

Story 1004 (1984 Tape 1) Narrator: Hasan Tekis, 35; now has clerical job in state office but previously held some religious position

Location: Seydiler village, kaza merkezi of Afyon, Afyon Province

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Why İmamı Birgüyi¹ Wept

İmamı Birgüyi was from Birgi village of Ödemiş kaza of İzmir. He wrote the book titled Küdri.² He was a Sunni Moslem and was a person well equipped to be part of a religious community.

One day as İmamı Birgüyi was plowing one of his fields, he saw a man walking hurriedly past. He called to this stranger and asked him to come and talk with him, but even though he repeated this invitation several times, the stranger did not come. It was only after several more invitations that the stranger acquiesced and joined him. After they had talked together for a while, İmamı Birgüyi took from his saddlebag his lunch of bread and

¹. İmam is the word for a Moslem prayer leader in the mosque. His name is apparently taken from the village name Birgi. There is at Birgi village (Ödemiş kaza, İzmir Province) an İmamı Birgüyi Medrese.--The narrator calls him either Birgüi or Birgüyi.

² Book not known to translator or editor

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olives and insisted that the stranger share it with him. When they had finished eating, İmamı Birgüyi asked the stranger, "What is your problem? Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I was not going to tell you about that, but now I shall,"³ said the stranger. "I once had a very good friend, but after some time we quarreled, and in my anger I cursed his ancestors. He took me to court for this offense. I was found guilty, and because the word ancestor could include Mohammed, the judge declared the offense very great--so great that I was condemned to death. However, I managed to escape before the time set for my execution. I am still fleeing, and that is why I did not wish to stop to talk with you."

İmamı Birgüyi asked, "Do you have the written judgment of the court with you?"

"Yes, I do," said the stranger, and, taking it out, he handed it to İmamı Birgüyi.

Taking the court order, İmamı Birgüyi wrote upon it, "The word ancestor is so broad that it refers to one's forebears for ten generations back, but it does not extend

³Once one had accepted food from another, he is so indebted that he cannot refuse any reasonable request made by his benefactor.

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beyond that. Inasmuch as Mohammed preceded this man by well over ten generations, it is not necessary that he be executed for his offense." He wrote this upon the back of the court order and signed it. He then said to the man, "Take this to the Seyhülislam."⁴ 96-98

The man returned happily to Istanbul, where he had been tried, and delivered the written message to the Seyhülislam. When that official read the message on back of the court order, he realized that it cast a new light on the situation, and so he conferred at once with the padişah about it. Together they decided to release the man without any punishment. They also wrote a letter to İmamı Birgüyi asking him to arrange his affairs in such a way that he would be able to come to the palace and visit them there for several days.

One day İmamı Birgüyi went to the palace, and he arrived there at lunch time. When it was known that İmamı Birgüyi was to join them in the noon meal, they spread on the table an even greater variety of foods than usual

⁴ The Seyhülislam was the highest authority on Moslem religious law in the Ottoman Empire. Although the Sultan was by then the Caliph, the Sultan held that title not because of religious knowledge but because he had the power to take it. He deferred on religious matters to the Seyhülislam.

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and they invited him to eat with them.

"No, I cannot eat any of this," answered İmamı. Taking from his bag a small piece of bread and some olives, he began eating them

When the padişah insisted that he eat some of the food on the table, İmamı Birgüyi moved his hands before the ruler's eyes. When the padişah looked at the table again, he saw that all that was spread before him was inedible. "You can see now why I could not eat your food," said İmamı Birgüyi.⁵

The padişah now began to cry, "Why are you crying?" asked İmamı Birgüyi.

"Why shouldn't I cry, hoca?⁶ The Seyhülislam has issued so many fetvas,⁷ all of which I have signed,

⁵ It is not clear whether İmamı Birgüyi had the food miraculously polluted or decayed in some way or whether he miraculously had the eyes of the two leaders opened to the corruption of their way of life. Their repentance and contrition suggest that it was the latter.

⁶ A hoca was both teacher and preacher in Ottoman times, education then being in the hands of the clergy. Hoca can still mean either teacher or preacher, but the separation of state and church has made education a secular function in the Republic, and so hoca rarely means both teacher and preacher in the same person. Most of the time nowadays hoca refers to a preacher.

⁷ A fetva (or fetwa) was a legal opinion handed down by a Moslem jurist on canonical law, either the Seyhülislam or a mufti.

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thereby killing many people!"

Then the Seyhülislam began to cry too. "Why do you, of all people, cry, when you stand at the head of the whole religious community?" asked İmamı Birgüyi.

"Who has greater reason than I to cry? It has been because of my fetvas that many people have died."

Then İmamı Birgüyi himself began to cry. Surprised by this, the padişah asked him, "But why do you cry?"

"Who but I should cry?" asked İmamı Birgüyi. "Who else can see as clearly as I that the country is in the hands of incompetent men? That is why I cry!"