

lived Religiosity among Young People in Bir El Ater: From Religious Representations to Everyday Practices -An Anthropological Approach

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Abstract: Anthropological interest in religious practices throughout their long history and across diverse cultural, philosophical, and social contexts is not a recent development. Rather, it is the outcome of cumulative epistemological advances that have enabled anthropologists to understand the foundations of religiosity and the methodological tools required to study it. This study approaches religiosity with methodological caution, viewing it as a dynamic, multidimensional concept within the anthropology of religion. It seeks to interpret and analyze the religious practices observed in the lived social reality of Bir El Ater. The study is based on the assumption that textual approaches alone cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious phenomenon. From an anthropological perspective, religiosity cannot be reduced to a set of rituals and symbols embedded in the everyday lives of young people; instead, it should be understood as a human construction shaped by a long history of lived experiences. Adopting an ethnomethodological approach reflects the belief that it enables the researcher to move beyond the visible manifestations of religiosity and reconstruct the interpretive frameworks through which religious practices generate meaning, viewing them as socially produced processes that continuously shape and reproduce religious meanings within society..

Keywords: Anthropology; Religion; Lived Religiosity; Rituals; Symbols; Social Context.

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I- Introduction :

Religion, as a social and anthropological phenomenon, constitutes a central field in which numerous intellectual perspectives intersect. It is often approached as a closed system of beliefs and a fixed discourse that does not admit interpretation. Nevertheless, a close examination of the social practices of individuals and groups, their patterns of social life, and their representations of symbolic and ritual spaces within their various interactions clearly demonstrates the profound interconnection between historical, social, and cultural dimensions in shaping the understanding of religion and religiosity. From this standpoint, the manifestations of religiosity among young people in the Algerian city of Bir El Ater represent an anthropological case worthy of investigation, as they reflect the ways in which religious values and beliefs are translated into everyday practices and behaviors influenced by the constraints of the local context and the rapid socio-cultural transformations. Anyone observing the patterns of Algerian social relations and everyday practices will recognize that they constitute both behavioral and doctrinal expressions seeking to organize social life according to a set of systems rooted in Islamic thought as a fertile source for directing and regulating symbolic values and nurturing social meaning among social actors. Religion, therefore, cannot be understood solely within a cognitive framework characterized by rigidity and permanence; rather, it should also be approached through its flexible and dynamic form, capable of balancing the symbolic and the real at the heart of contemporary transformations. In this regard, Rivière *aptly notes that* nothing confirms that, when confronted with the realities of material progress, we can only adopt appropriate forms of behavior without losing the essence of our religious beliefs. If the secular tends to constrain the sacred, human beings nevertheless constantly combine the secular world and the sacred world despite their apparent opposition (**Claude Rivière, 2015, p. 265**).

Religious anthropology consistently directs our attention toward understanding and exploring the numerous behaviors and actions practiced by individuals in their interactions with one another. It may be regarded as a flexible analytical instrument for interpreting and examining religion as a fundamental driving force of social life. This becomes directly observable within the social system as a whole through the ensemble of rituals and everyday representations, and through the meanings these representations generate within diverse social and cultural contexts as part of the existential experience surrounding the relationship between human beings and the universe, the sacred and the profane, the visible and the invisible. These dynamics may be understood as manifestations of individual and collective identity, serving as a means of adapting to lived reality without departing from doctrinal texts. We are therefore dealing with a symbolic social practice operating within the context of accelerating transformations and the challenges that transcend the boundaries of space and time, whereby individuals continuously produce and reproduce values while regulating cultural norms according to ideas whose source remains constant despite the diversity of interpretations surrounding them. These ideas remain deeply imbued with symbolism and grounded in belief in the effective power of a supreme force with which human beings constantly seek to establish a connection in the hope of achieving desired outcomes (**Claude Rivière, 2015, p. 150**).

The present study draws upon a wide range of concepts and bodies of knowledge that may initially appear clear, straightforward, and accessible, yet are, in reality, complex and ambiguous, making them difficult to comprehend or accurately trace except by specialists and experts. This challenge has become even more pronounced in light of contemporary digital and economic transformations saturated with accumulated Western cultural influences and paradigms that, in their essence, tend to transcend religion by portraying it as an inherited legacy incapable of keeping pace

with modern modes of thought. What is at stake here is the existence of a genuine gap characterized by the tension between the self and intersubjectivity in interpreting Islamic philosophy and producing meanings compatible with both individual and collective commitments. In other words, the study seeks to understand how Algerian youth reconstruct their understanding of religious belief as a symbolic instrument within the cultural and social system, whereby individuals monitor themselves according to shared moral standards, thereby generating a form of social order that depends less upon external coercion than upon religious conscience (Weber, 1991, p. 92).

