

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

SERVICE ON SUNDAY 8th December 2013

Prelude,

Light Chalice

Flame of truth, justice and compassion that is the symbol of our values, burn brightly today as we mark the passing of one of your children! Open our minds and our hearts and call forth the best spirit that is within us.

Nelson Mandela

I invite you to review, in silent tribute, the life of Nelson Mandela and the meaning that life has for you.

SILENCE

Opening words

Of course, some of you may be vaguely aware that this is far from the first time I have led a service focussed on the Muslims. It is not that I believe there is anything of outstanding spiritual value in Islam but rather that while the Sikhs, the Buddhists and the Hindus of the world's religions are not any threat to our security or to our way of life, some Muslims are a threat to both and perhaps their whole belief system is just such a threat too.

Three years ago I gave an address on Tariq Ramadan, a European Muslim thinker whom I saw as bridging the gulf between the bulk of Muslims and the open sceptical values of the West. Since then I have been learning more about IslamISTS rather than Muslims or Islamics. And I want to

speak today about the roots of that new insight and what its practical implications might be.

Let us not forget that for a period Nelson Mandela was indeed a terrorist too. Since then he has shown the world, the ancient French proverb which translated means “To understand is to forgive.” We need to understand our terrorists.

But first, above all, this is a service for shared worship and only secondly for teaching and discussion. So let us begin our worship together by singing together our first of today’s hymns.

Worship is not just about solemn rumination or awestruck contemplation but it is also about celebration, celebration of life. And I cannot think of a better way to celebrate than to dance.

First Hymn (Purple) 88 Let it be a dance we do

Let a dancing song be heard.

Play the music say the words

And fill the sky with sailing birds.

Let it be a dance, let it be a dance,

Let it be a dance,

Learn to follow, learn to lead

Feel the rhythm, feel the need

To reap the harvest, plant the seed.

Let it be a dance.

Let it be a dance we do.

**May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and the bad times too**

**Let it be a dance
Every body turn and spin.
Let your body learn to bend
and like a willow in the wind,
Let it be a dance, let it be a dance.**

**Let it be a dance
A child is born, the old must die.
A time for joy, a time to cry,
Take it as it passes by.
A time to dance.**

**Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and the bad times too**

**Let it be a dance

Morning star comes out at night
Without the dark there is no light
If nothing's wrong then nothing's right
Let it be a dance, let it be a dance.**

Let it be a dance we do.

May I have this dance with you?

Through the good times and the bad times too

Let it be a dance

Contemplation

But we can also contemplate and search for the calm centre within each of us that reflects that of peace in the world outside

(Green) 53 Calm Soul of All Things

Calm soul of all things, make it mine

To feel amid the city's jar,

That there abides a peace of thine

We did not make and cannot mar.

The will to neither strive nor cry,

The power to feel with others, give.

Calm, calm me more; nor let me die

Before I have begun to live.

First Reading

Abridged from the chapter titled Polemic in Maajid Nawaz' s 2012 book RADICAL

You drop bombs on my people knowing full well that the level of 'collateral damage' – we call them innocent Muslims – will far

exceed the damage to any 'legitimate target'. For you killing our children en masse – and you still call it 'collateral damage' – is an unavoidable consequence of pursuing your policies in our lands. To us they are simply children. Don't you think we've been crying too, like you are now, (after 9/11) for years? Do you think we felt no pain as you raped and plundered our lands and bombed our cities? Your arrogance is only compounded by your ignorance. Look to Iraq. In order to remove Saddam Hussein after the Kuwait war, you killed over half a million children. Because you could! And because my people were too lost, too defeated to be able to stop you. These are our children. We cry for them, even as you feel absolutely nothing. What of Lesley Stahl's question to (Bush's) Secretary of State Madaleine Albright?

“We have heard that over half a million children have died – I mean that is more children than died at Hiroshima, and, you know, is the price worth it?”

Albright's callous reply is etched in our memories, staining our innocence with her venom, “I think it is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it.”

