

Evaluation of the Perceptions and Approaches of Theology Faculty Students in Türkiye in the Context of Migration and Racism

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Abstract

The intensification of global migration in recent years has caused an increase in racism and exclusionary discourses in many host societies. This study examines how religious education shapes theology students' views on racism and migration in Türkiye. Findings from in-depth interviews suggest that religious education promotes inclusive attitudes and serves as a moral barrier against racism. However, its influence is constrained by nationalist narratives, cultural anxieties, and economic concerns. While religious teachings initially foster solidarity, primarily through the notion of religious brotherhood, their effect weakens when faced with real-life integration challenges. The study highlights both the potential and limitations of religious education in countering racism.

Keywords

Migration – Racism – Religious Education – Türkiye

Bewertung der Wahrnehmungen und Ansätze von Theologiestudenten in der Türkei im Kontext von Migration und Rassismus

Abstract

Die Intensivierung der globalen Migration in den letzten Jahren hat zum Anstieg von Rassismus und ausgrenzenden Diskursen in vielen Aufnahmegesellschaften beigetragen. In dieser Studie wird untersucht, wie der Religionsunterricht die Ansichten von Theologiestudenten über Rassismus und Migration in der Türkei prägt. Die Ergebnisse der Tiefeninterviews deuten darauf hin, dass der Religionsunterricht integrative Haltungen fördert und als moralische Grenze gegen Rassismus fungiert. Ihr Einfluss wird jedoch durch nationalistische Narrative, kulturelle Ängste und wirtschaftliche Bedenken eingeschränkt. Während religiöse Lehren zunächst die Solidarität fördern, vor allem durch die Vorstellung von religiöser Brüderlichkeit, schwächt sich ihre Wirkung ab, wenn sie mit realen Integrationsherausforderungen konfrontiert werden. Die Studie zeigt sowohl das Potenzial als auch die Grenzen der religiösen Erziehung bei der Bekämpfung von Rassismus auf.

Schlagworte

Migration – Rassismus – Religionspädagogik – Türkei

1. Introduction

Identity is essential for understanding individuals' lives and making sense of their environment. It encompasses one's sense of self, encompassing gender, class, or religious identity. Given its conceptual flexibility, modern sociology has not reached a consensus on its definition. Identity emerges from the expectations tied to social roles, shaped through socialization and internalized by individuals. These roles form the basis of identity construction during the socialization process.¹ Identity is a multifaceted concept that can appear in familial, national, class, religious, ethnic, racial, and sexual contexts. As a multiple category, various factors influence its construction. Identity often requires the "other" for self-definition, with distinctions like me, us, and them forming its core.

Religion plays a significant role in shaping both self-perception and perceptions of others. It structures life holistically and mediates identity through its rules. Religion fosters a sense of familiarity while also demarcating boundaries of "us" by distinguishing the foreign, the enemy, or the other. Religious education and formation contribute to defining friends, enemies, and others, shaping identity within religion's drawn boundaries.

Although religion may sometimes target specific social groups, it does not inherently align with any particular class. Unlike class identity, rooted in production and economic systems, religious identity arises from human experiences like social interaction and communication. It is shaped by cultural elements—values, symbols, myths, and rituals—that foster belonging. Religious identities thus unite individuals into communities grounded in shared meanings, moral codes, and faith-based practices. These communities often overlap with ethnic identities. While major religions aim to transcend ethnic divisions, ethnic groups frequently become the most devoted carriers of religious traditions.²

Another important and potentially problematic element of identity is the concept of race. It refers to people with shared physical traits and notable cultural or social similarities.³ More technically, it describes an ethnic group with distinct physical features, a shared culture, history, and language maintained over significant historical periods.⁴ Race has biological, cultural, economic, and political

1 Cf. MARSHALL, Gordon: Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, trans. O. Akinhay / D. Komurcu, Ankara: Bilim Sanat Publications 2009.

2 Cf. SMITH, Anthony David: National Identity, trans. B. S. Sener, İstanbul: İletişim Publications 2009.

3 Cf. VORSTER, Jakobus. M.: Racism, Xenophobia and Human Rights, in: The Ecumenical Review 54/3 (2002) 296–312. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2002.tb00155.x>.

4 Cf. MORNING, Ann: Ethnic Classification in Global Perspective: A Cross-National Survey of the 2000 Census Round, in: Population Research and Policy Review 1 (2000) 1–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-007-9062-5>.

dimensions. Historically, it served as a classification based on physical traits, especially skin color. With colonialism, it gained economic and political significance. The concept of race marks distinctions between “us” and “them.” When such classification becomes discriminatory, racism arises. Using race as a value judgment and expanding its meaning to serve one’s interest leads to racism. Although its definition is debated, racism as a form of othering has apparent historical and present-day realities.⁵

Racism, a form of prejudice based on physical differences, rests on the belief that hereditary traits create distinctions between social groups and determine status and intergroup relations. Traditional racism emphasizes genetic-biological features, assuming some ethnic groups are inherently superior, and sets rigid boundaries between them. It glorifies one race while humiliating the other race⁶, fostering attitudes such as dislike, hatred, and fear toward those perceived as different. This reflects the claim that the race one belongs to should be elevated, while others should be considered inferior.^{7,8}

New racism, a socioculturally modified form of traditional racism, is characterised by fear, hatred and xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants or foreigners living as minorities in dominant societies. A common thread across all forms of racism is the presence of prejudice, stigmatization, stereotyping, group-based hostility, hate speech, and discrimination.⁹ This also applies to the new conceptualization of racism. New racism broadens the scope of discrimination by incorporating cultural, psychological, historical, religious, and sociological dimensions.¹⁰ The “other” is now marginalized not only on biological grounds but also due to cultural factors.¹¹ This is often framed as a “natural justification” for opposing those from different cultures, feeling hatred, or becoming aggressive when deemed necessary.¹² While older race debates focused on biology, the new understanding includes linguistic and religious groups, customs, clothing

