Comment: *Reclaiming Leisure*

In 1952 *Leisure the Basis of Culture* by Josef Pieper (1904-1997) was published by Faber & Faber, translated by Alexander Dru and introduced by T.S. Eliot. In 1965 it appeared as a paperback in the Fontana Library. Still in print, this is a classic of twentieth-century philosophy, one of the few that are intelligible to the general reader.

Much impressed by the papal encyclical 'Quadragesimo anno', Pieper originally wanted to work in the social sciences. The ascendancy of the Nazis made that impossible. In October 1943 he was at home on leave from the army, with his wife and three young children, the day that the American air force set fire to the old centre of Münster — his hometown. The book resulted from lectures that he gave, in 1947, when he was at last able to take up an academic career. He had already written several of the short books in which he was to communicate quite widely a fresh and attractive interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's account of the virtues. Amazingly, when one remembers the condition of Europe then, and particularly of Germany, his thesis is that, without a certain contemplative leisure, there can be no such thing as culture; and there can be no such leisure without a certain openness to the divine.

As he contends in the second half of the book, the principal form which contemplative leisure takes is the practice of philosophy — conceived, of course, as Eliot notes, neither as a would-be exact science nor as a one-man world-view. Rather, for Pieper, trained as a classicist, philosophy is always 'love of wisdom', consciously or unconsciously operating in a religious tradition. As Aristotle says, in the *Metaphysics*, 'to us, who come afterwards, it has been handed down by our forefathers and the ancients, that the whole of nature is surrounded by the divine'.

That philosophy was the best way of cultivating leisure never seemed entirely plausible. It perhaps never seemed so even to Plato. As Pieper noted, granted that Plato's most profound thoughts about love and wisdom are in the *Symposium*, there must be a certain irony in putting them in the mouth of Apollodorus, once one of Socrates' groupies, and have him tell the story to Glaucon, a rich business man.

At all events, in his new book *Reclaiming Leisure: Art, Sport and Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Hayden Ramsay takes up something very like Pieper's conception of classical philosophy, and, as the subtitle indicates, extends it into other areas of leisure — sport, travel, reading and music — arguing for a more 'playful'

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and 'reflective' approach to all of these obviously far more widely practised activities than philosophy, however generously defined. Professor of Philosophy at the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne, Ramsay (though perhaps not much of a fan himself) can compare professional football matches in his native Scotland ('dark and tribal') with those in his adopted Australia ('entertainment'). Either way, he argues, sport now no longer plays the role it had in ancient Greece: 'thanksgiving to our gods, celebration of our faith, expression of our hope, and reminder of our mortality'. Nevertheless, he allows, sport may function as religion for many spectators today: 'religion-lite — like the short, emotional though shallow experiences of non-church goers who attend weddings and funerals in church'. Sport as national celebration capable of renewing a culture he regards as impossible now: no one says a prayer at the opening even of the Olympics. He doesn't mention the football players one sees (in television news clips) crossing themselves and looking up to the sky. On the other hand, at least at school and amateur level, there is still an ethical dimension, with virtues such as 'fair play', 'personal best', 'keeping to the rules', 'gracious in victory', 'dignified in defeat', and so on. In many universities, as Ramsay says, sports ethics is a sub-discipline of applied philosophy.

It turns out, perhaps not very surprisingly, that classical music, and even tourism to some extent, allow for richer possibilities of wonder and contemplative leisure. On the other hand, Ramsay concludes gloomily, disciplined reflectiveness is not encouraged in mainstream church life — never mind in universities. That is why, he contends, it is important to discover and confirm whatever possibilities there seem to be in the more popular leisure activities. Pieper's thesis could not be more cogently and sympathetically confirmed and explored.

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