



**POLEMIC MITIGATING WORKSHOP AT CUMBERLAND
LODGE
14–16 JANUARY**



Undeterred by bouts of English winter rain, scholars and faith leaders convened in Windsor Great Park to advance a polemic-mitigating toolkit designed to support dialogue around potentially incendiary religious texts. Interfaith discussions often gravitate towards passages that emphasise tolerance or unity, but building trust also requires confronting and acknowledging those elements of religious traditions that may cause harm to those beyond their communities.

In her opening address, Julie Siddiqi reflected that the period since October 2023 has been the hardest she remembers for interfaith dialogue, yet it is in engaging with these difficult polemic aspects of the discourse that is the most rewarding and revealing.

Across three days of workshops, discussions and presentations, those present continued the work of previous retreats in creating a resource to structure and support these most difficult conversations.



*In groups of four
 I shall not you bore
 Emotions still raw
 I will bring those sessions to a draw
 I know this may be a flaw
 Yet let not at your consciences gnaw
 Anything but the polemical toolkit once you leave the door
 For all is not rigid law
 Between and East and West is but a mythical shore
 Heed therefore Gingko's call not to each other gore
 And celebrate the advancement of anti-polemics galore.*

‘Lake Harry’

Composed for the occasion by Dr Imran Khan



The retreat was convened by **Mrs Julie Siddiqi** from Together We Thrive, **Professor Angeliki Ziaka** from the World Council of Churches, and **Mr Benjamin Kamine** of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Also in attendance, as representatives of interfaith organisations, academics, and advisors were: Dr Ali Aghaei, Dr Hana Bendcowsky, Dr Imran Khan, Dr Tajul Islam, Dr Maayan Karen Raveh, Ms Elena Dini, Rt Revd Rob Gillion, Mrs. Janine Gillion, Mr Harry Hall, Revd Calum Burke, Dr Melanie Gibson, Mr Rick Sopher, Dr Andrew Boyd, Dr Lindsay Simmonds, Professor Daniel Weiss, **Dr Barbara Schwepcke**

As an opening exercise, participants were invited to share, in a single word, their hopes for the retreat and its outcomes. Some adhered strictly to the constraint, offering terms such as *optimism*, *responsibility*, *trust*, *gratitude*, *fellowship*, *partnership*, *collaboration* and the (hyphenated) *splendiferous-conviviality*. Other contributions included *talking*, *reading*, and *thinking* together; the image of the ginkgo leaf itself was invoked as a symbol of *togetherness*, and the discussion of the retreat as a *journey* became a recurring theme. Referring directly to the challenging nature of discussing polemics, one participant offered *the hurt that makes the process possible*, and another *productive peace*.

Table of contents:

1. Introduction – lessons from the last two retreats	-5
2. The Methods	-7
i. Active Listening	-8
ii. The Rossing Centre Method	-9
iii. Scripture and Violence	-11
iv. The Liberty Fund Method	-13
v. Walk in Their Shoes	-14
3. Other presentations and discussions	-16
i. Religious Literacy	-17
ii. Reflections on Selecting Texts at Bossey	-19
iii. KAICIID	-22
iv. Places of implementation	-23
4. The Toolkit	-24
i. What will it contain?	-25
ii. Who is it for?	-26
iii. How do we move forward?	-27
5. Final Remarks	-28

1. INTRODUCTION

Lessons from the last two retreats

The convenors, Julie, Ben, and Angeliki, opened the retreat with reflections on the previous retreats: [Cairo and Anafora in 2024](#) and [Château de Bossey in 2025](#).

Julie began by discussing the importance and difficulties of the work that we are doing at the time we are doing it. Throughout the retreat, a continual effort was made not to exclude the outside world, but rather let it in. This was essential, after all, as the toolkit itself is intended to return to that world.

Reflecting on the retreat in Egypt, with Israel and Palestine in close proximity, Julie spoke of lessons learned there: that emotion cannot be set aside, and that the organisation of such gatherings must remain flexible, allowing space for the rawness that accompanies unfolding global events.

In Cumberland Lodge, we found ourselves again caught in the convulsions of global politics, not least with the communications blackout and protests in Iran. Throughout, we took Julie's learning to heart, and compassion and flexibility were at the heart of all proceedings.