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- 5 Cf. ZENGİNOĞLU, Samet: The Constructing of Racist Notions in Europe and Current Controversies on New Racism, in: *Journal of the Human and Social Science Researches* 11/2 (2022) 865–879. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.1031027>.
- 6 Cf. ÇAKIR, Mehmet: What is the Cultural (New-Neo) Racism? A Theoretical Overview, in: *Akdeniz University Journal of Institute of Social Sciences* 6 (2019) 11–24.
- 7 Cf. BULLOCK, Alan / TROMBLEY, Stephen (eds.): *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, London: HarperCollins Publications 1999.
- 8 Cf. HİDİR, Özcan: The Relationship Between Islamophobia and Racism-Cultural Racism, in: *Ombudsman Academic* 7 (2017) 23–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32002/ombudsmanakademik.440203>.
- 9 Cf. HİDİR, Özcan: *Ibid.*
- 10 Cf. KAYA, Emine Erden / DURGUN, Senol: Transformation of Racism: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis, in: *The Academic Elegance* 7/13 (2020) 79–102.
- 11 Cf. SUMBAS, Ahu: A Short Essay About Rising Tendency of a New Racism in Europe, in: *Alternatif Politika* 1/2 (2009) 260–281.
- 12 Cf. UNVER, Osman Can: *Alman Kışı Neo-Liberal Çağın Almanya’sında Irkçılığın Hedefindeki Göçmenler*, Ankara: Nika Publications 2015

styles, behaviors, cuisine, music, and literature.¹³ New racism, unlike traditional biological racism, is based on the belief that cultural differences are irreconcilable. Instead of asserting inherent superiority, it claims that distinct cultural structures cannot coexist. Emerging mainly in the post-colonial era, it was shaped by migration and justified through notions like “protecting borders” and “preserving cultural integrity.” First seen in Anglo-Saxon countries and later in France, this form of racism sustains discrimination by emphasizing cultural incompatibility without explicit biological distinctions. Known as “differential racism,” it reflects the modern transformation of racist ideology.¹⁴

In the new racism, which Somersan¹⁵ calls “racism without race” and Balibar terms “differential racism,” discrimination occurs through culture, alongside claims that cultures are hierarchically ranked. The idea that other cultures threaten or disrupt the dominant culture is presented as the primary justification. Various cultural elements thus become sources of discrimination. As Zygmunt Bauman¹⁶ states, it is a mindset that promotes “the expulsion, destruction, and alienation of the disturbing category from the group it disturbs.” This form of racism opposes cultural heterogeneity and excludes differences. Those who do not share common traditions, language, or history are excluded to preserve national homogeneity.¹⁷

Simon Clarke¹⁸ highlights the role of fear, especially in multicultural settings, noting that people feel secure with those who share their values, while others evoke fear. This fear constructs the “us-them” divide. Similar exclusion applies not only to ethnic groups but also to women, the poor, and marginalized communities. In this sense, new racism defines any deviation from the majority as “abnormal,” framing cultural differences as threats.¹⁹ Thus, difference—no longer genetic but cultural—becomes a basis for racism and discrimination.²⁰

Todorov, who refers to new racism as modern racism, describes it as “culturalism”. He argues that linguistic, historical, or psychological distinctions have replaced physical race. This implies a departure from the classical notion of “race”

13 Cf. GOLDBERG, David: *Racist Culture. Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, Oxford: Blackwell 1993.

14 Cf. BALIBAR, Etienne / WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel: *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. N. Okten, İstanbul: Metis Publications 2023.

15 SOMERSAN, Semra: *Sosyal Bilimlerde Etnisite ve Irk*, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Publications 2004.

16 BAUMAN, Zygmunt: *Modernity and the Holocaust*, trans. S. Sertabiboglu, İstanbul: Sarmal Publications 1997.

17 Cf. ANSELL, Amy Elizabeth: *New Right, New Racism. Race and Reaction in the United States and Britain*, London: Macmillan Press 1997.

18 Cf. CLARKE, Simon: *Social Theory, Psychoanalysis and Racism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2003.

19 Cf. DUFFIELD, Mark R.: *New Racism... New Realism: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, in: *Radical Philosophy* 37 (1984) 29–34.

20 Cf. MATHESON, Donald: *Media Discourses*, Open University Press 2005.

based on ancestry, but not from the function racism assigns to it. Racist ideas and behaviors persist, only now legitimized through nationalist or culturalist discourse—the so-called “right to difference”.²¹

In this context, the belief that culturally dissimilar groups cannot coexist peacefully becomes central, leading to the view that different groups should live separately.²² Migration has accelerated this new form of racism, as migrants are often accused of disrupting local identities and cultures. The far-right promotes the idea that migrant and host cultures are fundamentally incompatible, reinforcing stereotypes that migrants resist integration and are prone to crime. Such narratives fuel everyday racism. After 9/11, security and terrorism concerns intensified, especially in the US and Europe, with Muslim migrants increasingly associated with terrorism. During the 2015 migration wave, anti-immigrant and xenophobic movements gained significant traction, blaming migrants for various social and economic issues. Migration, as a new form of marginalization, frames foreigners as cultural threats who cannot adapt and who endanger national unity.²³ This perception has boosted far-right political influence in Europe. The fear that immigration will erode Europe’s universal values has become a key argument for these groups, intensifying anxiety among settled populations and deepening migration-related fears.

In Türkiye, discriminatory actions and discourses against immigrants have intensified, often justified by the growing number of migrants and specific incidents. Terms like foreigner, minority, crime, culture, Middle East, barbarian, and violence are frequently emphasized, helping legitimize xenophobic attitudes and new forms of racism in public discourse. These identity-based approaches, rooted in the “us” versus “them” distinction, spread negative behaviors toward foreigners. As the migrant population increases, so do discriminatory behaviors—though often in implicit and indirect forms rather than overt claims of superiority. Criticisms commonly include migrants crowding beaches, opening businesses, using Arabic signage, and concerns about cleanliness. Some also argue that migrants pose future threats to demographics and lifestyle. Far-right ideologies frequently echo such narratives. Rather than direct ethnic discrimination, cultural differences are emphasized, with fears that migrants will disrupt existing cultural and social order. Consequently, biologically based racism shifts into a cultural dis-

21 Cf. TODOROV, Tzvetan: Race and Racism, in: BACK, Les / SOLOMOS, John (eds.): Theories of Race and Racism, London: Routledge 2001, 64–70.

