Syncretism

In anthropology and sociology, syncretism means combining elements from different cultures to make something new. A famous example would be Christmas as celebrated in Europe and North America, which combines ideas from Egypt and the Near East — monotheism, the birth of an infant who will grow up to be the savior — with winter solstice observances from northern Europe — Yule log, candles, holly, and the date itself.

Examples in racial and ethnic relations are legion. Plains Indian cultures combined Native American ideas with Spanish horses and horse culture. Jazz combines European instruments, notation, and musical ideas with some instruments, vocal practice, and musical ideas from West Africa to form something uniquely American. Inuit (Eskimo) silk screens combine Inuit artistic ideas with Euro-American printmaking techniques.

Syncretism has another use in racial and ethnic relations: to combat naive notions of ethnocentrism and racial superiority. Americans need to grasp that their culture is not a "white" product, but derives from many cultures. Whites need further to understand that the current global dominance of European and North American societies and cultural ideas does not imply that whites are or have been smarter. European cultural ideas derived from many sources — China, India, Arabia, Africa, and the Americas. The resulting innovations were syncretic and historic, not genetic, outcomes. – Loewen, “Syncretism,” in *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America, v.* *3* (Pasadena: Salem, 1999 et seq.).