

Exams Past, God Forgotten :(Ir) religiousness In Algerian Tertiary Schools

Kassim Boudjelal Safir

Mustapha Stanbouli University- Mascara, Algeria

Abstract: “I am spiritual, but I am not religious”. This is the confession of one of the students when asked about his religiousness. The students (ir) religiousness seems to be a deserted issue in the sociological studies about tertiary schools. In this study context, irreligiousness should not be understood as the absence of religion only, but the indifference towards it as well. Contexts, situations, and mood may affect students’ attitudes about religion. Despite the over-mediatisation of religious content in the Arab TV channels and social media, the Algerian society witnesses an unprecedented “loss of faith”. Has the rise of youth irreligiousness coincided with the rise of the technological revolution, social media and rationalism? This paper tries to identify the main reasons that are leading to this hypothesized “loss of faith” in religion. A semi-structured interview with ten schooled participants has been conducted to scrutinize their perception of religion. The results of the study yielded surprising ambivalent facts about the psycho-social profile of the modern Algerian young Muslim who acknowledged the presence of God. Religiousness can attain an unprecedented peak in exams time and tend to disappear as soon as far as exams finished. Exams Past, God forgotten?

Keywords: (Ir) religiousness, Tertiary Schools Algerian Students Loss of Faith

I. INTRODUCTION

The issues of religion and (ir) religiousness have always been a subject of great and passionate debates among sociologists. About 97% of the Algerian population are Muslims (Groth, Sousa-Poza, 2012). During the colonial period, the French tried relentlessly to undermine the Algerian culture that was based on Quranic schools, maraboutism, *Turuq* (ways), and traditional conservatism influenced by Berber than Islamic traditions (Lazreg, 2016). Islam survived all the attempts of the forced westernisation, but the majority of the Algerians adopted the coloniser’s modernisation of the educational institutions that replaced Quranic schools. The *Ulemas* (Muslim scholars) reluctance was timid but played a role in maintaining the spiritual roles of the rare Quranic schools.

After the independence (1962), Islam became the religion of state. The mosques, and the *zaouias* (Islamic religious schools), became parts of the architectural and cultural identity of the Algerian society. In the 90’s, students were permitted to create *Mussallas* (space of prayer outside mosques) in campuses and universities as an initiative from the government to deal tactfully with the *Islamic sahwa* that was the result of the cross-pollination between the Saudi Wahabism and the Egyptian Brotherhood (Obaid, 2020).

The bloody decade that followed the *Sahwa* was a tragic period for the Algerians who learnt sour lessons from the painful events. The technological advances played a great role in shaping the culture of the Algerian society (Pelton, Oslund, 2004) because in the 90’s satellite dishes transformed the cultural identity of youth and even the elders. The Algerians were stupefied by the radical transformations Europe and the world reached. The French channels were the second attempt (after the French coloniser) to transform the Algerian minds and it seems that it worked. As a result, four Algerians out of five want to reach Europe and live there forever (Glatzer, 2017).

The post-colonial period, and mainly the post-millennial period was marked by a high rate of unemployment (Kpotar, 2007). That rate reached 26.40% in the second quarter of 2018. Therefore, the disenchantment of youths coupled with a mediatic (satellites dishes programs) exposure played a dramatic role in shaping the “new” identity of the Algerian youth. Youths, and mainly adolescents with their admiration of the Christian/ irreligious Europe and the other successful states around the world (as seen on TV) have no faith in the institutions like schools and mosques. Unfaithful youths in a Muslim country?

Today, youths are dreaming of better days in Europe and see no usefulness to go to schools or mosques. Some of them tried football. A footballer in Algeria can earn almost 30 times the salary of a teacher at university. This situation reinforced the feeling of the uselessness of the traditional institutions like schools, youth associations and even mosques. Today, mosques are empty places where we can find only elders and a very small minority of youth. The explanations are numerous, and it seems that the mediatic culture played a great role in the transformation of the Algerian society as a whole.

After the satellite dishes, came internet. Internet has radically changed the way youth live and even learn (Dunkels, 2011). Youths spend the biggest parts of their awaking times with their computers, and mainly their smart phones. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and Snapchat are becoming the new entertainment Gods (no pun intended). The uncontrolled internet content is shaping the Algerian youths. Songs and series about drug, sex, and money are the preferred entertaining content of most of the users. Besides that content, romance (girls and boys), football (for boys) and Facebooking (for both) are the main activities that the adolescents prefer.

Religion and religiousness are the concern of a small minority in schools.

II. AIM AND PROBLEMATIC

This paper, therefore, aims to explore the hidden reasons of irreligiousness in schools and mainly in tertiary schools. This study has chosen the University of Mascara as a case study. The issue of irreligiousness seems to be an international phenomenon that is a result of a complex factors led by globalisation. But, is irreligiousness really a problem? Is an irreligious student always a bad citizen? Studies around the world released different and sometimes contradicting results about religiousness/ irreligiousness. Studies in the USA confirmed that “college freshmen are less religious than ever” (Downay, 2010). But compared to industrialized countries nations, the US has a high rate of weekly attendance at religious services when compared with Sweden, Japan, Russia, and France (Brenner, 2016).

In his study, Mooney tried to investigate the relationship between religion and academic achievement. He came with this result: “regular attendance at religious services increases achievement” (Mooney, 2010). What impacts have (ir) religiousness on students’ behaviour at universities? The question seems to be an interesting, yet, a deserted psycho-sociological avenue.

III. METHODOLOGY

Through this investigation my main objective is to pave the way to other researchers from different academic horizons and get a global vision of this complex issue. Three methods have been selected to respond the following research questions: Are

Algerian students (youths mainly) losing faith? Is religion becoming “old people stuff”?

A semi-structured interview has been conducted to analyse the 10 respondents’ text and even sub-text as recommended by Irving Seidman (2006). The second method was observational research that was based on analysing the chronemic dimension of the students’ behaviours. Through that method the aim was to quantify time spent by students inside and outside religious services. For our case I tried to observe the students behaviour using chronemics. The third and last method was content analysis due to the nature of content that one can usually discover on Algerian schools’ tables, i.e., text, drawing, symbols, graffiti etc. Tables may speak louder than words. Content analysis is probably the most effective method since it is a non-invasive tool to analyse diverse social phenomena.

The interview

Ten (10) respondents were asked in a brief five minutes interview (due to time constraint) 5 boys and 5 girls from different classes (Licence -i.e., graduation- and master levels).

The main questions of the interview were the following:

- “Do you consider yourself as a religious person?”

- “Do you think that religiousness in university make the difference in terms of psychological wellbeing and success?”

The following table contains non redundant data from the respondents’ answers:

Keys: Eg.: 1.G.19 (Respondent n°1, girl, 19 year old).

Table 1: Excerpts and themes

Respondent	Excerpt	Code	Theme
1.G.19	“Well, am religious but my relationship with God is special...”	2	Personal philosophical perception of religion
2.B.21	“To tell you the truth, I pray only in Fridays... (laughter)... do you see all of those students (his friends) they are worse... (laughter), <i>Lah yahdina</i> (may God show us the path)”	3	Confusion/ unawareness/
3.B.22	“I used to pray 5 times a day, but what can we do, that’s the way life goes...”	4	Regret/remorse
4.G.20	“ I cannot pray here in university, there is no time, and teachers do not allow us to leave to pray, it’s impossible”	5	Self-justification
5. G.20	“ Yeah, of course I pray, and I respect all of the rest of the religious rituals, what I love best is helping the others through charity”	1	Social desirability
7.B.20	“My father is always insisting on the necessity to live with morals and ethics but if you are kind, you’ll be considered as a weak person, and you can’t survive this jungle. Sometimes we are forced to follow the mainstream”	6	Band wagon effect
8.B.17	“I am very religious inside my heart, and I don’t have to show it to anyone.”	7	Selective religiousness
9.G.19	“How would succeed if you don’t ask God to help you?”	1	Social desirability
10.G.22	“ I am almost 23 so yeah religion is the most important thing in my life”	1	Social desirability

IV. OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

Six (06) students (3 boys and 3 girl) have been subject of a naturalistic, i.e., non-participatory observational research. The aim of this research was to observe then to analyse the chronemic behaviour of the randomly chosen students in their

natural setting which is university, namely gardens. Each student has been observed during one typical academic day (Wednesday and Thursday). It took 6 days to gather the data. Observation started at 8.30 a.m and lasted until 15.00 p.m.

Lunch time (around 45 minutes) was not included in the process. So, the total observation time = 4h.84m.

I faced two typical limitations. The first limitation concerned the fatigue of the observer (me). The second was the difficulty to identify the root causes of the behaviours of the students that seemed rational for them. Moreover, the issue of representativeness is a recurrent phenomenon in observational research.

V. CONCLUDING THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

The following table summarises the observed behaviours in a form of categorical data. We mean by categorical data the qualitative data in statistics.

Useful keys: T: Time. H: hour. M: minutes. S: seconds

Table 2: The 8 observed behaviors

		Boy1	Boy2	Boy3	Total
Behaviour		T	T	T	T
1	Talking on phone	3m.11s	1m.27s	4m.44s	8m.83s
2	Chatting/laughing with friends	4h.39m.	4h.72m	3h.21m	12h.32m
3	Listening to music	18m.19s	0m.	0m.	18m.19s
4	Staring at phone	16m.31s	8m.17s	7m.53s	32m.01s
5	Staring at others	7m.4s	3m.21s	21m.52s	32m.13s
6	Praying/Quran reading	0s.	0S.	0s.	0s
7	Reading/revising in the lib	0s.	0S.	0s.	0s
8	Attending courses	0s.	0S.	1h.30m	1h.30m
		Girl 1	Girl 2	Girl 3	Total
Behaviour		T	T	T	T
1	Talking on phone	7m.36s	4m.22s	9m.54s	9m.54s
2	Chatting/laughing with friends	4h.52m	2h.49m	3h.37m	3h.37m
3	Listening to music	9m.48s	13m.42s	0s.	0s.
4	Staring at phone	11m.14s	46.23s	9m.19s	9m.19s
5	Staring at others	4m.56	14m.10s	0s	0s
6	Praying/Quran reading	0s.	0s.	0s.	0s.
7	Reading/revising in the lib	0s.	0s.	0s.	0s.
8	Attending courses	0s.	1h.30m	1h.30m	1h.30m

Analysis and interpretations

- Chronemics is the principle communicational theory that has been used to analyse the behaviour of students. Chronemics is concerned with how people use and perceive time. If, for instance, you spend a whole day in a library, so we can imagine that you give learning and books a great importance even greater than your family, friends and entertainment (Youtube). Therefore, statistical analysis of someone's behaviour in a day might give a clear idea

about the degree of interest/ in item(s), or the degree of fondness for the person(s) they communicate with.

- In the days we were conducting the observational study we found out that the observed students had lectures but did not attend any since it is not compulsory. However, the following day they had tutorial class which are compulsory in Algerian faculties. This could explain the long hours outside the classrooms and the amphitheatres.
- The observations were conducted in mid-October which is the beginning of the academic year. This might explain the emptiness of libraries.
- The emptiness of the mosque could be explained by either the students carelessness of religious services, their ignorance about its creation, or the coincidence of prayer time (*El Dohr*: 2nd prayer of the day) with lunch time, i.e., 13.00 p.m.
- Girls who spent almost the whole day chatting, listening to music, staring at phone (probably Facebooking), or talking on phone show a reluctance to attend lectures or even to go home. This behaviour might inform of the bad relationship between those girls and their parents or siblings. As it might be due to the absence of a peaceful atmosphere at home or the absence of a relaxing open space like gardens.
- Romance is the other reason that might incite boys and girls to stay in the university garden almost all day long, from the first hour (8.30 a.m) until 15.00 pm. Romance is usually considered by a part of the Algerian society as the anti-thesis of ethics and religiousness.
- Staring at once phone is a relatively new phenomenon that appeared with the accessibility of smart phones in 2010. With the democratisation of internet, namely 3G and 4G technologies, smart phones became the most serious competitor to real communication with real people like parents, teachers and even friends.
- Staring at others might be the characteristics of boys rather than girls. However, girls can show that attitude as well. Boys often stare at girls that they find attractive. Girls may stare at other girls to "learn" about the new fashion tendencies or simply to amuse boys and girls. So, entertaining the other by saying "funny" remarks about other people is a culture that belongs to adolescents, as it might be a way to communicate with the friends surrounding them.
- The absence of ethics in some of the behaviours like staring, and laughing outloud while staring at someone, for instance, may be symptomatic of the absence of any intrinsic moral values.

Content analysis

"Content analysis is a research method for studying documents and communication artifacts, which might be texts

of various formats, pictures, audio or video” (Ortlieb, Cheek Jr., Semingson, 2018). In content analysis a text can have five types: written, oral, iconic, audio visual, or hypertextual. This study focuses on the two main types of texts are can be found in schools, i.e. written, and iconic. Both of them can be perceived as graffiti.

According to Cambridge dictionary, graffiti means words or drawings, especially humorous, rude, or political, on walls, doors, etc. in public places. Those public spaces might be schools walls, and schools furniture like tables, and desks. Sometimes graffiti and tags are interchangeably used. But both of them are meaningful messages sent to the others. In a school context, messages on tables, desks and sometimes walls are sent to other students, teachers, administration, or to a government if politically loaded.

The Analysed elements

Tables can tell the untold stories of the authors. Students as authors can tell about their emotions, feelings, expectations, worries, mood, dreams and even their level and learning styles. By their suspicious silence, schools authorities in the majority of the Algerian schools -not to say all the public schools- allow graffiti on tables and even on desks. The sample of our study was two classrooms tables (35) and desks (2) that we thought could be representative. The elements that we counted are words, phrases, sentences, and iconic content like symbols, and drawings.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table summarises the different elements (items) related to the above categories and their psychological, socio-communicational, academic functions.

Table 3: In vivo codes and the sociological constructs

In vivo codes	Text type	Sociological constructs	Function	Frequency	%
I hate you Who cares F- words (6) Leave me alone Roma	written	Angry/rude content	Communicational	10	17.85 %
Swastika Gun Knife Skull	iconic	Hate speech ,hate symbols	Communicational	4	7.14 %
Hala Madrid Barça (5) Forza Milano Real Madrid (3) Champions	written	Sport	entertainment	11	19.64 %
You are my life Heart (2) Heart with arrow (4) Miss you Crazy of you +name	written	Romance	Social/communicational	9	16.07 %
Lessons written down to cheat (17)	written	Academic s	Contextual (as a learning	17	30.35 %

			strategy)		
Tattoo Female face Man smoking Signature Names	written	Artistic items	Entertainment	5	8.92 %
Total				56	100%

Religious texts and icons were unsurprisingly absent in the students content which meet our thesis statement. Through the deductive approach we predicted other social construct to appear in the students’ speech and iconic texts like: academic and non-academic content. The non-academic content was predominantly related to angry and rude content, and sport (football namely). This might explain the students’ negative attitudes towards schools.

Frustration, boredom, and anger are the main psycho-emotional expressions communicated on tables and desks. Romance as a social construct might be symptomatic of a quasi-de-connection with academics and even with morals since romance is usually unaccepted in traditional societies like Algeria and mainly is semi-rural districts like Mascara.

What surprises us was rather the overwhelming presence of texts in a form of lessons prepared earlier by students in order to cheat. The majority of students do not use “open book exams” as an evaluative approach which might explain the students’ academic dishonesty. When students are submerged by academic contents to learn they might be ready to take risk and cheat. Cheating informs us about the irreligiousness of some students that we unfortunately cannot quantify even if we can give an approximate that might be closer to reality.

The implications for teachers, supervisors, and policy makers could be easily drawn. So, all the school stakeholders’ efforts should concentrate on questioning the old-fashioned assessment methods that usually -if not always- obligate students to cheat. Open book exams and online assessment can be efficient alternatives for post millennial students. Some Algerian schools – not to say the majority of them- are still using outmoded assessment techniques like pencil and paper exams, content-based exams, rote learning exams, and oral exams.

The advent of web 2.0 technologies did not really create that aspired educational revolution. Today, students have knowledge stored on their smart phones and have access to all the prestigious (e) libraries. The questions that are worth posing now are these: do we really need to go to school when one knows that one can have Mr Google within a click reach? How about collaborative learning, and learning outside schools in the cyber space? Memorising for traditional exams should be banned from our schools and replaced by process-based assessment.

VII. CONCLUSION

Chronemics can be by far an unprecedented “linguistic tool” that might decode our whole life in terms of communicational behaviours. So again, and to refresh the readers minds, if you spend a whole day in a gymnasium, your body and health are then more important than your family, friends and leisure. If you do so, one can assume that you are narcissistic person. The whole story is about creating that equilibrium between the self, and the others that surround us. It would seem paradoxical, but this is true. One wants to have the whole world for himself, but can never succeed to live alone for he needs the others to be happy.

It seems that the students discourse that we analysed in the interview is the anti-thesis of their behaviours in real life as observed in the observational study. *Bismillah* (in the name of God) is usually the first words a student might utter when they sit for exams, but minutes later cheating follows. Another teen’s paradox? The majority of the interviewed students attested their respect to religion; however, they tend to turn a blind eye on unethical behaviours like inappropriate romance and/or cheating in exams. So, interviewees discourse is suspiciously incongruent with real world behaviours.

Content analysis reinforced the deduction we stated in the introduction. Students religiousness can dramatically be shown and maintained during Ramadan (the fasting month) but tends to disappear as quickly as it appeared. Students’ religiousness might appear few days before exams. Students who have exams to pass can be met in mosques, but tend to disappear as soon as those exams finished. Is it the river

passed, God forgotten attitude? Is it a loss of faith? Or a selective religiousness?

REFERENCES

- [1] Brenner P. S. (2016). Cross-National Trends in Religious Service Attendance. *Public opinion quarterly*, 80(2), 563–583. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw016>
- [2] Downey, A. (2017). College Freshmen Are Less Religious Than Ever. Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/college-freshmen-are-less-religious-than-ever/>
- [3] Dunkels, E., Fränberg, G., & Hallgren, C. (2011). *Interactive Media use and youth: Learning, knowledge exchange and behavior*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.
- [4] Groth, H., & Sousa-Poza, A. (2014). *Population Dynamics in Muslim Countries Assembling the Jigsaw*. Berlin: Springer Berlin.
- [5] Kpodar, K. (2007). *Why has Unemployment in Algeria been higher than in MENA and Transition Countries*. Washington: International Monetary Fund.
- [6] Marnia Lazreg, (2016). *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*: Princeton University Press
- [7] Mooney, M. (2010, July 01). Religion, College Grades, and Satisfaction among Students at Elite Colleges and Universities*. Retrieved December 17, 2020, from <https://academic.oup.com/socrel/article/71/2/197/1673303>
- [8] Obaid, N.E. (2020). *The failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab World*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- [9] Ortlieb, E., Cheek, E. H., & Semingson, P. (2018). *Best practices in teaching digital literacies*. Wagon Lane, Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing.
- [10] Pelton, J. N., Oslund, R. J., & Marshall, P. (2004). *Communications satellites: Global change agents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [11] Seidman, Irvin. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.