22 Cf. SOMERSAN, Semra: Sosyal Bilimlerde Etnisite ve Irk, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Publications 2004.

23 Cf. TAS, Mehmet: Avrupa’da Irkçılık, Ankara: İmge Publications 1999.

course that frames difference as a threat. This leads to arguments for preserving the dominant culture and expelling those who fail to adapt.

Following the Syrian civil war outbreak in 2011, Türkiye shifted from a transit point to a destination country for international migration. According to official figures, the number of Syrians under temporary protection was 3,085,056 as of 07.11.2024, peaking in 2021 at 3,737,369. The provinces with the highest Syrian populations are: Istanbul (527,632), Gaziantep (428,674), Şanlıurfa (270,931), Hatay (250,206), Adana (217,123), Mersin (201,626), Bursa (170,849), Konya (121,800), İzmir (119,087), Ankara (88,016), and Others (689,112).²⁴ Additionally, between 2010 and 2023, Türkiye received 647,579 international protection applications. In 2023, 19,017 people applied; the highest numbers were 112,415 in 2017 and 114,537 in 2018. As of 2023, most applications came from Afghanistan (13,068), Iraq (2,776), Iran (1,426), and other nationalities (1,757).²⁵

In a statement dated 21.08.2024, the Directorate of Communications under the Presidency of Türkiye reported that 3,099,524 Syrians are under temporary protection. It further reported that 1,104,353 foreigners hold residence permits, including 221,353 under international protection, totaling 4,425,230 legal residents.²⁶ However, various NGOs, media outlets, and opposition groups argue that the actual number of refugees and migrants exceeds official figures. These claims are occasionally used to reinforce anti-foreigner sentiment. The rising foreign population in Türkiye has altered public perception. Unlike Europe, where cultural difference is often emphasized, Türkiye's discourse has highlighted religious brotherhood. While religious and conservative segments of society essentially responded positively, others viewed the situation differently. This divergence underscores the influence of religion and religious education in shaping attitudes toward foreigners.

Religious education aims to equip new generations with the knowledge and skills to understand and fulfill their religious duties. In Türkiye, this responsibility falls under 'Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge' courses taught in primary and secondary schools. Unlike informal instruction, this model is systematic, structured, and developmentally appropriate from early childhood.²⁷ According

24 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management: Temporary Protection, in: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638%20GE%C3%87%C4%B0%C4%B0%20KORUMA> [retrieved on 13.11.2024].

25 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management: International Protection, in: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/uluslararasi-koruma-istatistikler%20Uluslararası%C4%B1%20Koruma> [retrieved on 13.11.2024].

26 Republic of Türkiye Presidency Directorate of Communications: Statement Regarding Claims About the Number of Foreigners in Türkiye and Their Citizenship Status, in: <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/turkiyede-bulunan-yabancilarin-sayisi-ve-vatandaslik-durumları-ile-ilgili-iddialara-dair-aciklama> [retrieved on 20.10.2024].

27 Cf. CEBECİ, Suat: *Din Eğitimi Bilimi ve Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi*, Ankara: Akçağ Publications 2005.

to the Ministry of National Education, there are 2,589 imam and preacher lower secondary schools in Türkiye, with 545,471 students and 46,326 teachers. Imam and preacher high schools number 1,723, with 525,389 students and 23,454 teachers.²⁸ At the higher education level, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) data show that 100 theology or Islamic sciences faculties offer religious education. Some universities also provide associate-level religious education through open and formal programs.²⁹

An examination of the theology faculty curriculum, where the study was conducted, reveals no courses directly addressing migration, immigrants, racism, or new racism. The curriculum primarily includes Tafsir, Hadith, Kalam, Islamic History, Islamic Law, Islamic Beliefs and Principles, Quran Reading, and Religious Education. Courses such as sociology, philosophy, and psychology of religion are also offered. However, topics like racism or religious brotherhood are addressed only superficially in courses like Islamic Beliefs, Hadith, History of Islamic Sects, and Islamic Civilization.

While none of the courses directly focus on racism, they generally reflect Islamic perspectives on humanity. Analysis of both curriculum and interview data shows that references to racism and migration mainly cite the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell Sermon and certain Quranic verses. In the sermon, he emphasizes human equality: *"All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a White has no superiority over a Black nor a Black has any superiority over a White except by piety and good action"* The Qur'an also contains verses that reject racism and emphasize that all people are brothers and sisters: *"The believers are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy-Surah al-Hujurât, 10", "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you-Sûrah al-Hujurât, 13"*. These verses are considered to be messages that reject racism and emphasize equality.

This study explores the role of religious education in shaping theology students' attitudes toward xenophobia and racism. As Türkiye hosts a large refugee population, terms like foreigner, refugee, Syrian, and Afghan frequently appear in social and political discourse, sometimes fueling racism and xenophobia. Thus,

28 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Education, Directorate General for Religious Education: Number of Schools, in: https://dogm.meb.gov.tr/bilgisistemi/okul_listesi [retrieved on 14.11.2024].

29 Council of Higher Education: All Universities Offering a Theology Program, in: <https://yokatlas.yok.gov.tr/lisans-bolum.php?b=20041> [retrieved on 14.11.2024].

this study is significant in uncovering how religion and religious education contribute to identifying, interpreting, and potentially preventing such attitudes.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted as a qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on examining the social interactions and individual experiences of individuals in their natural environments, describing and interpreting these situations, and developing theoretical inferences in this context.³⁰ The research process is designed as a case study. *Case studies* are a qualitative research strategy that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics present in a particular context. This method is usually conducted through various data collection techniques such as interviews, documents, and observations.³¹

2.1 Participants

Within the scope of the study, 17 theology faculty students were interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who voluntarily participated in the study. Eleven of the participants were male, and six were female. Eleven participants attended imam and preacher high school before the faculty of theology. Imam and preacher schools are educational institutions that officially provide religious education at the high school and middle school levels in Türkiye. Six of the participants stated that they were hafiz. A hafiz is a person who memorizes all the verses of the Holy Quran, the holy book of Islam, in Arabic and certifies this through exams. Hafiz education is provided by public or private institutions in Türkiye on a boarding or daytime basis. Students who complete their memorization can study at the faculties of theology with a special quota. In addition, it was determined that seven participants had weak contact with immigrants, five had moderate contact, and five had substantial contact with immigrants. The researchers determined these findings based on the participants' responses to the social contact and interaction questions (shared common space, city/neighborhood, one-to-one interactions, friendship, etc.). Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

30 Cf. O'BRIEN, Bridget C. et al.: Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research, in: *Academic Medicine* 89/9 (2014) 1245–1251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388>.