Ben then spoke of moments in past retreats where trust had broken down, concluding that the cause was not what had been said, but what remained unsaid. The more participants avoid confronting what is difficult or unsettling, the more space there is for suspicion to take hold. It is precisely for this reason that polemical texts must be addressed directly: to foster interfaith trust without the sense that the most inflammatory aspects of religion are being concealed.

The texts used during the Geneva session, selected from a much longer list, were chosen precisely because they were expected to be challenging. Yet the experience demonstrated that such material can be engaged with constructively when a sense of collective responsibility for the dialogue is firmly established.

Angeliki built on this by reflecting on what is required to sustain a sense of collective responsibility. What has proven most effective in these retreats is collaboration not only across faiths, but also between youth and experience. This is made possible by a clear and shared vision, held in friendship and trust by Barbara and Julie, which creates a space sufficiently safe to accommodate the challenges of such dialogue.

From GINGKO's perspective, Barbara reflected on what had and had not been successful in previous retreats. Most significantly, she spoke of the need to connect head and heart, bringing academics and community leaders together to undertake work that is not only intellectually demanding but also engages people's most deeply held feelings. She emphasised that this synthesis, in which understanding is pursued both as knowledge and as compassion, is essential to the foundation of the toolkit.

Harry, also of GINGKO, set the intention from the retreat, entreating us all not to lose sight of the fact that we are building something that must be useful outside the context of the fellowship that had convened, and to always be considering *who this is for*. And *what form will it take?*



2. THE METHODS

Across the three days, we experimented with a range of approaches, drawn from different organisations and presenters, for engaging polemical texts in group discussion. These methods were tested not only as potential components of the toolkit, but also as prompts that continually returned us to the three essential questions around which we had convened at Cumberland Lodge: **who the toolkit is for, which methodologies are most effective, and how the toolkit is intended to be implemented.**



I

ACTIVE LISTENING Mr Benjamin Kamine

This method, which can be used for the presentation of polemic texts or discussing instances of bias, was adapted for our context to practice active listening through stories of difficult life events. It proved a very suitable first exercise in building group trust and cohesion, while also experiencing the active listening methodology.

Method: The practice is designed to focus attention on content of speech rather than the internal processing lens of the listener. A storyteller tells a story of a difficult moment in their lives over the course of four minutes to a group of three listeners. Each listener was given a different focus: the first to listen for the ‘facts’, the second for the ‘feelings’ and the third for the ‘values’. The listeners, who are not allowed to write any notes during the reading, then have an allotted time to repeat back only what they have heard in terms of facts, feelings and values, respectively. Structured this way, the listeners are challenged to really engage with what is being said, not trying to add their own opinions, but carefully pay attention and understand another perspective.

Thus, we divided into groups of four, and in our small groups each told a story of a difficult life experience, with the instruction: “if one is stubbing your toe, and ten is going to war, aim for a five and a half or six.” It was crucial that the stories told not be discussed outside of the group of four. When we reconvened as a group, we were careful to only discuss the method and not the stories that were shared.

Feedback: Ben first invited participants to reflect on what they had found most challenging about the experience. Many noted the difficulty of knowing which story to tell, an uncertainty that generated a degree of anxiety and, at times, distraction. This was thought to stem in part from the more open-ended format with which we had been experimenting.

Others found the task demanding because it required participants to reproduce the story's content as faithfully as possible, rather than projecting their own interpretations, emotions, or values onto it. Additional challenges raised included how to define “values” as a distinct category, whether it was meaningful to prohibit note-taking, and whether the success of the session could be replicated in other settings without the good faith that had characterised our own.

At the same time, the method was widely regarded as an effective way of opening difficult conversations, training participants to listen attentively and to think beyond their own perspectives, and as a strong starting point for the necessary work of engaging with scripture.

II THE ROSSING CENTRE METHOD: A SPIRITUAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Dr Hana Bendcowsky

[The Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue](#), in its own words, is “an interreligious organization based in Jerusalem which promotes an inclusive society for all religious, ethnic and national groups in the Holy Land.” Its approach to interreligious dialogue has therefore been shaped within an exceptionally challenging context. Hana began by speaking to us about trauma, how it can give rise to hatred, and the restorative power of listening. Healing, she told us, “comes from hearing that you have been heard.”

