The Personal Before and After the Political

Case Study of a Dialogue Methodology for Crisis

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Abstract

The authors of this article co-facilitated a dialogue workshop for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communal leaders and academics in Cairo as part of the GINGKO Interfaith Fellowship Retreat in September 2024. The Interfaith Dialogue in Times of Crisis workshop guided the participants through a series of exercises, culminating in reflections on how to move forward. In preparation, the authors held their own retreat, speaking openly and personally about how they had experienced the events of 7 October 2023 and their immediate aftermath, seeking mutual understanding and strengthening their deep relationships. We modelled this work for the group at the workshop in Cairo. We will share several methodological successes from that retreat, as well as reflecting on some structural challenges and representational issues that shifted our focus on the final day of the retreat.

Keywords

interfaith relations, dialogue workshop, crisis, Israel-Palestine, Abrahamic

DOI: 10.1111/erev.12889

After the events of 7 October 2023, we, the three authors of this article, found ourselves in need of trusted connection. Amid increasingly polarized debates and arguments around us, we chose to reach out to each other: friends and scholars of other faith traditions who were somehow connected to the terrible events taking place in Israel and Gaza, beloved colleagues with whom we could not only discuss the events and share reactions but also eventually think through now routine challenges in interreligious relations. It was clear to each of us that the tragedy we were witnessing did not begin on 7 October, but even so, the global response to the horrors of that day and its subsequent horrors demonstrated that something fundamental had shifted in the framing of our relationships, in Palestine, Israel, and even the faraway countries in which we each reside.

The ensuing conversations we had brought us each a measure of hope. As a result, we took action together, co-facilitating a retreat on dialogue in times of crisis in September 2024 in Cairo, convened by the GINGKO Foundation, with which we are all affiliated. In that retreat, we attempted to expand our understanding of why we could dialogue with each other, and we sought to replicate those methodologies with a larger group of dialoguers, the GINGKO interfaith fellows. What follows is a case study of that effort: its challenges, its successes, and a brief assessment of our methodological conclusions.[1]

Background

We have all been active in interreligious dialogue circles for a long time. All three of us have been part of the GINGKO Interfaith Fellowship, and Mohammed Gamal joined the foundation as a trustee. Beyond that, we each carried many other connections, affiliations, and experiences. And we watched as difficult conversations strained the ability of cohorts and communities to keep open and respectful lines of communication. Reflecting on this shared experience in our conversations after 7 October led us to think programmatically about a possible project that we could offer to support interreligious groups to help all of us stand together in times of crisis. We were motivated by a core question: When we do not have the same outlook on what is happening around us, when our ideas and interpretation of events differ, when the communities we belong to are pulling us apart rather than moving us closer, what tools can we use to maintain and restore healthy relations?

Because we had got to know each other thanks to the generous support of the GINGKO Foundation, GINGKO was a natural choice for our institutional collaboration.

[1] The authors wish to thank the GINGKO leadership and staff for their ongoing financial, administrative, intellectual, and emotional support of this work. For more information about the GINGKO Foundation, see https://www.gingko.org.uk.

GINGKO is a UK-based charitable foundation, established in 2014, which describes itself in the following terms:

> In a context of mistrust and misconceptions, GINGKO works to improve mutual understanding between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the West. We fund and publish innovative research into the history, art history and religions of the MENA region. We bring together people from MENA and the West for transformative interfaith and intercultural encounters.[2]

One of GINGKO's most important programmes is the interfaith fellowship, which brings together approximately 20 emerging theologians and community leaders from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region and the West for an annual dialogue retreat.[3] This annual retreat alternates between a site in MENA and a site in the West. Each fellow commits to attending two retreats and has the possibility of applying for the Fellowship Collaboration Prize and receiving special consideration when applying for other GINGKO grants.[4] The three of us met for the first time on the annual retreat that was convened in Germany in September 2023. To initiate our project, Benjamin Kamine and Elena Dini applied for GINGKO's Fellowship Collaboration Grant with a workshop proposal based on the conversations the three of us had been having, and Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, who was ineligible for the grant due to his role as a foundation trustee, joined us as a co-facilitator.

