



# DIVINE *Intervention*

THE MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF ABDULLAH ANTEPLI

BY SHERRY WILLIAMSON & ELISABETH STAGG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DONN YOUNG

**O**N FRIDAYS AT NOON, MEMBERS OF THE DUKE MUSLIM COMMUNITY QUIETLY ENTER THE DIVINITY SCHOOL'S YORK ROOM FOR *Jummu'ah*. BY ONES, TWOS, AND THREES, THEY SLIP OFF THEIR SHOES AND TAKE A PLACE ON A MAKESHIFT PRAYER RUG—EIGHT WHITE SHEETS SPREAD ACROSS THE FLOOR—FACING MECCA. THE MEN LINE UP IN THE FRONT AND MIDDLE ROWS, WHILE WOMEN WEARING TRADITIONAL HIJAB HEAD COVERS ABOVE THEIR BLUE JEANS FORM A ROW IN THE BACK. THEY BOW, KNEEL, AND PROSTRATE THEMSELVES IN ISLAM'S RITUALIZED SIGN OF HUMILITY.

AMONG THE WORSHIPPERS IS ABDULLAH ANTEPLI, WHO IN 2008 BECAME DUKE UNIVERSITY'S FIRST MUSLIM CHAPLAIN. ALTHOUGH ISLAMIC CLERGY

ARE BECOMING MORE COMMONPLACE ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES, ANTEPLI REMAINS AMONG A HANDFUL WHO SERVE AS FULL-TIME CHAPLAINS IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION.

ANTEPLI HAS INVITED IMAM ABDUL H. WAHEED OF THE MUSLIM SOCIETY OF AMERICA, WHO VOLUNTEERED FOR MANY YEARS AS DUKE'S PART-TIME CHAPLAIN, TO PREACH THIS PARTICULAR FRIDAY, AND A DUKE UNDERGRADUATE TO LEAD PRAYERS. ANTEPLI LEADS THE WEEKLY SERVICE TWICE A MONTH AND ENCOURAGES MEMBERS OF DUKE'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY—STUDENTS, STAFF, AND FACULTY—TO PARTICIPATE, AN EXPERIENCE HE CONSIDERS ESSENTIAL TO THEIR FORMATION AS LEADERS OF THE FAITH.

Top: Opening prayers during *Jummu'ah* in the Divinity School's York Room; Imam Abdullah Antepli; worshippers facing Mecca.



On the wall are portraits of two Methodist patriarchs: the Rev. George Washington Ivey, whose family endowed the chair now held by Dean Richard B. Hays, and Bishop John Carlisle Kilgo, president of Trinity College from 1894–1910. York was named for the Rev. Brantley York, founder of the rural school that evolved into Trinity College and then Duke University, and was the center of community worship at the Divinity School from 1930 until 2005, when the new Goodson Chapel opened. The York Room now serves as a reading room available for special events, including services such as *Jummu'ah*.

Once the service ends, many students rush off to classes, but other worshippers linger to visit with Antepi and one another. The sense of community is palpable.

“Abdullah Antepi has completely revitalized Muslim life on campus

by greatly increasing the number of Muslim students participating, and by building relationships with people of different backgrounds,” says Sobia Shariff, a Duke University senior and former co-president of the Muslim Student Association.

Duke’s Center for Muslim Life, dedicated in 2009, is not just a place where Muslims can gather and feel at home, she adds. “It’s a place where anyone can learn about Islam and spend time with Muslims.”

The soft-spoken Antepi’s sense of humor surfaces with quicksilver speed, his tone shifting from gentle solemnity to bemused wordplay. He describes himself as an enthusiastic fan of Duke basketball and the only imam who “prays for the Devils”—a reference to the university’s Blue Devil mascot. The men’s 2010 national NCAA basketball championship is proof, he quips, “of the power of prayer.”

He was born three weeks premature, says Antepi, 37, because of his eagerness “to see God’s manifestation in all of creation. I couldn’t wait any longer.”

That curiosity, he says with a more serious tone, is a manifestation of the divine, leading him from his native Turkey across the world “in search of God’s unique fingerprints. I see them in the many different shapes, textures, and colors of diversity.”

One of six children, Antepi was born March 6, 1973, to a privileged family in Maras, very near Antioch, the city in southeastern Turkey where the apostle Paul based his ministry. The senior Antepi owned a small business selling auto parts; his wife cared for the family in their comfortably secular neighborhood. Soon after the end of World War I, the Turkish government had begun a campaign to propel the country from its traditional Islamic roots toward European-style modernization. Muslim

## WWJD? NOT BURN THE QURAN

BY RICHARD B. HAYS,

DEAN AND GEORGE WASHINGTON IVEY PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT



Ed.’s Note: *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.) published this essay Aug. 13, 2010, after a Florida pastor announced he would burn copies of the *Quran* on Sept. 11.