Method: A participant completes a questionnaire outlining a dilemma they are facing, alongside questions relating to their spiritual and personal background, and then presents this material to the wider group, who listen and take notes.

The remaining participants reflect on what they have heard as if the presenter were not present. Crucially, the presenter is not permitted to interrupt the discussion, and those taking part must remain within the presenter’s frame of reference, refraining from introducing their own opinions, ego, or judgment.

One person in the group takes the role of ensuring that the rules are being followed, guided by the diagram of ‘Sami’s house’, a building containing those elements not allowed in discussion.



Sami’s house, built of rooms that we are tempted to go into, in order to ‘look good’ or validate our own egos.

The spiritual questionnaire method aims to be non-judgemental and allow each member of the group to take on roles as presenter, partner, counterpoint, facilitator and enabler, engaging as active listeners and responsive witnesses.

The method is usually practised over an extended period of time; in our session, we undertook an abridged form, with each participant presenting on a dilemma to do with Israel and Palestine, as well as picking two other questions from the questionnaire.

Feedback: It was agreed that the format works very well, and that hearing one's own dilemmas reflected, without the opportunity to intervene, is both an unusual and valuable experience. The process was seen as potentially beneficial and therapeutic, offering value not only to the presenter but also to those listening.

In contrast to the active listening exercise, the option to take notes was largely viewed as helpful. Some concerns were raised, however, about participants later regretting what they had written, and it was suggested that notes be collected at the end of the session.

A shared concern across the group was the lack of clarity around what "reflection" precisely entails. Listeners felt they would have benefited from more explicit guidance on how to discuss what they had heard without introducing their own opinions.

A further issue concerned whether the method functions as effectively when participants already know one another. As experiences varied across the group, some noted that listening to the dilemma of someone familiar made it more difficult to set aside personal feelings and prior knowledge.

III

SCRIPTURE & VIOLENCE METHOD

Professor Daniel Weiss

The [Scripture & Violence Project](#) is based at the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, which is part of the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. They have developed a methodology specifically for dealing with what they call ‘violent-sounding’ passages of scripture, in inter- or intra-faith settings.

When confronted with such texts, readers often take a certain interpretation to be correct and, from there, make assumptions about people for whom this is a sacred text. The purpose of the Scripture and Violence method is to disrupt this chain of thinking by asking participants to consider violent-sounding texts in different ways.

Method: Works by preparing specific polemic texts, so far from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur’an into a worksheet with accompanying questions for discussion.

In the sessions, participants read out the text, and then discuss questions which have been specifically designed to challenge and reveal the assumptions that have been made. This is strengthened by a look at a historical exegesis, or contextualisation, offering a new perspective on the text. The intention is that completing this exercise helps people to look at texts in new ways, and be open to challenging their assumptions about the scripture of one's own, or another's faith, and what it might mean to a believer.

The method can easily be adapted for different groups or different time constraints, should provide enough information in the worksheet that they don't require the participants to be experts, and does not require prior-reading.

This method has been practised in the past, and surveyed participants reported feeling more confident in their ability to engage with their own texts, as well as texts from other faith traditions.

Feedback: The method was generally felt to be a very good way of directly engaging with polemic texts, while providing structure for empathetic discussion and challenging assumptions. It was seen as a flexible approach that could work well in different settings, including in an online format.

The method requires more work to be done in advance of the sessions in preparing the text, questions and further reading. And this creates its own set of specific problems. One that came up in particular was the question of language. From the discussion, it was clear that there's always a balance between letting everyone access the text in the language most familiar to them and keeping everyone engaged with the same material, and it's to create an equal experience either way.



IV

THE LIBERTY FUND METHOD

Dr Imran Khan

Imran Khan presented to us his experience of attending *Faith, Freedom and Reason in the German Enlightenment and post October 7th*, a reading and discussion session hosted by [The Liberty Fund](#), an educational foundation that promotes libertarian values and dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions.

Method: Liberty Fund sessions are invite-only round-table events in which selected participants gather, having read designated texts in advance, to reflect collectively on the material. Two rules structure the proceedings: sessions are moderated by a chair, whose role is to enable rather than inhibit free dialogue, and each session must begin and end on time.