31 Cf. EISENHARDT, Kathleen M.: Building Theories from Case Study Research, in: *The Academy of Management Review* 14/4 (1989) 532–550. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>.

Table 1.
Participants Demographics

Participant ID	Gender	Theology Faculty Student	Imam and Preacher High School Student	Hafiz	Immigrant Contact
P1	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Weak
P2	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Weak
P3	Female	Yes	No	No	Medium
P4	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
P5	Male	Yes	No	No	Weak
P6	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Strong
P7	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
P8	Male	Yes	No	No	Strong
P9	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong
P10	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Weak
P11	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
P12	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Weak
P13	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Strong
P14	Female	Yes	Yes	No	Weak
P15	Female	Yes	No	No	Weak
P16	Female	Yes	No	No	Strong
P17	Female	Yes	No	No	Medium

Table 1: Participants Demographics

2.2 Procedure

The study data were collected through in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form. For the research, ethical permission was obtained from the Atatürk University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Date: 22.10.2024, E.88656144-000-2400348186). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interview. The face-to-face interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. After the interviews with the participants, the interviews were manually transcribed by the researchers and analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative analysis method. The analysis process followed the thematic analysis stages established by Braun and Clarke³². In this direction, the entire text was read carefully and repeatedly to become familiar with the data, and attempts were made to identify meaningful codes. An inductive approach was adopted while creating codes. It tried to capture the meanings contained in the text fragment, not the contents that attracted the researchers' attention. The codes that were common among these codes were gathered together and grouped under different categories. Then, themes were formed by bringing

³² Cf. BRAUN, Virginia / CLARKE, Victoria: Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, in: Qualitative Research in Psychology 3/2 (2006) 77–101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

these interrelated categories together. In the next stage, it was evaluated whether the themes reflected the meaning of the text. Finally, the themes were defined and named.

3. Findings

In this section, the codes for the themes created within the scope of the study will be transferred and analyzed together with quotations. The themes of the study are presented in Figure 1. The themes are interconnected, so detailed and connective evaluations regarding the analysis of the themes will be made in the results and discussion section. As preliminary information, it should be mentioned that many individuals have different official statuses (migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, temporary protection, etc.) in Türkiye. For this reason, all of them are referred to as „migrants“ to avoid confusion in the research process and the reporting and reading process.

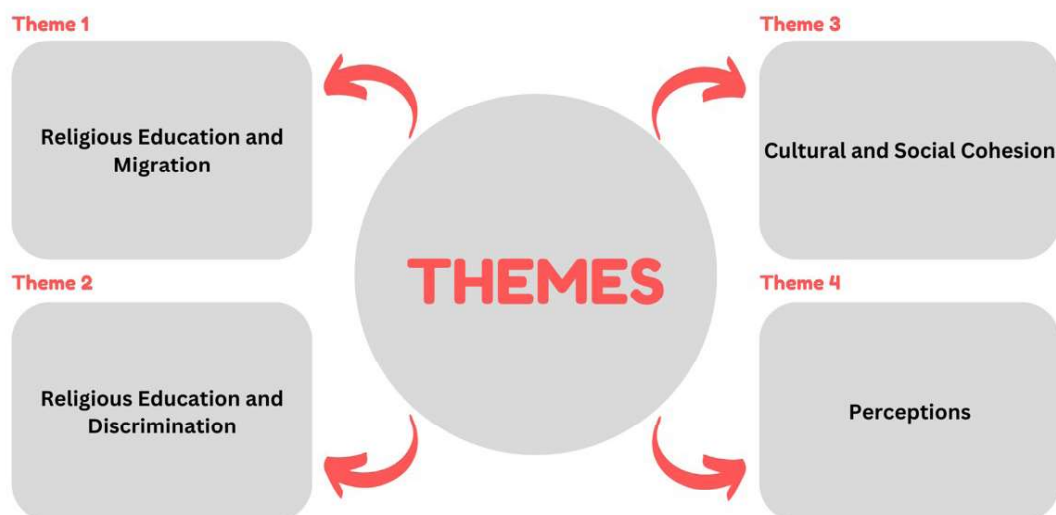


Figure 1: Themes

3.1 Religious Education and Migration

The notion that religious education fosters integration and cohesion is a recurring theme in the literature. In both content and purpose, it has the potential to regulate extraordinary social situations by promoting tolerance and social contact.³³ This section examines the role of religious education in the migration process. It first explores how migration and the migrant experience are addressed within the religious education received by participants. Based on participants'

33 Cf. MALLA, Hamlan / MISNAH, Misnah / MARKARMA, A.: Implementation of Multicultural Values in Islamic Religious Education Based Media Animation Pictures as Prevention of Religious Radicalism in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, in: International Journal of Criminology and Sociology 10 (2021) 51–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2021.10.08>.

views, references to the Qur'an, Hadith, and the concepts of *Ansar* and *Muhajirun* are discussed in theology faculties and imam and preacher schools in Türkiye. In Islamic history, the Muslims who migrated to Medina due to persecution in Mecca are known as *Muhajirun*, while those who hosted them are called *Ansar*. This migration is central to the Prophet Muhammad's life and the spread of Islam, making its presence in Islamic education expected. It is also known that conservative political actors invoked the *Ansar-Muhajirun* discourse to frame migration, especially during the early stages of immigration to Türkiye. P1 reflects this perception as follows:

"When the Syrians came, I looked at them as Muhajirun, who had taken refuge with us. I have been studying in religious schools for eight years. The spiritual values we are given and those given in a normal school will differ. I think that this idea stems from the religious education I received." (P1)

In parallel to P1's views, P14 also stated that their lecturers emphasized the same approach to migrants during religious education.

