

Discussion Guide by Gail Forsyth-Vail

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SUSAN J. RITCHIE

CHILDREN OF THE SAME GOD

The Historical Relationship Between
Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam

Introduction

Children of the Same God explores a history of Unitarian creative engagement with Islam and Judaism, engagement that goes back many centuries. Ritchie does more than recount what she has discovered through her extensive research; she explores implications for Unitarian Universalist identity today. This short (75pp), highly readable book offers a look at our history that will deepen your understanding of the place of interfaith dialogue in the development of our faith.

This discussion guide provides an opportunity for participants to test Ritchie's ideas and to explore their implications for their own Unitarian Universalist congregations and groups. Questions invite participants to re-examine their own understanding of their faith and to explore the central role "mixing" continues to play in Unitarian Universalism today.

Plans are provided for a single 90-minute session, with the recommended option of expanding the session to 2 hours in order to include an engaging video sermon of Ritchie exploring some of the implications of her research. Prepare by reading the book, viewing the sermon, and reviewing the suggested discussion questions, making preliminary decisions about which questions to include. In line with Ritchie's statement that our faith communities are changed by who shows up, allow your plans and question selections to be changed by who shows up to participate and what responses, impressions, and questions they bring. Enjoy!

Goals

- Provide a framework to respond to *Children of the Same God*
- Explore the ways in which our contemporary faith has been shaped by a long and rich history of mixing and interacting with Islam and Judaism
- Consider how knowledge of our history of engagement and dialogue with Islam and Judaism can inform and support Unitarian Universalism today.

Materials

- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook, copies enough to share

- Optional: Computer and projector
- Optional: Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

- Distribute hymnbooks.
- Review hymns from the Jewish tradition #392, #394, and #399. Choose one of these or another from the Jewish tradition that is likely familiar to participants.
- Review Hymn 188, from the Muslim tradition.
- Review all discussion questions and make preliminary choices, remaining open to changing your selections as the discussion proceeds.
- Optional: Recruit a musician or song leader to lead.
- Optional: Download the video "[A Mixing Gesture](#)," and prepare to project.

Chalice Lighting/Opening (10 minutes)

Welcome participants. Share a short clip (7:47- 8:38) of Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie preaching her sermon, "[A Mixing Gesture](#)" or read her words aloud:

...Unitarian Universalism has its special gift in knowing something about the nature of religion. That religion is not a container that holds a kind of context, but that religion is a matrix of relationships, a kind of circulation, not static and not pure. Nor was it meant to be pure. That religion in some sixth sense is a mixed gesture, or even better yet, a mixing gesture. Or even better yet, I wonder if we don't understand that religion comes out of mixing gestures.

Light the chalice.

Invite participants to attend to some of the wisdom from Islam and from Judaism found in our hymnbook. Invite them to turn to the hymn you have chosen from the Jewish tradition. Point out its source, found beneath the music. Sing the hymn together once or twice. Then, invite them to turn to Hymn 188 and point out its source. Tell them that Rumi was a 13th-century poet, theologian, and Sufi mystic whose work remains popular today. Sing the hymn together once or twice.

Invite any comment or thoughts.

Introductions and First Impressions (15 minutes)

Tell participants you will invite each person to introduce themselves and take two or three sentences to share their responses to these questions:

- What stays with you after reading the book?
- What did you find surprising or memorable about the history that Ritchie relates?

Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted, asking them to share only a single question, reflection, or impression from the book.

Discussion (60 minutes)

Choose from the questions below to lead a discussion. Here are some approaches to selecting questions:

- Choose one question from those listed for each Chapter and devote about 15 minutes for the group to consider each question
- Choose questions that reflect participant initial responses to the book
- Choose questions that connect with themes important in your congregation or community.

Chapter 1: Developing Heresies, Developing Allies

- Is it important to you that Unitarianism claims a long tradition of dissent?
- Ritchie tells us that heretical Christians and Jews were lumped together as dangerous outsiders by those who were trying to enforce uniformity of belief. How did this make it possible for Arian Christianity to be influenced by Judaism and to develop a culture of religious tolerance? Have you ever felt that Unitarian Universalism is “lumped together” with other religions on the edges of the religious mainstream? In our own time, have you observed creative interplay among religions outside of the religious mainstream (perhaps around shared social justice commitments)?

- Ritchie notes that anxiety about multi-religious living led to 15th-century Spanish purity of blood laws and to the Inquisition. In what ways do we still live with the cultural and political legacy of that time?
- What is attractive about uniformity of religious belief and/or anxiety-provoking about diversity of belief? Are there ways in which our communities and congregations enforce uniformity of belief, creating outsiders? Can you think of a time when your congregation, community, and/or group navigated diversity of belief well? Can you remember a time when your congregations, group, or community had difficulty with diversity of belief?