Is killing civilians justified only for your own foreign policy interests? You claim that, unlike us, you do not target civilians, that your intentions are noble, that you seek only humane concerns. How many deaths of 'untargeted' civilians entitle us to respond? Five, ten, a hundred, half a million? Are three thousand deaths enough to make you feel the pain of each and every mother you 'untargeted' with depleted uranium? If not, then know that our intentions in bringing you death can also be noble, we too shroud destruction in humane concerns. You do not have a monopoly in reaping devastation off the back of good intentions. You can support, fund and train dictators in our lands who have been torturing our brothers and raping our sisters in their prisons for decades, and yet you invade our countries claiming to bring democracy? You cite international law at us, while you wilfully ignore Israel's occupation of Palestine as defined by the UN. We will never forget your friendship with Mubarak and Assad, your unconditional support for an occupying Israel, the way you used us

as Mujahideen in Afghanistan only to turn on us once you got what you wanted.

We have come to know that no amount of civilised pleading, no amount of appealing to your humanity, for your mercy, no amount of playing by your rules in your game, will move you. You are stupefied in ignorant bliss while we bleed and secrete pus from every orifice. There is only one thing you people value and cherish, and that is your own lives, your own happiness and your own selfish oblivion. If inflicting on you even an atom's weight of the pain we suffer at your hands wakes from your stupor and forces you to listen to our cries as we drown, then I am afraid we have decided that, although it is 'a very hard choice, we think the price is worth it'.

YET Nawaz writes immediately after that polemic

“This was powerful stuff and it worked, but my polemic – a reflection of my instinctive response after 9/11 – was only half the truth. How easy it is for a victim to construct a narrative out of half-truths and inspire thousands out of righteous indignation!” “If my efforts can achieve only one thing, let them build an understanding of the mindset that can make people so angry that they lose all empathy for others. Let them humanise even those who dehumanise others, so that the process of healing can begin. My above polemic may have been uncomfortable reading for many of you, especially for my friends who survived the 9/11 attacks, and for that I am sorry. The reality is, and it will help us not to pretend otherwise, that there are still many people out there who think this way, whether we like it or not.”

Second Hymn (Green) 39 We move in Faith to unseen Goals

We move in faith to unseen goals;

We strive in patience through the night

Which weighs upon our doubting souls,

To some great realm of love and light.

**For still the ignorance that kills
And still the hatreds that divide,
And still the strife of warring wills
Subdue our strength and check our pride.**

**But even as we fail, our aim
Grows larger from our high attempt;
And while we suffer love's large blame,
And reason's most august contempt,
We grow in greatness of design,
In higher powers of patient toil,
In hopes that seize the secret sign
Of far-off joys which none may foil.**

Address: Muslims, Islamics or Islamists?

How does it feel to be targeted with hatred and threats, you and yours, from a people you barely know? Don't you want to understand why? Don't you want to search out how you and yours can meet this? Much as you may affect to find politics and religious institutions irrelevant to your life I am saying to you, "You had better try to understand!" As you saw in that frightening reading of those penetratingly intelligent curses, firmly founded in halve-truths, Maajid Nawaz, who wrote that - AND who wrote these last few lines, is a man whose insight finally pierced through his

anger and led beyond even just forgiveness – as if that was not amazing enough.

A few weeks ago I woke up in front of the television and watched the leader of the English Defence League investigating various forms of Islam and questioning Imams and other Islamic leaders. I was astonished that here was a man whom I had regarded as a thug, allied with the BNP and UKIP displaying such concern to understand his alleged enemies, such intelligent questioning and such open-mindedness that I was charmed right out of my tree. At the end of his investigations he chose to go with an organisation I had never heard of before, the Quilliam Foundation. This led to my investigation of several astonishing Muslim and ex-Muslim free thinkers – people who had endured terrible experiences and yet had the courage and integrity to stand for the open society and so for our Unitarian values too.