The event that Imran attended was particularly relevant to our discussion, as it constituted an interfaith dialogue both in terms of the texts selected and the composition of the participants.

Feedback: Discussion of the Liberty Fund method opened up a productive conversation about the merits of circulating readings in advance and, in doing so, allowing participants time to prepare and research the topic. This approach was clearly well-suited to the Liberty Fund context, deepening discussion among participants selected for their expertise and capacity to engage with longer-form texts. However, in the broader contexts for which the toolkit may be intended, some felt that advance reading creates a barrier to entry. If not all participants complete the reading, it can also produce an asymmetrical dialogue. Presenting texts collectively during the session was therefore seen as the most effective way to “level the playing field.”

This session also prompted deeper reflection on the purpose of discussing texts. There was broad consensus that uncovering the “real meaning” of a text should not be the primary aim, and that the sessions should move away from a “theologocentric” approach. In other words, texts should be treated as living entities open to interpretation, rather than as fixed truths that necessarily produce specific outcomes.

Imran’s concerns regarding the specific texts chosen for that event led to further discussion about how materials should be selected for the toolkit. Participants expressed a desire for a balanced representation of texts from different religions, so as not to privilege or marginalise any particular faith. The question was also raised as to whether the toolkit should be limited to scripture alone, given that other forms of “text”, such as social media posts by faith leaders, can function as polemical texts in their own right.

V**WALK IN THEIR SHOES****Rt Revd Rob Gillion***Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*

Romans 12:15

While less strictly a “methodology” in the sense presented by other organisations, Rob Gillion’s presentation on the importance of walking in each other’s shoes offered a timely return to the fundamental purpose of the toolkit: to broaden our understanding of one another and to move beyond our own subjectivities in the search for deeper connection.

The “method” for doing this, of course, shifts with each context and extends beyond the remit of the toolkit into our wider lives. By way of illustration, Robert shared a story from his time as a prison chaplain in Hong Kong, where he was once confronted by an inmate who pulled him to the bars of his cell and challenged him to understand what it truly meant to be confined there, to quite literally walk in his shoes.

Accepting that he needed to learn, as far as was possible, what life inside the prison entailed, the chaplain asked the warden to find him a cell. Through this act, he was able to form a genuine connection with the inmates, who in turn opened themselves up to him.

Through stories of prisoners and their lives together, some in solitary confinement, and some, as they rebuilt their lives after release, Robert emphasised that the most important thing he could offer was attentive listening and an effort to understand grounded in love rather than judgement. Through listening, he argued, we can demonstrate the heart of God, affirm the value and dignity of each individual, and show the transformative power of empathy and understanding when they arise from a place of sincerity.

Discussion: In connecting the presentation more directly to the toolkit and to the sharing and listening exercises that had been workshopped, it became clear that in this context, “walking in each other’s shoes” refers to the painful but productive work of engaging with polemical texts from another perspective. Recognising how one’s own texts affect different groups, or understanding why another faith’s texts feel familiar or unproblematic to its members. Through listening and understanding without judgement, it becomes possible to engage with these texts in more constructive ways. As a group, we discussed how we can love, without needing to like other people, and that this can be the basis for turning judgement into curiosity.



3. OTHER PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the retreat, other sessions were held, some more structured presentations, and others that facilitated general discussion on the toolkit, its aims, audience and purpose. Each, in its way, contributed towards a critical and engaged understanding of interfaith work and its implementations.



I**RELIGIOUS LITERACY:
A CRITICAL LOOK AT INTERFAITH DIALOGUE****Dr Mayaan Raveh and Ms Elena Dini**

Mayaan and Elena presented their research on some of the structural problems that can occur in interfaith dialogue.

As facilitators of interfaith dialogue, they have witnessed the pitfalls that can emerge within such encounters and shared with us the need to examine the foundations from which this work proceeds. Beginning from a premise of liberal tolerance, they demonstrated, can itself be problematic. Secularism does not simply sit outside religion but actively defines and prescribes it. One way this occurs is through relegating religion to the private sphere, an approach that may align with some forms of faith but sits uneasily with others that are inherently communal in expression.