**A SMALL CHURCH** in Gainesville, Fla., (ironically called Dove World Outreach Center) has announced plans to burn copies of the *Quran* on Sept. 11, in vengeful commemoration of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington nine years ago. This news item happened to reach me while I was attending a conference in Berlin, Germany—and for that reason it struck me with special force.

Earlier that same day, I had stood in a public square known as the Bebelplatz, just across the street from Berlin’s Humboldt University. In the middle of the Bebelplatz there is a translucent panel embedded in the pavement. Looking down through the glass, you see below ground many rows of white bookshelves, all completely empty.

This simple but moving memorial is designed to recall the events of May 10, 1933, when Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels instigated a book-burning to destroy books by Jewish authors, along with other ideologically “incorrect” works. With the eager participation of the SS and

the Hitler Youth, more than 20,000 books were burned in the Bebelplatz on that infamous day, in the shadow of Germany’s pre-eminent university.

Nearby stands a plaque containing the words of the German poet Heinrich Heine: “*Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen*” (“There, where they burn books, they will in the end burn people.”) Heine wrote those words in 1820. One hundred and thirteen years later, his prophecy began coming true, and Heine’s own works were among those burned by the Nazis.

Having just witnessed Berlin’s rueful monument of public contrition, I was dismayed to hear the report of the planned book-burning in Florida—not least because I fear this planned event is a sign and symptom of the angry temper of our times.

Many Christian leaders in the United States promptly disavowed and deplored

clothing was replaced by Western-style dress; centuries of Islamic faith practices were supplanted by secular priorities. During Antepli's childhood, as still today, the country's 120,000 imams were made civil servants of the government. Imams are issued the same sermon to preach at weekly worship.

As a boy of 8, Antepli recalls a sense of discovering God. But he lacked the language to articulate that experience, and knew no one in whom he could safely confide. During his teens, he became increasingly fascinated by Islam, which he learned about through Muslim friends at school, a few teachers, and books. He began to study holy texts, and to pray, hiding his growing faith from his parents and siblings.

Into this unlikely household, says Antepli, "God came and filled a huge gap in my heart when I was 13 years old. God entering my heart provided an amazing fulfillment.



From left, Abdullah Antepli with his brothers Gultekin and Ali, and their mother, Sukran Antepli. Above, 10-year-old Abdullah's 5th-grade photo.

"Even though my family had everything we needed materially, I felt something was not right. Islam, with its perfect connection of daily prayers leading to God—and verifying that relationship by loving others—closed that gap."

Antepli was careful to pray mostly at neighborhood mosques, although he feared that a neighbor would recognize him and might tell his parents. He performed his early morning prayers

as quietly as possible behind the closed door of his bedroom.

One morning, his mother awoke to sounds coming from his room. When she discovered him praying on his bedroom carpet, she screamed.

"It was so traumatic ... as if she had caught me using drugs," says Antepli. "I was devastated and disappointed, but I knew what I was doing was not wrong. I was caught between a rock and a hard

the spiteful plans of the tiny Florida church. Richard Land, director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, called the plan "appalling, disgusting and brainless."

News reports gave several reasons for such disapproval: Burning Muslim books is contrary to America's own ideals of freedom of speech and religion; such actions will exacerbate tensions between Christians and Muslims around the world; if Christians burn the Quran, we may soon see Muslims burning Bibles. (The last point seems to be a pragmatist permutation of the Golden Rule: Don't do something bad to somebody else, because if you do, they may retaliate.)

But in fact followers of Jesus have deeper reasons not to burn the books of their enemies, reasons integral to their own faith.

The apostle Paul, struggling against

opponents of his gospel in the city of Corinth, insisted that "the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world." Rather than resorting to violence, he sought to "demolish arguments" and "captivate every thought" through open statement of the truth.

For him, to use coercive or deceptive means would be to succumb to the forces he was opposing. His message could be defended only by clear, peaceful proclamation of the word. As Angel Nuñez of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference observed, "The greatest weapon a Christian has is godly love."

Similarly, the Gospel of Luke tells a story about Jesus' response to a Samaritan village that rejected him and his followers. His disciples James and John asked, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But Jesus rebuked them and said

(according to some ancient manuscripts of Luke's Gospel), "No, you don't know what spirit you belong to" (Luke 9:51–56).

