

SEARCHING FOR JOSEF PIEPER

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[In some recent prominent studies, Josef Pieper has merited only brief attention. He is presented as one who accommodated Roman Catholic theology and philosophy with National Socialism in the early 1930s. Alongside such thinkers as Michael Schmaus and Karl Eschweiler, Pieper's name appears as evidence for the Catholic pursuit of rapprochement with the Nazi State. The writings of Pieper, however, contain considerable evidence to maintain a contrary reading of his involvement with the National Socialists. He may in fact be understood as a man who said no to the spirit of his age.]

OVER THE PAST fifty years the writings of Josef Pieper (1904–1997) have made a definite mark in the theological and philosophical world. His lucid explanations and applications of Thomistic thought and his—at times—devastating critique of contemporary society have gained him a sure following. In spite of this, however, Pieper's works surface infrequently as the subject of major studies; although there is to be found in Pieper's work, as David Heim discovered, *un embarras de richesses*, surprisingly little work has been done on the now deceased German Thomistic scholar.¹ The absence of scholarly attention to Pieper is all the more surprising given that he may well represent one of the few bright instances of Christian, indeed Roman Catholic opposition to German National Socialism in the post-World War I period. Such a person would of course be a welcome discovery, given the dismal showing in the Christian quarter of that time.

This possibility, however, is clouded with uncertainty. It is in this regard that Pieper's life and work have not altogether escaped the attention of scholars. In particular, Pieper has merited brief attention in several prominent studies outlining the accommodation of Roman Catholic theology and philosophy with National Socialism in the early 1930s. In these studies

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¹ David Heim, "Josef Pieper and the Pursuit of Virtue," *The Christian Century* 104 (December 2, 1987) 1077.

there have been formidable challenges to the authenticity of Pieper's opposition to Hitler's regime. Indeed, Pieper's name has been associated with those Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers who sought to construct a viable bridge between the fascist state and the Church. In Gary Lease's "The Origins of National Socialism," Pieper is charged as a contributor to a patently pro-Nazi Party (NSDAP) series of booklets named *Reich und Kirche*, in which, according to its initial advertisement, the purpose "was to serve 'the building of the Third Reich from the united forces of the National Socialist State and Catholic Christianity.'"² In his essay, Lease numbers Pieper along with the most notorious and outspoken collaborators with the Nazi Party. Nor is Lease alone in this judgment. More recently, Robert Krieg has described Pieper's optimism toward the potential good of authoritarian regimes in general and the arrival to power of National Socialism in particular.³

And thus, as an admirer of the man, I am faced with this question: who, precisely, was Josef Pieper? Did he, as some historians have argued, fall under the spell of National Socialism, or, in the face of corruption, was he one of those rare instances of Christian defiance? It is the latter option, I believe, that is most defensible. Up until this time historians have done Pieper a significant injustice. It is my contention that he may be safely exonerated from the accusation of succumbing to the deceptive power of his age.

Looking first at Pieper's immediate context, however, I am not in some respects surprised that he has been viewed with considerable suspicion. Despite some exceptional instances of courageous opposition to Hitler, some at the highest sacrifice,⁴ it is all too accurate to comment on the many failures of Roman Catholicism within the context of National Socialist Germany. Notwithstanding its initial resistance to the Nazi Party, scholars still refer to Roman Catholicism's "all-too-few moments of heroic resistance,"⁵ its "overall picture . . . of indifference and apathy,"⁶ and the almost universal pursuit by Catholic thinkers of "a rapprochement with the New

² Gary Lease, *The Origins of National Socialism: Religion and Politics in the Modern World*, ed. Peter Merkl and Ninian Smart (New York: New York University, 1983) 73.

³ Robert Krieg, *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 20.

⁴ Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1979) 366.

⁵ Michael Lukens, "Joseph Lortz and a Catholic Accommodation with National Socialism," *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, ed. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 151.

⁶ Guenter Lewy, "Pius XII, The Jews, and the German Catholic Church," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* 142.

Nazi state" by 1933.⁷ Vigorously active in this accommodation were a number of prominent neo-Thomistic scholars, such as Karl Eschweiler and Michael Schmaus, who used the Thomistic scheme of grace and nature to bridge the gap between the church and National Socialism. The link between grace and nature was particularly useful to these theologians given the importance of ethnicity to Hitler's political agenda, although this emphasis was not original with Hitler. The ideology of National Socialism was borrowed largely from the ethical dualism of the German *völkisch* movement—an intensely nationalistic movement that taught that Germans, in accordance with their ethnicity, had been given by Providence the unique role of vanquishing evil on behalf of the whole world.⁸ German destiny, according to *völkisch* belief, was inextricably entwined with Teutonic blood. Any person, therefore, that might threaten to dilute the concentration of Germanic blood and culture, would actually in this view be threatening world order. Hitler's zeal for racial purity is best understood in light of his adoption of this *völkisch* ethos. It was in response to this dualism that scholars such as Eschweiler and Schmaus turned to Thomas Aquinas to justify the preoccupation with preserving the purity of the German race. Using Aquinas's concept of, "grace presupposes nature," they supported the notion that Germany as it is constituted of German blood is an indispensable part of the divine plan.

