidays” in honor of abstractions is something Pieper repudiates. The joy of festival time does not flow from some ideal in abstraction, such as the idea of “fraternity”—unless
that “fraternity” is incarnate and experienced by the celebrating community. In other words, the object or occasion celebrated must be something meaningful and linked to the very life of the community for the festival to engender any real festivity.

**The Tension of Spontaneity and Traditium in Festivals**

The special occasion celebrated flows from the life of the community and is ordered within the traditions of the celebrating community. The object of celebration is a spontaneous occurrence, meaning that the special occasion for celebration is not contrived or crafted by man. To legislate a festival does not mean that there really is a festival. Pieper makes this quite clear: “Where in the world has there been a real Festival arising from a mere act of legislation, a decision by a representative assembly? Who is empowered to establish a festival?” The harvest, a marriage, the holy days of the liturgical year, the foundation of a city, all serve as spontaneous events in the history and life of the culture, and do not spring from the pen of a social engineer. And such valid occasions for festivity can only inspire festivity if its meaning is still existentially present in the minds and hearts of the people.

There is therefore a tenuous balance in the emergence of the festival between spontaneity and order. The freedom and spontaneity connected to the festive occasion is intelligible if one considers one of the most common dimensions of festival time: celebration. Can we force ourselves to experience joy as if it is the output of a Kantian categorical imperative? On the contrary, real joy flows from a freedom to respond. And it is joy that is often so characteristic of festivities. As the argument reveals, the object of festivity is not something legislated from the top-down or created at a whim by a community or a social engineer; the “festivals” of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and the French Revolution illustrate this point. In such cases the state mandated festival time with coercion and utilized the events as mediums of propaganda. Rather the festival emerges from the ground-up and from the religious vision of the people. This emergence of festival time will likely then become incorporated into the life of the community and ordered correspondingly, for the festival permeates all dimensions of life.

Yet the festival is not wholly spontaneous. It generally occurs in an ordered, periodically reoccurring manner, meaning that once the occasion for festivity has emerged, the festival is ordered within the way of life of the people. Pieper argues that the primal and ultimate object for festival—the ritual festival or religious feast—is ordered within the * traditium*, or ritual tradition, of the community. What is meant by ritual tradition is not
simply a static social order, but a dynamic, living ritual tradition incorporating both the essentials of the past and what is truly good and beneficial to the contemporary bearers of the tradition.\textsuperscript{19} Without the *traditium*, the reason for celebrating may be lost to successive generations, resulting in the disappearance of the festival, though it may live on in a residual state.\textsuperscript{20} The survival of the traditium is therefore essential to the survival of the festival.

\textit{Art as the Mediating Expression of Festivity in the Festival}

How are these dimensions expressed in the concrete during festival time? The festive celebration is expressed through the medium of the arts.\textsuperscript{21} One has only to consider the various manifestations of practices now deemed commonplace, though not originally so. Drama, both in the ancient and the medieval world, found its origin in festival time; the special occasion merited something utterly unique and distinct from working life. The dramas of Ancient Greece occurred during the Dionysian festivals, while the cycles of medieval miracle plays in England began in the celebrations of the Feast of Corpus Christi.\textsuperscript{22} One sees the particular aspects of the celebrating community in the arts of the festival, yet one also sees festivity through the expression of the arts. The manifestation of the arts during festive time reveals something distinct from everyday life in the minds of the celebrants and is also the manifestation of festivity in the festal participants.

\textbf{PIEPER ON THE INTERNAL QUALITY OF FESTIVITY IN THE FESTIVAL}

Pieper argues that the external qualities of festivals are not enough to understand the festival. What is essential to festivals is the presence of festivity, since no social gathering is truly a festival if it is devoid of festive participants. Festivity is ultimately the affirmation and praise of the world rendering the subject disposed to rejoice in the goodness of existence.\textsuperscript{23} If so, then the disposition to be festive is rooted in human nature and does not derive solely from the social event. Pieper identifies two conditionals or necessary qualities for being festive: to see reality as a gift and to be at leisure. He further argues that the substance of festivity is love—the assent to the goodness of things—and that the grounding for any festival is the very goodness of reality. Ultimately, the source and pinnacle for festivity in the human person is found in the transcendent and one’s openness to praise and worship God in the ritual festival. This reaffirmation of Pieper’s philosophy of the festival therefore includes his account of the internal aspects of the festival.
Thanksgiving as the Predisposition for Festivity

Festivity flows from a conception of reality, and the basic precondition for this conception is to see reality and the festival itself as a gift—a gift that need not be. This notion of gift derives from the contingency of human nature and temporal existence. In festival time the participants, either implicitly or explicitly, give thanks for the goodness of the festival time. The festival is a free response to the gift of the good object celebrated, and not a coerced activity. Festivity and the fruit of the festival can only be celebrated in a spirit of thanksgiving. Pieper clearly articulates the gifted nature of festivity: “it is the element of festivity that can never be ‘organized,’ arranged and induced.” Therefore the festivalgoer gives thanks for the time of the festival, and the spirit of thanksgiving becomes a possibility only in the person who can recognize the goodness of things.