By opting for moderate positions only, interfaith dialogue can end up excluding legitimate expressions of belief that are considered extreme. This leaves many people out of the room and often ends up in a lack of knowledge about real diversities and stereotypes. When faith is articulated through formulations such as “I believe” or “the belief is that”, often in an effort to accommodate a plurality of truths, more direct and earnest expressions, such as “it is true that”, are implicitly ruled out. In this way, interfaith dialogue can become wary of genuine disagreement, limiting the extent to which the fullness of belief can be brought into the conversation.

Power asymmetries are very much at play in dialogue and this is evident as well in the language that is used. For example, some terms come from specific traditions but are held as universal and minority traditions are asked to adapt to it.

Mayaan further argued that this privileging of certain practices over others manifests in practical ways, drawing on her experience of dialogue in the Holy Land. The requirement to conduct discussions in English, or sometimes Hebrew, can itself create asymmetries, with minority participants frequently bearing the burden of translating themselves.

Religious literacy can then be seen as a potential regulatory practice: we are not talking only about content but an approach that can also have a social and political function. Their presentation also entreated us to be critical of the role of toolkit facilitators, advising that they cannot be presented as above the dialogue, and must acknowledge their own biases.

Responses: In response, there was a discussion about practical ways to attempt to mitigate these potential downfalls, particularly agreeing with the presenters on the need for an **interfaith lexicon** that could accompany the toolkit, in which words could be explored by a Muslim, Jewish, and Christian author, alongside their equivalents in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, such that the conversation takes place as equally as possible.

While potential problems with the lexicon, such as the authority of authorship, were acknowledged, it was also felt that just by having one at all, the conversation about language is opened, and participants will examine the words they use, and be curious about the way others use them.

It was agreed that any lexicon needs to be conscious of being prescriptive, and be an invitation to dialogue and not be a barrier to the conversation.

II REFLECTIONS ON SELECTING TEXTS FOR THE SWITZERLAND RETREAT

Mr Benjamin Kamine

One of the key questions we sought to discuss during the retreat was how to select polemic texts to include in the toolkit, as well as to what extent the toolkit should be an empty slate that can be adapted by facilitators for different texts in different situations. To begin this discussion, Ben described the process by which texts had been chosen for last year's retreat at Château de Bossey, the home of the Ecumenical Institute.

How texts were chosen: Before the retreat, a text selection committee was agreed, with an even distribution of Jewish, Christian and Muslims (2 of each) deciding on the polemic texts from their own faiths. There needed to be differences within the faiths, a Shia and a Sunni Muslim, an Orthodox and a Catholic, an American and an Israeli. This couldn't be a perfect system; Christianity proved especially difficult to represent by just two groups, but it was nonetheless important to attempt.

The committee deliberately chose polemic texts that are often excluded from interfaith dialogue because of the potential harm they may cause, which were internally authoritative to a community or externally leveraged against another.

In the retreat itself, different modes of presenting the text were experimented with, and the best model was to work as one collective group, with the two presenters from each faith presenting their chosen texts.

Guidelines for presenting text:

1. Contextualise the text, discuss it and its reception in historical terms.
2. Elevate intracommunal difference in interpretation.
3. Acknowledge continued harm. This may most difficult aspect, but it is necessary.
4. Invite encounter: participants must feel welcome to engage with the text, and as such, it should be presented in a dialogical way that has space for emotion and does not require specific expertise to understand.
5. Presenters should adhere to time limits.

Discussion:

A wide-ranging discussion followed on how texts should be selected and framed within the toolkit.