So I have to tell you that this man, Maajid Nawas, is also a man whose diligent search for the whole global truth led him from being a man who, as a dedicated Islamist (not Islamic, but Islamist) was a member of an Islamist organisation called Hisb al-Tahrir (partisans for freedom) and a key operative in promoting hate thinking and hate speech in London, in Europe, in Pakistan and finally in Egypt. As a Pakistani youth, he learned that carrying a ruck sack and pretending it contained a suicide bomb could save his life when surrounded by the local skinhead racist thugs with knives while the institutional racist police of the time didn't want to know anything about his predicament.

So, as a young man, he worked tirelessly for Hisb al-Tarhir for at least ten years. He now, at 42, has a degree in Law and Arabic from the University of London's famous School of Oriental and African Studies

and he co-founded the Quilliam Foundation. It's website describes it as "The world's first counter-extremism think tank."

What a journey (!) from a shaky fearful defence against racist knife gangs in Essex with no hope of protection from the racist police, through fomenting hatred and terrorism in London, to Egypt and Murbarak's main torture prison and several years in an Egyptian jail where he gradually faced his doubts and reconstructed his world-view to a different kind of political activism and to finally being attacked by his own people. He is still a Muslim (Quilliam was the name of the Muslim convert who founded London's first mosque back in the nineteenth century), but a very different Muslim now from the days when he thought as you heard in that reading. That intellectual, political and spiritual journey of his was a journey of daring to 'think outside of the box', as legend says Unitarians once did in the nineteenth century, a journey from hate to empathy and understanding, a journey from religious chauvinism and partisanship to many realisations that his faith and his culture had so much to learn from the very people he hated and despised.

It is important to try to understand that the Sufism of Turkey and the Salafism of Saudi Arabia and the Moslem Brotherhood of Egypt and the Taliban of Pakistan and the Shia of Iran are all forms of Islam but not necessarily the same as ISLAMISM.

Maajid Nawas argues that IslamISM is as much as, if not more, about politics as it is about religion. From Maajid Nawas's position as a young Pakistani oppressed by racist gangs in Essex it was a revelation for him to be told that his troubles were not just about racism. The white Muslims of Bosnia were just as much a target as the brown ones of his Pakistani parentage.

IslamISM, as a political movement, worked, and still works, by word of mouth among young men who recruit each other to a belief system that gives them restored pride and hope. It has little to do with mosques and older Muslims, although some mosques, as we all know, have notoriously been infected by it. These young men, and a few young women connected with them, are invited to meet in small house groups, reminiscent of the Communist cells, where they are educated in the new view of history and the new ideology. There was little or no religion in the sense of worship of Allah in the proceedings of these groups. Their educators are as well rehearsed in answering every doubt and possible objection as the Communist and fascist agitators of the past. I sense that in these house groups there is an adolescent ferment of excitement in new ideas and widening horizons among them as they are given a coherent programme for action. And, of course beyond the house-groups are ever bigger and bigger meetings extending to Wembley Arena where, as Nawas narrates, more than a million voices bawled for the IslamIST Caliphate.

In his radicalisation, Maajid Nawas was shown many videos of appalling atrocities by the Serbs against the Bosnian Muslims which he has never forgotten. He thinks the Bosnian wars were the real crucible in which British Islamism was formed. They saw the people of their religion and culture, white Muslims NOT of their race, being massacred, raped and having foetuses torn from wombs and they saw genitals cut off while the other Europeans stood by and did nothing – just like his local police. Some young Muslims in the nineteen eighties went off to defend the white Muslims in Bosnia and came back as local heroes. As Muslim refugees from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Nigeria flowed into Britain and met each other

around the mosques they realised that what bound them all together was their shared religion and when they became aware of what was going on in the wider world they could see everywhere men women and children of the Muslim RELIGION being killed in Kashmir, in Gujarat in India, in Nigeria and, of course, in the war in Iraq. And so Maajid Nawas was led to see all this as a war on his religion which needed to be defended against the Christian and secular West. This, he saw, needed a united response from all Muslims, a political IslamIST response that would restore the respect and the military power of the great Caliphate of Bagdad and the cultural supremacy of the Sharia Law.