Leisure as the Condition of Soul for Festivity

Festivity is possible in the person who possesses the disposition to be at-rest and recognize the meaningfulness of reality. The recognition of what is meaningful flows again from an attitude of mind, and the absence of this disposition renders the subject incapable of festivity. Otherwise the good things of reality are reduced to utility or pleasure. Pieper notes that the only justification for not working at all is the dedication of leisure to some noble or meaningful reality. The festival flows from this dedication of leisure, and this account indicates that leisure is not simply a time for hobbies and interests away from work, but is a condition of the soul. Herein we find that festivity is not a means to an end, but something meaningful-in-itself and worthy of a special response from the people.

Being at-leisure is conditional for festivity to be present in the human subject. First, the person at-leisure is at rest internally; his rest from work includes not only resting his vital energies but also resting his spirit. Leisure is a power of the soul whereby man is able, in stillness, to be receptive to reality. This power is therefore the seed of intuition and contemplation, which Pieper also connects with festivity. As the festival takes place during the absence of work, we find that the festival participant must analogously abstain from work in spirit. Indeed, the festival ought to be, in a sense, effortless, for an easy sign that festivity is absent is that the occasion becomes arduous or an intensive effort to “have a good time.”

This receptivity to reality engenders a second aspect of leisure, namely attunement with the world. This harmony with the world is what brings forth the celebratory spirit, which is essential to festive gatherings. Leisure and festival therefore derive their possibility not only in the interior rest.
from work but also the cheerful affirmation of existence and one’s correspondence with its meaning. Such a disposition enables the rising above function and efficiency, which are mutually exclusive to festivity. The quality of leisure’s correspondence of the human subject to reality reveals a certain ethical nature to leisure and the festival. For leisure to be present in the subject, the person must be in accord with her nature, purpose, and end. But what exactly does the “cheerfulness” of affirmation entail? This cheerful affirmation entails something distinct from the disposition of leisure in the human soul.

Love is the Substance of Festivity

The affirmation of reality found within leisure is rooted in love. Pieper notes this festive spirit, engendered in leisure, is a “cheerful affirmation” of one’s own existence and the world as a whole. Leisure empowers the soul to have the capacity to be festive, yet the core of festivity is found in something other. The core of festivity is the power to love—to affirm the goodness of reality. Pieper observes that “it is insufficient to call affirmation of the world a mere prerequisite and premise for festivity. In fact it is far more; it is the substance of festivity. Festivity, in its essential core, is nothing but the living out of this affirmation.”

The essential connection between festivity and affirmation is seen in the nature of joy. Joy is essentially something secondary, and is only possible at the reception of something beloved. This is the justification for Pieper’s aphorism: “C’est l’armour qui chante.” And if the festival is universally recognized as a time for joy—a joyous affair—then Pieper is correct in identifying festivity in the power to love.

The power to love is not enough to account for the substance of festivity, unless the world as a whole is in fact good. It is both the fundamental reality of the goodness of existence and the act of affirmation that renders festivity possible. Pieper writes:

I mean the conviction that the prime festive occasion, which alone can justify all celebration, really exists; that, to reduce it to the most concise phrase, at bottom everything that is, is good, and it is good to exist. For man cannot have the experience of receiving what is loved, unless the world and existence as a whole represent something good and therefore beloved to him.

And it is in leisure that one finds the openness to be present to this existential reality in human existence. For as we noted, leisure facilitates the intuitive gaze upon reality and the stillness, not to be found in either the idle individual or proletarian, but in the person at-leisure. So the joy of festivity is rooted in one’s resting in the goodness of what is beloved.
The affirmative spirit of love in festivity is expressed during festival time. This assent to the goodness of things is not solely on the mind of the festal participant, though this does not obviate the reality of the affirmative spirit. In festal time we see cultural expressions of this affirmation as well, such as the “well-wishing,” times of peace, merriment, the collapse of class distinctions, and the presence of the arts, which all, at their root, kindle an affirmative spirit.\(^{37}\) Even in the seeming absence of joy, we see the affirmative spirit in festivity. As Pieper notes, even holidays or feasts for the dead contain in their root the cheerful affirmation of the goodness of the world.\(^{38}\) Here we see the significance of the last clause of Pieper’s definition of the festival as “the universal assent to the world as a whole.”

