

MEZGER, WERNER. *Narrenidee und Fastnachtsbrauch. Studien zum Fortleben des Mittelalters in der europäischen Festkultur* [The idea of the fool and carnival customs: Studies concerning the survival of the Middle Ages in contemporary European festival culture]. Konstanz, Germany: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1991. 624 pages. 354 photographs (many in color), bibliography, indices of subjects, persons, places. Hardcover DM 98.—; ISBN 3-87940-374-0. Cloth in box DM 128.—; ISBN 3-87940-386-4. (In German)

Among German folklorists the subject of carnival has for quite some time stirred more interest—and generated more discussion—than any other type of festival. Today few search anymore for the “Germanic” roots of the festival: the Christian context is undisputed. This fact alone, however, hardly constitutes a full explanation of carnival’s history nor of the far-reaching changes it has undergone. This is precisely what Mezger accomplishes in the present work, which constitutes his profound and learned postdoctoral thesis.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Mezger argues, the image of the “fool”—and thus of the festival itself—underwent a change. In medieval times carnival was a festival like any other, celebrated on the eve of the Lenten season. Because of the rigidity of the rules that governed fasting during Lent, carnival centered upon abundant food and drink as well as upon scarcely inhibited sexuality. In early times the attitude of the Church towards the festival was not generally disapproving, but as the medieval social order altered so did the position of the Church. The basic principle of social organization during the Middle Ages was corporativism, but in the fifteenth century radical changes occurred that led to widespread uncertainty and apocalyptic expectations. Characterizing the epoch were fear and hysteria on one side, hedonism and ecstatic religiosity on the other. With the apparent breakdown of society the medieval concept of “ordo” lost its validity, and the idea spread that the whole world had become foolish or insane. Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools* belonged to this era: published for the first time in Basel in 1494, it castigated the follies of a society that had fallen into confusion; Mezger writes that it “soon became a bestseller.” With these developments the Church’s attitude towards carnival altered: it was increasingly perceived as “foolish,” and thus distant from God and proximate to the devil. The idea of the “fool”—a mentally or physically retarded outsider of the social order—combined with that of carnival, and the two long remained an inseparable unity.

Mezger’s hypothesis is completely reasonable from a historical standpoint, and opens up new perspectives for interpreting the elements of carnival. In two very detailed chapters Mezger analyzes these elements, starting with the characteristics of the fool: the bells and mirrors, the fox’s tail, the sausage, the pig’s bladder, etc. Under the heading “The Idea of the Fool as a Counter Model to the Doctrine of Salvation,” he considers the ship of fools, the fool’s mother, the fool’s fountain, and the fool’s tree. Concerning the last topic, I had hoped that the author would take up the issue of the tree’s impact on legal history, but this issue is not addressed. His reflections do include, quite properly and consistently, the European tradition of the “dance macabre.”

Mezger is very well acquainted with the literary sources. His approach is novel in its abundant use of pictorial and iconographic material, including many reproductions that are quite helpful for the reader. Anyone engaged in carnival research will wonder why the major studies of the past neglected to incorporate this critical iconographic material. The reader is grateful not only for the large number of prudently

selected pictures, but also for the learned and thoughtful manner in which the entire book is written. As would be expected in a work of this quality, there is a comprehensive bibliography and an index of persons and subjects. The price of the book, DM 98.00, might seem a bit expensive, but for a comprehensive work like *Narrenidee und Fastnachtsbrauch* I find it quite reasonable.

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JAPAN

NEFSKY, MARILYN F. *Stone Houses and Iron Bridges: Tradition and the Place of Women in Contemporary Japan*. Toronto Studies in Religion. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 1992. xviii+260 pages. Tables, bibliography, index. Hardcover SFr 69.50; ISBN 0-8204-1568-5; ISSN 8756-7385.

This book concerns women, religion, and change in Japan during and after World War II. It differs from other books on the subject in that it does not merely describe how the position of Japanese women has changed but also attempts to explain the disparity between their present legal status and the reality of their social experience, which lags so far behind.

The author, a historical-sociologist of religion, aspires to present a model that will comprise "a tool to better understand Japanese society" (xvii) and thus help the reader to a deeper understanding of his or her own society as well. The author's methodological approach is eclectic, employing sociohistorical as well as empirical analyses. Her explanation centers upon the religiocultural tradition without neglecting the impact of other factors such as the social and political systems. She contrasts the postwar era with the period of the so-called Fifteen Year War (from the 1931 Manchurian Incident to the end of World War II in 1945), because, she says, "it is the Fifteen Year War that most clearly illustrates the power of the religious cultural beliefs, values and norms, their intensity of expression, and their ultimate impact on the Japanese people" (3). Nefsky chooses as her "ideal type" of Japanese woman the postwar urban middle-class woman, since she finds that this type represents the normative standard for women in Japanese society.

To present Nefsky's conclusion first: it is the religiocultural tradition—the basic value system—that has hindered legal changes from taking full effect in Japan and that explains why Japanese women still are confined to the traditional role of the "good wife and wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母). In the first chapter she clarifies fundamental concepts such as the relation between tradition and modernity, which she sees not as a dichotomy but as a convergence of old and new values and a coexistence of change and continuity. Nefsky's concept of religion is a broad one, since it includes not only religious institutions and dogmas but also general beliefs, values, and norms. She thus sees religion as a dimension that can be found in any society, "however differentiated its social structure" (11).

Nefsky considers the role of religion during the Fifteen Year War to have been the promotion of a "sense of sacredness of being Japanese" (33) founded upon Shinto, a unifying principle in the broadest sense. She shows how this belief was utilized on the