I fear that my Christian brothers and sisters in the Dove World Outreach Center, like James and John, do not know what spirit they belong to. If they burn the Quran, they will be acting in the spirit of Goebbels. History has taught us where that leads. But if they listen to Jesus, they will learn that his way is not to call down fire against enemies. Instead, his way is to commend the gospel through open statement of the truth—to act in a spirit of patience and generosity, to return good for evil, to pray for those who hurt us. That is the spirit of Jesus.

I pray that the citizens of Gainesville will not someday in the future need to build a memorial like the one in Berlin's Bebelplatz. ■



place—between the love and respect of my parents and my faith. My parents were not bad people. They reacted out of compassion, because they believed what the society said—that religion was an ugly and bad thing. Looking back on it now, I realize my family was a victim of their own misperceptions about Islam

and religion. And they failed to realize how much fun I was having with this business of religion.”

By the time he entered high school, the conflict between him and his parents led them to issue an ultimatum: abandon Islam or move out of their home.

Antepli joined a *madrasah*, an Islamic

school where boys of all ages lived and studied in preparation to become religious leaders.

It was a difficult three years for Antepli. He had no financial support from his parents or other relatives, who shared the same anti-religious views. He earned scholarships from the school,

## A PRAYER FOR CONGRESS

**OFFERING THE** opening prayer at the U.S. House of Representatives last spring gave Duke’s Muslim chaplain the rare opportunity to open an interfaith conversation with the entire nation.

Abdullah Antepli, who served as guest chaplain at the invitation of Congressman David Price D-N.C., became the first Muslim in that role since 2003, and only the fourth ever.

“The campus and the nation appreciated seeing a human face and voice of Muslims,” Antepli says. The opportunity to represent Islamic Muslims before the House “lifted a heavy weight in the hearts, minds, and souls of many Muslims in the United States. Hopefully, the words of the prayer corrected the negative stereotype of Muslims by showing the peaceful essence of Islam—to love God and love each other.” ■

Watch video of the prayer at <http://ondemand.duke.edu/listing/tag/abdullah%20antepli%20muslim/>

### Opening Prayer before the U.S. House of Representatives, March 3, 2010

*Oh God of all nations,  
Look with favor upon this esteemed Congress.  
Guide these important decision makers with Your Divine Light.  
Be their source of strength and comfort.  
Enable them to serve You and glorify Your names by serving the citizens  
of this great nation and the entire humanity regardless of their gender,  
ethnicity, or religion.  
Oh God, make them Your instruments to deliver Your Divine Mercy  
and Compassion.  
Bless them with Your Openness and Humility.  
Fill their hearts and minds with passion and determination to improve the  
quality of the life of their fellow human beings.  
Grant them success in their efforts to wipe out poverty, ignorance, racism, and  
hate in this country and beyond.  
Oh God, make these women and men peacemakers, healers, and bridge builders,  
so urgently needed in our wounded and broken times.  
Give them the strength that they need to keep what needs to be kept.  
Give them the courage that they need to change what needs to be changed.  
Give them the wisdom that they need to distinguish the one from the other.  
Oh God, if we forget You, do not forget us.  
In Your most Holy and Beautiful names, we pray.  
Amen – Abdullah Antepli*



Far left, Antepli and worshippers during *Jummu'ah*; at home with Jacob Arif, 6, Zainab, 9, and his wife, Asuman, a pediatric oncology nurse. At the March 2009 Duke Center for Muslim Life dedication, from left, Duke President Richard Brodhead, Antepli, and daughter Zainab.

which was mandated to help orphans and other needy children, and worked at odd jobs after school and on weekends. During his last few months of high school, he learned that his father was dying. “His death brought us together, and I was able to reconcile with the rest of my family gradually afterward,” he says. “Now my family has grown to respect what I do.”

Although Antepli resisted becoming an imam in an atmosphere where religion is rigidly controlled by the government, his spiritual mentor convinced him that his resistance, like that of reluctant prophets in both the Bible and the Quran, was a sign from God. But he knew in his heart that he would have to leave Turkey to experience fully God’s diversity.

After earning his degree and completing imam training in 1996, Antepli wanted to continue working for social justice, a passion he had discovered during college. He spent the next eight years in Southeast Asia with faith-based NGOs building orphanages and helping to rescue children trapped in the sex trade. Those efforts were as gratifying as they were heartbreaking.

