



An Examination of the Acculturation Experience of International Theology Students in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in the number of international students in Türkiye has made the process of acculturation a critical issue that influences identity, cultural values, and academic success significantly. Despite the growing body of research on acculturation, the literature remains insufficient in addressing the unique challenges and strategies encountered by students within the specialized context of higher religious education, where religious and cultural sensitivities are particularly pronounced. This research gap hinders the development of optimized guidance and support systems specifically tailored to the diverse needs of international theology students. This study aims to examine the acculturation processes and strategies employed by international theology students receiving higher religious education in Türkiye. The study was conducted using an explanatory sequential design, which is one of the mixed-methods designs. First, quantitative data were collected from 169 students at Necmettin Erbakan University, Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Theology. These students represented a wide geographical diversity, coming from 48 different countries across Europe, Africa, and Asia. The quantitative phase used the 84-item "Acculturation Scale" to measure integration, separation, and assimilation tendencies. The subsequent qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 16 purposively selected students to provide deeper insight into their lived experiences. The quantitative findings revealed that students most frequently adopted the integration strategy ($\bar{x}=3.786$), indicating a high level of tendency to maintain their own culture while engaging with the host culture, and least frequently adopted the assimilation strategy ($\bar{x}=2.568$). Statistical analyses showed significant differences based on the religious majority in the students' home countries, with those from Muslim-majority countries showing higher integration and separation scores. Additionally, students from Asia exhibited a significantly higher tendency towards separation than their European counterparts. The qualitative data, categorized into socio-cultural, academic, and psychological dimensions, further clarified these findings, showing that integration was most prominent in social relations and academic environments. Conversely, academic separation was noted regarding differences in assessment methods and course content, such as the inclusion of secular subjects like the history of the Turkish Revolution. The study concludes that the higher religious educational environment in Türkiye is largely supportive of cultural integration, yet acculturation remains a multi-layered and dynamic process shaped by academic and religious experiences. These findings support the flexible interpretation of acculturation strategies, suggesting that students frequently adopt multiple strategies simultaneously depending on the context. Future research should adopt interdisciplinary and multidimensional frameworks to explore acculturation across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Particular emphasis should be placed on the influence of institutional practices, academic culture, and curricula on international students' acculturation strategies.

Keywords: Religious Education, Higher Religious Education, Theology, Acculturation, International Student.

Türkiye’de Okuyan Uluslararası İlahiyat Öğrencilerinin Kültürlenme Tecrübelerinin İncelenmesi

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ÖZ

Türkiye’deki uluslararası öğrenci sayısındaki hızlı artış kültürlenme sürecini kimlik, kültürel değerler ve akademik başarıyı önemli ölçüde etkileyen kritik bir mesele haline getirmiştir. Kültürlenme üzerine literatürde artan araştırmalara rağmen, dinî ve kültürel hassasiyetlerin özellikle belirgin olduğu yüksek din eğitimi bağlamında öğrencilerin karşılaştığı özgün zorluklar ve stratejiler yeterince ele alınmamıştır. Literatürdeki bu boşluk, uluslararası ilahiyat öğrencilerinin çeşitli ihtiyaçlarına özel olarak tasarlanmış ve optimize edilmiş rehberlik ve destek sistemlerinin geliştirilmesini engellemektedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de yüksek din eğitimi gören uluslararası ilahiyat öğrencilerinin kültürlenme süreçlerini ve stratejilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Karma yöntem desenleri arasında yer alan açıklayıcı sıralı desenle yürütülen çalışmada, ilk olarak Avrupa, Afrika ve Asya’daki 48 farklı ülkeden geniş bir coğrafi çeşitliliği temsil eden, Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi Ahmet Keleşoğlu İlahiyat Fakültesi’ndeki 169 öğrenciden nicel veriler toplanmıştır. Nicel aşamada bütünleşme, ayrışma ve asimilasyon eğilimlerini ölçmek için 84 maddelik "Kültürlenme Ölçeği" kullanılmış; ardından gelen nitel aşamada ise öğrencilerin deneyimlerine dair daha geniş bir açılım sağlamak amacıyla amaçlı örnekleme ile seçilen 16 öğrenci ile yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiştir. Nicel bulgular, öğrencilerin en sık bütünleşme stratejisini ($\bar{x}=3.786$) benimsediklerini ve ev sahibi kültürle etkileşim halindeyken kendi kültürlerini koruma eğiliminin yüksek olduğunu, en az ise asimilasyon stratejisini ($\bar{x}=2.568$) tercih ettiklerini ortaya koymuştur. İstatistiksel analizler, geldikleri ülkedeki dinî çoğunluğa bağlı olarak anlamlı farklılıklar göstermiş; Müslüman çoğunluklu ülkelere gelen öğrenciler hem bütünleşme hem de ayrışma boyutlarında daha yüksek puanlar sergilemiştir. Ayrıca, Asyalı öğrenciler Avrupalı öğrencilere kıyasla ayrışma boyutunda anlamlı derecede daha yüksek bir eğilim göstermiştir. Sosyo-kültürel, akademik ve psikolojik boyutlar altında kategorize edilen nitel veriler bu bulguları daha da netleştirmiş; bütünleşmenin sosyal ilişkilerde ve akademik ortamlarda en belirgin olduğunu göstermiştir. Buna karşın; değerlendirme yöntemlerindeki farklılıklar ve müfredattaki seküler içerikli dersler konusunda akademik ayrışma gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışma, Türkiye’deki yüksek din eğitimi ortamının büyük ölçüde kültürel bütünleşmeyi desteklediği, ancak kültürlenmenin akademik ve dini deneyimlerle şekillenen çok boyutlu ve dinamik bir süreç olmaya devam ettiği sonucuna ulaşmıştır. Bu bulgular, kültürlenme stratejilerinin esnek bir şekilde anlaşılmasını desteklemekte ve öğrencilerin bağlama göre genellikle birden fazla stratejiyi eşzamanlı olarak yürütebildiklerini göstermektedir. Gelecekteki araştırmalar, farklı kültürel ve eğitimsel bağlamlarda kültürleşme sürecini incelemek üzere disiplinlerarası ve çok boyutlu çerçeveler benimsemelidir. Kurumsal uygulamaların, akademik kültürün ve müfredatın uluslararası öğrencilerin kültürleşme stratejilerini nasıl şekillendirdiğine özellikle odaklanılmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Eğitimi, Yüksek Din Öğretimi, İlahiyat, Kültürlenme, Uluslararası Öğrenci.

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Introduction

The concept of acculturation was first introduced in 1936 by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits.¹ It is defined as the process of psychological and cultural change that occurs in individuals and groups as a result of intercultural contact.² This complex process manifests itself in identity, beliefs, language, values, cultural behaviors, and practices based on interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds.³ When people from different cultures live together, they inevitably interact, which can lead to cultural and psychological changes.⁴ These changes may result in either harmony or incompatibility. If the incompatibility between an individual's culture of origin and the host culture is significant, acculturation tends to be negatively affected.⁵

Acculturation is currently understood as a choice between the home culture and the target culture.⁶ It requires the acculturated individual to analyze the practices, relationship networks, forms of expression and interpretation, and moral values of the two cultures in a deliberate, reflective, and often comparative manner.⁷ This process oscillates between adherence to the home culture and adaptation to the new culture, resulting in a combination of the identity, values, and practices of the inherited and acquired cultures.⁸ Acculturation involves adapting to the host culture as a member of the immigrant group, and occurs through changes in language, values, lifestyle, customs, and habits.⁹ Although it is often considered to be a unidirectional change from the home culture towards the new culture,¹⁰ it also involves adapting to a third culture that emerges after contact with the new culture.¹¹

The acculturation process often begins with curiosity. However, as cultural differences start to impact daily life, individuals may blame themselves, resulting in acculturative stress.¹² The challenges in mental health and social behavior experienced by migrants when adapting to a foreign culture are defined as acculturative stress.¹³ The lack of life skills in the new culture can lead to psychosocial problems.¹⁴ Therefore, international students may encounter many problems related to daily life during the acculturation process, which can significantly impact their academic performance