Working on the Workshop Structure

Once we had decided to embark on this dialogical adventure, our small working group had to meet multiple times: to compose our application for the Fellowship Collaboration Prize, to meet with the GINGKO leadership to lay out the specifics of our goals and ideas, and to develop the actual structure of a workshop that could, within the short time the fellows would be gathered, make modest progress toward our dialogical hopes. We began by proposing a single session on practical approaches to coexistence in times of crisis based on our personal experiences. However, given the urgency of our topic, GINGKO asked us to consider a larger component that could become the backbone of the annual interfaith fellowship retreat that was due to take place in Cairo in September 2024.

Agreeing to that new, expanded format required us to take on a significantly more thorough approach to our workshop design. We now had the opportunity to sculpt a multi-day experience that could introduce the fellows to a series of tools and create multiple

[2] GINKO Foundation website, "About Us," https://www.gingko.org.uk/contact-us.

[3] The two areas are defined on the GINGKO Foundation website: https://www.gingko.org.uk/contact-us.

[4] GINKO Foundation website, "Interfaith Fellowship," https://www.gingko.org.uk/projects.

opportunities for dialogue. To meet this challenge, GINGKO supported a special two-day meeting for the three of us in London during Summer 2024 to finalize the workshop structure. In the course of our two-day session of brainstorming and design, three guiding elements became clear to us.

The first guiding element was that the key to the strength of our relationships was sharing our personal narratives with each other and listening to the other's narratives with compassion and attention. These acts ensured that we could "hear" the other person clearly, approach them with curiosity and care, and better understand where they stood, as well as their concerns. The vulnerability of sharing, rather than waiting for trust to form before being vulnerable, made it easier to build trust. To this end, participants needed to be trained in personal narrative strategies and methods of compassionate listening.

The second guiding element was that a valuable part of productive dialogue involved building skills to navigate the divisions the conflict was creating in our own communities and in how we met others. We opted to model a conversation for the fellows that illuminated the possibilities for keeping meaningful and fruitful relationships open. In London, we practised a 90-minute conversation in which we asked each other to explain, slowly and clearly, our experience of the days, weeks, and months following 7 October, clarifying how new information and encounters with others impacted our relationship with the global shift that was underway.

The third guiding element was that, given our audience of early-career scholars and young community leaders, it was beneficial not only to model a positive interaction and share practical tools but also to discuss theoretical frameworks that have been meaningful to each of us and provided the basis for our personal engagement and reflection. Therefore, each one of us facilitators worked on presenting a theoretical element supporting our vision of interfaith connection in this time of crisis.

Implementing the Retreat and Workshop

The 2024 annual GINGKO Interfaith Fellowship Retreat took place in Cairo and Anafora, Egypt, from 16 to 20 September 2024. The workshop we are presenting in this case study took place on 18 and 19 September. The GINGKO Foundation structured the retreat in two main parts: first, a day of significant site visits in Cairo on 16 September, followed by a day of group reflection in Anafora on 17 September; and, second, the two days of our workshop on Interreligious Dialogue in Times of Crisis in Anafora.

In addition to the three of us, the cohort consisted of 12 fellows, the majority of whom were Muslims, followed in number by several Christians and one Jew. We were also

fortunate to be joined by the leadership of the GINGKO Foundation, as well as Julie Siddiqi, an interfaith Muslim activist from the United Kingdom.

Site visits and reflections

The first day in Cairo (16 September) was dedicated to visits to places of worship and meaningful places for each of the three religious traditions represented within the fellowship group. The morning began with visits to the Ben Ezra Synagogue, known for its traditional connections to the biblical Moses and Ezra as well as the significant modern discovery of the Cairo Geniza; and the churches of Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus, known as a stop for the Holy Family on its flight to Egypt, and the Hanging Church, a beautiful and unique Coptic church. One might say that the fellowship began by retracing the steps of Moses and Jesus. The day continued with visits to important Muslim sites, including the Mausoleum of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub and the Al-Azhar Mosque. Al-Azhar is the home institution for many of the fellows, and so that visit was particularly special, including a guided introduction and the opportunity to perform or observe the afternoon prayer. Each of these sites, in turn, represented the multicultural and multireligious history of Cairo, a place where all three traditions have flourished and built significant intellectual and spiritual legacies. Exploring these legacies primed the fellows for the encounter with the other that we would ask of them in the days to come.

