

Some thoughts on Chattanooga, written in July 2004 by Edward Ordman

Chattanooga, Again

Occasionally I get to see or hear twice about a place, with a large time gap in between. It makes changes jump out at one - much more so, I think, than if one watched the changes slowly.

I first became acquainted with Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1963. That summer, I attended an undergraduate summer school program in mathematics at the University of the South, in Sewanee, Tennessee, in the mountains northwest of Chattanooga. This was the nearest I'd ever been to the Deep South. Each venture away from campus brought revelations. For the first time I saw twin drinking fountains labeled "White" and "Colored", and restaurants with a door in the back alley for their "Colored" clientele.

One weekend when a friend and I took the bus into Chattanooga, he very nearly got himself beaten up. He had wandered into the wrong neighborhood with a book visible under his arm. It was a mathematics book, a textbook for an advanced calculus course, entitled in large letters, "The Theory of Integration." Luckily, someone slowed the prospective assailant down long enough to allow the book to be opened.

One tale of the period, vaguely remembered, is of a Chattanooga politician whom I know only by his nickname, not his name: "Bookie" Turner. I don't know anything about him except that a friend quoted a local woman as saying "Any politician may be crooked. There is an advantage in knowing exactly what kind of crook you are voting for." I might add that this sort of gossip didn't strike me as especially southern; I'd grown up hearing strange stories about Mayor James Curley of Boston, who was reelected while serving a jail term.

Let's move forward forty years or so. In the last couple of years, my wife and I have occasionally turned up at social hours at our local Mosque, and some other local Muslim functions. I'd always regarded it as normal to attend programs and occasional services at the Methodist Church on our block, not that I'm Methodist, just as a way of being friendly and informed about the neighborhood. And I've occasionally invited non-Jewish friends to functions at Temple Israel. But until relatively recently, it hadn't occurred to me to drop in and visit the nearest Mosque. You can't just inconspicuously slip into a pew as at most churches, but each Mosque I've visited has been happy to show my wife and me where visitors could sit and watch, and were delighted to have us at the social hour.

And at some Muslim functions in Memphis, Tennessee, one popular speaker is a Chattanooga politician, and I saw face-to-face how much things have changed. Yusuf Hakeem is a member of the Chattanooga City Council, one of the relatively few Muslims holding elective office in the United States. He represents a mixed electorate, all races and creeds, but very few of them are Muslims.

His audiences in Memphis are typically Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States. Many of them have been in the United States for thirty years or more, some have come more

recently. They warmly receive Mr. Hakeem, who is an African-American. He came to mainstream Islam by way of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. He said, "At that time I was Joseph X - X meaning an unknown quantity of force and power. Elijah Muhammed said, you have energy, take that energy and do something positive with it. So I went back to school."

Mr. Hakeem told his audience to get involved in their communities - be there for blood drives, for charitable projects, for school parent meetings. He said he started that way, and then got into politics by way of the School Board. "Develop a thick skin. You won't believe what they'll say about you. But be fair, be fair to your opponents as well as your friends." He found opponents, but he found friends too - he says, "I'm a Muslim, but I was raised, politically, by African-American ministers."

Was religion raised in his political races? Yes, it was. But you've got to be what you are, he told his audience, you have to be honest. He hasn't won all his political races. But he is doing what he can, he says, to make America what it should be for everyone. And a colleague on the city council has said to him, "You are Black, and male, and even a Muslim. You seem to strive to have difficulties. Friend, I'm going to pray for you."

I don't really know much about Yusuf Hakeem as a politician. But I think the message he has been delivering in his Memphis speeches is a very important one, and I find the mere fact of his presence on the Chattanooga City Council symbolic of the great progress we have made since the 1960's. Progress sometimes comes in small steps, but after forty years, Chattanooga, and the country, has come a long way.

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