1. Religious Anthropology as a Symbolic Perspective on Reality

It is self-evident that anthropology, as a scientific discipline, possesses the capacity to approach the essence of human beings and their activities throughout the long course of human history through methods and analytical tools grounded in observation, understanding, and interpretation. The pioneering works of Boas, Frazer, Lévi-Strauss, and Clifford Geertz continue to stand as enduring testimony to the legitimacy and intellectual significance of this discipline. These accumulated theoretical and ethnographic contributions inevitably lead us to engage with the religious sphere and to examine the manifestations of religiosity among young people in a promising Algerian city where religious discourse is deeply embedded in everyday social practices. Today, the community of Bir El Ater deserves scholarly attention from researchers and specialists in anthropology seeking to understand the dynamics of interaction between individuals and groups. Raising questions about religiosity as a social phenomenon inevitably directs us toward explaining the relationship between religion and the social structure of this community. Consequently, there is a pressing need for an important branch of anthropology capable of satisfying part of our intellectual needs by constructing a flexible body of knowledge based on diverse empirical realities, shaped by the various intellectual currents and contemporary religious debates prevailing in Algerian society as a whole. A cautious methodological engagement with religious anthropology is particularly warranted because it has developed ethnographic methods of inquiry and theoretical frameworks through field research (Lionel, 2011, p. 34). As a specialized branch of anthropology, it is capable of deconstructing social structures and investigating the various phenomena underlying the practice of religion within social institutions—including the family, the workplace, the school, and the street—and its influence on patterns of social life through acts of worship and religious rituals. As Émile Durkheim argues, *collective ends alone constitute genuinely moral ends, and authentic moral commitment is fundamentally attachment to the group; attachment to society is attachment to the social ideal* (Durkheim, 2011, p. 94). Accordingly, it becomes possible to examine the mechanisms of religious thought as reflected in everyday actions and behaviors embraced by the social sphere and preserved by history as a continuously renewed repository of religious belief that mediates between religious texts, interpretation, and the social context of contemporary phenomena as a philosophical and intellectual response to the needs of society.

1.1. Sources of Interpretation and the Construction of Religious Meaning:

Within the context of the contemporary socio-cultural and social transformations taking place in the community of Bir El Ater, religious knowledge among young people has shifted from the traditional mode of transmission, formerly regulated by institutions of religious socialization such as mosques, schools, and even the street, toward an open sphere characterized by a plurality of sources of understanding and the intersection of religious and social frames of reference. This transformation is closely associated with the depth of religious belief or the religious experience lived by the individual, whether within the strategy of personal life or within the community to

which he or she belongs. In other words, we are dealing with meaningful relationships between concepts associated with religion and those connected to other domains such as work, emotional life, and political choices, in addition to the diversity of religious attitudes themselves (**Sabino Acquaviva & Enzo Pace, 2015, p. 77**).

Observation of the everyday lives of some young people in Bir El Ater reveals that they engage with religious texts within a broad interpretive horizon, particularly following the emergence of modern Islamic thought—or Islamic philosophy, if the term is appropriate—which has granted them greater freedom to interpret religious texts. Consequently, the religious text has shifted from being perceived as a fixed and immutable text to becoming a subject of continuous, dynamic, and flexible interpretation. The authority of the text thus intersects with the authority of individual understanding, giving rise to what may be described as an implicit form of practical, exercised through interpretation, selective appropriation of religious texts, and the production of meanings that correspond to their everyday experiences.

Manifestations of religiosity—such as wearing a beard, adopting Islamic dress, and regularly performing prayers in the mosque—acquire symbolic value that transforms them into criteria for evaluating the degree of religious commitment and classifying individuals accordingly. Field observations conducted among the youth of Bir El Ater clearly reveal the dialectic between the "religious" and the "ordinary." This distinction restructures social relationships and regulates the rhythm of everyday interactions. A young man who displays visible signs of religious commitment—whether through wearing a beard, adopting a particular style of dress, or demonstrating specific patterns of behavior—generally receives greater recognition and appreciation within his social environment. These outward manifestations become symbolic indicators that contribute to the construction of social status while earning him respect and trust among members of his community.