The second day (17 September), the group travelled to Anafora, a retreat centre and farm located on 127 acres (approx. 51 hectares), which is a project of Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Orthodox Eparchy of El-Qussia and Mair in Upper Egypt. That afternoon, GINGKO's CEO Dr Barbara Schwepcke and Julie Siddiqi led the group through a workshop titled "Manifestations of Faith – Understanding Religious Other(s) through Reflections on their Artistic Expressions." The workshop, developed by Dr Schwepcke, aimed to share and advance interfaith dialogue by reflecting in a respectful way on events, actions, or objects of faith the fellows had identified during the site visits of the previous day. The day ended with a contemplation exercise led by Dr Schwepcke, in which individuals traced their own labyrinth on a page while thinking through personal questions. These reflective and contemplative exercises helped the fellows turn inward and build some of the self-awareness that would be necessary in the deep dialogue work we were to ask of them.

Anafora proved to be an ideal place for the kind of work we were seeking to do. The centre is sizeable, with conference rooms, guesthouses, classrooms, two churches, and an amphitheatre, but it is isolated in the desert outside Cairo. Twenty Coptic Orthodox religious sisters and one novice who live in a monastery on the grounds operate the centre, providing hospitality and formation, together with a few laypersons and two Coptic Orthodox priests. The remote and prayerful atmosphere of the monastery was conducive to the experience we were building. We planned to spend the next two days discussing conflict

– and specifically the current conflict in the Middle East – and approaches we could use to navigate these difficult times. Therefore, a place where we could really build our small community, getting to know each other and possibly grow in mutual trust and friendship, was extremely helpful. We wanted to encourage the kind of intimacy and spiritual growth that is best cultivated without distraction.

Dialogue workshop: Active listening and personal narratives

On the third and fourth days, we ran the Interfaith Dialogue in Times of Crisis workshop. The goal was to lead the fellows through a process that (1) trained them in active listening, (2) modelled a difficult conversation for them, (3) offered a theoretical basis for that conversation, (4) encouraged them to go through a similar conversation, and then (5) asked them to reflect on these skills as a way of moving forward to take what they had learned home.

We began by introducing the fellows to an active listening exercise based on a tool that Ben and Elena had practised as KAICIID fellows. After sharing a few tips and reflections on the importance and benefits of listening in dialogue and in any relationship, we divided the fellows into groups of four. In each group, the fellows rotated telling a story of a difficult situation, while the other three were instructed to focus their attentive listening on the facts of the story, the storyteller's feelings while telling the story, or the values expressed by the story. They were to do this without taking notes, focusing their full attention only on the storyteller. They then each reflected back to the storyteller what they had heard.

The fellows noted that the work created a strong and intimate bond in their private group. They learned that, based on their backgrounds, each of them had a different barometer for what qualified as a difficult situation. They were also amazed by how much could be communicated in a brief exercise when they were truly listening and were listened to. In all, the experience was extremely positive, and this first session laid the groundwork for subsequent conversations.

We then remodelled the conversation about the conflict through personal narratives that we had prepared during our sessions in London a few months prior. As demonstrated in the previous exercise, telling personal stories is a tool for moving beyond opinions or positions, inviting a relationship based on compassion and vulnerability. As such, it is very helpful as an entry point into a conversation across lines of difference, even when those differences provoke a sharp contrast of suffering. We hoped that showing ourselves – as the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim organizers – going through a truly dialogical conversation could be a source of inspiration for the fellows about what might be possible in their own dialogues. The fellows responded positively to what we had modelled and noted the deep relationships that seemed to make such honest and open encounter possible.