This usage of Aquinas found expression even in those theological circles where neo-Thomism was less than popular. For instance, the prominent theologian, Karl Adam, though decidedly critical of neo-Thomistic Christology,⁹ utilized the same axiom that grace presupposes nature in order to lend credence to a working relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Hitler's government.¹⁰ According to Adam, the natural basis which the new chancellor was providing—the upholding of the uniquely German Volk tradition—was the basis "on which the Church could undertake its mission of celebrating the sacraments."¹¹ The "germanizing" of Germany was a precondition to the outpouring of grace. Accordingly, Adam at one time claimed that it was "the right and duty of the state to preserve the blood purity of the Volk."¹²

⁷ Donald Dietrich, "Catholic Theologians in Hitler's Reich: Adaptation and Critique," *Journal of Church and State* 29 (1987) 24.

⁸ Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich: Volume One, 1918–1934* (London: SCM, 1987) 75.

⁹ Robert Krieg, "Karl Adam, National Socialism, and Christian Tradition," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 438–40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 444.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Donald Dietrich, "Catholic Theologians in Hitler's Reich" 22–23.

CATHOLIC CHURCH AND GERMANY

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany during the hundred years that led up to the Germany of post-World War I was an ideal seedbed for this theological and political compromise. Since the Kulturkampf of the 19th century, the German Roman Catholic Church was particularly desirous to identify itself with the spirit of nationalism; the late 19th-century struggle with Otto Von Bismarck had left a less than desirable impression of Roman Catholics in the minds of the German Protestant majority. As late as 1943, the Nazi-supported Grade 5 textbook, *Geschichtsbuch für die Deutsche Jugend*, labels Ultramontanism as the great enemy and spoiler of 19th-century German unification: even the iron-fisted Bismarck was bested by the power of the Vatican.¹³ In light of such manifest prejudices, Roman Catholics were especially eager to prove that their allegiance to Rome did not diminish their love for the Fatherland. Accordingly, with the surge of nationalistic fervor incited by National Socialism, Catholics perceived their opportunity to “disprove the charge that German Catholics were somehow less than true Germans [and] were eager to demonstrate an appropriately zealous degree of patriotic fervor.”¹⁴ It is in this context that Josef Pieper attempted to live out his Roman Catholic identity.

With respect to the “totalitarian idolatries” encountered in Hitler’s Germany, Roland Hill writes: “. . . that Pieper, and countless other ‘good Germans’ failed against these mightier forces of evil was the special tragedy of German Catholicism.”¹⁵ Upon the exact nature of this failure Hill does not expound. Yet, as when reading Lease, the reader is left with the distinct impression that Pieper’s proposed place as “one of the great liberators of the Christian mind in the 20th century” is tainted or even spoiled by a distinct moral failure, by a degree of complicity with the spirit of his age.¹⁶ To be sure, if Pieper is guilty of some kind of collusion with National Socialism then his place as a teacher of moral theology is necessarily suspect. However, even though Pieper has been accused without qualification, the verdict is by no means certain. In fact, so considerable are the challenges to Pieper’s complicity with National Socialism that it is strange that up until now his case has not sparked more controversy. Not least of these

¹³ Gilmer W. Blackburn, “The Portrayal of Christianity in the History Textbooks of Nazi Germany,” *Church History* 49 (1980) 443–44.

¹⁴ Michael Lukens, “Joseph Lortz and a Catholic Accommodation with National Socialism” 151.

¹⁵ Roland Hill, “In Companionship with the Gods,” *The Catholic World Report*, January 1994: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/COMP GODS.htm> (accessed April 2, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

challenges is Pieper's own testimony, for here it is plain that collaboration with the Nazi Party is a failure to which Pieper admits no participation. Having cast his vote against the Nazi Party on March 5, 1933, Pieper came to the immovable conclusion in 1934 that "no pact was possible with such a regime."¹⁷ It is such a confession that necessitates an evaluation of Pieper's thought. Whereas his contemporaries like Adam and Eschweiler advertise an unmistakable allegiance to the values of National Socialism, the writing of Pieper evinces no such quality, running in stark opposition to the predominant values of his day.