"When the migrants arrived, our lecturers said that these are our religious brothers and sisters, let us approach them from the perspective of muhajirun. That is how we approached them." (P14)

Similarly, other participants stated that when migrants first arrived, they frequently encountered „Ansar-Muhajirun“ indoctrination in schools. The idea of „Ansar-Muhajirun“ creates a perception of migration and migrants within a powerful religious narrative, especially relevant in a religion whose Prophet himself was a migrant.

Questions were asked to the participants to determine what content is conveyed in the religious education process at university and high school. The responses reveal that the religious education curriculum in Türkiye does not focus intensively on the concept of migration/migrants. P5's complaint in this regard is as follows:

"I wish the lecturers touched on these issues more. If they had mentioned it, people would have been more aware. I tried to learn about migration issues by researching books and other platforms. Because the lecturers do not talk about it much." (P5)

The statements of other participants confirm P5's views. It is observed that migration and migrant issues are weakly covered in the lessons and do not play

an active role in the teaching objectives of religious education programs. Various statements that lead to this observation are as follows:

"We do not talk much about migrants. We do not talk much about politics either. Of course, there are verses and hadiths. They say them. They say there are good ones and bad ones." (P12)

"Until now, migration issues have not been explained intensively. They usually say do not be racist. That is it." (P9)

The evaluations on how the participants' religious education affects their perspectives towards immigrants determined that it is very effective in forming the perspective toward immigrants. The inclusive and integrative aspect of religious teachings provides students a theoretical background and creates a boundary against extreme views and actions. Many participants associate the fact that they do not show harsher reactions to the current migration process with the religious education they have received. In this regard, P5 and P13 made the following statements:

"My field of education has a great influence on me. If I had not studied at this school, I probably would have been tougher on refugees." (P5)

"My education is, of course, effective in my perspective on them. As an imam and preacher student, I cannot discriminate against immigrants; I stand against racism as much as I can." (P13)

The codes and quotations analyzed under this theme show that the discourses mentioned in the religious education process seriously affect people's perceptions of accepting immigrants. Even if the course contents are insufficient in the context of migration and integration, it is understood that discourses based on verses and hadiths are effective in forming positive perceptions of immigrants and in preventing racist thoughts.

3.2 Religious Education and Discrimination

This theme explores the participants' racist, sectarian, and discriminatory perspectives. Since most immigrants in Türkiye share the same religion as the host society, the study examined how perceptions might differ in cases of sectarian divergence.

All participants expressed clear opposition to racism at the discursive level. Although some held contradictory views between discourse and action, their

overall perception of racism remained negative. The literature also notes that individuals with racist attitudes often do not define themselves as racist.³⁴ Regarding how participants were educated on racism in religious education, it was found that professors strongly opposed racist views and conveyed this stance to students.

"We read verses and hadiths about racism. Our lecturers raise our awareness on this issue. We look at race in the context that no one is superior to anyone else. The curriculum always emphasizes the inclusive aspect of religion." (P5)

"Our hodjas say that racism is haram. They say those who practice racism have committed one of the biggest sins. They remind us of the message of the Prophet Muhammad in his Farewell Sermon." (P13)

"In imam and preacher high school, we were told that we were brothers with immigrants. They instilled in us not to be racist, that superiority is only in taqwa." (P1)

As can be understood from the quotes, the participants theoretically internalized the messages of their religious education on racism. This is evidenced by many participants emphasizing the hadith or theme with the same content. This shows that religious education has a functional position in preventing racism.

Another issue examined under this theme is the participants' attitudes toward sectarianism. Sects are sub-branches formed by differences in opinion and practice within a religion. Islam encompasses various major and minor sects across its broad geography. Understanding sectarian perspectives is essential for analyzing discriminatory attitudes and perceptions. When participants were asked about sectarian differences among migrants, their responses diverged from their stance on racism. While most expressed clear opposition to racism, their views on sectarianism fell into two categories: those moderate toward sectarian differences and those more distant. The views of respondents with relatively moderate approaches are presented below.

"I accept people as they are. Sect does not matter to me; I put differences in the background." (P8)

"I do not care about the sect of migrants. I care about their personalities. Their sects are their business" (P12)

34 Cf. BONAM, Courtney M. et al.: Ignoring History, Denying Racism: Mounting Evidence for the Marley Hypothesis and Epistemologies of Ignorance, in: Social Psychological and Personality Science 10/2 (2019) 257–265. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617751583>.

"For me, sectarian differences are not a serious problem. We talk, discuss, and consult with those of different sects. The fact that one sect does not adopt another sect does not require exclusion. I am not interested in the social structure or situation of the person. I am interested in the character of the person. (P1)

"I believe that sects only provide certain criteria for people's lives. They are important to make life easier. However, I do not think that sects separate people from each other. After all, religion is the same. We have the same goal." (P16)

The views of the participants who are distant from sects are as follows:

"I think that if the migrants were from a different sect than us, my view of them would be different" (P6)

"If we had sectarian differences with migrants, we would not get along with them so much. Our situation would have gotten worse." (P7)

"I think that we should not trust them too much because people from other sects do not look at us very positively." (P13)

The expressions show that integrative and separatist sectarian views are also valid for students receiving religious education. However, interpreting this situation through religious education may lead to an incomplete and inaccurate interpretation because belonging and perceptions of sects are shaped more by identity, culture, and politics. Most participants stated that they did not experience significant sectarian attitudes and discourses by their lecturers during their education.

When asked about the discriminatory and deterrent policies of various local administrations in Türkiye towards migrants, most participants gave similarly challenging responses. Even participants who were more distant towards migrants emphasized that they did not support discriminatory practices.