- ¹ Robert Redfield et al., "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation", *American Anthropologist* 38/1 (1936), 149-152.
- ² John W. Berry, *Acculturation* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 16; David L. Sam, "Acculturation: Conceptual Background and Core Components", *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, ed. David L. Sam - John W. Berry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11; Redfield et al., "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation", 149; David L. Sam - John W. Berry, *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.
- ³ Paul G. Schmitz - Florian Schmitz, "Correlates of Acculturation Strategies: Personality, Coping, and Outcome", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 53/7-8 (2022), 877.
- ⁴ Abdurrahim Güler - Murat Yıldırım, "How is Acculturation Linked to Subjective Wellbeing: Evidence from Turkish Immigrants in the United States?," *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences* 7/2 (2021), 48.
- ⁵ Ramin Aliyev - Selahiddin Öğülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi", *Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 4/1 (2016), 91.
- ⁶ Elwood Carlson - Abdurrahim Güler, "Cultural Involvement and Preference in Immigrant Acculturation", *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 19/3 (2018), 626.
- ⁷ Valery Chirkov, "Alfred Schutz's 'Stranger', the Theory of Sociocultural Models, and Mechanisms of Acculturation", *Culture & Psychology* 29/1 (2023), 128.
- ⁸ Seth J. Schwartz et al., "Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation", *American Psychologist* 65/4 (2010), 237.
- ⁹ José Szapocznik et al., "Theory and Measurement of Acculturation", *International Journal of Psychology* 12 (1978), 114.
- ¹⁰ Anita Stasulane - Terhi-Anna Wilska, "Acculturation Orientations among Russian Youth in Finland", *Minorities - New Studies and Perspectives*, ed. John Hermann (Intechopen, 2023), 2.
- ¹¹ Peter F. Titzmann - Richard M. Lee, "New Temporal Concepts of Acculturation in Immigrant Youth", *Child Development Perspectives* 16/3 (2022), 1.
- ¹² Bohdan Rożnowski, "Acculturation Strategies of Ukrainian Students Studying in Poland and Their Well-Being", *Journal for Perspectives of Economic Political and Social Integration* 28/2 (2022), 47-48.
- ¹³ Bo Eun Jung, "Effects of Acculturation Types on Acculturative Stress and Adjustment to South Korean Society: Focusing on Chinese Immigrants", *Sustainability* 14/13370 (2022), 4.
- ¹⁴ Güler - Yıldırım, "How is Acculturation Linked to Subjective Wellbeing: Evidence from Turkish Immigrants in the United States?," 47-48.

and psychological well-being.¹⁵ In brief, international students' adaptation to a new culture occurs in four stages in general: In the first stage, individuals are excited by the new culture. In the second stage, culture shock begins, characterized by anger, anxiety, and loneliness. In the third stage, the acculturation process begins as individuals start to adapt to new conditions, and in the final stage, they establish an acculturation strategy, and the process becomes stationary.¹⁶

Berry defined acculturation as a multidimensional and dynamic process of cultural and psychological change resulting from the interaction between two different cultures.¹⁷ He based the acculturation process on the desire to maintain one's own culture while engaging with the host culture.¹⁸ Taking these two factors into account, he proposed four different acculturation strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization.¹⁹ The strategies of integration, separation, and assimilation were initially introduced. The marginalization, a form of deculturation, was later added to these strategies.²⁰ These four strategies do not represent a linear or sequential progression, but rather culturalization processes that develop independently of one another. However, an individual may adopt different strategies simultaneously in different situations.

Integration involves preserving one's own culture while accepting the new culture. Assimilation means refusing to maintain one's own culture and communicating only with the new culture. Separation entails trying to preserve one's own culture while avoiding interaction with the new culture. Marginalization means being indifferent to both cultures.²¹

Berry's acculturation model provides a framework for exploring identity in multicultural environments. It conceptualizes acculturation by distinguishing between processes and outcomes, classifying individuals' attitudes and adaptation status, and categorizing acculturated groups.²² According to Berry, there are four types of migrants: voluntary migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and guest migrants. Voluntary migrants migrate for reasons such as work and marriage; refugees settle in a new country unwillingly due to circumstances such as war, disaster, or persecution; asylum seekers voluntarily seek refuge in a new country due to fear of torture or violence; and guest migrants go to another country for a specific purpose and a limited period and then return home.²³ While 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are often used interchangeably in general discourse, they represent distinct legal and psychological statuses in migration literature. According to the UNHCR, an asylum seeker is an individual whose claim for international protection has not yet been finally decided, whereas a refugee is someone whose need for protection has been formally recognized.²⁴ In Berry's framework, this distinction is crucial as the uncertainty of the legal process for asylum seekers often leads to higher levels of acculturative stress compared to those with settled refugee status. International students, seasonal workers, and individuals travelling for professional reasons fall within the category of guest migrants.

¹⁵ Prashanth Talwar et al., "Sociodemographic Determinants of Acculturation Stress Among International University Students", *Journal of Social Science (EJOSS)* 8/1 (2022), 24.

¹⁶ Nesime Can, "International Students' Acculturation and Adjustment to College: Suggestions for Turkey", *Kastamonu Education Journal* 29/1 (2021), 213.

¹⁷ John W. Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation", *Applied Psychology* 41 (1997), 8.

¹⁸ John W. Berry et al., "Immigrant Youth: Acculturation, Identity, and Adaptation", *Applied Psychology* 55/3 (2006), 306.

¹⁹ John W. Berry - D. Sam, "Acculturation and Adaptation", *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Vol. 3*, ed. J. W. Berry et al. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon., 1997), 291-326.

²⁰ Schmitz - Schmitz, "Correlates of Acculturation Strategies: Personality, Coping, and Outcome", 879.

²¹ Yuezuo Mao et al., "Acculturation and Academic Adjustment of Student Sojourners in the Chinese Higher Education Context", *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10283153221150114 (2023), 3; Daniel Quilaqueo et al., "Dual Educational Rationality and Acculturation in Mapuche People in Chile", *Frontiers in Psychology* 14/112778 (2023), 2.

²² Quilaqueo et al., "Dual Educational Rationality and Acculturation in Mapuche People in Chile", 2.

²³ John W. Berry, "Contexts of Acculturation", *Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, ed. David L. Sam - John W. Berry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27-42.

²⁴ Anthony H. Richmond, "Reactive Migration: Sociological Perspectives On Refugee Movements", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6/1 (1993), 7-24; The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, "Asylum and Refugee Status", *Help Global*, (Access 01 April 2026).

Acculturation strategies may vary depending on different circumstances and areas of experience. Three factors have been identified as influencing the choice of strategy: the individual's current environment, the experiences acquired in the new culture, and the attitudes of the majority group.²⁵ A country's migration policy and the expectations of the majority also significantly affect acculturation strategies.²⁶ Therefore, the preferred acculturation strategies in work, family life, social life, and religious life may differ from one another. Studies reveal that acculturation is a multifaceted process involving different strategies employed in public and private domains.²⁷ For instance, integration may be the preferred strategy in education and professional life, while separation may be favored in home life.²⁸ Similarly, an integration strategy may be preferred in public areas, whereas a separation strategy may be favored in private areas.²⁹

The first legal regulation on international students in Türkiye was enacted in 1983. The issue of international students began to be addressed as a priority policy area in Türkiye, particularly in the early 1990s, following the independence of the Turkic Republics. Since then, the number of international students enrolled in Turkish higher educational institutions has fluctuated. While around 16,000 international students were studying in our country in the mid-1990s, the number first increased and then declined to approximately 14,000 by the mid-2000s. It then began to increase again, reaching 26,000 in 2010.³⁰ By 2024, this number reached approximately 336,000. This increase stems from the Higher Education Council's goal of increasing the number of international students in Turkey to 500,000 within the next five years and to 1 million in the long term. Türkiye aims to increase its visibility on the global education landscape and contribute to the national economy.³¹

Theology Faculties in Türkiye accept international students from other countries through various programmes. The International Theology Programme is a scholarship-based education programme run by the Presidency of Religious Affairs to provide Turkish youth living abroad and others of non-Turkish origin with the opportunity to pursue higher religious education in Türkiye.³² YÖK offers educational opportunities through the Higher Education Entrance Exam for Foreign Students in Turkey, administered by ÖSYM (Student Selection and Placement Center).³³ The "Türkiye Scholarships" programme, coordinated by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, provides international students with scholarships at international standards.³⁴

Acculturation is not a new field of study, as it has been the subject of research since the 1930s.³⁵ However, the global increase in migration, improvements in transportation opportunities, and the recognition of the relationship between human behavior and culture has increased academic interest in acculturation.³⁶ Intercultural interaction brings individuals and nations together, contributing to the development of an educational system that serves humanity as a whole.³⁷ The coexistence of people migrating from different cultures is reflected in national education policies, enabling the creation of

²⁵ Berry - Sam, "Acculturation and Adaptation".

