

Chrismukkah? Hybrid holiday shows tension in religiously blended families

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DALLAS (ABP)—There's a new winter holiday on the rise, and it could be the perfect opportunity to enjoy Fa-La-La-La Latkes, Blitzen's Blintzes, and Christmas trees filled with "menorahments."

It's not Christmas. And it's not Hanukkah. It's both. And the humor and religious syncretism behind the hybrid holiday "Chrismukkah" cut to the heart of modern-day tensions in American society.

According to the [United Jewish Communities' National Jewish Population Survey](#), roughly 31 percent of married Jews in the United States have non-Jewish spouses. For Jews who married after 1995, the intermarriage rate is nearly 50 percent.

Chrismukkah was invented for Jewish-Christian families who decide to celebrate both holidays. The term had its first wide pop-culture appearance in 2003, thanks to a mixed-faith family featured on the now-canceled Fox

television show *The O.C.*

But several new books are taking the holiday at least semi-seriously, reflecting the increasing number of American families that blend Christianity and Judaism.

Chrimukkah: The Official Guide to the World's Most Beloved Holiday by Gersh Kuntzman, and [*Chrimukkah: Everything You Need to Know to Celebrate the Hybrid Holiday*](#) by Ron Gompertz, both extol the virtues of the Dec. 15-25 celebration. *Judaikitsch: Tchotchkes, Schmattes & Nosherei* by Jennifer Traig and Victoria Traig also highlights the new holiday alternative.

Gompertz, a Jew who moved from New York to Bozeman, Mont., founded the website www.chrimukkah.com. He is married to the daughter of a pastor in the United Church of Christ, and the couple has decided to raise their daughter in the Jewish faith.

Gompertz's family chooses to celebrate Hanukkah. But in addition to lighting the menorah and frying latkes—that's a traditional Hanukkah potato pancake—they add a Christmas tree.

"Frankly, it's fun to challenge the status quo and question tradition," he said. "Chrimukkah has gotten people talking, allowing expression of diverse opinion, and it's helped bring Jewish intermarriage issues to mainstream cultural awareness."

While he sits on the board of directors for Bozeman's synagogue and calls himself "a proud Jew," Gompertz recognizes compromise as a key part of fostering a good marriage with his wife, Michelle. It's one of the reasons they launched the website as a project to express their views as a "real interfaith family."

"While we are typical in the sense that ... we never had a political or

theological agenda, we certainly don't believe we represent the beliefs of all interfaith couples," he wrote on his website. "That said, it has been a nice surprise to find how many others share our beliefs and values. We've found that by celebrating both December holidays ... we manage to keep peace and harmony within our family."

Chrismukkah fans say the event celebrates both Christian and Jewish beliefs, even if it is a bit tongue-in-cheek. It's a state of mind for the season—a "multicultural mish-mash of the cherished holiday rituals we grew up with," Gompertz wrote. And that's one of the reasons the website is popular, he said.

But the reason Gompertz likes his new holiday is exactly why Chrismukkah critics dislike it.

In 2004, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the New York Board of Rabbis issued a joint statement disparaging the holiday for misrepresenting the spiritual aspects of Christmas and Hanukkah.

"Chrismukkah is a multicultural mess that glosses over the historical significance of both Hanukkah and Christmas," said William Donohue, the Catholic League's president.

"In this vein, we would agree with the recent statement on mixed marriages prepared by the U.S. Catholic-Jewish Consultation Committee. It branded attempts to raise a child simultaneously as both Jewish and Catholic a 'violation of the integrity of both religious traditions, at best, and, at worst, syncretism.' From a Catholic perspective, anything which contributes to this phenomenon should be resisted, and that would include Chrismukkah."

The term has also been used disparagingly in recent years by some as a way to describe the commercialization of Hanukkah and the dominance of commercialized Christmas in American culture.

Rabbi Jeremy Schneider of Temple Shalom in Dallas said Hanukkah is ultimately about maintaining a Jewish belief system in the face of a larger majority belief system surrounding the Jewish community. To create a “hybrid” holiday, he said, insults both Christianity and Judaism.

“Even if the majority of Christians do not take their religious symbols seriously, that does not give Jews license to adopt them and proclaim them secular or American symbols,” he said in an e-mail interview. “I urge my congregants to (imagine) how we would feel if Christians started wearing a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, or a yarmulke, a Jewish head covering, and ‘de-Judaized’ them for their own purposes.”

In an essay called “[Confronting the December Dilemmas](#),” Ron Wolfson said that by adopting Christmas and its customs, Jews introduce symbols and traditions into their families that are foreign to Judaism. Wolfson is a Jewish educator and president of Synagogue 3000, a Jewish networking and resource center with offices in New York City and Los Angeles.

Christmas celebrates the birth of a Messiah whom Jews do not recognize, and Hanukkah celebrates the right not to assimilate into the dominant non-Jewish culture—the very thing that Jews who celebrate Christmas are doing, he said.

“Many Jewish educators will advise parents to give children who want to celebrate Christmas a very important message: Christmas is someone else’s party, not ours,” Wolfson wrote. “Just as we can appreciate someone else’s birthday celebration and be happy for them, we can wonder at how beautiful Christmas is, but it is not our party.”

Jewish people have many more holidays than just Hanukkah to celebrate, Wolfson continued. It may be difficult to convince Jewish children that they don’t need to trim a Christmas tree or wait for Santa, but once they have experienced the meaning and beauty of their own Jewish traditions, he

said, children “will understand that to be Jewish is to be enriched by a calendar brimming with joyous celebration.”

Who knows? The kids might not even miss that kosher fruitcake.

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