If you can overcome your fear and prejudice against people you may see as the fomenters of terrorism and use your imagination, I think you can also see a kind of Gospel evangelical 'good news' in this political campaign. Here to you fearful and down trodden, condemned to be second and third class citizens clinging to a despised culture is how you can walk tall too and be a part of greatness.

It takes a little understanding of world history and of political science to appreciate this and how it is part truth and part lies and distortion. An important strand of many IslamISTS' beliefs is that there can be a restoration of the Great Caliphate of Bagdad of the eighth to tenth centuries when it ruled most of the civilised world when, probably quite rightly, they counted Europe as Barbarian-land. The IslamISTS see the Turkish Empire of pre-nineteen-fourteen as the last remnant of that great Caliphate and see that last pride of the Islamic world as being destroyed by Britain and France in the vengeful and punitive settlements of Versailles and, especially in the Middle East, of the Sykes-Picot agreements after the first world war which set up the possibility of an Israeli state. But what the IslamISTS dream of restoring is a nuclear

Caliphate on equal terms with Israel and the West that cannot be bullied and is respected by all. And they see their best chance of a nuclear Caliphate in the failing state of Pakistan.

Of course, as we all know, besides the restoration of the Caliphate, the IslamISTS want to restore Sharia Law. This is, as most of you will well know, a set of religiously based laws that date back to pre-medieval times and an authoritarian and patriarchal desert government and it involves the cutting off of the hands of thieves and the stoning of women adulterers to death, for example.

According to the IslamIST ideology, its system of beliefs and hopes, the whole structure of the governments of the Middle East is the product of neo-colonialism. Although on the face of it, the government of Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative Muslim regime, even it was, in fact, created by the British in the nineteen twenties through Lawrence of Arabia as a reward to the house of Saud for their rebellion against what the Islamists see as the last Caliphate of the Turkish Empire who fought with the Germans and Austrians against Britain and France in the first world war. It is an imperialist puppet regime allowing the Americans to base their troops there, and selling them their oil. The Islamists teach that throughout the Middle East there are agents of the West in charge, torturing the true Muslims to keep them from power: rulers like Mubarak in Egypt; the Shah of Iran before his fall in 1979. Even Saddam Hussein had been the beneficiary of Western support for many years before the West turned on him. "The West talked of democracy yet pumped billions into propping up these brutal dictators to keep the legitimate real force, Islam, from coming to power." In this way the grievance of Islamics or Musliims as second class citizens is globalised and the Islamists think they need a unified political force to restore them to their rightful place as

the most recent expression of the voice of God and the great civilisation respected by all that they once had been. Of course much of this is true - but it is so simplified that the complications of policy and the other reasons for action are left out so that the half-truths come across as entirely credible.

It is several centuries since we had that kind of explosive mixture of religion and politics that devastated much of seventeenth century Europe in what is known as 'the Wars of Religion'. Now, today, on a global scale rather than just a European one, we could be staring that kind of destructive mix in the face, but with different, and I would argue, more dangerous ingredients on a larger scale and with different weapons that threaten the very future of our species. So far as we know, at the moment no Islamists have nuclear weapons. One of my nightmares for many years has been that the extreme Christian right in the USA might gain power and decide to bring on the end of the world and the rapture they expect to share before they die – or that some zealots in Israel will one day decide that the Jewish state is finished and the rest of the world has no right to continue to exist. They can blow us all up. Think of an Islamist state with the same suicidal mentality!

But let us turn from fear to hope, because there really IS hope, hope from people like Maajid Nawas. Let us examine his journey from hate to enlightenment. Maajid, after campaigns for Islamism in Denmark and Pakistan needed to go to an Arabic speaking country to complete his degree with the University of London and was directed by the Islamists to Egypt. There, he was arrested and thrown into Mubarak's most notorious torture centre. He heard the screams of the tortured as the electricity went through their genitals and he as waited in line for his own treatment but the British Consulate rescued him at the last moment and

he received five years in a Mubarak jail without torture. Like so many political prisoners before and after him, that jail was his University.