Dialogue workshop: Theoretical frameworks

Our last session on the third day was an opportunity for us to share with the fellows, who are mostly scholars, the personal theoretical frameworks that structured our thinking around approaching dialogue in hard times. In this way, we hoped to provoke the fellows into thinking theoretically, as well as practically, about the challenges in front of us all. Theoretical frameworks allow us to ground our practice in our values. While our practices may evolve to meet the realities of the moment, grounding those practices in theory allows us to maintain a strong connection to the values that orient our thinking.

Benjamin Kamine framed his reflections on the power of attending to individual human dignity through classical Jewish texts. Rabbinic interpretations of Leviticus 19:18, which calls upon us to love our neighbours as ourselves, open the door for a recognition of the power of individual human dignity. If we can find our way to cherishing each individual human life as necessary, regardless of the hurt it may cause, then we find a way toward compassionate engagement across difference. As the classical Rabbinic source, Avot d'Rabbi Natan, states:

> "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" was said with a swear – "I am the Lord."
> Why? Because I, the Lord, created them.[5]

One is obligated to love their neighbour because God created them. There is no exception to this framing. As individuals, each is a specific creation of God. Indeed, our diversity is God's glory. As Mishnah Sanhedrin explains, this is the reason we are all descended from a single being, though we appear different and distinct:

> To proclaim the greatness of the Holy One:
> Humans stamp many coins with one seal, and all are alike.
> The Holy One stamped every human with the seal of Adam, yet none is like another.[6]

But this idea alone does not fully confront the human urge. Loving is an action, but pain can allow us to justify breaking from that action. This is the true reason for Leviticus 19:18. As articulated by Rabbi Akiva in Genesis Rabbah, the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself is necessary lest one say, "since I am disgraced, let my neighbor be disgraced along with me; since I am cursed, let my neighbor be cursed along with

[5] Avot d'Rabbi Natan A 16 (Menahem Kister, Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Mahadurat Sh. Z. Schechter [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997], 64).

[6] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

me."[7] It is not only that we should treat others the way we want to be treated, but we must also resist the human urge to drag people down with us when we suffer. We must resist the retreat to pettiness and tribalism.

The great 19th-century rabbinic commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch proposed a way of thinking about individual human dignity that wove these ideas together into one ethical statement:

> Imagine for a moment that all your fellow-men whom God has placed at your side have disappeared, and that you are alone on the desolate earth. What would be your existence, what pleasure could you have – still more, what would become of your mission, if you were not able to love and do kindnesses? … you are meant to support, to sustain, to comfort, to instruct, to nourish, to make happy, to revive, and you would have no one for whom you could do all this. And do you not see that it is only in association with mankind as a whole that God endows your work with permanence? Mankind takes up the work of each individual and, itself undying, becomes the heir to it.[8]

Hirsch clarifies that love is an action, not a feeling, and that we owe that action to every human we meet, no matter what, because they are human. Further, every human's individuality is their contribution to humanity. Every life lost diminishes all of us. By recognizing the pain of that diminishment and taking seriously every person's personal stake in that pain, we can strengthen ourselves against the instinct toward tribal thought, prioritizing some individuals over others.

Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour used the global mind, as opposed to the tribal mind, as a theoretical framework that may help us lay down the foundations for a shared future. The following is a brief exposition of the features of each mind and its potential impact on the domain of interfaith relations.

The tribal mind prioritizes loyalty and identity within a specific group, often at the expense of self-reflection and connection with others. It thrives on the following elements:

- *Stereotypes*: A stereotype reduces a person's complexity to a single trait, undermining their humanity.
- *Chosen trauma*: Historical events like the Holocaust, Nakba, and Jesus' crucifixion become foundational to group identity. Vamik Volkan's concept of transgenerational

[7] Genesis Rabbah 24:7.

[8] Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances, vol. 1*, trans. I. Grunfeld (London: Soncino Press, 1962), 53.

trauma transmission shows how unresolved grief and humiliation can perpetuate conflict.
- *Memories of a feared future*: Imagined fears of future harm, when emotionally charged, can feel as real as past experiences. These "memories" reinforce distrust and hostility, pulling groups into what may be termed the "tribe's effect."