²⁶ Schmitz - Schmitz, "Correlates of Acculturation Strategies: Personality, Coping, and Outcome", 878.

²⁷ Güler - Yıldırım, "How is Acculturation Linked to Subjective Wellbeing: Evidence from Turkish Immigrants in the United States?", 48.

²⁸ Seth J. Schwartz et al., "Biculturalism: Negotiating Multiple Cultural Streams", *Handbook of Acculturation and Health*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz - Jennifer B. Unger (Oxford University Press, 2017), 20-47.

²⁹ Judit Arends-Tóth - Fons J. R. Van De Vijver, "Multiculturalism and Acculturation: Views of Dutch and Turkish-Dutch", *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33/2 (2003), 249-266.

³⁰ Murat Özoğlu et al., *Küresel Eğilimler Işığında Türkiye'de Uluslararası Öğrenciler* (Ankara: SETA Yayınları, 2012), 54.

³¹ Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK). *2030'a Doğru Türk Yükseköğretiminin Yol Haritası*. Ankara: Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2025.

³² Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA). "UIP - International Divinity Program" (Access 15 September 2025).

³³ Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi (ÖSYM). "Türkiye Yurt Dışından Öğrenci Kabul Sınavı (TR-YÖS/1) Kılavuzu" (Access 15 March 2025).

³⁴ Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı (YTB). "Uluslararası Öğrenciler". Access 12 September 2025.

³⁵ Paul N. Lakey, "Acculturation: a Review of the Literature", *Intercultural Communication Studies* XII/2 (2003), 104.

³⁶ Sam - Berry, *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, 1.

³⁷ Aliyev - Öğülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi", 95.

new educational fields and the development of educational programmes. Therefore, the strong relationship between education, culture, and migration necessitates research on this topic.³⁸

International students, unlike groups displaced by wars, disasters, or crises, voluntarily choose to reside in a foreign country, making them particularly suitable subjects for acculturation research. Previous studies on acculturation have examined the acculturation status of university students in either Türkiye or another country. For example, Aliyev investigated how foreign university students in Türkiye perceived their interactions within the educational environment and their levels of acculturation.³⁹ Alkar examined the relationship between the cultural intelligence levels of international students in Türkiye and their levels of intercultural sensitivity and acculturation, using quantitative research methods.⁴⁰ Bektaş has revealed the psychological adaptation and acculturation attitudes of Turkish students in the United States.⁴¹ Unlike previous studies, this study employs a mixed-methods design to examine the acculturation experiences of international theology students at higher religious education institutions.

1. Research Problem

The rapid globalization of higher education has led to a significant increase in the number of international students in Türkiye, making acculturation a crucial process that shapes student identity, cultural values, and academic success. Acculturation, defined as the psychological and cultural changes arising from sustained intercultural contact, involves complex negotiations between students' home and host cultures. It is influenced by factors such as social support, cultural capital, self-esteem, and trust.⁴² Although extensive research has examined acculturation strategies among international students in Türkiye—highlighting common strategies such as assimilation and integration⁴³—there remains a notable gap concerning the distinct experiences of students in theology faculties. Theology faculties present unique challenges due to pronounced religious and cultural sensitivities, pedagogical differences in religious instruction, and social interactions governed by specific religious norms, which complicate the application of standard acculturation models such as integration or separation.⁴⁴ Empirical evidence suggests that theology students often demonstrate high intercultural sensitivity, but they also face ethnocentrism and identity negotiation processes that differ from those of other groups.⁴⁵ Their acculturation is also shaped by factors including geographical origin, religious majority status of their home country, and curriculum specifics.⁴⁶

³⁸ Tshatiwa Makula, "Independent Schools in South Africa: Acculturation of Zimbabwean Immigrant Teachers", *To Be a Minority Teacher in a Foreign Culture*, ed. Mary Gutman et al. (Switzerland: Springer, 2023), 184.

³⁹ Ramin Aliyev, *Farklı Kültürlerden Gelen Yüksek Öğretim Öğrencilerinin Eğitim Ortamlarındaki İlk Etkileşim Algılarının ve Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi, Doctoral Dissertation, 2011).

⁴⁰ Elif Alkar, *Eğitim Göçü Perspektifinde Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Kültürel Zeka Düzeyleri ile Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık ve Kültürlenme Düzeyleri Arasındaki İlişkilerin İncelenmesi* (Bursa: Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Doktora Tezi, 2022).

⁴¹ Dilek Yelda Bektaş, *Psychological Adaptation and Acculturation of the Turkish Students in the United States* (Ankara: Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Doctoral Dissertation, 2004).

⁴² Hatice Ergin Kocatürk et al., "Acculturation Strategies of International Higher Education Students in Türkiye: The Role of Social Support, Cultural Capital, Self-esteem, General Trust, and General Self-Efficacy", *Current Psychology* 44 (2025), 10679-10695; Esra Tekel et al., "Impact of Culture Shock, Acculturation Approaches, and Sociocultural Adaptation on Perceived Proficiency in Turkish and English Among International Students in Turkey", *Acta psychologica* 256/104999 (2025), 1-12.

⁴³ Ebru Boynueğri - Tülin Şener, "The Relationship Between Identity and Acculturation in International Students in Turkey", *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 92 (2021), 297-316; Tekel et al., "Impact of Culture Shock, Acculturation Approaches, and Sociocultural Adaptation on Perceived Proficiency in Turkish and English Among International Students in Turkey".

⁴⁴ Lasa Maximilian, "Transnational Islamic Higher Education: The International Theology Programme in Turkey", *Religionspädagogische Beiträge* 48/1 (2025), 1-12; İrfan Erdoğan - Muhiddin Okumuşlar, "Intercultural Sensitivity and Ethnocentrism Levels of Theology Students in a Turkish University Sample", *Religions* 11/237 (2020), 1-19.

⁴⁵ Erdoğan - Okumuşlar, "Intercultural Sensitivity and Ethnocentrism Levels of Theology Students in a Turkish University Sample", 14.

⁴⁶ Maximilian, "Transnational Islamic Higher Education: The International Theology Programme in Turkey"; Zekiye Demir - Ömer Toprak, "Changes in Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of Euro-Turk Students With Theology Education", *Teaching Theology & Religion* 26/1 (2023), 29-43.

Addressing this gap through mixed-methods research could help to develop culturally sensitive support systems tailored to the multifaceted sociocultural and academic needs of international theology students within the higher educational context in Türkiye.⁴⁷

Building upon these theoretical and empirical considerations, the current study addresses the central research question: 'How do international theology students in Türkiye navigate the multifaceted processes and strategies of acculturation within the specialized context of higher religious education?' To facilitate a comprehensive analysis through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods framework, the research further investigates the following sub-questions:

1. What are the dominant acculturation strategies—specifically integration, separation, and assimilation—utilized by international theology students?

2. To what extent do these strategies vary significantly according to key demographic and academic variables, including the religious majority status of the home country, grade level, and specific cultural-theological basins?

3. How do students' experiences in sociocultural, academic, and psychological dimensions explain and elaborate upon the acculturation patterns observed in the quantitative phase?

4. How does the unique institutional atmosphere and curriculum of the theology faculty influence the students' holistic interaction with the host culture?

2. Method

2.1. Research Model

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach. It was conducted using an explanatory sequential design.⁴⁸ First, quantitative data were collected, followed by qualitative data to further clarify findings from the quantitative data that required additional explanation. The quantitative part of the study examined the acculturation experiences of international students receiving higher religious education in Turkey using descriptive and correlational methods. A survey method was chosen for this study. As emphasized in the literature, this method should be the preferred method for large samples when using a standardized scale based on self-reporting.⁴⁹ The qualitative part of the study was designed as a case study. In a case study, the factors related to a situation are investigated holistically, focusing on how these factors affect that situation and vice versa.⁵⁰ This study adopts a case study design to analyze the case of acculturation within a real-life context and highlights the holistic interaction between international theology students and their specific institutional environments. The boundaries of the "case" in this research are clearly defined by institutional, temporal, and participant-specific parameters, establishing it as a bounded system. Geographically and institutionally, the case is confined to the Necmettin Erbakan University, Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Theology in Konya, Türkiye. Focusing on this specific institutional setting, the research examines how the unique atmosphere of a Turkish theology faculty—characterized by its specific theological pedagogy and social environment—interacts with the diverse cultural backgrounds of students from 48 different countries.