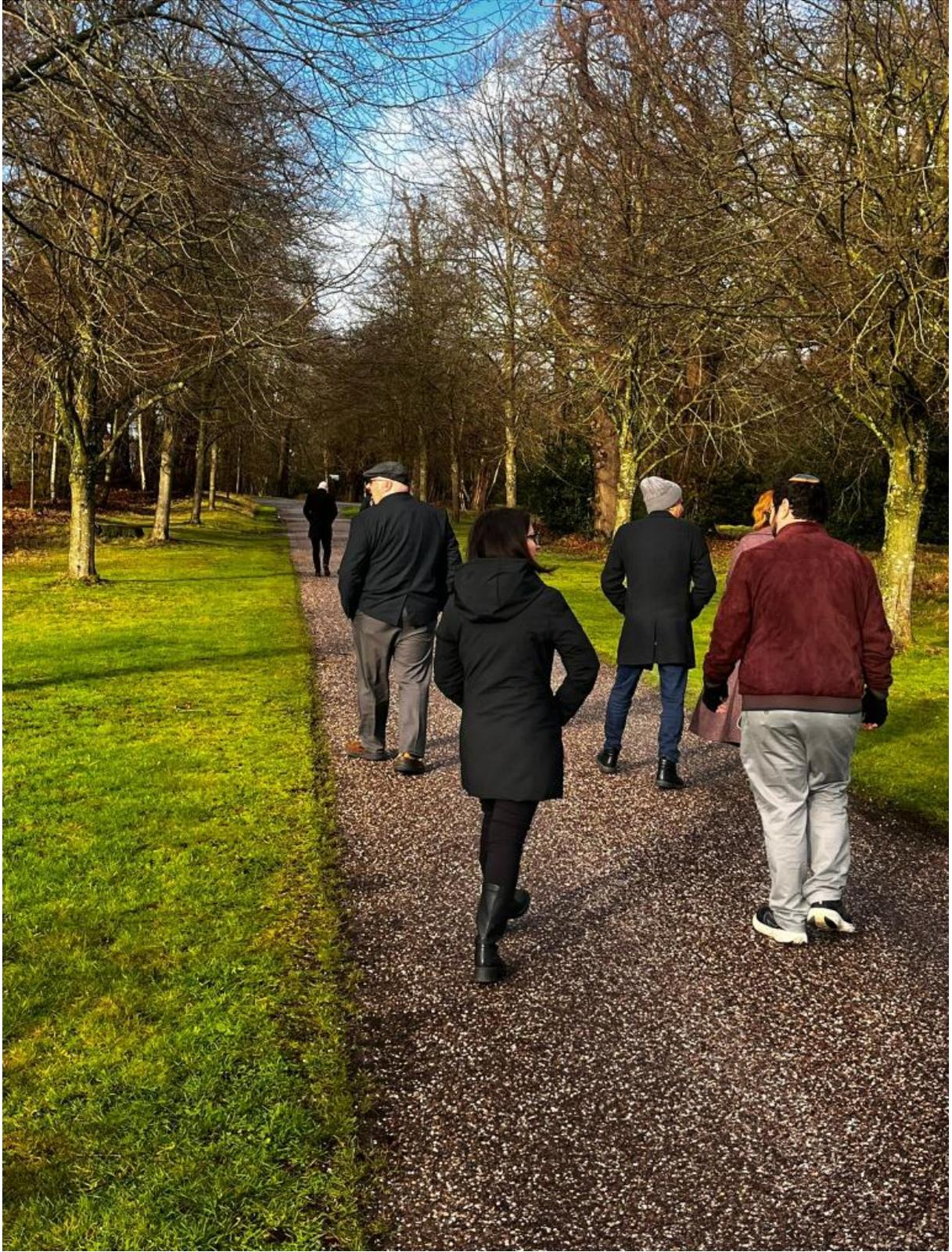
Text selection raised a number of foundational questions. What properly counts as a polemic text: should this category be limited to scripture, or might it also include religious practices, the teachings of religious authorities, or even harmful memes? It was also suggested that the process of selecting texts should itself be visible across faiths: observing how different traditions choose and justify particular texts could be an important part of the dialogue, and something that should not take place solely within intra-faith spaces.

Some proposed going further still, suggesting that texts should not be pre-selected at all. Instead, the act of choosing texts could be incorporated into the toolkit itself and undertaken collectively with participants. This, it was suggested, might be supported by providing illustrative examples of how texts can be identified and discussed, rather than prescribing specific materials in advance.

Once texts have been chosen, the question of framing becomes central. One proposal was that more “positive” texts should be presented alongside polemical ones. This raised deeper questions about the purpose of engaging with such material: whether the aim of the toolkit is ultimately to tackle difficult texts to move interfaith relations forward, or whether it is to build trust and deeper relationships at the individual level by confronting and sharing the most challenging elements of one’s tradition.