Transitioning from a tribal to a global mind involves the following elements:

- *Self-reflection*: Self-reflection interrupts automatic reactions, such as defensiveness, by helping individuals understand what is driving their emotions.
- *Connection*: Connecting with others fosters empathy by challenging stereotypes, allowing individuals to see the full complexity of others. As highlighted by research by Susan Fiske and Steven Neuberg, breaking out of the confirmation bias cycle – where evidence reinforcing stereotypes is prioritized while contradictory evidence is dismissed – requires conscious effort to view others as multidimensional.
- *Embracing universal principles*: Religious teachings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam often promote universal values like compassion, justice, and the dignity of all people. Highlighting these shared tenets can counteract tribal exclusivity.
- *Balancing tribal and global connections*: Tribal connections are not inherently harmful; they offer a sense of belonging and meaning. However, when loyalty to the tribe overrides ethical and universal considerations, it becomes dangerous. A global mind does not erase tribal identities but situates them within a broader framework where interdependence and coexistence take precedence. This shift reduces the potential for interfaith conflict and promotes a world where cooperation and peace become the norm.

Elena Dini focused on the topic of the expectations of others that we bring to the dialogue process. The events of 7 October elevated the expectations that people had of each other. The expectations came from very diverse sources and were often framed as demands. Each expectation articulated by a different player might contradict expectations from another party. For example, one might be asked to condemn the other party; take a side; accept, justify, or support actions that involved violence; or police certain kinds of language. From a basic Google search, one realizes that the word "expectation" can refer to expectations one might have about the other or about oneself. In either case, we bring expectations into the context of any relationship. The expectations that one brings to a dialogue might disturbingly impact the value that one attributes to the dialogue partner. This can cause a negative change in perceptions and actions. The trajectory of such expectations can lead one to devalue

the relationship and, eventually, the former partner or even friend. This can also take the form of generalized prejudice against the entire community to which the other person belongs.

Elena spoke about the impact of post–7 October expectations in the context of the Roman Catholic Church, to which she belongs. She noted that the responses to some statements by the church leadership invoking peace, the release of hostages, and an immediate ceasefire were not always positive. Expectations articulated by dialogue partners about where the Catholic community should stand or what it should do (the same applies to all communities) have become a routine part of the landscape since 7 October. Reflecting on the request or need for positioning oneself, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, recently expressed these ideas in a paper he gave in May 2024:

> We cannot remain silent in the face of injustice or invite quiet living and disengagement. However, the preferential option for the poor and weak does not make us a political party. Taking a stand, as we are often asked to do, cannot mean becoming part of a confrontation, but must always translate into words and actions on behalf of those who suffer and groan and not into slogans and condemnation against anyone.[9]

All communities can see how expectations negatively influence our relationships in times of conflict. However, Elena concluded with ways that one can positively invest in expectations as a way of building healthier relationships rather than further division. This requires listening to the expectations of the other while acknowledging the expectations that you are bringing to the table. Leading with an emphasis on truth, justice, and forgiveness can bring everyone to the same table, conscious that although expectations have a strong top-down dimension due to leadership statements and social perceptions, there is also an important bottom-up aspect, where we can positively rely on close friendships and extant relationships.

On the evening of that third day, the Anglican Christian ministers celebrated the eucharist, to which everyone was invited. This initiated a model of spiritual sharing, which will be discussed further below.

Dialogue workshop: Addressing the conflict

For the second day of the workshop, our initial plan had been to split our cohort into multiple small groups to make use of the tools we had provided on the previous day in discussing the conflict and responses to 7 October. However, shortly before our arrival

[9] Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, "Characteristics and Criteria for a Pastoral Care of Peace," 7 May 2024, https://www.lpj.org/en/latin-patriarch-of-jerusalem/documents/speeches/caratteri-e-criteri-per-una-pastorale-della-pace.

date in Cairo, it became clear that several Jewish fellows would be unable to attend due to security concerns. As a result, we were left with only two Jewish participants: Benjamin and one other Jewish fellow. This was too few to execute our initial plan.