**Transcendence and Worship as the Source and Pinnacle of Festivity**

The affirmation of the world as a whole discloses the source and pinnacle of festivity in the human person: openness to transcendence. No greater act of rejoicing in the beloved goodness of things can be conceived than the praise and affirmation of the Creator of this good world.\(^{39}\) The existence of God and the willingness to worship God reveals the ultimate source of festivity: the goodness of the world is grounded in its being created by an Eternal God. This, as Pieper notes, “becomes the wellspring for a thousand legitimate occasions for festivity.”\(^{40}\) Without the belief and existential conviction in the existence of God and His goodness, it seems that love and all other internal qualities hereto mentioned fall short of facilitating festivity.

It is not enough to simply be open to the transcendent; it is necessary to affirm and praise God in ritual worship. The pinnacle of festivity is therefore to be found in the ritual festival. Hence Pieper terms the ritual festival the most festive of festivals.\(^{41}\) In the ritual festival one celebrates the very source of one’s goodness and existence, as well as the goodness of the world. This is evident in the Christian Seventh Day, the celebration of the contemporized sacrifice of Christ in the ritual liturgy. In the Seventh Day there is divine assent to the goodness of existence and celebration of the new life instituted and vouchsafed by Christ in the lives of the celebrating community.\(^{42}\) The Christian therefore celebrates the gift of being created by God, the promise of the beatific vision, and the intimation of the life of Christ in the lives of the celebrants.\(^{43}\)

Above all, Pieper identifies openness to transcendence and ritual worship as the key to the great festivals and their corresponding vitality. The manifold contemporary pseudo-festivals\(^{44}\) Pieper cites fail because they do not originate in an affirmative view of the world and worship the Creator.
Moreover, the disposition most destructive to festivity, as expressed in pseudo-festivities, is the rejection of transcendence:

There can be no festivity, when man, imagining himself self-sufficient, refuses to recognize that Goodness of things, which goes far beyond any conceivable utility; it is the Goodness of reality taken as a whole which validates all other particular goods and which man himself can never produce nor simply translate into social or individual ‘welfare.’ He truly receives it only when he accepts it as pure gift. The only fitting way to respond to such gift is: praise of God in ritual worship. In short, it is the withholding of public worship that makes festivity wither at the root.45

We now see the peril of the prevalent secular festivals legislated or created at a whim by peoples and the state. Without a connection to genuine festivity in praise of the Creator, the manifold “festivals” of various cultures become opportunities not for the stillness of leisure or the merrymaking flowing from love, but for the entertainment and stimulation of the senses disconnecting the subject from a higher reality. The genuine festival is therefore subverted with a sham substitute, with the new festival bearing little or no reference to genuine human fulfillment.

THE COMMON VISION OF A CULTURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE FESTIVAL

As the first dimension of Pieper’s account illustrates, the festival is a cultural event—a living expression of the festive spirit in cultural life. Every culture possesses not only a common way of life, but also a common vision or shared worldview.46 Pieper alluded to this quality of culture in his identification of the traditium in its relation to the ritual festival. What then is the nature of culture and what is the place of the festival within the context of a culture’s common religious vision? A brief analysis based on the thought of Pieper and Christopher Dawson issues three conclusions: that the shared vision is revealed in the festival; that, as the religious vision of a people changes, so too do its festivals; and that not just any commonly shared vision of a culture will engender festivity—there is in fact a role for truth in the festival.

**Festivals Reveal the Common Vision of the Celebrating Community**

To understand any particular festival one must understand the commonly shared vision of the particular celebrating community. The festival is a cultural event and the special occasion celebrated by the community flows from the identity and shared worldview of the people. Pieper alluded to
this reality when he identified the festival as the “self-portrait” of the celebrating community. For example, Christians celebrate Easter, and not Hanukkah or Ramadan. Similarly, Americans celebrate the Fourth of July and not Bastille Day. This variance in the special occasion celebrated is due to the common rational or spiritual vision of the people. Additionally, we find that the signs and symbols expressed in the particular festival will flow from the common vision of the culture, as conditioned by the material aspects of its common way of life. The symbols akin to the Christian—the Crucifix, images of the Virgin Mary, etc.—all pertain to the spiritual vision of the people. And we find that the material culture of the community conditions the expression of these symbols, even if varying cultures possess a similar vision.