"What they do is inhuman! I think some borders should not be crossed. Because when we cross that border, we are no different from other racist countries." (P17)

"These discriminations are not normal; they are racism. Racism is forbidden in our religion" (P9)

"I think what those administrators did was wrong. Because there is no discrimination in basic human rights." (P5)

Participants' responses show that there is a more empathetic approach to discriminatory practices than to discriminatory discourse. When racist or discriminatory thoughts are put into action, reactivity increases and creates the need for a boundary.

3.3 Cultural and Social Cohesion

Cultural and social cohesion is a central issue in migration processes. Whether cohesion develops between migrants and the host society significantly affects migration dynamics. While adaptation challenges, prejudice, and cultural differences hinder integration, social contact, empathy, and cultural exchange can facilitate it.³⁵ This theme explores how religious education students interact with immigrants, how they assess them culturally and socially, and what kind of society they envision for the future. Questions regarding cohesion, contact, and interaction revealed complex emotions among participants. Türkiye's unplanned migration process and future uncertainties appear to shape these perceptions. Many participants struggle to imagine the future, having not fully accepted that migrants may become permanent. P3 illustrates this as follows:

"I feel like they will break the order at any moment. They cannot adapt. I do not want a common future." (P3)

P3, who has the thoughts mentioned above, does not seem as decisive as his first statements regarding the sending of migrants.

"Forced sending would be chaos. Innocent migrants would be victimized. That is why the thought of forced sending makes me uncomfortable. They have already established a life here. They will not give up." (P3)

Many participants stated that migrants should not stay for long periods, arguing that cultural differences are too significant. The discourses on this situation are as follows:

"I want them to go to their own countries because our cultures and habits are different. It is not that easy to adapt. It requires many years. They need to adapt to us. Because they are the minority." (P8)

"We cannot live in harmony. We have no unity of language. We have no unity of culture. Even if they learn the Turkish language, adaptation is difficult. They cannot leave their culture. We also have a culture. We have certain customs." (P12)

35 Cf. SAM, David L. / BERRY, John W.: Acculturation: When Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds Meet, in: Perspectives on Psychological Science 5/4 (2010) 472–481. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610373075>.

Most participants also expressed opposing views on establishing a shared future with migrants. While expressing these views, religious brotherhood could not be dominant in these negative perceptions due to cultural and nationalist concerns. P5 states this situation as follows:

"Religion allows us to construct a common future. But religion alone is not enough. Therefore, religion alone cannot establish a common future." (P5)

When asked about contact with migrants, many participants stated they had a migrant friend, teacher, or neighbor. Even P16 stated that her closest friend was Syrian. As for the idea of marriage with migrants, only 5 out of 17 participants were in favor of it. Participants who did not want to marry migrants generally cited cultural incompatibility, while those who saw no problem in marrying migrants emphasized factors such as religious unity and morality.

"I would not want to get married because there would be a culture clash between us. I have no other reason." (P17)

As an interesting detail, respondents who do not want to marry migrants do not favor the idea of their children marrying a migrant. However, two female participants stated that they would not have a problem with their son marrying a migrant. These participants said that the same moderate attitude did not apply to daughters.

"Maybe my son can get married. The idea of shaping the person he marries according to our own culture seems a little softer to me." (P10)

Most participants said they would not have problems working in the same workplace or doing business with migrants. However, they also emphasized not wanting to work under a migrant boss. This reveals that there are certain latent balances at the point of contact with migrants and that there are imaginary boundaries, especially in situations of power or hierarchy.

"I do not want my boss to be an immigrant. In that case it is different. Because he can give you orders. Give orders in your own country, you cannot give us orders" (P11)

A more balanced distinction emerged among the respondents regarding being neighbors with migrants. In line with the analysis, participants with high levels of contact quickly stated that they could be neighbors with migrants, while those with medium or low levels of contact were more skeptical. Two participants who already had migrant neighbors said that as they got to know them, they invited

migrants to their wedding ceremonies and gatherings and took food to their homes.

"We live together in a small town. Naturally, a friendship arises. We invite them to tea talks. If we connect in tea talks, we become even closer" (P13)

Participants' responses on cultural and social cohesion indicate that most do not favor reducing social distance with migrants. Their answers reveal contradictions: while religious brotherhood is initially emphasized, national and cultural identities gradually take precedence. Although sharing the same physical space is not seen as problematic, most participants are reluctant to embrace lifestyle convergence. They believe maintaining a certain distance is necessary to preserve cultural and national identity. This suggests that building a shared culture with migrants is perceived as unlikely. While religious identity influences attitudes to some extent, it tends to be replaced by national and cultural identity as social contact increases and distance narrows. As a result, participants express ambivalence about coexistence. Though their responses do not reflect overt racism, they reveal a delicate line with potential for discrimination.

3.4 Perceptions

This theme evaluates participants' economic, political, security, crime, and religious brotherhood perceptions. Understanding these perceptions helps assess how anti-racism and anti-discrimination ideals promoted through religious education intersect with daily life and other social institutions.

The first area analyzed is economic perception. Türkiye has faced significant economic challenges in recent years due to political developments and the Covid-19 pandemic. Declining purchasing power from high inflation has triggered public discontent. The uncertainty surrounding migrants' status further shapes these perceptions. Registered migrants in Türkiye receive regular in-kind and cash support from state institutions, international organizations, and NGOs. In light of economic difficulties, some participants expressed discomfort with such aid, while others held more conciliatory and egalitarian views. P15 reflects on this as follows:

"The state should help migrants but not neglect its citizens. Priority should be given to its citizens. Especially in this economic situation, it should help its citizens a lot." (P15)

Religious narratives can create a sense of belonging through shared beliefs and values. However, when concrete problems such as economic hardship, unemployment, and income inequality arise, immediate and practical concerns about people's daily lives come to the fore. In such cases, spiritual and symbolic arguments lose their impact as they fail to respond to individuals' real economic risks. Studies clearly show that the emphasis on concrete problems often overshadows abstract concerns in times of economic distress.^{36,37} Moreover, resource competition and the perception of scarcity are important reasons for this shift. When people feel that the available resources are insufficient, they act on the instinct of self-preservation. Even without a tangible lack of resources, the threat of scarcity can change individuals' decision-making processes to prioritize immediate personal needs.³⁸ This may weaken the acceptance based on religious solidarity. The contradiction between the participants' acceptance of religious solidarity and their economic concerns can be expressed in this case.

