

„I play the role of a calm mediator“

INTERVIEW Nevfel Cumart sees it as his life's work to mediate between Germans and Muslims. This was acknowledged by the reward of the cultural prize of the Upper Franconian Foundation.

What experiences have you had with your presentations on the theme of Islam?

In Germany there is a great deal of ignorance about Islam. But this ignorance does not prevent many Germans from having firm opinions on the matter, opinions which unfortunately often lead to clichés and prejudices. The atmosphere has become frostier since the 11th of September 2001, not only in global politics but also here in Germany.

Which clichés crop up over and over again?

There is a really broad range of them. It starts with many Germans perceiving Islam to be as a fundamentally violent and aggressive religion, which culminates for example in a member of the audience coming along dressed in a T-shirt with the slogan "Mohammed was a child-abuser". With impressions of this kind – sometimes somewhat subtle, sometimes blatant – one could fill a whole newspaper page. Whoever goes from place to place as a Muslim expert in Islam needs to be thick-skinned. Sometimes I get the feeling of being in the pillory. And sometimes the fee is insufficient to compensate for the pain felt.

How do you counteract the clichés?

I always remain quiet and polite in my attempts to transmit knowledge and information to the public. That is not always simple because such stereotypes are often connected with anxieties arising from ignorance of Islam and have no basis in reason. Many are astonished, for instance, when I explain that Christianity and Islam have more in common than Christianity and Judaism. Some are afraid of how numerous Muslims might be and are unaware that the 3.3 million Muslims in Germany comprise only 4 per cent of the population.

Do the anxieties also arise, let's say, from head-scarves and turbans?

Yes, exactly. Such outward signs as the head-scarves of women and the existence of mosques make Islam more conspicuous than Judaism. Moreover, in the minds of many Germans since September 11 Islam is placed in the context of terrorism and as such condemned wholesale. As a consequence the whole Near East is invested with a negative image.

That sounds as if you would not acquit the Muslims of all blame?

In my presentations I hardly have time to introduce my own criticisms. I am usually preoccupied with amending the crude clichés and prejudices coming from the audience. Many equate Islamic fundamentalism with Islam in general and fail to differentiate between the many trends in Islam. The moderate groups are hardly taken

into account. Islamic fundamentalism, on the other hand, is presented very forcibly. It is precisely the people who demonstrate and swing their fists who appear in the media.

It seems to me to be an arduous task to explain Islam and the Muslims to the Germans.

That's true, but it is the pledge of my life to apply myself to the task with all my heart. Because of my biography I have experienced such prejudices

from the cradle and know how I am to deal with them. I know their prayer-house a "mosque of victory", as is sometimes the case. That only creates unnecessary and unintended aggressions. And the second and for me absolutely elementary method is language. It is the key to participation, without which one can never really be integrated into a society.

frontational and rather take trouble to convey a differentiated image of things by playing the role of a calm mediator. An award like the cultural prize of the Upper Franconian Foundation is an acknowledgement of my work that means more to me than a grant.

And what advice do you give to the Muslims of Germany?

Consideration for the sensitivities of the Germans and for the German language are for me two of the most important methods of counteracting prejudices and living in peace with one another. But consideration should begin with Muslims refraining from calling their prayer-house a "mosque of victory", as is sometimes the case. That only creates unnecessary and unintended aggressions. And the second and for me absolutely elementary method is language. It is the key to participation, without which one can never really be integrated into a society.

How do you see future developments?

The fact that 4.3 million Muslims are living here is no cause for panic. That shouldn't degenerate into a bogey called "Islam". Certainly there are ideological campaigns being worked out in some mosque organisations and certainly there are some wolves in sheep's clothing that are not interested in constructive dialogue. But these constitute a small minority. Most Muslims want to live here in peace and quiet. They want to preserve their cultural heritage. They want to work here and pay their taxes. It will be impossible to write the history of Germany in the last 40 years without paying a fitting tribute to the contribution made by the "guest-workers". And many of them, after all, are Muslims.

The questions were put by Petra Breunig.