We therefore find that in the festival we see a glimpse of the identity of the community as a kind of microcosm of the celebrating culture. What the culture deems worthy of celebration reveals something about the identity of that culture. Additionally, we find all areas of communal life are integrated into the festival time, even if the feast is the celebration of a religious reality. This is evidenced in the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi in Toledo, Spain, where the people come together to celebrate a religious feast day in praise and worship of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The festival includes the ornamentation of tapestries hanging from windows, herbs and flowers cast upon the streets, and the Eucharistic procession followed by Mass in the cathedral. After Mass, subsequent events include a military parade, music concerts and dancing, and even a bullfight. We see that even a religious festival incorporates the “secular” or not explicitly religious dimensions of the community. If we glimpse the identity of a culture as it expresses its spiritual vision in the festival, then we can conclude that festivity is connected to the shared vision of the people.

**Change in the Religious Vision of a Culture Means Change in the Festival**

The celebration of a festival in a culture reveals an inextricable relationship between the vision of a people and its way of life. Therefore a change in the vision of a people will result in change in the common way of life. Christopher Dawson makes this point explicitly:

> Every religion embodies an attitude to life and a conception of reality, and any change in these brings with it a change in the whole character of the culture, as we see in the case of the transformation of ancient civilization by Christianity, or the transformation of society of Pagan Arabia by Islam.
If so, then we find that the change in a religious vision of a people will result in a change of the festival, for the festival is an element within the common way of life of a people.

In such cases, we find that the festival can change in one of two ways. The first is that the same special occasion is celebrated, but in a different manner or for a different reason. A clear example is the celebration of Christmas in the West. Originally Christmas was celebrated for the birth of the Christian God-Man and Savior, Jesus Christ; the festival was seen as a holy day. Christmas was therefore a time for the celebration of the Mass and the Christian vision permeated the entire community in feasting, games, song, and dance. But with the secularization of society in Western civilization, Christmastime is now generally celebrated as a time for exchanging gifts and a paid holiday from work.51

The second way the festival changes with the corresponding change in religious vision is the supplanting of the festival with a new festival or sham-festival. The new vision no longer calls for a special response for the particular occasion; yet, a new festival will replace the old—whether or not the people are conscious of its emergence. An example of this cultural process can be seen with the change in religious vision of French life during the French Revolution. The revolutionaries rejected the Christian vision, instituting a new “sacred” calendar and a new series of festival days. Such festivities included the “Festival of Reason” and the “Festival of the Supreme Being.”52 Legislated by the Committee of Public Safety, the state mandated and codified the festal proceedings and designed the festivals as means of propaganda to inculcate the vision of the revolutionaries to the populous.53 This is an example of the supplanting of the traditional festival with its sham substitute.

The new festival that emerges will again flow from the new religious vision of the people. Consequently, the merits or detriments of the newly shared vision will be manifest in the emerging festival. A mark of real progress or decline in the new worldview view of the culture will be seen in whether the new festival is a genuine festival (festive) or its simulacrum. The emergence of a sham-festival rather than a genuine festival therefore marks a decline in the particular culture.

SYNTHESIS: THE RELATIONSHIP OF FESTIVITY TO A CULTURE’S COMMON VISION IN FESTIVALS

This account inexorably leads us to the conclusion that not just any shared vision of a people will engender festivity. We see this in two ways. First, for any festival to be festive the special occasion celebrated must be something that is genuinely good for the person and that ennobles the spirit and
way of life. Not every occasion is worthy of the festival. In other words, not just any object suffices for festivity to flourish. To celebrate something contrived or harmful to man’s nature is peculiarly unfestive. For we have identified festivity as flowing from the human person and not only the social event of the festival. Therefore any occasion celebrating something that moves man away from his purpose or fulfillment will not encourage the subject to enter more deeply into reality. Rather the festival will become a means of escape from the real via entertainment and sensual stimulation, all couched in a vitality that renders the subject unaware that he or she has lost true festivity.

Second, we find that not just any commonly shared vision of a people will engender a true festive spirit. Though all cultures attempt to celebrate festivals, their commonly shared visions will to some extent determine whether or not the festival is truly festive. Pieper’s account of the festival—through the addition of the clause “the universal assent to the world as a whole”—excludes those worldviews that do not kindle an affirmation of reality or an existential openness to transcendence. Marxism, Puritanism, Utilitarianism, Buddhism, and such, do not rest on the rock-bottom assertion that the world is good, and that it is good to exist. We therefore find such religious or pseudo-religious visions of reality peculiarly unfestive.