These differing aims have implications for how texts are positioned. If texts are treated as problems in themselves, the focus of the toolkit becomes working through those passages directly. Alternatively, if belief is understood to precede scripture, then engaging with texts functions less as an end in itself and more as a means of strengthening interfaith understanding and relationships.

Participants also reflected on the benefits of the retreat itself, namely that engaging honestly with these texts and working through the discomfort of sharing material that may cause harm to others ultimately strengthened their own faith and sense of integrity.



III

KAICIID

Dr Andrew Boyd

Andrew shared with us information about the organisation he works for, [KAICIID](#) (the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue), an intergovernmental organisation established by treaty between Saudi Arabia, Austria, Spain, and the Holy See.

Originally a funding body supporting external initiatives, KAICIID later developed its own programmes promoting interreligious dialogue. In doing so, it has encountered many challenges similar to those faced within the GINGKO fellowship. While KAICIID is distinctive in its focus on “inter-religious” dialogue, operating at the level of organised religion rather than personal faith, Andrew noted that this distinction does not hold consistently across all contexts.

Andrew oversees the fellowship programme and alumni network, which shares some overlapping membership with the GINGKO fellowship. KAICIID’s fellowship is large and draws participants from a wide range of educational and religious backgrounds, which frequently brings questions of unequal religious literacy to the fore.

One of the organisation’s most persistent challenges, he explained, is how to engage individuals or groups who are unwilling to enter dialogue, especially when interreligious divides map onto the lines of conflict.

KAICIID has never sought to offer a fixed definition of “dialogue”. Andrew cautioned against overly rigid definitions, arguing that such efforts can become exhaustive and may ultimately privilege certain participants or forms of engagement over others.

IV

PLACES OF IMPLEMENTATION

While the intended audience for the toolkit was a matter of discussion at the retreat, the groups in discussion were generally either academic or faith-based in nature. As such, we heard from two of the implementors about their groups.

The LSE Faith Centre

Dr Lindsay Simmonds

Founded in 2014 as part of the London School of Economics, the [LSE Faith Centre](#) is an interfaith organisation in an academic setting. It has a broad remit, including providing a space for different religions to worship, providing pastoral care, running a youth programme, hosting scriptural reasoning sessions, and facilitating dialogue between the Islamic and Jewish societies of the university. Until 2023, it ran mixed faith group trips to Israel and Palestine.

It was also suggested that Haifa University has a diverse student population and could be a potential site for the toolkit

Church Community in Bradford

Revd Calum Burke

Priest Calum Burke provided his thoughts on the toolkit from the perspective of his church community, which both provides a setting for thinking about intra-faith discussion among its Christian attendants, who may encounter polemic texts in the form of social media posts, and interfaith discussion, as the church is in a religiously diverse area with a large Muslim community who are also engaged with the church in different capacities.

4. THE TOOLKIT

As the retreat drew to a close, having explored a range of methods across multiple sessions, reflected critically on the toolkit, considered its potential contexts of implementation, and, perhaps above all, experienced the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue, we turned to three practical considerations for the toolkit's future: what it should include, who it is for, and when it will be developed.



I

WHAT WILL IT CONTAIN?

The purpose of the retreat was not to arrive at a fixed definition of the toolkit, but to surface the full range of possibilities that could later be refined into a finished product. In this spirit, the session on the toolkit's contents took the form of an open discussion, in which all ideas were welcomed. Contributions focused on what the toolkit might contain and how it might be presented:

- ❖ Multiple Methodologies: “different tools in the toolkit”.
- ❖ Emphasis on trusted sources for the texts.
- ❖ An interfaith lexicon, attached to provide context for the words we use, and prompt curiosity about how we may use them differently.
- ❖ One part for facilitators and one for the participants, with the facilitators given methods for preparing the ground for dialogue, such as active listening.
- ❖ Tools for facilitators to choose texts to create further sessions
- ❖ Guidance on choosing facilitators, emphasising the need for multiple faiths represented.
- ❖ An appendix of further sources and resources.
- ❖ Introduction and contextualisation of holy books.
- ❖ Instruction on the obligation of everyone to be resilient.
- ❖ If the language of a ‘safe-space’ is used, it should be said that safe is “an adverb, not an adjective”.
- ❖ Should utilise Scriptural Violence’s language of ‘violent-sounding’ texts.
- ❖ Decompression/debrief activity at the end.
- ❖ An end-of-exercise feedback form to gather data on how sessions proceeded.

