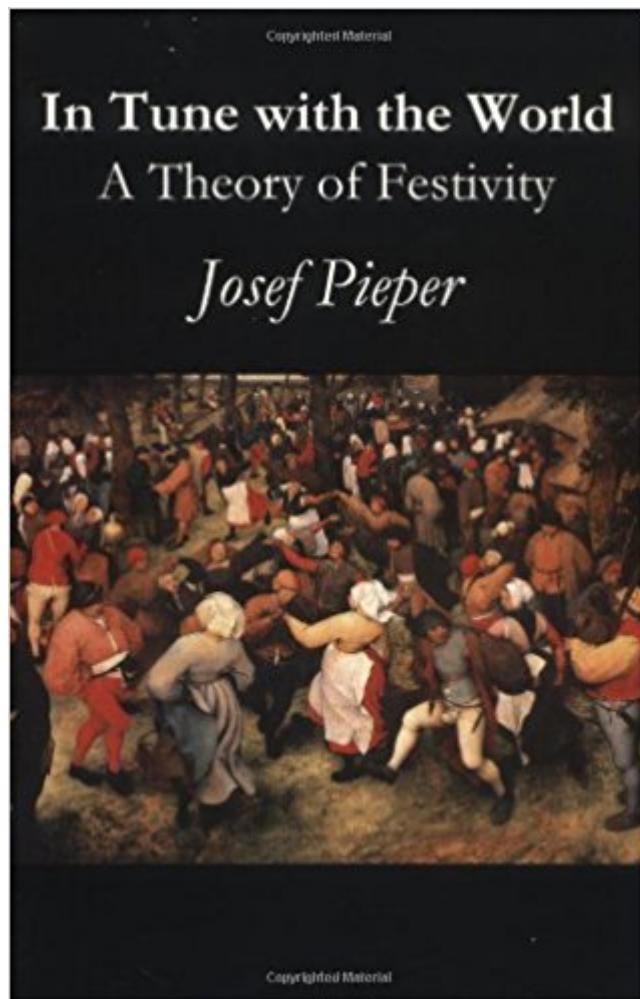


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In Tune With The World



Synopsis

In this stimulating and still-timely study, Josef Pieper takes up a theme of paramount importance to his thinking -- that festivals belong by rights among the great topics of philosophical discussion. As he develops his theory of festivity, the modern age comes under close and painful scrutiny. It is obvious that we no longer know what festivity is, namely, the celebration of existence under various symbols. Pieper exposes the pseudo-festivals, in their harmless and their sinister forms: traditional feasts contaminated by commercialism; artificial holidays created in the interest of merchandisers; holidays by coercion, decreed by dictators the world over; festivals as military demonstrations; holidays empty of significance. And lastly we are given the apocalyptic vision of a nihilistic world which would seek its release not in festivities but in destruction. Formulated with Pieper's customary clarity and elegance, enhanced by brilliantly chosen quotations, this is an illuminating contribution to the understanding of traditional and contemporary experience.

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Customer Reviews

In Tune with the World is a fine translation of a German monograph on feasts and festivals by philosopher Josef Pieper. It is a short but high quality softcover with heavy paper, large print, and nice wide margins. I had never read anything of Pieper's before and knew only his name from hearing of "Liesure, the Basis of Culture." I found him to be an interesting writer. He is a philosopher of Christian background who writes philosophy rather than religious texts. He references here Aquinas, Nietzsche, Rousseau and the French Revolution, and socialists from Hitler to Trotsky. He is therefore, squarely in the realm of the philosophical conversation of the 20th century. As for what