“I was helping make a difference in the lives of thousands of children,” says Antepli, whose faith is grounded in the concept of service. “Nothing fulfills me more than alleviating human suffering—enabling people to fulfill their dreams and potential in life. Just like in

Southeast Asia, I do that at Duke on a daily basis.”

Among the children Antepli helped in Burma was Maung Kyi, a 6-year-old boy whose parents had sold two older sons into slavery.

“I gave the parents \$75, and then gifts of food, sugar, and rice, to keep them from selling him,” says Antepli, who stayed in touch with the family, and was eventually able to help Maung attend school.

Recently, Antepli was surprised by a phone call from Australia that brought him to tears. Maung had tracked down his mentor to share good news: he had been accepted to medical school in Sydney.

In what Antepli described as another divine intervention, the Burmese government closed access to NGOs for six months in 1999. The break provided him an opportunity to travel to the United States for graduate study at the University of Pittsburgh. Three days after his arrival, Antepli was asked to volunteer as a part-time Muslim chaplain there and at nearby Carnegie Mellon University.

“The only ‘chaplain’ I had ever heard of was Charlie Chaplin,” says Antepli with a wry smile. Soon he was convinced that chaplaincy was his life’s work. It was not just chaplaincy that appealed to him, but the secular and pluralistic nature of American society.

“There was an acknowledgment that

God created everybody differently,” Antepli says. “You were welcomed in society and would not be discriminated against, shunned, or judged based on [your religion] but on what you did. There was no government-sanctioned religion. The United States was one of the most successful attempts to understand the pluralistic creation of God that I had ever seen.”

At the end of his six-month visit, Antepli flew back to Myanmar and resumed his work there. It was nearly four years before he was able to return and enroll in Hartford Seminary’s Islamic chaplaincy program, the only U.S. program accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

Soon after his arrival in 2003, Antepli realized that the United States was no longer the same country. It became clear that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, had diminished much of the tolerance of religious diversity he had so admired, leaving Islam as a religion—and Muslims as people—open to suspicion. Despite his own concerns about this radical change, and to his Turkish family’s dismay, Antepli agreed to stay at the urging of his wife, Asuman. “She believed that God was calling us to America to help explain what Islam is,” Antepli says. “And more importantly, what it is not.”

**The moment he** stepped on the Duke University campus, says Antepli, he felt

a connection to everyone he encountered. “There immediately was a strong attachment—a combination of being called and of being at home.”

Antepli had been offered the position of Muslim chaplain at Princeton, but before accepting was urged by a friend to visit Duke, which was also interested in hiring a full-time chaplain. Once here, he was attracted to the wider role Duke offered him.

He would be the Muslim chaplain for all students, not just the nearly 500 Muslim undergraduate and graduate/professional students. Those students—half second-generation Americans and half international students—reflect the “fingerprints of God” that Antepli is forever seeking. With ancestral origins from many parts of the world—Pakistan, China, Indonesia, Turkey, Great Britain, France, Germany—they encompass the wide range of ethical, theological, and linguistic diversity among the world’s 1.4 billion Muslims.

He would also be called upon to promote interfaith dialogue across the campus, in the local community, and nationally. And, even better, he would teach about Islam as an adjunct faculty member in Islamic studies at the Divinity School and at the Duke Center for Islamic Studies.

Duke’s decision to hire a full-time Muslim chaplain reflects the university’s status as a leading international university in an increasingly cosmopolitan social and religious culture, says Sam Wells, dean of Duke University Chapel and research professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School.

“Duke wanted to send a signal to the Muslim world that Duke is a hospitable and intellectually rich environment for the growing of the next generation of international Muslim leadership.”

Wells welcomed Antepli as a colleague who could speak “in a compel-



“Muslims and Islam are at the center of attention in our time. Divinity students will have parishioners whose daughters and sons will fall in love with Muslims. Or, perhaps, they may have a mosque built next door, and ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ will come to have a different meaning.”

— ABDULLAH T. ANTEPLI

ling way about the troubling issue of terrorism by extremist Muslim factions. Many Muslims believe what Christians believe: love God, love your neighbor, and live in peace.”

Despite opposition from some alumni and other Christians, the Divinity School faculty and administration, led by then Dean L. Gregory Jones, agreed to add Antepli to the adjunct faculty of the historically ecumenical Methodist seminary.

“They recognized that it was their inescapable responsibility to prepare divinity students for Christian leadership within the realities of their future ministerial contexts,” said Wells.

This semester nearly 20 students, most from the master of divinity

program, are enrolled in “Listening Together: Christians and Muslims Reading Scriptures,” a new course that Antepli is co-teaching with Ellen Davis, Amos Ragan Kearns Professor of Bible and Practical Theology.