Over the past decade, Europe has faced a major wave of migration. Recipient countries have struggled with cohesion and integration, contributing to the rise of far-right ideologies. Similar far-right parties and anti-immigrant rhetoric exist in Türkiye. Although these parties did not gain significant electoral support in the 2023 general elections, their discourse has resonated, particularly among youth active on social media. When participants' views on far-right discourse and practices were analyzed, most criticized such positions as wrong or even racist. P12, who believes these approaches would provoke deeper social crises and humanitarian disasters, expressed the following:

"For example, if I were an immigrant in another country, I would not want to be treated the same way. Therefore, I do not see these discourses positively. I empathize with such a situation. I may also have to migrate to another country. I would not want them to treat me like that. When the issue of justice comes up, my empathy starts directly." (P12)

P1, who wants migrants to leave, also thinks that the methods proposed by far-right parties will not be effective in the process of sending migrants away and points to more applicable options.

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- 36 Cf. REESKENS, Tim / VANDECASTEELE, Leen: Economic Hardship and Well-Being. Examining the Relative Role of Individual Resources and Welfare State Effort in Resilience Against Economic Hardship, in: *Journal of Happiness Studies* 18/1 (2016) 41–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9716-2>.
- 37 Cf. SINGER, Matthew M.: Who Says "It's the Economy"? Cross-National and Cross-Individual Variation in the Salience of Economic Performance, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 44/3 (2010) 284–312. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010384371>.
- 38 Cf. CANNON, Christopher / GOLDSMITH, Kelly / ROUX, Caroline: A Self-Regulatory Model of Resource Scarcity, in: *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 29/1 (2018) 104–127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1035>.

"If you send them back by force, they will somehow find a way to come back. Therefore, migrants should be sent back voluntarily, not by force." (P1)

We detected that the vast majority of religious education students disapprove of the discourse and practices of far-right parties, as they do of racism and discrimination. Participants approach the issue of migration from a more humane and empathetic framework.

Another important factor shaping participants' perceptions of migrants is security concerns and fear of crime. Officials claim that the number of crimes committed by current migrants is very low, but opposition parties and media claim that the figures cited do not correspond to reality.³⁹ On the other hand, there are discourses and judgments in many societies that associate migrant and minority groups with crime.⁴⁰ Associating with crime is the most frequently used method of stigmatizing the other in societies. A significant number of participants in the study also stated that migrants are a potential crime risk and that they are concerned about this situation. There is an important detail: many participants report their concerns based on hearsay. This situation indicates that various disinformation and perception operations impact the participants and that real or unreal information is intertwined. P4 explains this issue as follows:

"I think some of the news reports are deliberate and served in a way to promote hatred. Recently, a Turkish citizen martyred a policeman. For example, if a Syrian had done it, there would have been an uproar. The incident in Erzurum became so big because an Afghan did it. If two Turks had fought and one of them had stabbed and killed the other, it would not have made such a resonance." (P4)

P16, who stated that he was disturbed by generalizations about criminals, stated the following:

"This kind of discourse is attributed to all refugees. This is not true, and I think the news is exaggerated. My migrant friends are very upset about such news." (P16)

Religious brotherhood is another prominent perception in light of the findings. As mentioned earlier, the position of migrants and the uncertainty of their future have also affected how migrants are viewed today. When they first arrived, the perception of guests, muhajirun, and religious brotherhood had been replaced by reactionary and distant adjectives. The current approach in Turkish society is

³⁹ Cf. KOC, Murat / EKMEKÇİ TURK, Zubeyde: Suriyeli Sığınmacılar Bağlamında Suç-Göç İlişkisi, in: https://21yyte.org/tr/merkezler/islevsel-arastirma-merkezleri/suriyeli-siginmacilar-baglaminda-suc-goc-i-liskisi#_ftn1 [retrieved on 29.11.2024].

⁴⁰ Cf. STANSFIELD, Richard / STONE, Brenna: Threat Perceptions of Migrants in Britain and Support for Policy, in: *Sociological Perspectives* 61/4 (2018) 592–609. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121417753369>.

also seen in religious education students. Although in their statements, they state that they still see immigrants as religious brothers and sisters, it is understood that this emphasis has become fragile and weakened. P2 and P4 express this fragility as follows:

"We say that we are religious brothers, but when there are incidents like the ones we see on the news or hear about outside, people are hesitant." (P2)

"We call them our religious brothers and try to take good care of them, but frankly enough is enough. We are tired." (P4)

Another important detail about religious brotherhood is that national codes and national interests are more important than the bond of religious brotherhood. Accusing Western countries of taking in qualified immigrants and leaving the unqualified ones to Türkiye, the participants complain about the current immigrant profile and think that despite their population, they cannot provide the necessary added value to the country. Participants were asked whether they would prefer a qualified Christian immigrant or the current immigrant profile, and almost all of the participants answered that they would prefer qualified Christian immigrants.

"Of course, I prefer the qualified one. His religion is his business. I care about his/her job. An unqualified person will harm our country." (P13)

Lastly, it should be noted that mainstream media and social media greatly influence most of the participants' current perceptions. As is well known, despite their many functional features, media platforms are also used for disinformation and manipulation. In the extraordinary agendas of societies, consciously or unconsciously biased news is produced for specific interests and policies. As a result of these manipulations, target individuals or groups are stigmatized and highlighted. In the sociological literature, it is reported that in times of social crisis, other groups called „others“ are the first to be reacted to and are scapegoated.⁴¹ Once again, the analysis of participants' perceptions confirms this argument.