Field investigations further demonstrate that manifestations of religiosity among young people extend beyond expressing religious commitment to performing important social and economic functions within the local environment. We observed that many individuals preferred to engage in commercial, economic, and other forms of interaction with people who visibly displayed signs of religiosity. When asked about the reasons for this preference, participants provided the following responses:

- Individuals who appear religiously committed are more likely to be honest and trustworthy in their dealings.
- Individuals who appear religiously committed treat others with greater respect.
- People feel more comfortable dealing with a bearded young man or someone who visibly appears religiously committed.

These responses illustrate the symbolic meanings attached to religious appearance, which confer upon their bearers a considerable degree of trustworthiness and credibility within the local community. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand the transfer of religious symbols from the sphere of worship into the economic sphere. Consequently, some young men intentionally grow beards and modify their style of dress solely to gain greater acceptance and trust within spaces of economic exchange. The adoption of outward manifestations of religiosity can project a positive moral image that strengthens one's social standing. In this sense, religious appearance becomes a form of symbolic capital capable of being converted into economic benefits by attracting customers within local communities.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that certain religious symbols are transformed into symbolic capital that grants their bearers status and respect within the community. The prominence accorded to different manifestations of religiosity is likewise reflected in our field findings. Several female participants reported that some young women intentionally adopt a more visibly religious appearance. It is common to observe many unmarried women wearing the Islamic hijab together

with face covering, particularly before marriage, because within the local cultural imagination the hijab symbolizes modesty, chastity, and good upbringing. This transformation in dress enhances their prospects of acceptance within the marriage market and increases their opportunities for marriage.

If religious manifestations perform social functions that extend beyond their devotional dimension in certain contexts, they also reflect the increasing engagement of young people in Bir El Ater in rethinking religious texts and attempting to understand and interpret them through diverse intellectual frameworks. Accordingly, the construction of religious knowledge among Algerian youth emerges through a dialectical relationship between the sacred texts (the Qur'an and the Sunnah) and lived reality. It is noticeable that many young people today believe that authentic religion is derived exclusively from the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. In other words, they adhere to religious laws and prescriptions drawn directly from these primary sources without the mediation of religious scholars, whom they perceive as practicing a form of Islamic philosophy whose intellectual propositions may conflict with other Islamic currents. For them, these doctrinal differences represent positions of affiliation and belonging that require individuals to choose between supporting or rejecting different intellectual trends, including Salafism, Islamic modernism, Islamic reformism, Sufism, and others.

Observation of everyday life among young people further reveals that, for some, religion primarily emphasizes moral values—such as justice, honesty, benevolence, and compassion—as they are embodied in their patterns of social life and interactions with their communities. These individuals rely on the personal selection of meaning from the objectives of religiosity, since such values generate a sense of social acceptance by virtue of their visible expression, which can easily be recognized by others. This tendency is reinforced through interactions across various digital platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others, which are strategically employed as spaces for constructing a performative digital identity before virtual audiences. Through visually oriented religious discourse rich in symbolic meanings, young people seek to obtain social recognition within digital networks through shared interactions.

Another segment of young people, however, remains committed to ritual observance according to the interpretations advanced by religious scholars within Islamic philosophical traditions. Every religious scholar possesses followers who adopt his approach and adhere to his guidance. Weber argues that sectarian affiliation generates networks of trust and mutual solidarity while reorganizing social relations upon an ethical foundation, whereby moral reputation becomes a form of social capital that guarantees acceptance within the community (Weber, 1991, p. 201).

2.1. Rituals as Social Acts: The Dynamics of the Past in Contemporary Experience:

Rituals are generally associated with a set of rules that regulate, preserve, and continually reproduce them. They have always been closely connected with the religious and spiritual dimensions of both ancient and contemporary societies. Rituals explain the meaning of religion and endow it with the symbolic aura that preserves its significance within the collective consciousness while simultaneously reinforcing group belonging and regulating social behavior. The relationship between life and death, for example, is understood as one of complementarity that gives meaning to the universe. These meanings are deeply rooted in cultural values and norms. Individuals pause to reflect upon death, birth, marriage, and other major life events, surrounding their existence with meaningful objects, symbols, and signs through which they organize the rhythm of their lives and transform both sorrow and joy into opportunities for solidarity and mutual support within the communities to which they belong. Rituals therefore constitute both symbolic and social dimensions of collective existence.

The dynamics of communal feasts, particularly the preparation of food, accompany hospitality and are preceded by invitations that culminate in shared meals. For Marcel Mauss, food is fundamentally a symbolic act that reinforces social alliances. Within this context, one may ask: how does food become a social ritual? This ritual combines two complementary functions: a biological function and a cultural function related to identity, both of which contribute to strengthening and regulating social relationships. Durkheim argues that rituals should not be understood merely as individual expressions of faith or emotion; rather, they contribute to the creation of what he termed *social integration*, a moment of intensified collective consciousness, that is, an immediate awareness of universal existence. It also represents the experience of the infinite as the eternal life of the whole within the individual and of the individual within the whole (**Ben Abdelmoula, 2012–2013, p. 16**).

From another perspective, however, a fundamental question may be raised: Is ritual action not inseparable from all forms of social action, and are ritual celebrations not genuine occasions for mobilizing collective consciousness through reservoirs of meaning within societies undergoing rapid transformation? (**Moncef Mahouachi, 2010, p. 17**). Indeed, the legitimacy of rituals within everyday life remains evident, as they continue to draw upon religion and the religious philosophy repeatedly articulated by religious scholars. This discourse regulates the rhythm of social life. Contemporary Algerian youth strive to produce meaning through participation in numerous rituals embodied in religious festivals and ceremonial seasons that restore symbols to their functional significance. They thus seek to reinterpret the sacred within everyday life. Yet the modern reinterpretation generated by ongoing socio-cultural transformations has, in many respects, transformed ritual into an object of consumption. This process inevitably affects the bodily presence through which meaning was traditionally constituted as a symbolic entity expressed through gestures, signs, and movements deeply embedded within ritual celebrations. The transformation of ritual's symbolic function has consequently contributed to the erosion of physical presence, replacing it with digital presence increasingly subjected to the authority of contemporary algorithms. As rationalization has expanded throughout modern social life and the logic of efficiency and utility has come to dominate social relations, an essential question inevitably arises: What need remains for the practice of rituals in an age that celebrates instrumental reason and technology? (**Moncef Mahouachi, 2010, p. 18**).

2. Hybrid Religiosity and Adaptation to Modernity

Hybrid religiosity represents a contemporary social phenomenon that combines religious commitment and sacred ritual practices with a secular way of life. Within this framework, classical religious references intersect with modern means in shaping religious experience. On the one hand, traditional religiosity is grounded in commitment to ritual acts of worship, such as prayer, fasting, and the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), as well as the religious education that individuals receive within their families and communities. On the other hand, it incorporates the use of modern technologies-including the Internet, satellite television, and social media-for self-directed religious learning, thereby allowing believers greater selectivity in choosing religious references that are more flexible and responsive to contemporary realities.

This interaction between the two frames of reference should not be understood as a contradiction but rather as an ongoing dialogue between authenticity and modernity. Such a cultural synthesis reconstructs the symbolic meaning of religion in a flexible manner that corresponds to the social and cultural realities of religious youth. From an Islamic perspective, this integration fulfills a legitimate religious objective by facilitating the acquisition of religious knowledge and employing technology to serve and disseminate religion. These technological means are therefore not

substitutes for authentic religious authority but complementary tools that facilitate access to religious knowledge and make it more accessible.

Furthermore, this synthesis between tradition and modernity contributes to renewing religious discourse and enhancing its relevance within contemporary society. It reaffirms that Islam is a religion valid for every time and place, capable of accommodating social and technological developments without compromising its essential principles or higher objectives. In its highest form, religion is not merely a collection of rigid legal rulings, formal rituals, or the repetition of invocations devoid of spiritual depth. Rather, it is a comprehensive system designed to prepare contemporary human beings to shoulder the profound responsibilities imposed by scientific progress and the complexities of modern life (Azzam, 2017, p. 121). A number of Muslim thinkers recognized this reality, foremost among them Muhammad Iqbal, who sought to transcend the abstract conception of religion by transforming it from a body of theoretical knowledge into an existential form of knowledge corresponding to lived religious experience, whereby religion becomes a practical experience embodied in action rather than a purely intellectual construct.

Iqbal demonstrated that religion possesses an epistemological foundation comparable to that of science. Religion is not merely an emotional belief but an intellectual and spiritual system capable of producing certainty and truth. This understanding empowered believers in confronting materialist and atheistic currents that had long claimed science as the exclusive source of certainty. From the perspective of Islamic studies, this approach is consistent with the objectives of Islamic law (Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah) in promoting beneficial knowledge and integrating religious knowledge with human experience, thereby establishing religion as a comprehensive framework that simultaneously guides both reason and spirit. It further confirms that Islam remains valid for every time and place and is capable of embracing scientific advancement without losing its doctrinal and spiritual essence (Muhammad Kamal, 1986, p. 46).

