

# Catholic, Muslim, Human

**Presentation of Award** The Bamberg poet Nevfel Cumart is the first Muslim to have received the Pax Bank Prize. It is awarded by a Catholic bank for inter-religious commitment.

By Sarah Bernhard

## Bamberg

At the age of about 15 Nevfel Cumart began mediating between two worlds. He lived in a housing estate for foreigners; his parents had come to Germany as guest-workers from Turkey. "In the district my father had acquired the reputation of 'lord mayor of the Turks' by always being on the spot to solve problems", says Cumart. However, he could read and write only very inadequately, so that his son had to help out. At the offices of authorities he explained the immigrants' problems and helped them to fill out forms.

## Mediator between the worlds

Mediating between the worlds has remained his mission to this day. "There is an enormous amount of ignorance about Islam out there, but that doesn't stop people having opinions. I see it as my life's task to counteract these clichés", says the 46-year-old in a deep voice that is well-known to the public as that of a poet.

For his inter-religious commitment he has received the Pax Bank Prize, an endowment of €2500. For the first time ever the prize has been awarded to a Muslim. Cumart does not consider that anything special, describing himself as a believer but not a very pious Muslim.

With this award the Catholic Pax Bank has acknowledged the various projects with which the German with Turkish-Arabian roots – his parents belonged to an Arabian minority in Turkey – is trying to bridge the gap between Islam and Christianity. These projects are so multi-layered that they address all classes and age groups. On the one hand he gives lectures on Islam, Turkey and migration. "There I meet people who hide behind Thilo Sarrazin". But lack of education has nothing to do with religion but is rather a class problem. "No-one would criticize Italian migrant workers for being Catholic."

But more important for him is what he calls "grassroot work", i.e. the work with youths living in social trouble spots. "I think we have to help the children of migrants to build an identity", he says. As they don't know where they belong, one has to assist them in discovering both sides. "I am enriched by carrying German, Turkish and Arabian cultures in me – that is what I want to bring across to the youth". For that, however, they have to develop an initial understanding for the Other. Nevfel Cumart tries to convey this understanding by means of writing workshops and seminars in which the youth learn to take on other perspectives. His biography helps him in this: "I can serve as a model for the youth because I am one of them who has made the grade." Through his background he knows the problems that they have: "I, too, was called a Turkish wog, although I never saw myself as a foreigner as I knew nothing outside of life in Germany. But I had the advantage that I spoke better German than those who taunted me", he says and laughs. He grew up in a small town where he was the only foreign child. "I had to speak German if I wanted to play with other children."

His work as author has also been acknowledged. He not only writes poetry but also works of translation. He has translated writings by the fa-

mous Turkish novelist Yasar Kemal and also those of the reform theologian Yasar Nuri Öztürk, who is often referred to as the "Martin Luther of Islam". For his commitment to intercultural understanding he has already received various awards. In 2008 he received the Bavarian Culture Award and in 2009 the Cultural award of the Upper Franconian Foundation.

## Education is extremely important to him

He had never heard of the Pax Bank Award, for which reason he felt doubly honoured by its being unexpectedly bestowed upon him. On the one hand because it shows that commitment towards the integration of migrants is being acknowledged. "That my work constantly crops up in the media is not very gratifying in itself. On the other hand the unexpected financial boon has its advantages: "I use the money to sponsor three youths from Germany, Turkey and Pakistan." He wants to give them the chance of benefiting from the education which he considers to be so important. "I was in a position to enjoy a very good education in Germany although I came from a very poor family. I want to pass that on to other young people."

## Nevfel Cumart

born in 1964, published his first book in 1983. His sixteen volumes of poetry are proof that he is one of the most productive poets of his generation. Cumart received a Masters's Degree in Turkic, Arabic and Islamic Studies from the Otto-Friedrich-University in Bamberg. He has been living and working as a free-lance writer, translator, lecturer and journalist near Bamberg since 1992.

In addition to poetry and short stories in German, English and Turkish, Cumart has also published numerous essays in specialist publications.

Cumart has translated many Turkish writers into German, including Aziz Nesin, Yasar Kemal and Celil Oker. He also writes articles and reviews about modern Turkish literature.

Cumart has given many many lectures and seminars on Turkish culture, the role of minorities in Germany, and on Islam. He has traveled widely and given readings in England, Ireland, Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Switzerland. Cumart has received numerous awards, among others the coveted literary awards bestowed by the German federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate (1992), Bavaria (1995) and Berlin (1996), the cultural prize of the Upper Franconian Foundation (2009) and the Pax Bank Prize for inter-religious commitment (2010).

[www.cumart.de](http://www.cumart.de)



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