PIEPER AND AQUINAS

If Pieper's writings stand in contradistinction to the compromised scholarship of his contemporaries, he attributes this, ironically, to the influence of Aquinas. Having encountered Aquinas at a young age under the influence of a Dominican priest, Pieper returned to the Angelic Doctor in order to seek clarity amidst the feverish pitch of Hitler's propaganda in 1934.¹⁸ It was in Aquinas that Pieper discovered the antidote to his poisoned age. In fact, Pieper's landmark study on the four cardinal virtues is fundamentally a critique of his own times: the thoughts that fueled his interpretation of Aquinas were forged in reaction to National Socialist Germany. At this point it is important to consider precisely what Pieper says: "It is therefore of considerable importance that man prepare himself to encounter historical realizations of evil in which a high degree of 'morality' is joined with a considerable measure of 'heroism' but which nonetheless remain thoroughly and unsurpassingly inhuman and evil, because at the same time they embody uttermost injustice."¹⁹ Pieper's study of the ethical dimension of the thought of Aquinas, which we now have in part as *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, began with an inquiry into the virtue of fortitude. This study was occasioned by the inescapable heralding of the "heroic" by the propagandists of his day. In keeping with the *völkisch* ideas of providence and special German destiny, propagandists bombarded the German public with exhortations to an uncompromised, sacrificial loyalty toward the state for the sake of *Volk, Vaterland und Heimat*—three "mythic" values that, rooted deep and fast in the Ger-

¹⁷ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known: An Autobiography: The Early Years 1904–1945*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 89, 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 98.

¹⁹ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1966) 68.

man psyche, awoke an exceptionally vivid imagery.²⁰ It was in response to such that Roman Catholicism gave birth to its tragic collaboration. The call to heroic sacrifice, however, met with little enthusiasm in Josef Pieper. Rather, it aroused his suspicion, which in turn led him to inquire once more into Aquinas's teaching on fortitude. What Pieper discovered in Aquinas "had nothing at all to do with the ideal of the 'hero' as set forth and stridently proclaimed by propaganda."²¹ On further reflection it became Pieper's conviction that the Western concept of fortitude had grown like an "over painted fresco" and subsequently had become unrecognizable and largely unfamiliar to Christians.²² Accordingly, he set about his work: to reintroduce the Church's heritage as a "counter-model" to the contemporary ethics that had inundated German society.²³

THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

Although Pieper was very prolific, for the present purpose I will limit myself to his ethical teaching as found in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. Here it becomes apparent that Pieper is swimming against the current of his contemporaries. The concept of fortitude which we discover here certainly contains the element of sacrifice that Pieper was hearing (and seeing) in his day—willingness and readiness to die—but it also includes an aspect that, even in our contemporary ethical landscape, may seem "bizarre and counterintuitive."²⁴ Here I refer particularly to the unity of the virtues. For Pieper, fortitude never acts in isolation, but rather is dependant on two other virtues, namely prudence and justice, but temperance also. In particular, it is the virtue of prudence that enables fortitude to attain its proper realization, for fortitude is only truly fortitude when it is directed, not toward the self (the brave man), but toward "a deeper more essential intactness."²⁵ That is, the brave man must first be cognizant of the "human good" in order that he may risk rightly personal injury for its possession.²⁶ This cognizance, however, is not within the grasp of fortitude alone: fortitude "must not trust itself."²⁷ Rather, perception of the human good is the special function of the virtue prudence.

Pieper's conclusion that the contemporary Church had grown unfamiliar with the virtue of fortitude is ultimately grounded in his belief that the

²⁰ Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962) 30–32.

²¹ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 98.

²² *Ibid.* 98–99.

²³ *Ibid.* 98.

²⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, "Explorations in the Thought of a Philosopher of Virtue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (Spring 1983) 117.

²⁵ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* 119.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 124.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 122.

modern world had forgotten the virtue of prudence: no “dictum in traditional Christian doctrine strikes such a note of strangeness to the ears of contemporaries . . . as this one: that the virtue of prudence is the mold and ‘mother’ of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance.”²⁸ Prudence, according to Pieper, is that virtue that enables the other virtues to lead an individual not only to action, but to right action.²⁹ Apart from prudence, the virtues are merely hollow shells; prudence imparts to them their form and essence.³⁰ Prudence does so by enabling the virtues to act in accordance with the way things are; that is, the imperative of prudence directs the virtues to act in accordance with reason, which may be defined as “openness to reality.”³¹ When through this openness to reality an individual becomes cognizant of truth—“the unveiling and revelation of reality”³²—and when this truth shapes volition and action, then one may be said to have acted with prudence, and thus justly or bravely or temperately.³³