“Most Jews and Muslims in North America know more about Christianity than Christians know about Judaism and Islam,” says Davis. “This puts a special burden upon Christians for intellectual growth and generosity.”

She and Antepli agree that any 21st-century graduate of a divinity school or seminary should have some knowledge of another faith, as well as some degree of comfort and ability to lead or participate in interfaith conversations and study.

“The people our students will serve will have members of other faiths as their nearby neighbors, and sometimes as family members, and we are commanded to love and serve our neighbors,” says Davis, Duke’s 2010 University Scholar/Teacher of the Year.

“We cannot do so in total ignorance of the ways they themselves strive to know, love, and serve God. Growing in this knowledge is the only way to cast out the fear that often characterizes relations among people of different faiths.”

Last October Antepli and Stephen Gunter, associate dean for Methodist studies and research professor of evangelism and Wesleyan studies, participated in a panel discussion, “Love of God and Neighbor: Children of Abraham in Conversation,” moderated by Dean Hays.

Antepli and Curtis Freeman, director of the Baptist House of Studies and research professor of theology, followed a March 2010 screening of the film “Different Books, Common Word: Baptists and Muslims” with an open discussion.

These events serve as models for stu-

dents, faculty, and staff on how to have conversations with a person of another faith “without compromising your own integrity, religious beliefs, and practices,” says Antepli.

He rejects the premise that interfaith conversation should focus only on similarities between the world’s religions. It’s more important, he says, to emphasize the differences.

“Those differences ultimately make us who we are!” he says. “Until we understand and admire our differences, and see them as God’s fingerprints, we won’t see the unique ways God is manifested in the world.”

The particular challenge for Christian/Muslim dialogue, he says, is that the faiths share fundamental similarities: both believe in one God

who sustains creation, in the revelation of God’s word through a holy book, and in prophets as messengers from God. The differences between these two great faiths come into play in the details and interpretation.

Looking ahead, Antepli will lead a seminar on Muslim/Christian relations with Mennonite theologian Paulus Widjaja of Indonesia at the Duke Summer Institute June 6-11 ([dukesummerinstitute.com](http://dukesummerinstitute.com)). His future goals include keeping Duke University at the forefront of interfaith dialogue—and Muslim engagement—within American society, improving support services for Muslim undergraduates, and strengthening the alumni base of Muslim graduates since the 1950s. Connecting those alumni and their

work throughout the world with campus life will enrich the Muslim experience for all of Duke, he says.

“Muslims and Islam are at the center of attention in our time. Divinity students will have parishioners whose daughters and sons will fall in love with Muslims. Or, perhaps, they may have a mosque built next door, and ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ will come to have a different meaning.

“Or the members of their congregation may want to understand this whole Muslim business. The first person they will turn to is a pastor, priest, or other clergy. In a society where we are coming closer to new global realities, God is putting everybody together. And we are called to learn to love and respect each other.” ■

## WEB EXTRAS

### “LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR: CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM IN CONVERSATION”

Dean Richard Hays moderates this Oct. 12, 2010, Divinity School event featuring Imam Antepli and Professor Stephen Gunter discussing commonalities and differences between Islam and Christianity.

[www.divinity.duke.edu/news-media/news/2010-10-12-love-god-and-neighbor](http://www.divinity.duke.edu/news-media/news/2010-10-12-love-god-and-neighbor)

### MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

Duke Chapel Dean Sam Wells interviews Antepli in this Sept. 10, 2010, webcast of Duke University’s “Office Hours” about the legacy of 9/11, the proposed New York City Islamic center, and how Ramadan is celebrated in the U.S.

<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/9474638>

### “DENOUNCING TERRORISM”

Antepli and Hussein Rashid of *Religion Dispatches*, a daily online magazine, discuss the Muslim response to terrorism during a Sept. 14, 2010, video blog discussion group.

<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/09/14/opinion/1248069025417/blogginheads-denouncing-terrorism.html>

### “VALUES ADDED: THE BLUE DEVIL IMAM”

Blogginheads.tv features Antepli in conversation with Mona Eltahawy in this archived video dated Dec. 26, 2010.

<http://blogginheads.tv/diavlogs/33157>

### PURSuing A CALLING AND RELIGION IN TURKEY

N.C. Public Radio’s *The State of Things* interviews Antepli about the role of religion in Turkey and how he overcame his family’s disapproval to pursue his chosen faith in this March 23, 2009, audio archive.

<http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/sot0323abc09.mp3/view> ■