He gradually came to see, as he talked with so many other people who had thought the same way as he had, and as he read into Western Political Philosophy, that the tactics he had been so successful with in recruiting adherents to IslamISM were borrowed from the Communists and the Fascists, a Western development that has no comparable history in the wider Islam. Indeed Maajid Nawas explicitly compares IslamISM to fascism and finds many similarities. His change of mind had begun long before with his repeated and increasing disappointment with the calibre of the leadership of Hisb al-Tarhir but now, crucially, he was unexpectedly adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. This had a profound effect on him. Here were his enemies campaigning vigorously for his release on the ground that his human rights were being violated when, I quote, "Why should Amnesty campaign for our human rights, when, given the opportunity, we would deprive others of theirs?" Again I quote, "The logical extension of supporting our case was that Amnesty should also, hypothetically, be prepared to campaign for Hitler if were incarcerated just for writing *Mein Kampf*. Amnesty resolved this controversy in the manner of Voltaire, best summarised using the words of Evelyn Beatrice Hall, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

I continue to quote Maajid himself: "Support from Amnesty was something that took me aback. It was its unconditional nature that humbled me: you are a human being and so you deserve our support. There was something very pure and very powerful about that premise. Like many ideologies, IslamISM derived part of its power from the dehumanisation of 'the other'. It is easier to dismiss and do things to

‘the other’ if you consider them as unworthy: the Nazis and the Jews, the Jihadists and the Infidels. Throughout my teenage and adult life I had been desensitised to violence. As I got sucked into the Islamist ideology, I in turn began to dehumanise others.”

When the 7/7 terrorist attack took place in London in 2005 he began to feel revulsion. I quote again “Gone were my ideological acrobatics and Machiavellian justifications. This time I saw the plain and simple death of innocents.” He had many bitter arguments with fellow prisoners in that Mubarak jail. More importantly, in jail he read voraciously into the origins and core of Islam, into English literature and into the European Political Philosophy of democracy. Whereas he had passionately believed that only Islam meant justice, he came to see that other Western thinking on justice was sometimes superior.

Maajid’s courageous voyages of the mind meant that, on his release, he had an even more courageous task to perform in revealing the extent to which he had travelled away from his wife, his old friends and from the Hisb al-Tarhir to whom he was now a hero. His intellectually fearless search for truth now had to be played out in his emotionally fearless confrontation of the fact that almost all of the relationships of his old life, based as most of them were, on his shared ideology, had to be torn apart. He was divorced and left Hisb al-Tarhir. He was estranged from all of his family except from his mother.

He met an old friend with whom he had long ago fallen out over ideology, and, after renewing his friendship, they founded the Quilliam Foundation together.

I quote from its website “Quilliam, as a think tank, aims to challenge extremist narratives while advocating democratic pluralistic alternatives

that are consistent with universal human rights standards. In seeking to achieve this, Quilliam targets numerous audiences: Muslim and non-Muslim, social and governmental, domestic and international. Quilliam stands for religious freedom, equality, human rights and democracy.... We hope to promote these values by challenging extremism, promoting pluralism and inspiring change.” I am already in touch with its leadership and hoping to meet up with some of its people in Glasgow.

Karl Popper was a widely acclaimed philosopher of science but he also wrote an influential book titled “The Open Society and It’s Enemies”. He examined the totalitarian ideologies of the fascism and communism of his time and how an open society such as the Western Democracies aspired to be, could always be penetrated by them and be taken over by them but might defend itself against them. At least a generation later we face much of the same problems as he did.