Now up to this point Pieper’s philosophy is not necessarily safe from a potential collaboration with National Socialist ideology. The human good may be seen, from the National Socialist standpoint, as the purification of German race which would in turn lead, not only to a local, but to a global “intactness.” Such collaboration may have been possible had not Pieper noted the very important concept of reciprocity among the virtues. While prudence is indeed the fountain of the other virtues, prudence is nevertheless dependent “at its very fundamentals on the totality of the other virtues, and above all on the virtue of justice.”³⁴ (Justice ranks first for Pieper because, while fortitude and temperance provide the basis for “doing good,” justice is itself the essential action of doing good.)³⁵ Whereas prudence is directed to putting the goal of humanity—which is “to be according to the reality which man himself is and which surrounds him”³⁶—into concrete action, the acknowledgment and affirmation of that goal, of that good, is the fundamental attitude of the just, brave, and temperate individual.³⁷ Therefore the reciprocity in the virtues works like this: only the just, brave and temperate person who “loves the good” can be prudent, but only the person who is prudent can actually perform the good. Since performance of the good increases one’s love of the good, the foundations of prudence sink deeper “to the extent that prudence bears fruit in action.”³⁸ Lest this should seem frustratingly circular, Pieper explains, in a poetic piece of prose, that the original desire for the good finds its source in the

²⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 7.

³² *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 33.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 6–7.

³¹ *Ibid.* 9.

³³ *Ibid.* 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

creative call of God in that moment when the new life flies across “the abyss which parts nothingness from existence.”³⁹

It follows then, that while an individual must possess all of these virtues in order to be prudent, she must preeminently be just in order to affirm the good of humanity, which in turn leads to prudence. Accordingly, as has already been quoted, Pieper refuses to admit any heroism that is not at the same time just. Indeed, as Pieper says elsewhere, the fruit of fortitude is corrupted by injustice⁴⁰ and thus, no doubt, his reference at one point to a “pseudo-heroic picture of the Führer.”⁴¹ Now it is in his explication of justice that Pieper departs most significantly from the ideology of National Socialism. Here it is necessary to quote Pieper at length:

It is not superfluous, I think, to spell out every obvious stage of the argument as we have done. For nowadays “liquidation” is both concept and reality. Liquidation does not mean punishment, subjugation, conquest, or even execution. Liquidation means extermination merely on the basis of otherness. It would be unrealistic not to see that this ferment: “Whoever is different will be liquidated,” works on like a poison, a constant temptation to human thought, destroying or at least menacing it.⁴²

It is not difficult to see here Pieper’s utter disdain for that *völkisch* dualism of which the identification and classification of the “other” resulted in such gross injustices. For Pieper, justice is grounded in the inalienable rights of the individual. To be sure, “justice is something that comes second: right comes before justice.”⁴³ These rights are not based in a particular *ethnos*, but have their origins in the far reaching activity of God as Creator: “Man has inalienable rights because he is created a person by the act of God, that is, an act beyond all human discussion . . . something is inalienable due to man because he is *creatura*.”⁴⁴

With respect to the state, Pieper contends that the governing powers may be said to be just when “the guardian of the common weal” fosters, protects, and supports the “good things bestowed in creation (men’s capacities and abilities)” which belong to the good of the community.⁴⁵ A state is just when it allows individual members the opportunity to share in the common good in accordance with the “*dignitas*, capacity, and ability that is distinctly his.”⁴⁶ The inalienable rights of the individual, therefore, consist of the freedom to enjoy one’s gifts and dignity as a creature as they are employed within and directed toward the social whole. Since all of this is based, not upon ethnicity, but upon common human nature, Pieper does not hesitate

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 65–66.

⁴¹ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 189.

⁴² *The Four Cardinal Virtues* 55.

⁴³ Ibid. 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

to point out that the totalitarian state emerges wherever human nature is denied: “‘*Il n’y a pas de nature humaine*’? This is, in truth, the formal justification for every exercise of totalitarian power—even though such a connection may not have entered the head of Jean Paul Sartre, who originated this existentialist thesis. If then, there is no human nature on the basis of which alone there is an inalienable obligation to man, how can we escape the consequence: Do whatever you think fit with man?”⁴⁷ Despite frequent appeals to morality and an elevation of the heroic, the state which does not recognize its debt to the “other” on the basis of a shared humanity is fundamentally unjust. Once a government is unjust, it is incapable of receiving praise. For whereas justice, “of all the human, natural virtues, is literally the fundamental virtue,”⁴⁸ the worst “disruption of order in the field of things naturally human . . . the true perversion of ‘human good,’ bears the name ‘injustice’.”⁴⁹ In other words, the unjust state is corrupt through and through. Quite clearly then, Pieper’s philosophy allows for no cooperation with National Socialism.⁵⁰