II WHO IS IT FOR?

This question shaped the discussion in every session of the retreat. At each stage, we remained attentive to the intended use of the toolkit and to the audience for whom it is being developed. The issue unfolded along several different lines, and from the group discussion, a set of key considerations emerged:

- ❖ **The main groups we are looking at are: faith communities, e.g., churches, mosques and synagogues; interfaith groups, and educational groups.**
- ❖ In education, particularly, the question of age emerges, presumably not looking at primary school-age children.
- ❖ Geographic considerations: Language and conflict make some regions, especially in the Middle East, more challenging than others.
- ❖ What religions? We have been limited to the Abrahamic faiths and countries dominated by them; if we wanted to extend beyond it, we would encounter a whole range of new challenges. (Jewish-Christian-Muslim might be a more accurate term than Abrahamic)
- ❖ Can we discuss the polemics of groups that are not present? Or should sessions be limited to those texts represented in the room?
- ❖ How does this work at a grassroots level? What additional explanation needs to be given in a faith community setting vs an academic one?
- ❖ How does the intended group affect the process time? More work may need to be done in trust-building in interfaith settings.
- ❖ Agility: A key question contained in this discussion was the balance of agility and accessibility. The less the toolkit gives in terms of material, the more adaptable it becomes across situations; however, with less guidance and examples, it can become less accessible.

III

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Timeline:

To sustain the energy generated by this retreat and carry it forward to the next gathering in Turkey in September, a clear timeline was agreed. The period between now and then will be dedicated to consolidating and building on the work undertaken here, with the aim of producing a draft version of the toolkit in advance of the September retreat.

The first phase focuses on reflection and consolidation. A post-retreat questionnaire has been circulated to all participants and is to be completed by **1 March 2026**. By the same date, participants are invited to submit suggestions of words or terms for inclusion in the initial lexicon, and those wishing to contribute written material to the toolkit are asked to signal their intention to do so.

The second phase centres on content development. Participants who plan to submit materials for inclusion in the draft toolkit are asked to do so by **1 May 2026**.

On this basis, a preliminary draft of the toolkit will be prepared by **July**, enabling it to serve as a living framework for the retreat in September and to guide the next stages.

September's Retreat:

The next retreat will take place in Turkey, a historical home to Jews Christians and Muslims alike. It will take place between 30 August and 3 September, beginning in Istanbul for site visits across the city, and then travelling to Iznik at the site of the ancient city of Nicaea, where the Council of Nicaea sat in 325 AD.

Hopefully, group trips to a synagogue and a mosque will be possible as part of the retreat to continue the work of spiritual sharing among the fellowship.

5. Final Remarks

Space was made in the last session of the retreat to invite final words from participants:

One participant reflected that the retreat had been among the most hopeful experiences they had encountered, suggesting that if we continue with grace and generosity, and remain willing to learn from past mistakes, we will be building something deeply poignant.

Another expressed profound admiration for the depth of academic knowledge present in the room, while also affirming the moral and spiritual heart of the project, grounded in the belief that God's love is extended equally to all.

Several participants reflected on the wider message conveyed by the retreat itself: that the gathering of different faiths in this way sends a powerful signal of what is possible. Others echoed this sentiment, expressing deep gratitude for the openness and welcome they experienced within the group.

There was also recognition of the privilege and safety shared at Cumberland Lodge, and of the responsibility this confers to carry the work beyond the retreat and into the wider world. In times of crisis, participants noted, shared understanding and dialogue become not only valuable but necessary, and GINGKO's diversity was seen as central to its meaning and strength.

The retreat concluded with collective expressions of gratitude to Barbara and the conveners for their care, labour, and commitment in bringing the gathering together.

Echoing the exercise at the beginning of the retreat, we were once more asked to share a word representing what they will take away and share from the experience when asked responses included:

Synergy, Challenges, Hope, Trust, Hospitality, Encounter, Charity, Friendship, Grace, Friendship (again), Method, Collegiality, Thinking, Togetherness...

