

History of a hybrid

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 23, 1998](#) issue

In about a year, after I finish directing the Public Religion Project, I plan to do some research on a way of writing about American religious history. Peter Burke in *Varieties of Cultural History* explains the complex subject in a fittingly complex manner: "the processes of cultural borrowing, appropriation, exchange, reception, transfer, negotiation, resistance, syncretism, acculturation, enculturation, inculturation, interculturalization, transculturation, hybridization (mestazaje), creolization, and the interaction and interpenetration of cultures," with a little dash of "mudejarism" and *bricolage* thrown in. I should live so long.

Writing history by following the paths of these borrowings strikes me as far more useful and accurate than the two prevailing ways to tell the story. One approach suggests that we always had a common narrative and were one big homogenous happy family until the pluralists and multiculturalists peskily pecked at our national family tree. The other set suggests that we never had anything in common--that hegemonous, dominating, abusive people in power forced a common story on us. In response, we've retreated to our separate identity groups ("don't tread on me") to keep pure our in-your-face separate narratives and ways.

I'm sorry if I offended anyone with that description. On to my observation: We are all mixes, hybrids. A thousand reinforcements per day support this observation. This column's musings were prompted by an article by Lan Samantha Chang, "Pass the Turkey. And the Stir-Fry" (*New York Times*, November 26). The Palo Altoan looked forward to turkey and shiitake mushrooms and Chineses sausage. "We've adapted an American tradition, and we serve it Chang-style."

Good. I'd say that "Chang-style" is the American tradition. Chang tells of adapting to American life in Appleton, Wisconsin, and of having a brother-in-law descended from John and Priscilla Alden. "Like the Pilgrims, we came to America from another country," and "like them, we have survived by adapting: both holding onto and letting go of our culture, our traditions and our past."

What does all this have to do with Christmas? Let's take a side trip first down the wedding aisle. "Traditional Christian marriage," as observed in America, is a mix of ancient fertility rites, Teutonic and Mithraic mythology, barbaric customs, sweet smiles, one or two biblical texts, some Broadway hits in the sanctuary, followed by showers of rice.

Now, Christmas. The Christmas tree is an old pagan fertility symbol. Evergreen, mistletoe, holly and Yule logs come from pre-Christian rites, and that fact could taint Christmas. But that's another story. What about the Gospel narratives themselves? They are themselves a mix. What are Magi--look them up--doing in that sacred narrative?

The important thing is to look for and hold on to whatever comes closest to our core narrative. And then to celebrate it, in sanctuary, home and heart. Parents do well by their children to help implant stories to be tested, doubted, tried on again, believed anew and held to in the deepest recesses of the heart. I recall the translation we sang in church of what seemed to be the 1,748th verse of Martin Luther's *Vom Himmel hoch*, as we yearned to gather for syncretism in that orgy of gift-giving under the Saturnalian tree back home:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.
Amen.