REICH UND KIRCHE

Given Pieper’s ostensibly irreconcilable views with National Socialism it is puzzling that his contribution to the series of booklets, *Reich und Kirche*, has not generated more suspicion among those who have indicted him as a Nazi sympathizer. One would expect a footnote at least. Instead, Pieper is identified as a Catholic “theoretician” who saw his “task as serving through [his] religion the nationalistic movement then sweeping Germany,” and is grouped without qualification among unabashed adherents to National Socialism.⁵¹ Yet to classify Pieper with such thinkers seems, at best, a grievous misrepresentation. For certainly, given Pieper’s philosophy, his contribution to *Reich und Kirche* must at once appear incontestably problematic. Why did someone so unambiguously opposed to National Socialism, who had indeed voted against the Party, contribute to such a project? To this problem Pieper has provided an answer.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 50.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 65.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 68.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer’s copy of Pieper’s *Zucht und Mass* (translated later as “Temperance” in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*) was heavily marked. It appears that Pieper’s writings played a significant role in shaping Bonhoeffer’s thought in opposition to National Socialism and to the various expressions of his own Lutheran Church that had conformed to National Socialist ideology. In the afterword to the German edition of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, the editors note that “Josef Pieper’s reformulation of the theology of Thomas Aquinas may have encouraged him to ‘courageously and strongly reach out for the old and new Catholic wisdom’” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 125, 419.

⁵¹ Gary Lease, “The Origins of National Socialism” 73.

Shortly after submitting his piece to *Reich und Kirche*, Pieper already foresaw the misunderstanding that would follow. While it is true that he admitted to some shame for having submitted the small booklet, it was a shame based solely within the misrepresentation it created: namely that some of his friends thought that he “had been trying to make [himself] acceptable to the powers-that-be.”⁵² Nothing, however, as Pieper recounts it, could be further from the truth. Up until the time of his contribution, Pieper had been intensely interested in the subject of de-proletarianization. Even in his student days he had made a new translation of Leo XIII’s social encyclical, *Rerum novarum*. With the appearance of *Quadragesimo anno*, an encyclical that appeared on May 15, 1931, Pieper held four evening discussions, “trying to direct attention in particular to the uncomfortable ‘socialist’ aspects of the encyclical, especially its concept of class and the ‘social mortgage’ view of private property.”⁵³ It was these evening discussions that evoked the sharp attack from the pastor of St. Lamberts who was later to become the famed bishop of Münster, Clement August von Galen. Although today celebrated for his “heroic stand in the face of the totalitarian demands of the Third Reich,”⁵⁴ his opposition to Pieper’s teaching lay within that period when he had fallen under the shadow of National Socialist influence.⁵⁵ Von Galen’s vehement critique casts light on the character of Pieper’s “leftist” thought, which even at this time was understood as opposing National Socialism. Now, Pieper’s interest in de-proletarianization was immediately responsible for his contribution to *Reich und Kirche*. The booklet which he contributed dealt with the recently issued “Law on the Ordering of National Labor.” However, as Pieper explains, it was not meant to be an endorsement of National Socialist policy, but rather it was Pieper’s attempt to steer the application of the law toward a salutary end:

My thesis was that . . . the new labor law . . . was therefore in agreement with the basic approach of *Quadragesimo anno*. . . . My intention was to take the proclamation of an idea just as it stood and interpret it by a comparison with *Quadragesimo anno*. Thus I hoped to influence the way it was to be applied—which, it seemed to me at the time, had not been finally determined. Naturally I could not formulate my intention in so many words without sabotaging the whole project.⁵⁶

Pieper’s motive, therefore, was essentially subversive. It is difficult to see it otherwise. It is puzzling then that a scholar such as Robert Krieg in his

⁵² Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 97.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 91.

⁵⁴ Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars* 124.

⁵⁵ Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 92. Klaus Scholder also notes von Galen as an exception to those clergy who condemned National Socialism. See Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Volume One, 239.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 96.

recent work, *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany*, paints Pieper as optimistic toward Hitler and his regime. "Josef Pieper," writes Krieg, "initially saw Hitler in 1933 as the political leader with whom Pius XI could build a new kind of corporate, or communal, society in Germany."⁵⁷ Krieg also implies that Pieper was "influenced" by Pius XI's comfort in negotiating with authoritarian regimes "that conveyed a public respect for the church."⁵⁸ This is to ignore what Pieper says. His attempt to influence the application of the law—subversively—is necessarily grounded in his fear that Hitler's government was not trustworthy. Where there is no such distrust there is no need for subversion.