Islam, as we are often told, means obedience, submission. To me that means also an authority to which you submit. This authority may be the Koran or the Hadith, it does not matter. Too easily it can become authoritarianism. In the open society we aspire to maintain, authority of all kinds is not so much submitted to but questioned and replaceable. The fundamentalism of the Christianity of the American far right, the gross ingrained exceptionalism of Zionism, and the potentially authoritarian basis of the basic structure of Islam could easily belong, in my view, with the potential enemies of the very open society we think Unitarianism above all represents. And elements in them all might try to destroy us if they could.

Neville Chamberlain famously waved a piece of paper when he came off the plane from Munich in 1938, declaring that it meant peace in our time.

Chamberlain was a Unitarian. He was pursuing his Unitarian belief in peace and reconciliation, in democratic government and the trust in others without the world cannot proceed. He was proved ignominiously wrong.

In my view, when setting our policy towards totalitarian organisations such as some Communist and Fascist governments and some similar ideologies, perhaps IslamISM too, we must not imagine that by mere dialogue and persuasion we can draw the poison of hatred from their fangs or that by some failure in vigilance we can ignore their threats or fall into the trap of wishful thinking that they are no threat to peace and imagine that we can continue in a self-centred and comfortable oblivion again. It is only by understanding the roots of their hatred and courageously and sometimes generously addressing these that peace can be won, not by intellectual, emotional, spiritual or physical disarmament in the hope they will just go away.

There are two final points I want to make here:

- I hope I have helped you to see that it was Maajid's innate compassion and his sense of justice that formed the basis of his recruitment to IslamISM and made him an ideologue for terrorism in the first place. We must respect that idealism and so also respect it in the many other young men recruited to terrorism and led up the ideological garden path by IslamISM. In different circumstances I could have been one of them too and perhaps you could as well.
- And, second, it was Maajid's fearless search for truth that transformed his political outlook and it was his courageous willingness to put the truth as he saw it before family, friends,

reputation and status that led him to his present position, hated by many within wider Islam, the religion of his father. So he and his foundation stands as a courageous beacon of hope in a dangerous world.

This is the end of the teaching and thinking part of our time together and once again we worship.

Contemplation

SILENCE

Let the best of the spirit within each of us help us to work for peace in our world,

peace not with guns, although we may need them to defend ourselves from time to time, but with patient listening,

peace with empathic imaginative understanding for all,

peace with intelligence and restraint in our actions

and peace with love, not just abstract love from a comfortable distance but face to face in person, each in our own small way.

We move in faith to unseen goals;

We strive in patience through the night

Which weighs upon our doubting souls,

Third Hymn (purple) 104

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria!

Beautifully moving, ceaselessly forming,
growing, emerging with awesome delight,
Maker of Rainbows, glowing with colour,
arching in wonder, energy flowing in
darkness and light: .

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Spinner of Chaos, pulling and twisting,
freeing the fibres of pattern and form,
Weaver of Stories, famed or unspoken,
tangled or broken, shaping a tapestry
vivid and warm:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Nudging Discomforter, prodding and shaking,
waking our lives to creative unease,
Straight-Talking Lover, checking and humbling,
jargon and grumbling, speaking the truth that
refreshes and frees:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Midwife of Changes, skilfully guiding,
drawing us out through the shock of the new,
Woman of Wisdom, deeply perceiving,
never deceiving, freeing and leading in
all that we do:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Daredevil Gambler, risking
and loving, giving us freedom
to shatter your dreams,
Life-giving Loser, wounded and weeping, dancing and leaping,
sharing the caring that heals and redeems.

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Benediction

Flame-dancing Spirit, come,

Sweep us off our feet and

Dance us through our days.

Surprise us with your rhythms,

Dare us to try new steps, explore

New patterns and new partnerships.

Release us from old routines,

**To swing in abandoned joy
And fearful adventure.
And in the intervals,
Rest us,
In your still centre.**

Closing Verse

Hymn (Purple) 175 second verse only

**To seek and find compassion's law
And share the holy quest,
Awaken to the cosmic awe,
Find peace and be at rest.**

Postlude