4. Results and Discussion

There is a need for reasonable, anti-racist, and tolerant decision-makers and policy-makers to be able to read and manage processes such as migration,

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Cf. SAHIN, Burak: The Sacrifice and the Other: Mimetic Desire, Violence and Scapegoat Mechanism in René Girard, in: Veche 2/2 (2023) 76–88.

which profoundly affect the social structure and social order. Educational institutions hold significant responsibility in raising such individuals. Religious education institutions have an important role among these institutions. It is widely acknowledged that religious education, regarding content and purpose, possesses significant potential to increase tolerance and social contact. Religious education's teaching objectives and outputs can effectively contribute to intercultural understanding and play an effective role in preventing racism and formulating reconciliatory policies.

This study yielded several findings that support the aforementioned perspectives. In line with these findings, the findings suggest that religious education and religious teachings provide students with a theoretical background with inclusive and complementary aspects and create a boundary against possible extreme views and actions. When the participants' views on racism were analyzed, it was revealed that all participants were clearly against racism at the discourse level. However, the study also revealed that discourse-level rejection of racism does not always align with behavior and more profound social perceptions. The religious formation shaped by religious education works as an important balance mechanism, which prevents the emergence of feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that can be called extreme towards immigrants.

On the other hand, in the early times when immigrants came to Türkiye, the emphasis on religious brotherhood was brought to the forefront through the conceptualization of Muhajirun to manage the process. Almost all participants stated that they approach migrants through the conceptualization of Muhajirun.

When the views of the participants on the discourses of the far right towards immigrants are analyzed, the findings suggest that the vast majority of religious education students disapprove of such discourses and practices, as in the case of racism and discrimination, and that they view the problem of migration from a more humane and empathetic framework.

Another finding in religious education is that the content of religious education courses in Türkiye is insufficient in the context of migration and social cohesion. Participants stated that there is no substantial theoretical transfer other than religious references. This indicates a significant gap between religious values emphasized in theory and the practical realities of a changing, multicultural society. The content of religious education courses in Türkiye, which receives intensive migration, needs to be updated to address migration and immigration. Inte-

grating interdisciplinary approaches and social issues such as migration, cultural integration, and coexistence into religious education curricula is necessary.

Despite the emphasis on religious values such as brotherhood and equality, the findings suggest that these values are often overshadowed by cultural distance, economic hardship, and nationalist narratives. This indicates that religious education, while theoretically robust, struggles to influence attitudes when confronted with real-life complexities.

When other findings are analyzed, it is observed that the participants' sectarian perception of migration is different from their holistic perspective against racism. The participants, who showed a more transparent and holistic approach to racism, were divided into two sides regarding perception in case of possible sectarian differences. This situation suggests that while general anti-racist principles are accepted, sectarian belonging still functions as a cultural boundary marker. It was also found that national codes and national interests outweighed the bond of religious brotherhood in some cases. National identity is perceived as a problem in the future vision for migrants. In possible future scenarios, the possibility that immigrants may cause a demographic and cultural rupture causes various doubts in the participants' minds, which leads to a situation such as prioritizing national identity over religious identity.

Cultural cohesion and integration are other important issues emphasized by the participants. As a result of the interviews, the findings suggest that the emphasis on religious brotherhood needs to be more decisive regarding tolerating the cultural differences that arise in everyday life. In the questions asked in the context of cohesion, contact, and interaction, it was determined that the participants had complex feelings. However, they expressed religious solidarity, and national and cultural concerns increasingly shaped their attitudes when direct social contact increased. It is believed that the unplanned migration process in Türkiye and the uncertainty about the future caused these perceptions to develop. The extended stay of immigrants has not been able to bring about the desired cohesion through cultural differences, leading some participants to be culturally distant towards immigrants. Türkiye's economic problems and the impact of this situation on individuals also lead to a differentiation of the perspective towards immigrants. The perception that the resources of the state are used for migrants, primarily through social media, negatively affects the perspective of most of the participants. The uncertainty of the position and future of migrants is also an important factor in shaping economic perceptions. The belief that registered migrants in Türkiye are regularly provided with in-kind and cash aid by official

institutions of the state, international institutions and organizations, and national/international NGOs can trigger feelings of discomfort towards migrants in individuals experiencing economic difficulties. Thus, many participants stated that priority should be given to Turkish citizens, and they expressed their discomfort with the public services and aid provided to migrants, given the current economic problems. These perceptions indicate that religious education alone cannot overcome the powerful influence of socioeconomic anxieties and nationalist discourses.

Participants seem to internalize religious anti-racism discourses at the theoretical level but exhibit hesitation or even contradiction in practical contexts such as marriage, employment, or neighborhood integration. This gap may be attributed to a lack of experiential engagement and the dominance of socio-political narratives that contradict religious teachings.

Another important factor shaping the participants' perceptions towards immigrants is security concerns and fear of crime. It is understood that the criminal profile created for immigrants in some channels of social media is somehow reciprocated, and this causes security concerns and fear of crime in some of the participants.

When the findings obtained from this study are evaluated, most of the participants feel conscientiously responsible towards migrants due to their education and religious formation. However, they experience a paradox with their conclusion that migrants should return to their countries as soon as possible. Considering the answers given by the participants, the findings suggest that they have a tension between their conscience and the experience they have gained in daily life regarding migrants. This duality reflects the gap between the moral values transmitted by religious education and the realities participants perceive in everyday interactions. To overcome this problem, it is suggested that religious education should be made more compatible with life, and its content should be enriched. This development may contribute to the development of positive feelings towards immigrants.

For religious education to have a more substantial transformative impact, it must extend beyond textual knowledge and values discourse and actively engage with students' lived realities. Practical modules, intercultural dialogue opportunities, and critical media literacy training could enhance the real-life applicability of religious principles. Moreover, religious educators must have theological knowledge

and the pedagogical tools to address racism, cultural diversity, and migration through an interdisciplinary and empathic lens.

In addition, it is advisable to raise the awareness of educators, the main actors in the religious education process, by receiving intensive training on this subject. As a last suggestion, it is thought that the effective presentation of data on the migration process (number of migrants, crime statistics of migrants, employment of migrants, etc.) to the public can help prevent possible manipulations and eliminate negative perceptions towards migrants. This would allow religious values such as brotherhood, justice, and compassion to be grounded in a more realistic and socially sensitive context.