Nor is there much room to argue that Pieper, in retrospect, is merely covering up a shameful deed, given his opposition to the Nazi Party prior to his contribution of the booklet. To be sure, the subversive nature of his contribution is further substantiated by the fact that he withdrew the booklet only a few weeks after it was accepted by the publishing house of Aschendorff (Münster)—a decision that was based firmly in his conclusion that the pervasive corruption of the Party rendered it utterly impossible to influence for good.⁵⁹ Pieper's fears were incontestably confirmed. Clearly, Pieper had no penchant for politics of this ilk.

Yet clearing Pieper of the opprobrium connected to his involvement with *Reich und Kirche* does not solve other remaining perplexities. In particular, Pieper's experience in the German military also represents a problem, appearing to contradict his repudiation of the Nazi Party. How could someone of Pieper's convictions willingly aid Hitler's war machine? In the fall of 1939, weighted beneath an understandable dread of conscription, Pieper decided to avoid a mobilization order by serving in the selection department of the *Wehrmacht* as a military psychologist. In this capacity, Pieper, among other duties, screened potential pilots for the *Luftwaffe* and, traveling to troops near the front lines, assessed candidates for commissions. From his own account it is clear that none of his scholarly aptitude was lost in the performing of his duties. Pieper's skill soon saw him promoted to "war administration advisor," and no doubt the sharp edge of the German war effort was spared the blunting which comes from an ill-chosen recruit. Indeed, there was no subversion happening here.

At first glance, it is difficult to reconcile Pieper's military participation given his moral and intellectual convictions. His actions appear to include a measure of duplicity and compromise. However, it is important to note that a clear dichotomy existed in the minds of many Germans between fighting for the *Vaterland* and loyalty to a dictatorship. As already noted,

⁵⁷ Robert Krieg, *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany* 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 96.

the mythic imagery of the fatherland ran deep and the most ardent critics of the state could still with good conscience spill their blood for German soil. Thus a man like Martin Niemöller, celebrated for his resistance to the Nazi Party, could offer his services as a U-Boat captain to the German government even while in a concentration camp.⁶⁰ So too, Bishop von Galen, at the height of his resistance to Hitler, was still encouraging his people to fight against the “enemy.” Pieper distinctly recalls his battle cry: “After a short conversation he accompanied me to the door: ‘And now go and serve your fatherland!’ . . . it was a long time since I heard such words. But on his lips they were by no means a mere pathetic cliché; he meant them in all seriousness; they were to be taken literally.”⁶¹ Indeed, for von Galen, the entry of allied troops “into his cathedral city was to prove a ‘shattering experience’ for him that would ‘always remain a sad memory’.”⁶²

None of this, of course, is offered to justify this dichotomy, but only to show that it existed in the German psyche and to offer an explanation for Pieper’s own involvement in military activity. Clearly this dichotomy existed in Pieper’s mind as well, for while he faithfully administered his wartime tasks, it is evident that his duty in no way eclipsed his loathing for the Nazis. In fact, Pieper makes it quite clear that the majority of his unit had little respect for National Socialist ideals whatsoever: “Apart from one psychology lecturer, as I soon learned, no one was a Nazi. We treated this man with some caution; when he was around, we changed the subject.”⁶³ In Pieper’s mind military service and rejection of National Socialism were entirely reconcilable.

But Pieper’s relationship with Hitler’s government took on other, more disturbing shapes. For Pieper, in June 1941, the horizon offered no promise of an imminent demise for the Nazi Party. As far as he could tell, “there

⁶⁰ It is important here to note that Niemöller’s decision to volunteer for the Navy was in part prompted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s suggestion and advice. On Bonhoeffer’s part it was seen as a non-compromising maneuver in order to assure Niemöller’s safety; any infiltration of the Confessing Pastors into the ranks of important military positions was viewed by Bonhoeffer as an important and positive move, insofar as it would serve the nation well if an overthrow against Hitler’s regime successfully transpired. Karl Barth did not understand this. He tried to suppress “rumors” that Niemöller volunteered. Niemöller’s decision to volunteer, however, was not equal to Bonhoeffer’s concern for his personal safety and the future success of a coup. Niemöller saw a division between service to the Church and service to the state, a view of which Bonhoeffer was decidedly wary. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 664–65.

⁶¹ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 190.

⁶² Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars* 144.