It is essential to distinguish this case study approach from phenomenology to clarify the research's analytical focus. While a phenomenological study would seek to explore the "universal essence" of being an international theology student—focusing primarily on the internal, subjective nature of the experience—this study uses a case study design to prioritize the interaction between the individual and their real-life context. The objective is not merely to describe the feeling of acculturation, but to analyze it as a case inextricably linked to the specific institutional environment of the Ahmet

⁴⁷ Nesrin Çötök Akıncı et al., "Evaluation of the Adaptation Processes of International Students Participating in Educational Mobility Through the Türkiye Scholarships Program", *Participatory Educational Research* 12/4 (2025), 134-150; Sevim Atıla Demir et al., "International Students' Adaptation Process in a Turkish University", *Journal of International Students* 15/5 (2025), 41-62.

⁴⁸ John W. Creswell et al., "Advanced Mixed Methods Research Designs", *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, ed. Abbas Tashakkori - Charles Teddlie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 209-240.

⁴⁹ Şener Büyüköztürk et al., *Bilimsel Araştırma Yöntemleri* (Ankara: Pegem Akademi Yayınları, 2008).

⁵⁰ Ali Yıldırım - Hasan Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri* (Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık, 2018), 73.

Keleşoğlu Faculty of Theology. Thus, the focus remains on the "case" as a functioning unit where academic, sociocultural, and psychological dimensions converge within the particular context of Turkish education.

2.2. Participants

Students come from abroad in three different ways to pursue higher religious education in Türkiye: Türkiye scholarships, the International Theology Programme (UIP), and the Exam for Foreign Students (YÖS). When the study was conducted between February and July 2024, there were approximately 330 international students enrolled at the Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Theology. Around 53% of these students were enrolled in the UIP programme, around 7% were recipients of the Turkish government scholarship, and the remaining 40% financed their studies independently (Source: NEÜ Theology Faculty Office of Student Affairs). The study group included students from all three programmes. Additionally, students who migrated to Türkiye due to war, disasters, or other events in their home countries were included to maximize diversity. The students came from a wide range of countries, including Afghanistan, Germany, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Denmark, East Turkistan, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Palestine, France, Ghana, Guinea, Georgia, India, Iraq, Japan, Cambodia, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Congo, Kosovo, Liberia, Lebanon, Mali, Egypt, Mongolia, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Rwanda, Senegal, Serbia, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Togo, Uganda, and Greece. The demographic data of the 169 students who participated in the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	Groups	N	%
Gender	Female	64	37.9
	Male	105	62.1
Marital Status	Single	149	88.2
	Married	20	11.8
Grade	Preparatory Class	30	17.8
	1st grade	46	27.2
	2nd grade	31	18.3
	3rd grade	34	20.1
	4th grade	28	16.6
Age	21 and under	60	35.3
	22-23	58	34.3
	24 and above	51	30.2
Place of Residence	Dormitory	135	79.9
	With family	34	20.1

	Europe	60	35.5
Continent of Origin	Africa	30	17.8
	Asia	79	46.7
Total		169	100

One of the purposive sampling methods, maximum variation sampling, was used to select students to participate in the qualitative phase of the study. To ensure diversity, different cultural regions around the world were first identified, and students from these regions were invited to participate in interviews. Those who wished to participate were included as interviewees. Accordingly, 16 students who had participated in the quantitative phase were selected for the qualitative phase and were interviewed. The demographic characteristics of the students in the qualitative study group are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Students Participating in the Interviews

Code	Age	Gender	Grade	Marital Status	Country	Native language	Length of Stay in Türkiye (years)	Accommodation type in Türkiye	Nationality of cohabitants	Length of stay in Home Country within the Past Year
M1	18	M	1	Single	Syria	Arabic	4	Dormitory	Iranian	2 months
M2	33	M	4	Married	Afghanistan	Uzbek	14	Home with family	Turkish	Never
M3	24	M	3	Single	Bangladesh	Bangla	4	Dormitory	Africa and Bangladesh	3 months
M4	24	M	2	Single	Belarus	Russian	4	Student house	Uzbek and Turkish	Never
M5	22	M	2	Single	Ivory Coast	Bambaridi	5	Dormitory	Uzbekistan and Guinea	Never
M6	26	M	3	Single	Mali	French	4	Dormitory	Bosnia and Herzegovina	15 days
M7	23	M	2	Single	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnian	4	Dormitory	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.5 months
M8	25	M	4	Married	Germany	Turkish	5	Home with family	Turkish	3 months
M9	23	M	2	Single	Palestine	Arabic	4	Dormitory	Sudan and Afghanistan	10 days
F1	22	F	3	Single	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	3	Student house	Syria	Never
F2	24	F	2	Single	Georgia	Georgian	5	Dormitory	Yemen	15 days
F3	20	F	1	Single	East Turkistan	Uyghur	6	Dormitory	Thailand and Indonesia	Never
F4	21	F	1	Single	Indonesia	Indonesian	1.5	Dormitory	Thai and Uyghur	2 months
F5	21	F	2	Single	India	Malayalam	3.5	Dormitory	German and Mongolian	2 months
F6	25	F	4	Single	Germany	German	5	Dormitory	Albanian and Georgian	2 months
F7	21	F	4	Married	Mongolia	Kazakh	5	Home with family	Kazakh	3 months

2.3. Data Collection Tools

In this study, quantitative data were collected using the Acculturation Scale, while qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Participants provided data through written self-reports. Necessary permissions were obtained from the ethics and administrative boards, as well as from the authors who developed the scale. The study was conducted following Ethics Committee Approval No. 2023/182, dated April 12, 2023, from The Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University.

Acculturation Scale: The quantitative phase of this study used the "Acculturation Scale," originally developed in Turkish by Aliyev (2011), to examine the acculturative levels of international students within the Turkish higher education context.⁵¹ Because the scale was natively designed for international students in Türkiye, it was highly compatible with the target population in terms of localised semantics and culture. The dimensions in the acculturation scale are assimilation, separation, and integration. The scale measures integration strategy with 31 items, separation strategy with 24 items, and assimilation strategy with 29 items. The scale was designed as a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which participants can evaluate themselves for each item with a range of 5 "Strongly agree" and 1 "Strongly disagree." The mean of each dimension in the scale reveals the preferred acculturation strategy of each individual. A high score on a subscale indicates the individual's tendency to use that strategy the most. In the factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) (.80) and Bartlett's test [$\chi^2(3846)=5676.72$, $p<.01$] results were found to be within acceptable values. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency value was found to be .82. According to the results of the exploratory factor analysis, the 1st Factor (Separation) explained 15% of the total variance, the 2nd Factor (Assimilation) explained 10%, and the 3rd Factor (Integration) explained 7%. Although this explained variance is relatively modest, it is consistent with the original validation study of the scale and reflects the complex, multi-dimensional nature of the acculturation construct in a Turkish context. Additionally, the high KMO value (.80) and strong Cronbach's alpha internal consistency (.82) confirm the scale's reliability and suitability for the sample.

The scale was administered to participants in Turkish, as it is the primary language of instruction and daily communication within the faculty. To ensure methodological transparency regarding the participants' ability to accurately comprehend the 84-item instrument, linguistic proficiency was assessed through several institutional and academic benchmarks: All participants had completed the mandatory one-year intensive Turkish language preparatory programme required for theological studies or demonstrated C1-level Turkish proficiency (or equivalent) to participate in departmental courses.

The internal reliability of the scale for this specific group was statistically confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha values of .882, .804, and .883 found for integration, separation, and assimilation strategies, respectively. These values ensure that participants accurately understood and reported the nuanced concepts within the integration, separation, and assimilation dimensions.

Semi-Structured Interview Form: To enrich the quantitative data in the study, participants were interviewed and asked semi-structured questions. The opinions of three field experts and one language expert were consulted in preparing the interview questions. The interviews were conducted in the Turkish language as all participants were proficient in listening to and speaking it. In alignment with the "researcher as an instrument" paradigm essential to qualitative inquiry, the interviews were conducted by the researcher, an academic member of the Theology Faculty with expertise in religious education and intercultural dynamics. This specialized background facilitated the establishment of professional rapport and a common theological vocabulary, which was critical for creating a safe environment where students could discuss sensitive cultural and religious themes. The researcher collected data free from personal bias whilst seeking to uncover the participants' perceptions and experiences.⁵² An audio recording was made during the interview, and the transcripts were dictated

⁵¹ Aliyev - Ögülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi".

⁵² Yıldırım - Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, 92.

by the interviewer. The interview transcripts were verified by the participants after they had been transcribed.

2.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained in the study were analyzed using the SPSS 21.0 statistical software. The study evaluated the requirements for parametric tests. The research design ensured the independence of observations. Normality tests indicated that skewness and kurtosis values were within the acceptable range of -1 to +1, as suggested in the literature.⁵³ The skewness and kurtosis values were "0.041" and "0.181" for the "separation" dimension, "-0.301" and "0.039" for the "integration" dimension, and "0.207" and "-0.388" for the "assimilation" dimension, respectively. In addition, Levene's test values indicated that homogeneity of variances had been achieved ($p > 0.05$). Descriptive, comparative, and correlational analyses were conducted on the findings. The "Pearson's Correlational Test" was used in the correlational analyses between the dimensions of the scale and the variables of age and length of stay in Türkiye. The "Independent sample t-test" was used to determine whether there were significant differences between the variables of gender, marital status, native language and religious majority. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether significant differences existed in terms of grade, length of stay in the home country in the past year, nationality of cohabitants and continent of origin. When tabulating the data, the subscales were used rather than the overall scale mean. Since the authors who developed the scale introduced acculturation as a construct based on its dimensions, assessments of these dimensions were considered more valid than an overall scale assessment when analyzing the findings. The assessment intervals for the Acculturation Scale scores were as follows: 1.00–2.33 = low level, 2.34–3.67 = moderate level, and 3.68–5.00 = high level.

To analyze the students' countries of origin, a t-test was conducted by categorizing the countries into two groups: "Muslim-majority countries" and "non-Muslim-majority countries." This distinction was influenced by the fact that religion significantly affects culture, that all the students in the study group are Muslim, that Türkiye, the host country where they pursue their university education, has a predominantly Muslim population, and that these factors may have an impact on the participants' acculturation process.

The qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 10 analysis software. Content analysis was employed during the analysis process. First, the codes were identified, and then themes were derived from the relationships between them. It is necessary to identify the similarities and differences between the codes, and on that basis, to group together related codes into themes.⁵⁴

3. Findings

3.1. Findings Related to the Quantitative Dimension

Descriptive statistics for the scores obtained from the Acculturation Scale are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Results Regarding Participants' Acculturation Scale Means

Factor	N	Minimum	Maximum	\bar{x}	S
Separation	169	1.83	4.50	3.232	.503
Integration	169	2.29	4.87	3.786	.498
Assimilation	169	1.17	3.86	2.568	.531

According to the results of the descriptive analyses in Table 3, participants received the highest score on the *integration* dimension ($\bar{x}=3.786$) and the lowest score on the *assimilation* dimension ($\bar{x}=2.568$). The mean score for the *integration* dimension corresponds to a high level of tendency, while the mean score for the *assimilation* and *separation* dimensions ($\bar{x}=3.232$) correspond to a moderate level of tendency.

⁵³ Darren George - Paul Mallery, *IBM SPSS Statistics 23 Step by Step: A Simple Guide and Reference* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 114.

⁵⁴ Yıldırım - Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, 250.

3.2. Findings Regarding the Differences in Participants' Acculturation Scale Scores in Terms of Independent Variables

The results of the independent samples t-test conducted to determine whether there were significant differences based on variables of gender, marital status, native language, religious majority in the country of origin, and place of residence are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test Results by Gender, Marital Status, Native Language, Religious Majority, and Place of Residence

Factor	Variables	Groups	N	\bar{x}	S	t	df	p
Separation	Gender	Female	64	3.201	.481	-.610	167	.543
		Male	105	3.250	.517			
	Marital Status	Single	149	3.238	.489	.421	167	.674
		Married	20	3.187	.608			
	Native Language	Turkish Languages	40	3.187	.490	-.641	167	.522
		Other Languages	129	3.246	.508			
Religious Majority	Muslim Majority	90	3.325	.499	2.632	167	.009*	
	Muslim Minority	79	3.125	.488				
Place of Residence	Dormitory	135	3.229	.490	-.152	167	.880	
	With family	34	3.243	.559				
Integration	Gender	Female	64	3.730	.446	-1.135	167	.258
		Male	105	3.201	.527			
	Marital Status	Single	149	3.790	.503	.256	167	.798
		Married	20	3.759	.472			
	Native Language	Turkish Languages	40	3.841	.510	.802	167	.424
		Other Languages	129	3.769	.496			
Religious Majority	Muslim Majority	90	3.916	.467	3.750	167	.000*	
	Muslim Minority	79	3.638	.495				
Place of Residence	Dormitory	135	3.77	.515	-.593	167	.554	
	With family	34	3.83	.431				
Assimilation	Gender	Female	64	2.493	.507	-1.436	167	.153
		Male	105	2.614	.542			
	Marital Status	Single	149	2.582	.540	.923	167	.358
		Married	20	2.465	.458			
	Native Language	Turkish Languages	40	2.687	.431	1.636	167	.104
		Other Languages	129	2.531	.554			
Religious Majority	Muslim Majority	90	2.618	.5302	1.297	167	.196	
	Muslim Minority	79	2.512	.529				
Place of Residence	Dormitory	135	2.566	.547	-.081	167	.936	
	With family	34	2.575	.467				

*p<.05

According to the t-test results conducted to examine the differences in participants' Acculturation Scale scores in terms of gender, marital status, native language, religious majority, and place of residence variables, no significant differences were observed ($p>.05$) except for the significant difference in favor of participants from Muslim-majority countries in the separation ($t_{(167)}=2.632$, $p<.05$) and integration ($t_{(167)}=3.750$, $p<.05$) factors of the religious majority.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Test Results Between Participants' Acculturation Scale Dimensions and the Age and Length of Stay in Türkiye

Variables		Separation	Integration	Assimilation
Age	r	.067	.079	-.095
	p	.390	.305	.220
	N	169	169	169
Length of Stay in Türkiye	r	.015	.060	-.154*
	p	.850	.435	.046
	N	169	169	169

* p< .05

When the Pearson Correlation Test results between the participants' Acculturation Scale dimensions and age were examined, no significant relationships were found between acculturation strategies and age ($p>0.05$). This indicates that being younger or older did not lead to any significant

differences in the preference for acculturation strategies. When the relationship between the participants' acculturation strategies and their length of stay in Türkiye was examined, a weak, significantly negative relationship was found only in the assimilation dimension ($r=-0.154$, $p<0.05$).

Table 6. ANOVA Test Results for the Grade Variable

Factors		Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	p	Differences (Scheffe Test)
Separation	Between Groups	.466	4	.116	.454	.769	-
	Within Groups	42.071	164	.257			
	Total	42.537	168				
Integration	Between Groups	2.729	4	.682	2.863	.025*	1st Grade < 2nd Grade
	Within Groups	39.085	164	.238			
	Total	41.815	168				
Assimilation	Between Groups	3.948	4	.987	3.726	.006*	Preparatory Class > 1st Grade
	Within Groups	43.448	164	.265			
	Total	47.396	168	.116			

* $p<.05$

In the ANOVA analysis conducted to examine differences in participants' Acculturation Scale dimensions according to grade, significant differences were observed in the *integration* and *assimilation* dimensions. A significant difference was found between the first grade and second grade students in the *integration* dimension ($F_{(4, 164)}=2.863$, $p=.025$); and between the preparatory class and the first grade students in the *assimilation* dimension ($F_{(4, 164)}=3.726$, $p=.006$). Second-grade students differed significantly from first-grade students in their use of the integration strategy, and first-grade students differed significantly from the preparatory class students in their abandonment of the assimilation strategy.

Table 7. ANOVA Test Results for the Length of Stay in the Home Country Within the Past Year Variable

Factors	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	p	Differences (Scheffe Test)
Separation	Between Groups	1.341	5	.268	1.061	.384	-
	Within Groups	41.196	163	.253			
	Total	42.537	168				
Integration	Between Groups	1.790	5	.358	1.458	.206	-
	Within Groups	40.025	163	.246			
	Total	41.815	168				
Assimilation	Between Groups	1.273	5	.255	.900	.483	-
	Within Groups	46.123	163	.283			
	Total	47.396	168				

In the ANOVA analysis conducted to examine differences in participants' Acculturation Scale dimensions according to the length of stay in their home country within the past year, no significant differences were observed between the groups ($p > .05$).

Table 8. ANOVA Test Results for the Nationality of Cohabitants

Factors	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	p	Differences (Scheffe Test)
Separation	Between Groups	.142	3	.047	.185	.907	-
	Within Groups	42.394	165	.257			
	Total	42.537	168				
Integration	Between Groups	.947	3	.316	1.275	.285	-
	Within Groups	40.867	165	.248			
	Total	41.815	168				
Assimilation	Between Groups	.700	3	.233	.824	.482	-
	Within Groups	46.696	165	.283			
	Total	47.396	168				

In the analysis conducted to determine whether participants' acculturation strategies differed according to the nationality of their cohabitants, no differences were observed between the groups ($p>0.05$).

Table 9. ANOVA Test Results for the Continent Variable

Factors	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	p	Differences (Scheffe Test)
Separation	Between Groups	2.195	2	1.098	4.516	.012*	Europe < Asia
	Within Groups	40.342	166	.243			
	Total	42.537	168				
Integration	Between Groups	1.142	2	.571	2.331	.100	
	Within Groups	40.673	166	.245			
	Total	41.815	168				
Assimilation	Between Groups	.185	2	.093	.326	.722	
	Within Groups	47.211	166	.284			
	Total	47.396	168				

* $p<.05$

According to the analysis conducted to determine whether participants' acculturation strategies differed according to the continent of origin, there was a significant difference between continents only in the separation dimension ($F(2, 166)=4.516, p=.012$). Accordingly, students from Asia had significantly higher mean scores on the separation dimension compared to students from Europe, indicating a significant difference in favor of Asian students.⁵⁵

3.3. Qualitative Findings

The data obtained to identify participants' acculturation patterns were analyzed under three main themes: *integration* ($f = 56$), *separation* ($f = 68$), and *assimilation* ($f = 24$). For each theme, the data were further categorized into socio-cultural, academic, and psychological dimensions. The fact that the frequency values for separation and integration strategies are close is noteworthy.

⁵⁵ A country-level classification was not feasible given the insufficient cell sizes it would have produced. Continental grouping thus provided a theoretically grounded and statistically viable unit of analysis, while acknowledging that within-continent cultural variation represents an inherent limitation to be considered in the interpretation of findings. It has been considered that European-origin students came predominantly from developed economies characterized by ethnically diverse, multicultural societies shaped historically by post-war migration. On the other hand Asian and African-origin students, by contrast, came from developing economies generally marked by lower levels of migration-driven cultural diversity.

Integration

Findings related to the integration theme are most prominently reflected in the socio-cultural and academic aspects, showing high frequencies in these areas.

Table 10. Findings Related to the Integration Theme

Category	Code	Statement
Socio-cultural integration <i>f=38</i>	Language	If there's a Turk around, we speak Turkish. But if there isn't, of course we speak Arabic. (F1)
	Religious life	Turkish culture is actually the same as ours. In my country, we also greet everyone the way people do here. (F4)
	Music/Entertainment	This year, I started listening to Turkish folk songs. I really liked them, whether they're religious songs or folk songs. The music in India is so different, but the music in Türkiye is completely different. It really feels good to me here. (F5)
	Clothing /Dress style	In Palestine, I did not use to wear pants. Now I can go out to the streets and markets in pants. We even started wearing suits here (in Türkiye). (F9)
	Cultural proximity / Social relations	Turkish culture feels really close to ours. I even lived in the same house with Turks. I really got along better with them. (F1)
	Food & Drink	When we first came to Türkiye, we only ate chicken rice. Now I am used to it; there is no Turkish food I haven't tried... I eat everything. (F5)
Academic integration <i>f=27</i>	Friendships	(With our professors and classmates at the faculty, the environment is really different. It's great. I'm really happy. After graduation, I want to stay in Türkiye and spend more time here. (F6)
	Educational quality	Courses like Sociology of Religion and Psychology of Religion were not offered in the madrasa. I am glad I took these courses (in the Faculty of Theology). Now, as a Muslim, I can comfortably sit, talk, and work with non-Muslims. I even believe I can represent Islam well. None of this would have been possible if I hadn't studied Theology in Türkiye. (M2)
	Learning environment	At the Faculty of Theology, I can also meet my professors privately. That doesn't happen in Germany. A student cannot have a teacher's phone number there; communication is only via email or through the school. (M8)
Psychological integration <i>f=1</i>	Religious freedom	For me, it was a very special moment: The first time we had a Quran class, I walked into the cafeteria holding the Quran in my hand. I said, 'Right now I am walking around the school with the Quran in my hand.' Even now, thinking about it makes me emotional. We could never experience this in Germany. (F6)

Separation

The frequency of the findings related to the theme of separation is mostly concentrated in the sociocultural dimension; however, the considerable number of findings exemplifying separation in the academic dimension is also noteworthy.

Table 11. Findings Related to the Theme of Separation

Category	Code	Statement
Socio-cultural separation <i>f= 38</i>	Social relations	In Afghanistan, we don't kiss hands. In Türkiye, people kiss the hands of elders and teachers. Actually, I want to do it, but because of the influence of my culture, I still can't. (M2)
	Eating and drinking	In Türkiye, it's bread in the morning, bread in the evening, always bread. Eating bread still affects me, I find it really difficult, I just can't do it. (M3)
	Bad habits	In Mongolia, people don't smoke. For example, a woman pushing a baby stroller with a cigarette in her hand.. That's really shameful. (F7)
	Music/entertainment	In our region (Syria), weddings are not mixed (men and women together), but in Türkiye they are. That's what I heard, so I've never been to a wedding in Türkiye. (M1)

	Clothing/Dress style	In my country (Ivory Coast), women don't wear trousers. I mean, if a woman go out wearing trousers, we ostracize her. But in Türkiye, women dress like men. (M5)
	Religious life	In Bangladesh, people know that not fasting is a sin, but at least they don't eat in public. Here, they smoke and eat openly. It's very strange, I couldn't get used to it. (M3)
Academic separation <i>f</i> = 28	Academic calendar	In Germany, the schedule for the next 2–3 years is already clear... Here, the midterm exam dates were announced just one week before. We were really surprised. (M8)
	Course content/number of courses	Psychology of religion, philosophy, religious education, (Islamic) arts, even History of the Turkish Revolution — we see all of these as outside our field. Since they're outside our field, they're really difficult for us. (M5)
	Language of instruction	The teacher doesn't teach the course in Arabic. But who originally taught this religion? The Prophet himself, and in the Arabic language. Yet your language isn't Arabic. The teachers don't have enough Arabic teach the course. (M9)
	Secular education/	Children in Türkiye can easily lose their religion. There's too much secularism, it's unbelievable. (M4)
	Teaching method	And also, the education is always theoretical. For example, when I studied Arabic prep, it was all theory, not focused on speaking at all. I was a bit disappointed about that. (F2)
	Assessment and evaluation	In Türkiye, everything being based on memorization is wrong. I guess that's just how the educational system is here. We had to get used to it. I had a really hard time getting used to it. (F6)
	Social environment	In the faculty of theology, the atmosphere is very reserved. Unfortunately, there is a distance between girls and boys. That felt a bit strange to me. (F2)
Psychological separation <i>f</i> =2	Exclusion anxiety and ethnic discrimination	I'm still hesitant to say that I'm Syrian. I don't tell anyone. (F1)

Assimilation

Although it is possible to encounter findings under this theme that highlight positive aspects of Turkish culture and argue that the experience of living in Türkiye contributes to personal development, there are also findings indicating that assimilation occurs through the emergence of certain undesirable behaviors in social, religious, and academic life.

Table 12. Findings Related to the Theme of Assimilation

Category	Code	Statement
Sociocultural assimilation <i>f</i> =17	Use of Turkish language	At the dorm and at school, I speak and write Turkish everywhere. So it feels like I've forgotten my native language. When I talk to my mom, Turkish words come out of my mouth. I've really gotten used to it now. (M3)
	Clothing / Dress style	My way of dressing has completely changed. I tried to adapt myself to how Turks dress and behave. (M5)
	Relationships between men and women	When I went to Germany for summer vacation, my friends there told me, 'You've become Turkish!' (M8)
	Religious life	In Türkiye, we were in the same class with girls, took the same bus, sat in the same seats. We found it a bit strange. In Afghanistan, this didn't happen. But over time, of course, we got used to it. I got used to it too. (M2)
Academic assimilation <i>f</i> =1	Late attendance to class	In prep school, for the first time, our teachers were late, didn't show up, didn't inform us. We were not used to that at all. But humans adapt. We got so used to it that now we are late too. (F6)
Psychological assimilation <i>f</i> =6	Subjective well-being	I felt more comfortable in Türkiye than in Belarus. Even though Belarus is my homeland, I never felt comfortable there. (M4) When I first went to Germany (from Türkiye), I used to say, "I'm from Konya now. My father was angry with me, asking, 'Why do you say that?' (F6)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal that some acculturation strategies share common codes. It's natural that some codes that support the separation or assimilation themes also appear within the integration theme. A moderate degree of adaptation to the host culture highlights the *integration* strategy, while a weaker degree highlights

the *separation* strategy, and a stronger degree highlights the *assimilation* strategy. Furthermore, the similarity of codes across themes suggests that not every participant has a single acculturation strategy, or that participants' acculturation strategies can vary on the same topic. As Berry and Sam point out, individuals may adopt a single strategy.⁵⁶ However, their strategy preferences can vary under different circumstances.