Only a culture that holds a religious vision that affirms the goodness of the world generates festive festivals. That many are shocked at the notion of the ritual festival being the most festive festival illustrates this point. For a commonly shared vision of the people to hold propositional statements that identify the world as good and instill openness to worshipping the Creator is not enough. What counts is the integration of such a religious vision into the lives of the people. Hence Pieper affirms that festivity flows from an existential disposition in the subject to affirm the goodness of the world and to praise God. But it is the extent to which a proper religious vision integrates into the lives of the people that the transcendent engenders festivity in the ritual festival. Otherwise, the festival is ultimately degrading to some degree. Without such a religious vision, and without the integration of the transcendent into the common life of the culture, we find Chesterton’s gloomy premonition to be an accurate assessment of the result of unfestivity in any pseudo-festival: “But it is necessary to make it clear, that if the holidays provided for the mechanic are provided mechanically as at present . . . I think that even the slavery of his labor would be light compared to the grinding slavery of his leisure.”
Notes

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2. Falassi, “Festival,” 2: “[F]estival commonly means a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview.”

3. Fredrickson, “Feast”: This encyclopedia article cedes full weight on the concept of sacred time and the ritual festival to the authority of Eliade.


5. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane.

6. Ibid., 102; 146–47: In Eliade’s account, the orgies and cannibalistic practices of ancients in their ritual festivals constitute a valid manifestation of the sacred in the festival. One might ask Eliade whether the quality of the sacred exacts any claim upon the human subject—whether the sacred involves not only religious experience, but also an ethical or normative harmony with the sacred.


8. Ibid., 44.

9. Ibid., 18: “The day of rest is not just a neutral interval inserted as a link in the chain of workaday life. It entails a loss of utilitarian profit. In voluntarily keeping the holiday, men renounce the yield of a day’s labor. This renunciation has from time immemorial been regarded as an essential element of festivity.”

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 24: “Not even the idea of freedom can inspire people with a spirit of festivity, though the celebration of liberation might—assuming that the event though possibly belonging to the distant past, still has compelling contemporary force.”

12. Pieper describes such artificially created occasions as “sham-festivals.” A sham-festival is a festival without a meaningful object of celebration or a manner of celebration that is contrary to human fulfillment. A sham-festival presents itself as the genuine thing, though in reality the festival serves as a simulacrum of a true festival. If the object of the festival is not something real, and really good for man, then it is likely the occasion of a “sham-festival.”

13. Pieper, In Tune with the World, 34.

14. Ibid., 62: “It remains true because while man can make the celebration, he cannot make what is to be celebrated, cannot make the festive occasion and the cause for celebrating. The happiness of being created, the existential goodness of things, the participation in the life of God, the overcoming of death—all these occasions of the great traditional festivals are pure gift. But because no one can confer a gift on himself, something that is entirely a human institution cannot be a real festival.”

15. Ibid., 24: “Memorial days are not in themselves festival days. Strictly speaking, the past cannot be celebrated festively unless the celebrant community
still draws glory and exultation from the past, not merely as reflected history, but by virtue of a historical reality still operative in the present.”

16. Ibid., 64–65.

17. Christopher Dawson succinctly explains that for any culture to truly experience social “progress,” the cause must come from within and not be an act of superimposition from a state or external force. It seems this is also true of human nature and the appearance of the festival. For more on cultural change, see Dawson’s Dynamics of World History.

18. Pieper, In Tune with the World, 35: “Festivals are, it would seem, traditional in a special sense, a traditium in the strictest meaning of the concept: received from a superhuman source, to be handed on undiminished, received and handed on again.”

19. Ibid.: “Real handing down, the living process of transmission from one generation to another, is deterred rather than abetted by the kind of traditionalism that clings to external appearances. For what really matters is not mere preservation and conservation, but a constant succession of new, creative reshapings which give contemporaneity to the content of festivals.”

20. Ibid.: “If the sons truly no longer knew the significance of the great holidays celebrated by their fathers, then the most immediate tie between the generations would be cut and tradition would, strictly speaking, no longer exist.”

21. Ibid., 53: “Also the effect of festivity, the stepping out of time and refreshment that penetrates to the depths of the soul, reaches the celebrant in the form of a message couched in the language of the arts.”