⁶³ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 145.

was no sign anywhere of it coming to an end."⁶⁴ Pieper was forced to admit that prospects for a regular and meaningful vocation looked grim. His books, due to censorship, "were simply not allotted paper."⁶⁵ With the horizon offering no promise for him as a writer, he accordingly felt inclined to make some decisions about his future. At the suggestion of a high ranking Party official, Pieper decided to apply for a regular commission as an army psychologist, a position that required good standing with Hitler's government. In spite of evincing a clear unwillingness to join the Nazi Party, Pieper was apparently willing to make himself as palatable to the Party as possible in order to secure a desirable vocation. Though his application was at first declined by the Party due to various factors—not least of which were his "questionable" writings—a second application to work for the *Central Sanatorium for the War Wounded* resulted, without a little difficulty, in his acceptance by the *Landeshauptmann*, the head of the provincial administration.

THE "JEWISH QUESTION"

In the process of making himself acceptable to the Party, it was inevitable that Pieper would eventually need to clarify his position on the "Jewish question." In the Regional Personnel Office of the Party, Pieper was asked by the Personnel Director where he stood with regard to the Jews. Pieper answered that it was "an extremely complicated matter that could not be summed up in a single sentence."⁶⁶ It was a tactful answer, perhaps, but an answer which leaves lingering doubts in the reader's mind. When the Director pressed him further, Pieper, although he denied that it was "right" to physically exterminate the Jewish people, admitted the Jewish question was a problem, albeit a "strictly theological" one.⁶⁷ He did not elaborate on the precise nature of this problem, but his comments, unexplained as they are, have a suspicious ring. They are all the more suspicious in light of his willingness to involve himself with a Party which, as he was well aware of by this time, was committing unspeakable deeds. Although he confesses his ignorance of Auschwitz during the war,⁶⁸ he was made aware in 1941, well before his interviews with the Party, that Jews in Russia were being transported in great numbers to be executed by German soldiers.⁶⁹ In light of this knowledge, what do Pieper's dealings with the Nazi Party say about his own sentiments toward the Jews?

Before answering this, a few more details are in order. First, it is clear that Pieper, in many instances, clearly denounced the anti-Semitism to

⁶⁴ Ibid. 154.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 161.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 165.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 155–56.

which he was witness. For instance, as he recounts his discovery of mass murders on the Russian front, Pieper acknowledges the rank injustice.⁷⁰ In learning of more deportations, Pieper writes of “silent revulsion.”⁷¹ After a later face-to-face encounter with Carl Schmitt, Pieper denounced the notorious lawyer’s “flagrantly anti-Semitic statements” as unequivocally unjustifiable.⁷² But even more telling is Pieper’s relationship with his Jewish friends. In particular, Pieper’s relationship with Jakob Hegner, a Jewish printer and publisher, bears striking witness to Pieper’s love and admiration for the Jewish people. In 1935, Pieper cultivated Hegner’s company, touring the “most unlikely taverns and cafés in the town,”⁷³ while the latter regaled him with his literary knowledge. After their separation during the war, Pieper notes that their first meeting was “enthusiastically celebrated.”⁷⁴ These, to be sure, are not the recollections of an anti-Semite. Indeed, his relationship with another Jewish man, Hans Nachdod, reveals the same liberal spirit.⁷⁵

Clearly then, for Pieper, the “problem” which the Jews represented was not that sort which in any way decreased his estimation of the people. To the contrary, the “problem” was such as could only be solved through the spirit of charity. Pieper was fully aware what fueled the anti-Semitic agenda: the *völkisch* dualism which was at odds with Christian belief. Therefore, in answer to the Party’s interrogation, Pieper swiftly asserted that access to the “Jewish Problem” may be gained only by “believing Christians,” thus undermining one of the driving forces of National Socialism.⁷⁶ By believing Christian, Pieper means that person who by participation in the trinitarian God is the recipient of the virtue of charity, the chief and indeed molder of all virtues.⁷⁷ Without this charity, any attempt to understand the Jewish people is bound to fall into error. As Pieper would later explain, any contempt for the created order “which does not arise from growth in charity” but rather from “man’s own judgment and opinions” is simple arrogance, “hostile to the nature of being.”⁷⁸ For Pieper, therefore, anti-Semitism is unequivocally un-Christian.

Pieper’s association with the Nazi Party, therefore, does not make him an anti-Semite. However, this difficulty remains: why would someone so opposed to anti-Semitism rub shoulders with the very Party responsible for such atrocities? For this there is no easy answer. It is evident that the war years for Pieper were, in many ways, a season in which he was simply

⁷⁰ Ibid. 156.

⁷² Ibid. 175.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 114.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 161.

⁷⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* 37.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 39.

⁷¹ Ibid. 157.

