

Future Tunisian Primary School Teachers' Perceptions Of Islam And Modernity

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Abstract

In recent decades, it is paradoxical to note, especially after centuries of rationality and modernization, the expansion of religious extremism and its internationalization in different countries around the world. Many researchers have shown that several cases of young Arab-Muslims were victims of fanaticism and radicalization because of their misunderstanding of Islam and religious ignorance.

The hypothesis is that the phenomenon of misunderstanding of Islam threatens the population of young students and future teaching staff in Tunisia.

Through this article, we aim to reveal the relationship that future Tunisian primary school teachers had with religion. In fact, we will delimit among them what Islam and modernity mean in Arab-Muslim thought and what they think about some confusing issues such as the civility of the State and the relationship of politics with religion, the wearing of the veil and the equality of women and men in inheritance.

Keywords: *future primary school teachers; modernity; Islam; civility of the State; wearing the veil; heritage*

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I. Introduction

From the beginning of the 19th century, the Maghreb experienced a movement of modernization which concerned all areas: politics, economy, culture and society (Smith, 2016). However, the social and political evolution of its countries throughout the 20th century demonstrates a strengthening of religious conservatism (Allani, 2009) which prevents them from freeing themselves from burdensome traditional practices and values (Adnani, 2022). The attacks of September 11, 2001 made the situation much worse (Gray & