

## Research Article

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## Theology Teacher Candidates' Perspectives of Geography\*

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### Abstract

Geography and religion have received a vast amount of attention in education, separately. It is well known that there are various interactions between religions and geography or geographical facts. However, it is still not known the role of geography on religion beliefs and practices. In this regard, this study aims to describe the relationship between religions and some elements of geography science from the point of view of theologians themselves. Data were collected from 20 graduates of theology from all over the Turkey. Participants were interviewed by using a semi-structured interview forms that consisted three main questions. The data were analyzed with content analysis method by using Nvivo 10.0. The findings of the study revealed the impact of geography on Turkish theologians. All of the participants stated that geographical information has a facilitative effect on their life, but as a part of general knowledge and at a simple level only. Also, it was found that geographical facts have influenced by the conception of denominations in religions. In other words, different geographical conditions have led the spread of different denominations or sects under religions. In addition, geographical conditions might raise distinct religious sensitivities. All participants indicated that it is a must to have basic geographical information. Accordingly, they pointed out the vital role of the various geography courses that have to be included undergraduate curriculum and the need for various geography courses at undergraduate level. The results with implication for future research and practice are discussed.

### Keywords

Geography, Religion, Theologian, Perspectives, Turkey

Geography, also known as the science of place, studies physical, human, and economic elements on the earth along with their formation and dispersion and the

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influencing factors in relation with human-environment relation in the scope of dispersion, causality, and relevance factors. It is also a multidisciplinary field bridging humanities and natural sciences. As a discipline, it examines the relationships between man and nature, geography in fact is as old as human history. However, the importance and value ascribed to geography and the conception of geography vary from community to community at times. For example, the descriptive and classifying geographical approach was later replaced by an applied discipline functioning for problem solving in many countries, mainly in North America and European countries, in the early 1900s. In time, geographers have made important contributions to works on various global issues, especially land use (Hardwick & Holtgrieve, 1996, p. 3-4). Geography, on the other hand, is a discipline which has an applied area beyond pure theory and undertakes the mission of finding solutions for a variety of problems faced by humans (Geçit, 2010, p.135).

The prominent geographical tradition in our country has been represented by descriptive regional geography for many years, and inquisitive geographers who are relatively knowledgeable about many things have posed the common profile of geographers (Arı and Kaya, 2014; Geçit and Gençer 2011; Gökçe and Öztürk, 2013; Şeyihoğlu and Geçit, 2010). However, today's world requires geographers who are specialized in certain areas rather than those relatively knowledgeable on any issue. Another problem related to the inception of geography is that geography is confined to physical and human geography, neglecting the holistic dimension (Gökçe ve Öztürk, 2013; Öztürk and Alkış, 2009). Besides, there are other shortcomings concerning geographers in the context of Turkey although they are expected to take a more active part in many teaching stages and other fields, because they are closer to the world's problems than many other discipline experts due to the nature of their study area (Artvinli and Kaya, 2010).

Geography, which can also be described as a collection of disciplines rather than a mere discipline in view of the content and point of view regarding phenomena, is thus placed at the intersection of many sciences with this feature. Geography has aspects related to both social and natural sciences. This discipline is regarded as a pure science or natural science in some countries today. It has also been mainly thought of as a natural science until the 1950s in Turkey. From 1937 to 1947, geography was a compulsory course in the high school third grade curriculum and offered for one hour in literature classes and three hours in science classes (Geçit, 2008, p.168). On the other hand, geography is both regarded as a social science and constitutes a source for other social disciplines due to its content. The ability to perceive space relates to knowing and noticing space. Though the term space is mostly used to refer to the place of residence, living or environment, it also has meanings such as Arabic-origin *mülhem* meaning "being; existing" (Göka, 2001). Human beings shape their living space according to their surrounding intentionally or unintentionally when they organize their space. Thus, geography is found to be somehow related to all sciences which basically study man and space.

It is a fact that geography and religion have an interaction and relationship in various aspects (Cooper, 1992, Holloway & Valins, 2002; Kong, 1990; Scott & Housley, 2001, Park, 2004; Sopher, 1981). In the literature, it has been well documented that religion has various influences on human life in almost all societies. It is possible to see effects of religious values in numerous areas; ranging from cultural lifestyles of communities to population policies, trade and life styles to cultural structures and political preferences, and from environmental attitudes to diet habits (Park, 1994). However, it still should not be overlooked that geographical and environmental factors could affect religious beliefs. Man can see clues in nature that trigger questioning of creation and God (Glacken, 1967). Thus, the main goal of this study was to describe the relationship between religions and some elements of geography science from theologians' perspectives. The results of the study could contribute to understanding the impact of geography on theologians' lives. The results could help to understanding of potential contribution of geography and religion to different cultural and religious groups. Furthermore, the results of the study would produce more questions for future research that could focus on positive strategies and interventions to facilitate students' lives.

### **Aim**

Relations and interactions can be mentioned between religions, religious understanding, and living and the place of living or geographical elements. In some places or times, religious understandings have a considerable influence on human life. In some other cases, religious understandings are shaped by places or geographical elements. The main objective of this study is to explore perspectives of theology graduates in Turkey regarding the science of geography as well as the interaction between geographical factors and religions. For this purpose, the study intends to search perspectives of graduates of theology faculty regarding;

- Whether geographical knowledge facilitates their life,
- The relationship between geographical conditions and religious practices and beliefs, and,
- The lessons of geography expected to be included in undergraduate programs.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The qualitative research paradigm used in the current study that based on phenomenological model to focus on investigating a situation in detail. In qualitative research, phenomenological method is often preferred as it allows researchers to investigate a situation in detail (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). In phenomenological research, the relationship between a person and his world can be described. Merleau-Ponty (1962) defined phenomenology as a methodology that describes the nature of our perceptual contact with our environment. Colaizzi (1978) indicated that participants' experience in environmentally different conditions is the focus rather than observed behaviors in the phenomenological research.

## Participants

The sample of this study included 20 participants who were both articulate and willing to talk of their experiences. Study group was selected with convenience sampling because in this method the researcher chooses a situation that is nearby and easy to access (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The study implemented with 20 students attending the Pedagogical Formation Education Course given by a Turkish Faculty of Education during the 2014-2015 academic year. The sample consisted of 9 female and 11 male students. The age range of the participants was from 22 to 24.

## Instruments

Demographic form was created by researcher that consisted age, education, and gender. As a data collection tool, a semi-structured interview form consisting of three main questions apart from participants' demographic data was used. Two experts, one in geography teaching and the other in religion teaching developed the form. The draft interview form was first given to two students to determine whether the questions are understandable and answerable. Then, the form was reviewed for internal validity by an academician specialized in educational sciences.

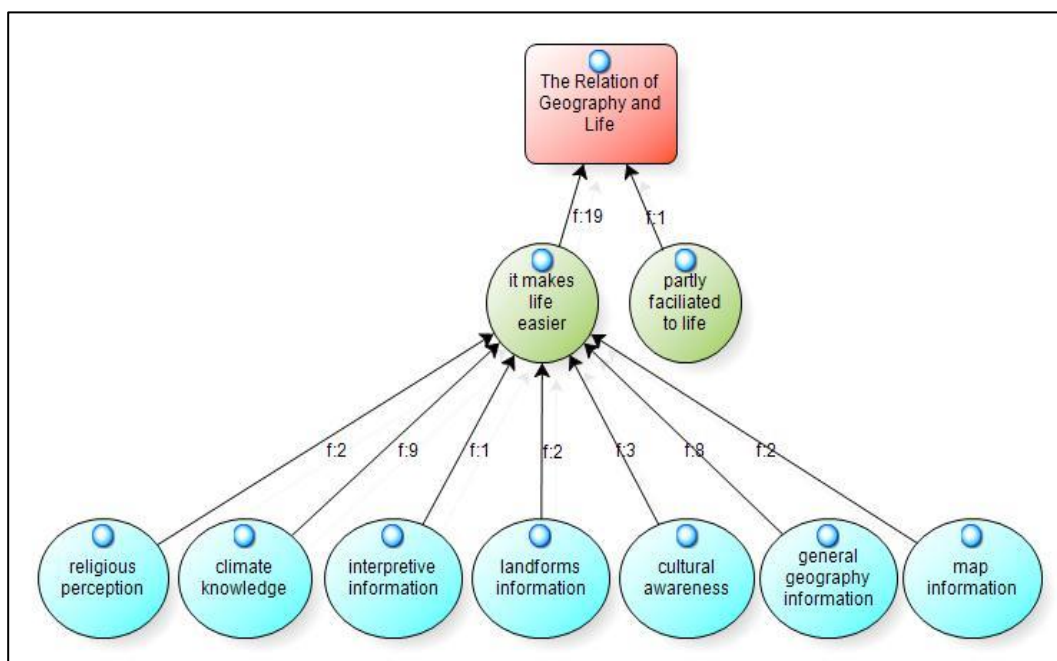
## Procedure and Data Analysis

The primary investigator conducted open-ended and semi-structured interviews that consisted three main questions. Question one investigated whether participants' knowledge of geography has a facilitative effect on their life. Question two was targeted to explore relationship between geographical elements and religions. The purpose of the last question was to determine that whether there is a need for geography lessons in undergraduate programs regarding participants' responses. Once questions were asked, the interviewer only asked for examples or clarification of the participants' experience.

The collected data were subjected to content analysis using Nvivo 10.0. Each interview was transcribed by reading the interviewer's part and another member reading the participants part. The research team worked together to find agreement on the themes and thematic structure. Reliability is one of the significant elements within qualitative research, therefore, coding has a vital role in the analysis of data. In this study, codes were used to link data to conceptual frameworks and concepts by two researchers. To measure consistency between coders, Miles and Huberman's (1994) calculation method were applied by using number of agreements/ (number of agreements +disagreements) X 100 reliability formula. According to result, the reliability was found 94%. The coders had a small amount of disagreement between only five codes that is acceptable for the reliability of the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that 70% agreement is sufficient for the reliability of the study.

## Findings

In this section, participants' responses to the questions were analyzed with content analysis in accordance with qualitative research approach, and the results are detailed below in order. To protect participants' confidentiality, the R letter was used with a number to give respondents' explanations. First, the analysis of question "Does



geographical information have a facilitative effect on your life, and if yes, in what ways does it have such an effect?" is shown in Figure-1 below.

Figure 1. Analysis of Participants' Views Regarding Whether Geographical Knowledge Facilitates Their Lives

As a response to question one, 20 participants stated that their knowledge about geography facilitates their lives, as far as general culture and everyday life is concerned at the modest level though. Only one participant indicated a *partial facilitative effect*, while the rest of them reported a direct *facilitative effect* of geography on their lives. It was found out that predominant reference was made to knowledge of climate (f:9) and general geography (f:8). Some of the respondents mentioned cultural awareness (f:3), geographical formations knowledge (f:2), religious perception (f:2), knowledge of maps (f:2), and climate (f:2) as the relationship between geography and life (Figure-1).

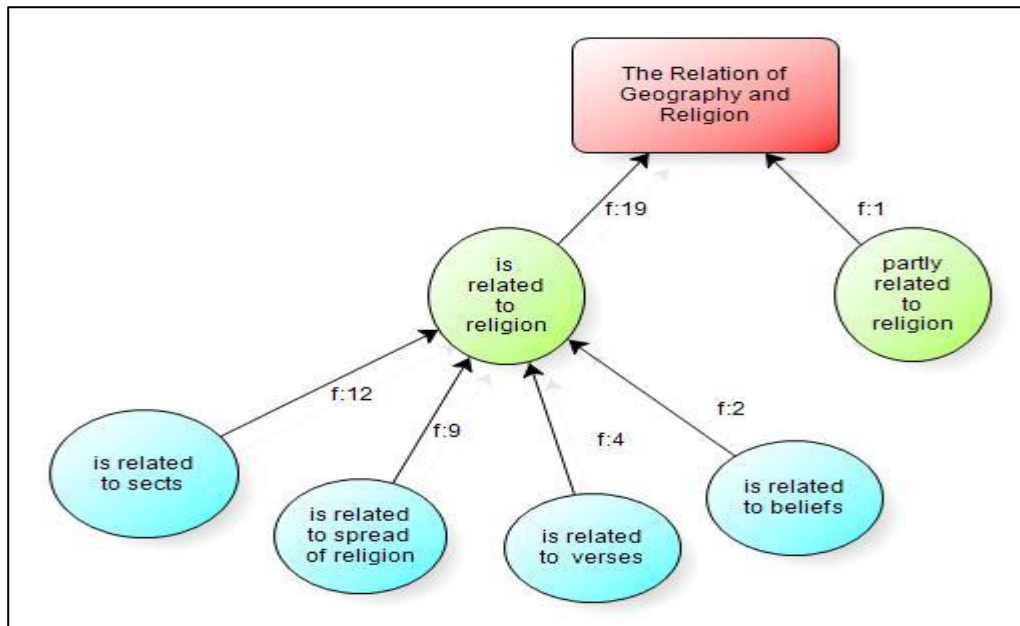
Below are some statements supporting the respondents' views in Figure-1:

*R1: Yes, it makes it easier. It teaches to interpret. It's useful to forecast what the weather will be like.*

*R12: Partially facilitating. We become aware of the conditions in places where we live or will live.*

*R15: Yes, it makes it easier. What the climate is like in what country, in what region, we learn in this regard; so we know which places are better for us to travel or for business....*

*R19: Yes. It helps me a lot in daily life. It is even asked in quiz shows. It gives information about our general knowledge....*



According to the question two, "What relation exists between geographical facts and religious practices and beliefs?", the analysis results of participants' views are given in Figure-2.

Figure 2. Analysis of Participants' Views Regarding the Relationship between Geographical Facts and Religious Practices-Beliefs

As seen in Figure-2, graduates of the theology faculty think that geographical conditions are influential on the spread of religions, religious beliefs and religious expressions, and especially understandings at denomination or sect level. Also under this question, only one participant pointed out that a *partial* relation between geography and religion; while the others referred to a stronger relation by means of different expressions. Particular emphasis was placed on the relationship between geography and geographical elements and sectarian understandings (f: 12) and spread of religions. They were followed by the connection with verses of the Qur'an (f:4) and belief systems (f:2).

Some of the participant views were quoted as a support for the finding below.

R1: *Yes, there is a relationship. When Islam was introduced, the clothes of the Islamic descendants were religious but also suitable for the desert setting. Also, the Qur'an described heaven considering the people who lived in that dessert. For example, rivers, greenery ... This may not make sense to someone living in Rize (the wettest Turkish city), but we realize it means a lot considering those living in that dessert.*

R2: *There is... .Geographical elements make it more difficult or easier to perform a religion. Cross-cultural relations are influenced substantially by geographical locations. In denominational/sectarian sense, provisions also differ by life conditions. That is, not only the spread and influencing and being influenced but also life relies on the geographical facts.*

R11: *The Holy Qur'an makes portrayals of the heaven by referring to the facts in geography course. In addition, in Hinduism, ablution is depicted with emphasis on the Ganges river; the bread and wine rituel and thus grapes and wheat (human and economic geography) are important in Christianity. As for Islam, because it expresses seeing everything created by our Lord with an understanding of gratitude and lesson in any sense, a way of expression without geography is hardly possible. Any worship regardless of prayer, zakat, pilgrimage, charity etc. is somehow related with geography.*

R8: *Geographical elements do not directly affect religion, but religions can shape certain rules according to the geographical situation. For example, people in the sect of Shafiism (one of the important sects of Islamic religion) mostly live far away from city centers and are intertwined with nature. They are constantly engaged in hard work and in such a case blood flow from any part of their body is quite usual. With this, the person in this sect must continuously perform ablution. However, sectarian imams addressed this situation along with many different ideas and concluded that blood does not spoil ablution unless blood flow is a lot.*

As for the last question, "What do you think about geography lessons which are and must be included in undergraduate curricula?", the analysis of results is given in Figure-3 and Figure-4.

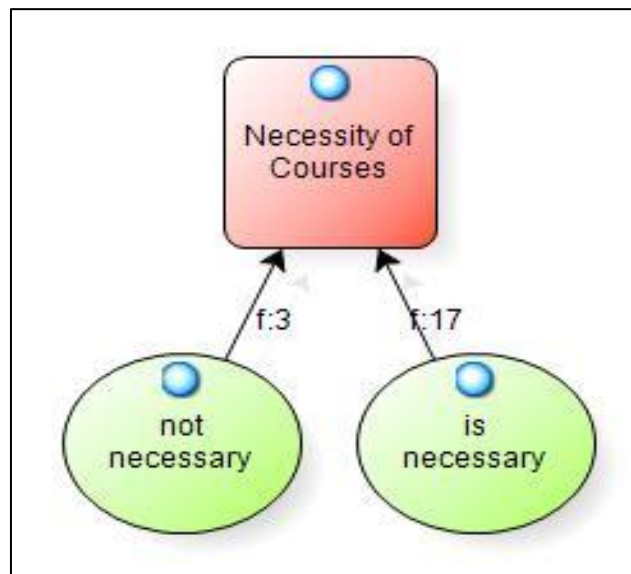


Figure 3. Analysis of Participants' Views Regarding Whether Geography Lessons Must Be Offered In Undergraduate Programs

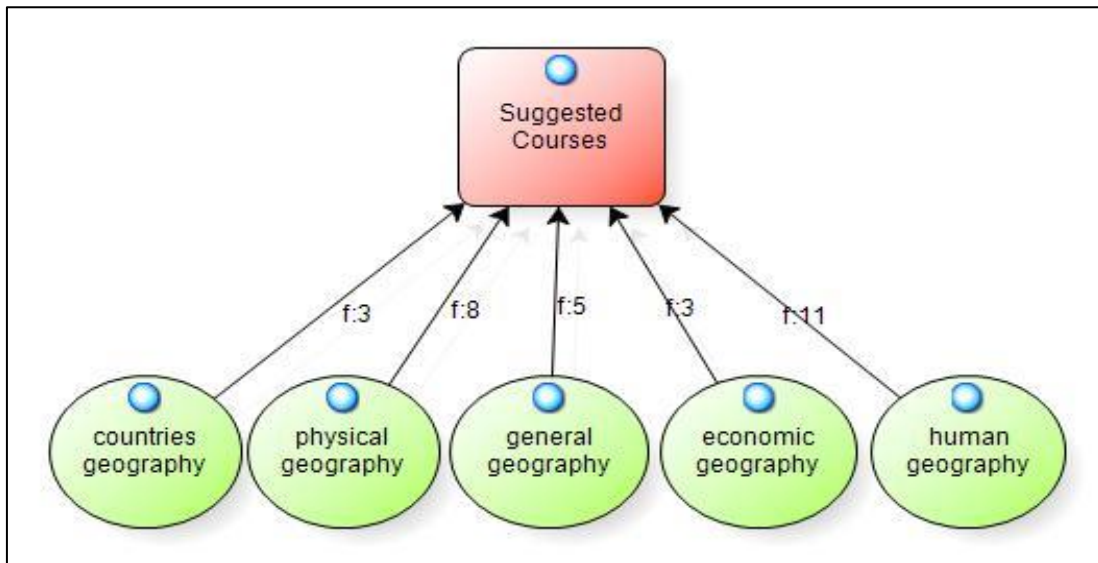


Figure 4. Analysis of Participants' Views Regarding the Geography Lessons Recommended For Undergraduate Programs

When answers given to this question are examined, it is seen that 3 of the participants believe there is no need for a geography course in undergraduate programs because the required geographical information can be provided during introduction to the main courses in the program of theology or with rooted geography education during the secondary education (Figure 3). As a matter of fact, it is understood that all of the three respondents agree that geography education is needed in a generic sense. On the other hand, all the other participants (f: 17) pointed out that they need independent and detailed geography lessons. Those participants recommended teaching of *Human Geography* (Geography of Religions, f: 11), which covers ethnical structure of the population, gender and settlement facts; *Physical Geography* (f: 8) covering climate, geographical formations, and water resources, which affect religious developments; and *Countries' Geography* (f: 3) to explain geographical regions for spread of religions. Also, the need for *Economic and Generic Geography* lessons was addressed by some participants (Figure-4).

The quotations below are given to support this finding:

R18: *Definitely must be offered. The distribution and performance of religions vary according to geographical conditions. It is possible to learn and explain this through geographical knowledge... Moreover, cultural structure is effective in spread of religion. The most important factors among geographical elements are geographical formations and temperature. Physical Geography, Climatic Geography, and Economic Geography should be taught in geography lessons.*

R17: *I think it's a right decision, because all events happen in geographical areas. The person who is going to be a teacher of religious culture should gain proficiency in geography as well as in his own field. Because all of the religions he is going to teach*



were experienced somewhere. Besides, explaining that religion without knowing that place will not be easy. Physical geography.

R15: *In my opinion, it will be useful. Religion covers every area in which a person is. Geography lessons are also part of it. Geography also studies people. Human Geography, Physical Geography, Countries' Geography.*

R12: *Could be offered. In particular, it facilitates a better understanding of denominations/sects and the lessons such as history of religions. Human Geography elements can be taught. Namely, Basic Geography information can be offered.*

R5: *Theology and Religious Culture is a field. It seems a bit insensible to include geography lessons there. It is enough to give good and rooted geography education in high school years.*

## Discussion

The current study shows that geographical information and geography lessons facilitate life according to graduates of theology schools. However, perception of such facilitation does not seem to comply with the basic approach of *applied geography*, the contemporary conception of geography, because the current understanding of geography argues that geographical information should be taken as a basis for investments which deal with people's problems and bring high added value (Arı & Kaya, 2014). On the contrary, the findings of this study revealed that geography is perceived as a convenience mostly for daily life and simple level activities. It is considered important to reconstruct the understanding of geography education in our country to raise the awareness that geography is a discipline which can respond to the needs of the age in order to reorganize this wrong or incomplete (misconception) conception.

We know that no belief system has managed to keep its original and pure structure at the time it emerged. For example, conditions such as the African temperatures, desert ecology, monsoon rains, and Siberian cold are an influence on human life; similarly, they affect implementation of beliefs and structure of temples seriously (Aras, 2016, p.227). Also, in the present study, vital relations were reached between geography or geographical facts and religious beliefs, spread of religions and especially sectarian approaches. This can be taken as an indication that geographical factors are, in reality, very effective factors on all human developments. Apart from that, identity development of nations is shaped under the effect of geography, history and socio-cultural environment of living (Yetişgin, 2007:36). Furthermore, personality traits are influenced largely by geographical conditions (Alptekin, 2013, p.77). Above all, in his prominent work titled *Mukaddime*, Arab Muslim historiographer and historian İbni Haldun draws seven climatic zones on the Earth and accounts for the characteristics of the societies with the climate in that climatic belt. Further, he said "Geography is fate." (Yetişgin, 2007, p.80). In addition, the scope and effectiveness of geography as a discipline seems obvious from the world-known historian Heredotos' (484-426 BC) argument that Egypt is the gift of the Nile (Güner, 2011: 16) and famous philosopher

Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) proposition "*No other scientific discipline can improve human mind and culture as geography does* (Nişancı, 1980, p. 344).

Unfortunately, the fact persists in Turkey that geographers are still facing a wide variety of problems from the professional recognition of geography and geographers to areas of employment (Geçit & Tokdemir, 2016). It can be said that theologians or religious educators should have solid background knowledge of geography in order to be able to perform their profession more effectively. It implies that geography lessons are needed in their curricula in general because a number of things ranging from spread of religions to religious understandings are affected by space that is geography. In particular, the connection with emergence of different sectarian understandings or sect preference, geographical effects of the places seem to be quite important. For example, in the Muslim Shafii sect, ablution is not broken in case of blood flow as long as it is not at extreme level (Turay, 2015). It is possible to justify it as following according to the participants' opinions. Since most members of the Shafii sect living in rural areas are busy with agriculture and other works requiring physical labor, they are quite likely to experience blood flow from any part of their body. In such a space and lifestyle, it may be difficult to perform ablution constantly, so the fact that ablution is not cancelled by small bleedings can be explained with the relation between the understanding of sect and the geographical conditions of the living space. As a result, the lessons requested by participants for both facilitating living activities and more effective religious education included *Human, Physical, Economic and Generic Geography, and Countries' Geography*. Particularly, it was demanded that these lessons are offered as compulsory or elective courses, independent or as an introductory part of some undergraduate courses within the framework of schedule, which seems to be noteworthy. In spite of the positive perception of geography discipline, some implications were also noted in this study which does not comply with the contemporary understanding of this discipline. Hence, we think it is a necessity to reshape the conception of geography, the perspectives regarding this discipline, and education of geography in our country in line with the contemporary and universal values. The results of the study produced more questions for future research that could focus on positive strategies and interventions to facilitate students' lives. Furthermore, different physical geography elements such as oceans, mountains, forests, water resources would be investigated to explore the effect of environment on religion and practices, profoundly. Also, an interdisciplinary study can be conducted to explain effects of the geography in economy, education, politic, and health.

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