2.1. Religiosity as a Space of Interpretation and Social Practice

The practice of religiosity cannot be separated from an understanding of social reality (fiqh al-wāqī'), which constitutes one of the objectives of Islamic jurisprudence in applying religious rulings to people's lives. Religious behavior is therefore influenced by surrounding social, economic, and political conditions. Unemployment, the pressures of everyday life, and exposure to digital media all contribute to shaping contemporary patterns of religiosity. Consequently, hybrid forms of religious practice emerge through a process of jurisprudential adaptation and what may be described as "symbolic negotiation" between preserving devotional commitment and adapting to the practical demands of daily life.

For example, observations in major Algerian cities indicate that young people perform prayers and participate in collective rituals according to flexible schedules that accommodate work and study obligations. They rely on smartphone applications to determine prayer times and participate in online religious discussion groups after completing their professional or academic responsibilities. These practices demonstrate that religiosity has become a dynamic process that interacts continuously with social reality while reconstructing the symbolic meaning of religion in a flexible manner that combines the objectives of preserving religion with the effective use of modern technologies.

From the perspective of religious anthropology, such interaction should not be interpreted as a departure from religion. Rather, it represents an application of the Islamic principles of balancing priorities (fiqh al-muwāzanāt) and jurisprudence of priorities (fiqh al-awlawiyyāt), whereby greater importance is assigned to what is religiously more necessary according to one's capacity and circumstances while maintaining adherence to fundamental doctrinal and legal principles. This

process also falls within the Islamic legal concepts of facilitation (*taysīr*) and the juristic maxim that "hardship necessitates ease." Accordingly, Islam emerges as a religion capable of adapting to social and economic transformations while preserving its doctrinal essence and higher objectives.

2.2. Reproducing the Sacred within the Social Context

Social and religious analysis demonstrates that Muslim individuals continually reproduce the sacred in their everyday lives through practice and interpretation while interacting across multiple social spaces. These include traditional settings, such as mosques and circles of religious remembrance, as well as contemporary digital environments represented by online discussions and religious activities conducted through digital platforms. Within this context, religiosity is not simply a mechanical repetition of inherited traditions. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic process founded upon symbolic renewal and an understanding of lived reality (*fiqh al-wāqī*), through which individuals seek to adapt to changing social, economic, and political circumstances while preserving the higher objectives of Islamic law concerning the protection of religion and identity.

In this way, the religious individual may be regarded as an active agent in the production of identity dynamics and symbolic meaning within society. Through continuous interaction with religious symbols, individuals constantly reinterpret and reconstruct them in ways that correspond to contemporary Algerian reality, thereby highlighting processes of cultural hybridity, symbolic negotiation, and the practical reproduction of the sacred.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that religiosity among young people in Bir El Ater cannot be reduced to individual commitment to religious rituals or regarded as a direct reflection of religious texts. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic social construct that evolves through a complex network of social relations, symbolic representations, and everyday interactions. From an anthropological perspective, the findings reveal that religious practice extends beyond its devotional dimension to perform multiple social functions that contribute to the organization of social relationships and the production of meaning within the local community.

The findings further indicate that religious knowledge is no longer confined to traditional religious institutions. Instead, it is increasingly shaped by the interaction of religious authorities, individual experiences, and digital environments, giving rise to new forms of religious meaning-making based on interpretation and reinterpretation in ways that respond to contemporary social realities without severing their connection to Islamic religious authority.

The study also shows that visible expressions of religiosity perform functions that go beyond signaling religious commitment. They operate as forms of symbolic capital that foster social trust, recognition, and acceptance, while also influencing economic and social interactions. In certain contexts, these outward manifestations may even function as strategies through which individuals seek moral legitimacy and enhance their social standing within the community.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that contemporary religiosity among young people should not be understood through the conventional dichotomy of tradition versus modernity. Instead, it emerges through an ongoing negotiation between religious texts, everyday social realities, and broader cultural and digital transformations, generating diverse expressions of religiosity that remain firmly rooted in the moral and ethical values of Islam.

From a sociological perspective, these findings reaffirm that religion continues to play a central role in fostering social cohesion, reinforcing trust, and regulating social behavior. However, these functions are increasingly being reshaped by accelerating social and digital transformations. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of religiosity in contemporary Algerian society requires an integrated analytical approach that brings together anthropology and sociology, enabling

religion to be examined as a living cultural and social system through which meanings are continuously reproduced in everyday practice and symbolic interaction.

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