



## Press Release: Friendship and Fellowship at Gingko's Second Interfaith Retreat

Collegiality and fellowship were the overarching themes at the second annual Gingko Interfaith Fellowship Retreat, which took place over three days this week in the secluded venue of Missenden Abbey, situated in the Buckinghamshire countryside outside London. The programme is a series of annual retreats that bring together students from Al-Azhar University in Cairo who are studying for a PhD in the United Kingdom and their peers from UK Divinity Schools. Fifteen scholars took part in the Retreat, which offered a combination of academic seminars and lectures, workshops and extracurricular activities, all aiming to encourage interfaith dialogue and friendship between young scholars of Christianity and Islam.

The Retreat opened on Tuesday evening with a keynote lecture by Professor Mona Siddiqui.



Professor Siddiqui, who is Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh, and co-founder of the Christian-Muslim Studies Network, spoke on some of the ways in which God's unity, ethics and friendship shape Christian-Muslim relations. The academic seminars that followed over the next two days were facilitated by Dr Joshua Ralston and Dr Omar Anchassi of the Christian-Muslim Studies Network, and included sessions on the possibilities and perils of comparative study and the importance of interdisciplinarity in interfaith discussions. A workshop was

led by Dr Romina Istratii, a Gingko Fellowship alumna based at SOAS, on developing a strong alumni network, and another workshop, titled "The Hero's Journey", was led by Dr Emma Fosbury, an alumna of the Westminster Abbey Institute Fellowship scheme.

Six Al-Azhar scholars are currently in the UK: Mariam Shehata, Mohammed Gamal Metawea, Mahmoud Afifi, Doaa Baumi, Muhammad Al-Marakeby and Rawdah Fawzy. They are studying for their PhDs at British universities including SOAS, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Lancaster.

UK Ambassador to Egypt Geoffrey Adams said: "It's never been more important that people of different faiths come together to exchange views and opinions, learn, understand and respect each other. The embassy has been supporting Al-Azhar scholars to study their PhDs in the UK since 2015. We're very grateful to Gingko for giving them and others a chance to meet a diverse group of theology students and help them make long lasting friendships."

Wen-Pin Leow, student at the University of Oxford, who attended the Retreat for the first time this year, said: "This well-organised retreat, held at the beautiful Missenden Abbey amid flowering bluebells, was an ideal platform to make connections and build friendships that will

last a lifetime. The seminars pushed our intellectual horizons, while the convivial activities provided fertile soil for fostering camaraderie. It was brilliant!"

Lucy Schouten, student at the University of Edinburgh, said: "The Gingko Fellowship is a challenging and engaging, yet rewarding, venture into one of the most challenging fields of interfaith encounter, between Christians and Muslims, East and West. I feel prepared to model this in my community."

Dr Barbara Haus Schwepcke, Founder of Gingko, said: "When we set up the Gingko Interfaith Fellowship Retreat we had two aims: by introducing the Al-Azhar UK Scholars to the wider academic community and building a mutual support network, we hoped that the programme would help them overcome the isolation I myself had experienced when I started my PhD in another country than my own, another system I was not familiar with, another language than my mother tongue. We hoped that lasting bonds of friendship and better understanding would be formed at these retreats, which would bridge cultural divides and equip a new generation of leaders with confident and credible religious voices, stronger than those calling for hatred and violence. It is our conviction that never has the Gingko Fellowship Programme been more important and relevant than now."



The Retreat also offered recreational time for strengthening bonds of friendship, including football on the lawn of the Abbey and a walk in the local bluebell woods.

### **Notes for editors**

Gingko is a UK registered charity seeking to promote and facilitate dialogue between the Middle East and the Western world through conferences, events, publications and student retreats. It aims to enable and inform open discussion, giving a voice to a new generation of thinkers and opinion formers.

Gingko is grateful to the Christian-Muslim Studies Network, supported by the Henri Luce Foundation, the Dean and Chapter of the Westminster Abbey, and the German Stiftung – Gingko Library for their financial support for this project.

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