In brainstorming alternative possibilities, we hit upon an idea. Benjamin and Elena had recently returned from a conference at which there was an in-person panel discussion presented by an Israeli and a Palestinian, who shared their personal narratives about the conflict and their reflections on building new dialogical conversations in the aftermath of 7 October. They were staff members at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, an interreligious organization based in Jerusalem that works to promote better relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the region and toward a shared society in Israel/Palestine.[10] We had found their presentation deeply moving, and we thought it might be beneficial to the group to hear from Israelis and Palestinians who had managed to keep their lines of communication open during the crisis. We reached out to the multifaith team at the Rossing Center and asked if they would present a similar panel on Zoom for us, featuring one Israeli and one Palestinian voice, suggesting some specific colleagues at the centre whom Benjamin and Elena thought would connect well with the fellows: an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Christian. Despite the short notice, the Rossing Center agreed to present the panel.

During the session, the atmosphere in the room got quite tense. During our coffee break, we engaged several fellows to understand their strong sense of discomfort. The fellows expressed dissatisfaction with a panel discussion on the conflict that did not include a Muslim voice or a Gazan voice. Further, due to the online format and lack of prior interaction with the Rossing Center speakers, some of what was shared by the panel was not fully received by the fellows, missing critical context about the centre and its exceptional track record as a dialogue institution. Technical difficulties also meant that the Rossing Center staff could not see or hear the fellows, which made follow-up questions and audience interaction nearly impossible. All of this made it much more difficult to enter into a healthy conversation.

Having heard the fellows' concerns and their request for the inclusion of other narratives, our small organizing team quickly met with the GINGKO leadership and decided to rethink the time we still had available. As a team, we decided to open the floor and give space to the personal narratives of the fellows regarding the current situation. We had planned this kind of open discourse for later in the day, after more time with the Rossing Center team. As originally scheduled, it would have been more constrained, but it was clear that several of the fellows felt unrepresented and unheard in our dialogue. This required repair.

[10] Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, "About the Rossing Center," https://rossingcenter.org/about/?one.

The rethinking and rescheduling in light of what we heard from the fellows definitely proved to be the right choice. An online session with external speakers (with all the technical challenges due to the lack of stable internet connection) on such a divisive topic for an international multireligious group was an unsuccessful choice. There simply was no substitute for the kind of trust building we had done through the exercises of the previous days. We had managed to start creating a safe space with the people we had in the room, and the too quick addition of other people remotely was rightly challenging. Notwithstanding, the heated and candid reactions of the fellows allowed us to improve our conversation. Indeed, their openness to sharing their displeasure rather than retreating from the whole experience was already an indication that we had succeeded in creating space for honest discourse. By further opening the conversation in response to their hurt, we made it possible to touch each other's suffering more fully and possibly reach an even more sincere exchange than what we might otherwise have had on the fourth retreat day of a cohort meeting for the first time.

We resolved to leave a space of silence for the remaining time before lunch, giving everyone time to digest their experience of the morning's panel. After lunch, we invited everyone back into the room, prepared to share with the group their own narratives and express their own hard time with the conflict. And that preparation came with a secondary promise – unreserved, compassionate, and active listening from the other members of the cohort. Everyone would have the opportunity to share. And everyone would commit to fully listening.

This time was a blessed one. It took us three hours to hear from every member of the group. Three hours of focus, attention, and presence. Because of the exercises we had already done on active listening and personal narratives, every person was open and ready to make this further step, to share and to listen. We had not expected to put these tools to the test so rapidly. The candour and compassion in that conversation showed how successfully people could rise to the occasion.

Dialogue workshop: Spiritual sharing

After this very intense session, all fellows were invited to gather together for two spiritual practices: the afternoon Jewish prayer and the sunset Muslim prayer. The Jewish and Muslim fellows each introduced the group to the deep meaning of those practices for those performing them. And then, after each practice, performed by the Jewish and Muslim fellows respectively, there was a question-and-answer session with the fellows. As with the Christian eucharistic celebration, the previous night, these moments of spiritual sharing afforded the fellows yet another opportunity to move beyond an intellectual encounter. The fellows performing the practices did so with full and unapologetic authenticity, not unlike sharing a personal narrative. And the fellows observing the

practices did so with intentional and attentive engagement, not unlike participating in an active listening exercise. Using these tool sets, the fellows came face to face with how the other greets God, a reminder of what brings us all together. It was an apt closing to a challenging day.