Chapter 2: European Unitarianism and Ottoman Islam

- If you were familiar with the story of the Edict of Torda, how does Ritchie's account change your understanding of how it came to be written? If this story is new to you, what do you find most compelling about the story?
- Ritchie explores the creative exchange, mutual respect, and mutual influence of Islam and Unitarianism during the Ottoman Empire. What does our historical association tell you about what is possible between Unitarian Universalists and liberal Muslims today? What might we do to bring about or strengthen creative interchange and mutual respect?
- Ritchie asks, "Could it be that toleration, that most precious gift of the European Enlightenment, was instead a shared liberal Christian-Muslim undertaking?" If this is true, how does it change our understanding of both our faith tradition and our religiously tolerant culture? How does knowing this history affect your personal struggles to embrace religious diversity?

Chapter 3: European Unitarianism and Judaism

- Ritchie tells two stories in this chapter, one of the personal relationship between a Unitarian leader and a Jewish rabbi and the other of the destruction of Bozodujfala (Note: This name is pronounced at 12:38 in the video of Ritchie's sermon, "[A Mixing Gesture](#)"). How do those two stories serve to illustrate the "promises and perils" of border crossing?

- Why are oppressive powers so invested in cultural and religious homogeneity? What examples of this are there in our nation and in the world today?
- Does your congregation follow any religious practices from Judaism? How does the inclusion of Jewish practices in congregational life honor the example of respectful relationship and dialog practiced by our religious forebears?
- What importance does the question of the nature of Jesus have for Unitarian Universalists today?

Chapter 4: North American Unitarianism in Relationship to Judaism and Islam

- Do you identify as a person who actively practices more than one faith? Are you part of a dual or multi-faith family? How does being a Unitarian Universalist impact or facilitate your religious identity?
- Ritchie explains that covenant in Puritan congregations was a restrictive concept, one designed to ensure purity of belief and practice among members. It has come to mean something different in contemporary Unitarian Universalist practice. How does the contemporary idea of covenant encourage border crossing and religious mixing in your congregation or community?
- On page 56, Ritchie offers this quote from historian Perry Miller: “Unitarianism was an entirely different wine from any that had ever been pressed from the grapes of Calvinism, and in entirely new bottles, which the merchants of Boston found much to their liking. It was a pure, white, dry claret that went well with dinners served by the Harvard Corporation, but it was mild and guaranteed not to send them home reeling and staggering.” She continues by writing about the “reeling and staggering” that goes on when people encounter those with different cultures, beliefs, and experiences. To what extent do today’s Unitarian Universalists in your congregation and community welcome the reeling and staggering that comes from border crossing? To what extent are Unitarian Universalists more comfortable with order and homogeneity?
- Along with explaining Unitarian Universalist connections to Islam and Judaism, Ritchie explores the deep historical roots Unitarian Universalism has in

Christianity. How does this knowledge of our roots help you to understand your own Unitarian Universalist faith?

- How will knowing our history help Unitarian Universalists become more comfortable with border crossing and a multi-faith identity?

Optional: “A Mixing Gesture” Sermon (30 minutes)

View the sermon, [“A Mixing Gesture”](#) preached by Susan T. Ritchie at San Diego, Oct 6, 2013.

Say, “Ritchie states that Unitarian Universalism’s special gift to the world is the ability to live in mixed and mixing ways.” Invite participants to brainstorm ideas for multi-faith dialogue within congregations and multi-faith dialogue and service work beyond congregations. Write ideas on newsprint and decide how to share them with congregational leadership. Ask for specific commitments from individuals to carry the work forward.

Closing (5 minutes)

Share these words from the conclusion of *Children of the Same God*, p. 73 -74:

I hope that we will more fully claim the multi-religious aspect of our identity. Not because the conversion of Jews and Muslims would be a triumph for us; not even because claiming multi-religious identity will allow us to escape our identity neurosis (although I pray that it will); but because, in doing so, we will finally realize that it is impossible to serve justice, let alone the God shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, without the very same staggering and reeling that the Puritans had warned would result from straying from singular and official truths. I hope that the good news is that we have no further to stagger and reel than into our own collective past.

Extinguish the chalice.

Find Out More

Islam:

[*Muhammad: The Story of a Prophet and Reformer*](#) by Sara Conover (Skinner, 2013)

[*Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom for Children and Parents*](#) by Sarah Conover and Freda Crane (Skinner, 2010)

[*Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak*](#) by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur (Beacon, 2005)

[*The Place of Tolerance in Islam*](#) by Khaled Abou El Fadl (Beacon, 2002)

Judaism:

[*Anne Frank and the Remembering Tree*](#) by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Skinner, 2014)

[*Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*](#) by Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller (Skinner, 2014)

Pluralism:

[*Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*](#) by Eboo Patel (Beacon, 2008)

[*Acts of Faith Discussion Guide*](#)

[*Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*](#) by Eboo Patel (Beacon, 2013)

[“Stand Your Ground,”](#) 2013 Ware Lecture at UUA General Assembly, by Eboo Patel (video, 41:38)

Interfaith Families:

[*Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family*](#) by Susan Katz Miller (Beacon, 2014)