22. Cawley, Introduction to Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays, xvi–xvii: “The miracle plays became associated with Corpus Christi Day after 1311 when the Corpus Christi festival was officially recognized. . . . The Corpus Christi play of York is first heard of in 1376, that of Beverley (no longer extant) in 1377. By this time the municipal authorities were in general charge of the play, with the trade guilds of the town financing and producing the individual pageants of the complete Corpus Christi cycle.”

23. Pieper, In Tune with the World, 52–53: “It should be clear moreover, that the invisible aspect of festivity, the praise of the world which lies at the festival’s innermost core, can attain a physical form, can be made perceptible to the senses, only through the medium of the arts.”

24. Ibid., 39–40.

25. Ibid., 9: “Anyone who is at a loss to say what activity is meaningful in itself is will also be at a loss to define the concept of festivity. And if that incapacity is existential, instead of merely intellectual, then the prerequisite for achieving any kind of festivity is lacking.”

26. Ibid.

27. Josef Pieper, Leisure, 31: “Against the exclusiveness of the paradigm of work as activity, first of all, there is leisure as ‘non-activity’—an inner absence of preoccupation, a calm, an ability to let things go, to be quiet.”

28. Ibid.
29. Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, 17: “The concept of festivity is inconceivable without an element of contemplation...the mind’s eye resting on whatever manifests itself. It means relaxing of the eye on the given frame of reference, without which no utilitarian act is accomplished.”

30. That the party, feast, or festival becomes an object of work during the festival time, ideally made for refreshment and joy, is peculiarly evident in the party-culture of the West. One must work to procure any kind of fraternal spirit and when such efforts fail, one turns to the inordinate consumption of alcohol to provide the mirage of refreshment and joyfulness so intimately connected to the festival. The human spirit cannot remain at work ad infinitum and therefore turns to the sham appearance of the festival in place of the real thing.

31. Pieper, *Leisure*, 29: “The opposite of acedia is not the industrious spirit of the daily effort to make a living, but rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole, and of God—of Love, that is, from which arises that special freshness of action, which would never be confused by anyone with any experience with the narrow activity of the ‘workaholic.’”

32. The ethical aspect of the human person in the argument on the festival is examined in the synthesis of this essay.


34. Ibid., 22–23: “But the reason for joy, although it may be encountered in a thousand concrete forms, is always the same: possessing or receiving what one loves, whether actually in the present, hoped for in the future, or remembered in the past.”

35. Ibid., 55.
36. Ibid., 26.
37. Ibid., 40–41.

38. Ibid., 28: “Even celebrations for the dead, All Souls Day and Good Friday, can never be truly celebrated except on the basis of faith that all is well with the world and life as a whole. If there is no consolation, the idea of a funeral as a solemn act is self-contradictory. But consolation is a form of rejoicing, although the most silent of all—just as catharsis, the purification of the soul in the witnessing of tragedy, is at bottom a joyful experience.”

39. Pieper, *Leisure*, 50: “But no more intensive harmony with the world can be thought of than that of ‘Praise of God,’ the worship of the Creator of this world.”


41. Pieper, *Leisure*, 51: “The most festive festival that can be celebrated is religious worship or ‘cult,’ and there is no festival that does not get its life from such worship or does not actually derive its origin from this. There is no worship ‘without the gods,’ whether it be mardi gras or a wedding.”

42. Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, 49.

43. Ibid., 50.

44. Labor Day, Festivals of the French Revolution, May Day, Brutus Festival, and the parties of contemporary Western universities all offer poignant examples.
Josef Pieper on the Festival in Light of Culture


46. Dawson, *Progress & Religion*, 66: “The unity of a culture rests not only on a community of place—the common environment, a community of work—the common function, and a community of blood—the common race, it springs also, and above all, from a community of thought. For a culture even of the most rudimentary kind is never simply a material unity. It involves not only a certain uniformity in social organization and in the way of life, but also a continuous and conscious social discipline.”


48. Ibid., 33–34.

49. As Falassi indicates, it is a modern phenomenon that we isolate particular social events within the broader festival and “celebrate” such qualities. We have “music festivals,” “art festivals,” sports competitions, etc., all divided and isolated into separate quadrants of human social life. Originally all such events were integrated within an entire festival. See Falassi, “Festival.”


54. Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, 24: “If the Incarnation of God is no longer understood as an event that directly concerns the present lives of men, it becomes impossible, even absurd to celebrate Christmas festively.”


Bibliography


Joseph Zahn