Conclusions

The experience in Cairo and Anafora was really meaningful for all of us. As organizers, we were strongly committed to it because it was an incredible chance to bring together experienced people from different religious traditions and viewpoints who were invested in dialogue and encounter with respect to the ongoing conflict. We were extremely fortunate to have the support of the GINGKO Foundation, which believed in this project and trusted our proposal.

Another important element was the composition of our facilitation team, which was not incidental to how the idea had come about. We had already worked together and trusted each other. That was the reason that at a particularly complex moment, we spontaneously reached out to each other. Our deep trust and working history were important supporting factors in allowing us to develop this project and put it into practice. And our pre-work in London set the stage for stronger results. Indeed, when we found ourselves having to rethink the dynamics and work sessions, the fact that we were already "broken in" allowed us to do so in a spirit of collaboration and understanding.

Even with these advantages, the workshop brought with it two significant challenges.

- *Anticipating others' framings*: For at least two of us in the leadership team, we were more knowledgeable about the context and arguments around this topic in the Europe/North America and Israel/Palestine frame, but quite ignorant about the feelings, reactions, larger history, and personal connections to the conflict that our Egyptian fellows brought to the conversation. One important response was that framing the discussion around 7 October 2023 did not resonate: "You drafted the conversation starting from October 7, but for me, for us, the trauma and the conflict didn't start then, it started decades earlier. So, if we need to talk about it, we cannot start there."
- *Lacking relevant voices*: It was not helpful for group cohesion that we had invited external conversation partners from Israel/Palestine for an online session without including a Muslim speaker. This challenge was exacerbated, naturally, by an unstable internet connection, which made it difficult for those in the room to listen carefully to the speakers we were able to include. Addressing the absence of relevant voices required more care in planning the session. Ironically, the invitation to our online participants was extended

at the last minute, as a response to our concerns around the small number of Jewish voices in the group. There had initially been more Jewish fellows, but travel to Egypt posed significant security concerns, causing some of them to withdraw shortly before the retreat. In seeking to address one challenge, we had created another.

Fortunately, both challenges led fellows to voice their uneasiness, which gave us the chance to rethink the format and propose new arrangements. We can say that it ended up giving us the opportunity to go deeper into the conversation. We are grateful for the fellows' openness and candour in that moment.

We also introduced some *successful* elements into the workshop design that were very productive and allowed the group to grow in mutual trust and be better able to face harder conversations when they arose:

- *Active listening and personal narrative exercises*: Focusing on active listening and preparing the group to present one's own personal narrative helped the fellows develop skills that are essential to any dialogue environment. Indeed, both exercises were adapted from other dialogue workshops that the facilitators had participated in, as they are common, though important, techniques.
- *Spiritual sharing*: Having space for spiritual sharing through an introduction and guided attendance to each other's moments of religious practice was equally important to building the ethos of the group. While active listening and personal narratives might be seen more in terms of tools to dialogue, the time devoted to spiritual hospitality allowed us all to share not only an academic or personal exchange but also a space of encounter with the Divine. This dimension is not frequently part of interreligious dialogue in academic or professional circles, and the three of us felt that this was a fundamental element to be added to our experience. We were there as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and the expression of each fellow's faith has huge potential to open up a sense of community. It demonstrates a willingness to give to and receive from the other as a creature worshipping the same God. It is a recognition of shared humanity. The three moments of spiritual sharing (on the evening of the third day and after the last session) allowed us to change the language and atmosphere at critical moments in the cohort's growth. It drew the group closer together.

In all, a combination of careful preparation and agility in facilitation allowed us to execute the workshop's successes as planned and meet the workshop's challenges as they arose. This will surely not be our last such collaboration, and we look forward to future shared work that can build on what we have learned in this process.