The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design of this study facilitates a rigorous synthesis where qualitative narratives directly illuminate the mechanisms behind statistical trends. The quantitative results reveal that international theology students predominantly adopt an integration strategy ($\bar{x}=3.786$), while the assimilation strategy ($\bar{x}=2.568$) is the least preferred. As noted in numerous studies, integration is the most desired and supported strategy.⁵⁷ In determining the nature of acculturation strategies and processes, the acculturating individual's perception of *the host culture* is of great importance. This high level of integration is explained by the qualitative findings as a result of "cultural proximity" and "academic synergy". For instance, participants like F1 noted that "Turkish culture feels really close to ours," which allowed for seamless social relations and shared living arrangements with Turkish peers. Furthermore, academic integration is bolstered by the perceived quality of education. It is also noteworthy that the participants who cited the quality of higher education in Türkiye as a reason for their choice included students from all regions, ranging from Western Europe to South Asia. Other studies have also reported that the quality of higher education in Türkiye is among the reasons international students studying in various faculties choose Türkiye.⁵⁸ Özkan's findings⁵⁹ that "the most important advantages of studying in Türkiye are 'receiving a good education,' 'studying in better and freer living conditions,' and 'earning a respected diploma,' are consistent with the findings of this study. On the other hand, there are studies suggesting that both integration and separation are prominent acculturation strategies⁶⁰ and that integration is the least commonly used acculturation strategy.⁶¹

The "paradoxical" t-test results showing that students from Muslim-majority countries score higher in both integration ($t=3.750$, $p<.05$) and separation ($t=2.632$, $p<.05$) are clarified through the lens of religious sensitivity. Integration is driven by a deep emotional and spiritual connection to the environment; F6 expressed profound emotion at the freedom to carry the Quran openly in the faculty cafeteria, an experience impossible for her in Germany. Conversely, separation among this same group is triggered by perceived secularization in the host culture. M3 noted a sense of alienation when observing people smoking or eating openly during fasting periods, a behavior he described as "very strange" compared to the public norms of his home country. This suggests that while shared faith facilitates integration, differences in "religious practice and public conduct" simultaneously drive a separation strategy. The qualitative findings are consistent with the findings of studies in the literature demonstrating that satisfaction with academic processes and academic adaptation have a positive impact on integration and a negative impact on assimilation and separation during acculturation processes, and that they contribute to the ability to cope with the stress caused by acculturation.⁶² Balcı and Ögüt found in their study that among students who came

⁵⁶ Berry - Sam, "Acculturation and Adaptation".

⁵⁷ Laura Elisabeth Tutorea et al., "Cultural Immersion, Acculturation Strategies, and Depressive Symptoms among First-Generation Vietnamese Migrants in Germany", *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 69/8 (2023), 2048-2058; Güler - Yıldırım, "How is Acculturation Linked to Subjective Wellbeing: Evidence from Turkish Immigrants in the United States?"; Şükrü Balcı - Nesrin Ögüt, "Yabancı Uyruklu Üniversite Öğrencileri Arasında Kültürleşme ve Kültürleşme Stratejileri", *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 42/1 (2019), 49-62; John W. Berry - Feng Hou, "Acculturation, Discrimination and Wellbeing among Second Generation of Immigrants in Canada", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 61 (2017), 29-39.

⁵⁸ Somayyeh Radmard, "Türk Üniversitelerindeki Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Yükseköğretim Taleplerini Etkileyen Etkenlerin İncelenmesi" *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi* 7/1 (2017), 67-77.

⁵⁹ Fatih Özkan, *Türkiye'de İlahiyat Fakültelerinde Eğitim Gören Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Memnuniyet Düzeyleri* (Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü: Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi, Doctoral Dissertation, 2019), v.

⁶⁰ Katharina Lefringhausen et al., "Majority Members' Acculturation: How Proximal-Acculturation Relates to Expectations of Immigrants and Intergroup Ideologies Over Time", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 26/5 (2022), 953-984.

⁶¹ Nnenna Ndika, "Acculturation: A Pilot Study on Nigerians in America and Their Coping Strategies", *Sage Open* 3/4 (2013), 1-8.

⁶² Murat Özoğlu et al., "Factors Influencing International Students' Choice to Study in Turkey and Challenges They Experience in Turkey", *Research in Comparative & International Education* 10/2 (2015), 223-237; Can, "International Students' Acculturation and Adjustment to College: Suggestions for Turkey", 213.

to Türkiye for education, Muslims were more likely to adopt the integration strategy than non-Muslims.⁶³ Similarly, Karipek reported the positive effects of sharing the same religion on the acculturation and integration processes of Syrian university students who had to migrate to Türkiye.⁶⁴

The qualitative findings reveal that the academic dimension's influence on the choice of strategy is comparable to that of the sociocultural dimension. This situation is related both to the unique nature of the field of Theology as a specialized area of study and to Türkiye's distinct circumstances compared to other Muslim countries. Since theological education is shaped around the fundamental teachings of a religion, students' expectations regarding this education may differ from those in other higher educational fields, such as medicine or engineering. An individual's or a group's understanding of religion can influence the "nature" of this education. On the other hand, considering that Türkiye's educational processes—including formal religious education—have integrated with Western education earlier and in a different manner than other Muslim countries.⁶⁵ Thus, the academic differentiation of students from other Muslim countries can be better understood. While students from Arab countries criticize higher religious education in Türkiye for moving away from traditional structures and placing greater emphasis on courses such as philosophy, sociology, and psychology, Muslim students from Western Europe criticize this education for still being close to traditional education.

According to the quantitative findings of the study, the length of stay in Türkiye has a minor effect on distancing from assimilation strategies and has no effect on the adoption of integration and separation strategies. This finding is inconsistent with the claim made by some authors that "the cultural adaptation process is a linear process that develops over time".⁶⁶ According to Balcı and Ögüt, the length of stay in Türkiye only has an effect on the assimilation strategy, but not on the adoption of integration and separation strategies.⁶⁷ The length of stay of international students in the host country has a positive impact on their acculturation strategies, particularly supporting the integration strategy.⁶⁸ However, this study found that a longer stay in Türkiye contributed only weakly to distancing from the assimilation strategy and had no effect on the separation or integration strategies. While this finding may be interpreted as a sign of incompatibility from the perspective of the host culture, it can be evaluated as a form of preserving one's own culture from the perspective of the guest cultures.

Another variable related to the length of stay in the host country is the length of stay in the home country within the past year. This study found that the length of stay in the home country within the past year did not have any effect on the participants' acculturation strategies. This finding may be interpreted as an indication that advances in technology and transportation have reduced the length of stay in the home country, thereby decreasing the severity of the longing for family,⁶⁹ which was previously reported in the literature as one of the major problems faced by international students.

The grade variable is also related to the length of stay in Türkiye. While no significant relationship was found between length of stay in Türkiye and acculturation strategies, a significant difference was observed in the integration and assimilation dimensions between preparatory class, first grade, and second grade students, in favor of the upper grades. Second graders adopted the integration strategy more than first graders, and first graders significantly differed from the preparatory class in their tendency to abandon the assimilation strategy. It can be interpreted that the time spent involved in educational processes in adopting an acculturation strategy can yield beneficial results.

⁶³ Balcı - Ögüt, "Yabancı Uyruklu Üniversite Öğrencileri Arasında Kültürleşme ve Kültürleşme Stratejileri".

⁶⁴ Yusuf Ziya Karipek, "Mülteci Deneyimi ve Kültürel Etkileşim: Türkiye'de Suriyeli Üniversite Öğrencileri Üzerine Bir Çalışma", *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 1 (2017), 66-86.

⁶⁵ Charlene Tan, "Introduction," *Reforms in Islamic Education: International Perspectives*, ed. Charlene Tan (Bloomsbury, 2014), 1-7.

⁶⁶ Szapocznik et al., "Theory and Measurement of Acculturation", 128.