⁷³ Ibid. 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 110.

looking to survive: to escape conscription, to feed his family, to find some useful vocation. Of course, this kind of survival is elemental to all humanity. But if survival is to be gained from the hands of those who hold no regard for human life, then one wonders if survival itself is tragically void of virtue. For, as Pieper so lucidly explains, the essence of fortitude is not concerned so much with survival as it is with the readiness to die.⁷⁹ Fortitude, as Pieper explains it, is the willingness to surrender one's own survival for the greater good, "a sacrifice of self in accordance with reason."⁸⁰ Is it possible that the very fortitude which Pieper recognized as so absent in the Nazi Party, that fortitude which, guided by prudence, does not hesitate to "pounce upon evil and . . . bar its way," was also sadly absent from the one who did so much to define it?⁸¹ Here we may only speculate, but we are reminded that Pieper's revulsion of anti-Semitism, however genuine, was also "silent."

But before concluding that a lack of bravery compelled Pieper to love too dearly his own life, we should also note the other side of fortitude: not a "tense and strained activism," but patience and endurance.⁸² Pieper was not uninjured by the National Socialist state. Clearly he was both suspected and disliked by those in power. His writing was banned and, at one point, entrance was denied to him by the university when he sought to continue his education.⁸³ With his mind and his obvious talent, it is clear that much opportunity could have opened before him had he chosen to join the Nazi Party, an option he refused to consider.⁸⁴ As a result, Pieper was forced into an existence that was utterly foreign to him, a harried military life in which he was never sure what the next day would bring. His cooperation with the Nazi Party in order to find employment, problematic as it is, should not suggest that he ever fell under the spell of National Socialism. His rejection of its ideology never faltered. Neither is it fair to say, in pointing out his endurance, that Pieper utterly failed to "attack" evil. He was, after all, ever mindful of the fact that all supporters of the "Führer" were trapped "in profound self-deception," and that the German nation was in the grip of an ugly tyranny.⁸⁵ Accordingly, where he found the opportunity, Pieper sought to use the written word with which he could provide the German people with "spiritual support" that they might "offer some resistance."⁸⁶ This may not represent a "pounce," but it was an effort nonetheless, however small.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 118.

⁸¹ Ibid. 130.

⁸³ Josef Pieper, *No One Could Have Known* 164.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 154.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 116.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 124.

⁸² Ibid. 130–31.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 215.

CONCLUSION

At no time did Josef Pieper grow enamored with the deceitful promise of National Socialism, but it seems that in his resistance he did falter and lose courage under its shadow. In keeping with Pieper's philosophy, it is more accurate to say that for a moment in time Pieper was guided, not by prudence, but by those "egocentric interests" that Pieper calls covetousness: "[a] desperate self-preservation, [an] overriding concern for confirmation and security."⁸⁷ Without a "reckless tossing away of anxious self-preservation," Pieper would have been indeed unable to see the proper human good which existed beyond his immediate needs.⁸⁸ This, of course, is a failure to which Pieper never admits in his story, but it is significant that he pulls no curtains over his personal account: the candidness of his story telling, whether the writer was conscious of this or not, serves as a confession by itself. It is also worth noting that Pieper frankly admits in the preface to the *Four Cardinal Virtues* that his daily life bears witness to his utter inability to meet these heroic moral standards.⁸⁹ And although he may have yielded for a time to these baser motives, his failure serves to highlight another aspect of his teaching on the virtues, namely that prudence is a *bonum arduum*, "a steep good."⁹⁰ Pieper's life teaches the arduousness with which a virtuous life is attained. What Pieper failed to achieve, however, does not in any way obscure his notable attainment. While Pieper may indeed have fallen victim to a lack of courage, he still represents a rare and praiseworthy exception to the many Roman Catholic thinkers deceived in the early 20th century by the intoxicating spirit of National Socialism. Besides scholars such as Eschweiler, Adam, and Schmaus, Pieper shines as an opponent to an intolerably corrupt system and his opposition to evil demands a retelling of history.

The great irony in all of this, of course, is that the same theologian—Thomas Aquinas—whose authority was used to support the collusion of the Roman Catholic Church with National Socialism was the very theologian who guided Josef Pieper through the minefield of National Socialist error. It is a somber warning against that human ability to use even light itself for dark purposes. It is also a telling example of Pieper's marvelous gift of perspicuity. Accordingly, while Aquinas may be said to have delivered Pieper from the peril of his day, we may also say that Pieper has, by discovering in Aquinas a sure guide through a dark night, delivered Aquinas as well from an alleged indirect contribution to one of the greatest failures of the Christian Church. It is, I hope, this strength of Josef Pieper that will give rise to a renewed study of this "philosopher of virtue," and that continues to vindicate him as a man who said no to the spirit of the age.

⁸⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* 20–21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* xiii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 16.