festivity is, let me try to summarize his argument: Festivals are special days, and therefore require ordinary days to exist. Ordinary days are days consisting of servile work, that is, work that is not just busy but has meaning in the utilitarian support of life. The opposite of servile work is not non-work but non-utilitarian work. Therefore, festivals are days of non-utilitarian activity, or work that is meaningful in itself. In order to define festivals, then, one must be able to define work that is meaningful in itself. Historically, religious and philosophical authorities have defined contemplation--the joy of seeing the world--as the ultimate form of activity that has meaning in itself. In order to engage in contemplation, one must have existential wealth, or the ability to be joyful; i.e., festivity and nihilism are not compatible. Joy requires an object or reason for joy, and if festivity requires joy, festivity then requires an object or reason, such as an event like a marriage or birth. Events are reasons for joy only if they are microcosms of the essential goodness of the universe. Therefore, festivals are properly days for remembering or confirming the essential goodness of the universe: "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." Pieper goes on to examine other aspects of festivity, such as its ritual nature, its need to touch on something eternal, its relationship to art, Easter as its ultimate example, and its relationship to modernity, including the incompatibility of festivity with totalitarianism. Although Pieper writes in a somewhat serpentine fashion, digressing and then returning to his main point over and over, and can be hard to follow at times because of this, I think this would be an interesting read for anyone serious about festivals and celebrations, Christian or not.

Sometimes it helps to take a second look. I wasn't halfway through the first chapter before I was disappointed with *In Tune with the World*. It was my own fault: Despite the book's subtitle, I had been expecting practical suggestions for recovering festivity in a society where abundance is commonplace. However, when Pieper says "a THEORY of festivity," that is exactly what he means. What's more, the first few pages put me off because Pieper seems to be dividing our lives between work and festivity, with work pretty much defined as what men do to earn a living, and I kept thinking, "But you still expect the women to cook and clean for your festivals; if they separated their work from the feast, it wouldn't be much of one!" He was writing in the early 1960's, so I can't say he's free from that attitude, but there's much more to what he is saying, and my preconceptions definitely distorted that first chapter. Before I had finished the book, however, I realized that it deserved re-reading for what it is rather than for what I wanted it to be. I'm not generally one to read books of philosophy -- largely, I'll admit, because I find them hard going. There is only so much of

this kind of writing I can take without my eyes glazing over: "Human acts derive their meaning primarily from their content, from their object, not from the manner in which they are performed. Play, however, seems to be chiefly a mere modus of action, a specific way of performing something, at any rate a purely formal determinant." The text is well worth working through, however -- perhaps several times. Pieper writes as a Christian, and clearly views Christian festivals as the highest and best of celebrations. Yet the theory of festivity he posits has its roots firmly in pagan, primitive, Jewish, Roman, and other practices as well, and the book is rife with quotations from sources many and varied. You can read *In Tune with the World* in under an hour, but Pieper's ideas are inexhaustible. If you consider what he has to say about the festivals of the French Revolution, you'll never look at the Olympic Opening Ceremonies the same way again.

This is a compact theological/philosophical work, which examines the idea of the festival. In our present time and culture, this is a lost art. It has been largely replaced by parties and vacations, which have no real meaning, except to escape from the drudgery of everyday life. Pieper examines the idea of festivity and shows that it requires the opposite viewpoint, not that life is terrible and we need to escape from it, but that life is good and we need to celebrate it. I find this book to be a very thorough and systematic examination of the idea and very edifying at that.

To be sure, this is a brilliant and thoughtful work, but it is so ponderously Germanic that it took me a year to get through this very thin book. True festivity, as the author defines it, comprises a great number of factors, most of which are predicated by an acknowledgment of God. I wish the author had made reference to more real-world examples than he did. He briefly mentioned the manufactured festivals of the French Revolution as examples of pseudo-festivity because of their secular, man-focused worship, but I would have liked him to expound on the praxis of true festivity as seen in history. I think of the great Catholic festivals as celebrated in the past. I compare them with the dreary and depressing experience of "celebrating" a Catholic "holy day" in modern times, and I wonder what exactly has changed, since we are still- at least ostensibly- celebrating the exact same things as in the past. This is a wonderful little monograph, but those of us with more concrete modes of thought might not appreciate the abstract and disembodied ideas at the center of this subject.

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