⁶⁷ Balcı - Ögüt, "Yabancı Uyruklu Üniversite Öğrencileri Arasında Kültürleşme ve Kültürleşme Stratejileri", 59.

⁶⁸ Aliyev - Ögülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürleşme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi"; Şeker, "Kente Göç Etmiş Bir Örnekte Kültür Uyum (Kültürleşme) Süreçleri", *Uluslararası İnsan Bilimleri Dergisi* 3/2 (2006); Talwar et al., "Sociodemographic Determinants of Acculturation Stress Among International University Students", 28.

⁶⁹ Teru Toyokawa - Noriko Toyokawa, "Extracurricular Activities and Adjustment of Asian International Students: A Study of Japanese Students", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26/4 (2002), 363-379; Kasım Kıroğlu et al., "Türkiye'de Öğrenim Gören Yabancı Uyruklu Lisans Öğrencilerinin Sosyo- Kültürel ve Ekonomik Sorunları", *Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi* 6/2 (2011), 26-39; Özkan, *Türkiye'de İlahiyat Fakültelerinde Eğitim Gören Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Memnuniyet Düzeyleri*, 106.

The ANOVA results regarding grade levels reveal a dynamic acculturation trajectory: a significant drop in assimilation is observed between the preparatory class and 1st grade ($p=.006$), followed by a significant rise in integration between the 1st and 2nd grades ($p=.025$). The qualitative findings suggest that this shift marks the transition from "forced adaptation" to "intentional integration". While preparatory students like F6 admitted to "assimilating" into undesirable local habits like late attendance, higher-grade students like M8 reported a deeper appreciation for the unique learning environment and the ability to communicate directly with professors. This evolution indicates that as students move beyond the linguistic hurdles of the preparatory year, they move from superficial adaptation toward a robust integration strategy that balances their native identity with the academic demands of the Turkish theological framework.

Analyses of whether demographic and educational characteristics caused a difference in Acculturation Scale scores revealed that gender, speaking a Turkish language, living with family or in a dormitory, younger age, and marital status did not significantly impact participants' acculturation strategies. The findings reported in the literature, such as "the rate of cultural adaptation decreases with age, and men adapt culturally faster than women",⁷⁰ "men experience more assimilation than women",⁷¹ and "age is a highly influential factor in acculturation",⁷² were not confirmed in this study. Naturally, acculturation strategies in this study did not show a significant difference according to age and gender. It does not support the findings in the literature that the stress created by acculturation processes is affected by being single, age, and gender factors.⁷³ Consistent with the findings of this study, Aliyev-Öğülmüş's study found no differences according to gender in the assimilation, separation, and integration dimensions.⁷⁴ Şeker, on the other hand, reported that women used the separation strategy significantly more than men. When considering the effects of age, place of residence, and marital status on acculturation style,⁷⁵ the findings of this study are partially consistent with those in the literature. While Aliyev-Öğülmüş could not detect an effect of the age variable on the *assimilation* dimension, they found that younger individuals preferred the separation strategy, whereas older individuals preferred the integration strategy. Regarding the residence (home-dorm) variable, Aliyev-Öğülmüş's findings align with this study's results in the assimilation and separation dimensions, as they did not identify any differences; however, they diverge from this study in the integration dimension, as they found that participants residing in dorms had an advantage.⁷⁶ Regarding marital status, Aliyev-Öğülmüş (2016) found that there were differences in assimilation, separation, and integration strategies; specifically, singles used assimilation and separation strategies, while married individuals used integration strategies, in a statistically significant manner.⁷⁷ Şeker's (2006) study also reported that the single group significantly preferred the assimilation strategy, while married individuals significantly preferred the separation strategy; no differentiation was observed between married and single individuals regarding the integration strategy.⁷⁸

According to the findings of this study, the nationality of the person with whom participants lived did not result in a significant difference in their acculturation strategies. The acculturation strategy of the person with whom they lived had no effect—specifically, that living with citizens of the same country did not affect adopting a separation strategy, and living with citizens of the Republic of Türkiye did not affect adopting an assimilation strategy. In Aliyev-Öğülmüş's study, however, participants who lived with someone from their own country differed significantly from those who lived with a citizen of the Republic of Türkiye in terms of the separation dimension, adopting the separation strategy to a greater extent.

In terms of adopting the separation strategy, a significant difference was found between students from Asia and those from Europe, in favor of the Asian group. This finding can be interpreted either as Türkiye being culturally closer to Europe than to Asia, or as Asian students showing resistance to the religious

⁷⁰ see Szapocznik et al., "Theory and Measurement of Acculturation".

⁷¹ Ebru Boynueğri - Tülin Şener, "The Relationship Between Identity and Acculturation in International Students in Turkey", *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 92 (2021), 297-316.

⁷² Choi JiWon et al., "Acculturation and Depressive Symptoms in Korean Immigrant Women", *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 11/1 (2009), 13-19.

⁷³ Talwar et al., "Sociodemographic Determinants of Acculturation Stress Among International University Students".

⁷⁴ Aliyev - Öğülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi".

⁷⁵ Şeker, "Kente Göç Etmiş Bir Örnekte Kültüre Uyum (Kültürlenme) Süreçleri".

⁷⁶ Aliyev - Öğülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi"; B. Dilara Şeker, "Acculturation Processes in a Sample of Migrants to the City," *International Journal of Human Sciences* 3/2 (2006).

⁷⁷ Aliyev - Öğülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi".

⁷⁸ Şeker, "Kente Göç Etmiş Bir Örnekte Kültüre Uyum (Kültürlenme) Süreçleri".

understandings and approaches to religious education in Türkiye. A critical finding in the quantitative data is the significant difference in the separation dimension regarding the continent of origin, where students from Asia exhibited higher separation scores than their European counterparts ($F_{(2,166)}=4.516, p=.012$). The qualitative data anchors this statistic in specific "socio-cultural and academic frictions". In terms of social norms, M2 (Afghanistan) highlighted a resistance to Turkish respect rituals like hand-kissing, while M3 (Bangladesh) expressed persistent difficulty adapting to the Turkish diet. More significantly, academic separation emerged as a defensive reaction to the secular elements of the curriculum. M5 (Ivory Coast) explicitly categorized subjects like the "History of the Turkish Revolution" as being "outside our field", while M9 (Palestine) criticized the use of Turkish over Arabic, questioning the theological authority of instruction conducted in a non-original language of the faith. Other studies in the literature have revealed interesting findings regarding the variations in acculturation across continents and cultural basins. For example, Aliyev and Ögülmüş found that those from Europe exhibited a significant difference from those from the Caucasus and the Middle East, adopting a more assimilation strategy, while those from the Middle East were significantly weaker in terms of integration strategies than those from the Caucasus and Europe.⁷⁹

Qualitative findings revealed that acculturation strategies possess a multilayered and dynamic structure that cannot be reduced solely to individual preferences. In this process, where academic, sociocultural, and psychological dimensions are intertwined, students were observed to exhibit attitudes and behaviors belonging to more than one strategy simultaneously. Consistent with the theoretical framework of Berry and Sam, the findings support the finding that acculturation strategies are not static but rather contextually and flexibly shaped.⁸⁰ The findings demonstrate that acculturation for international students should be addressed as three inseparable dimensions: sociocultural, academic, and psychological.

Bridging quantitative patterns with qualitative evidence, this study demonstrates that international students' acculturation processes are multidimensional and contextual, and that acculturation is shaped not only by the characteristics of the host culture but also by students' academic, religious, and social experiences. The findings suggest that while the Turkish institutional environment largely supports integration, the "separation" observed in certain groups is a complex negotiation of theological and cultural identity that requires targeted, inclusive administrative policies. Considering the findings, higher educational institutions must be supported by continuous assessment, inclusiveness, and cultural sensitivity policies. Otherwise, there is a risk that acculturation processes may turn into superficial assimilation or passive separation rather than integration.

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample is limited to international theology students in Türkiye, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Although a mixed-methods design was employed, it may not fully capture the complexity of acculturation processes. Finally, the findings are context-specific and should be interpreted in the context of higher religious education in Türkiye.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine the sociocultural, academic, and psychological dimensions of the acculturation process in greater depth, involving more diverse samples from different educational levels and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the role of educational institutions and practices in shaping the acculturation experiences of international students should be examined in detail. Finally, interdisciplinary studies should address the impact of academic culture, curricular content, and instructional processes on students' choices of acculturation strategies.

⁷⁹ Aliyev - Ögülmüş, "Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi".

⁸⁰ Berry - Sam, "Acculturation and Adaptation".

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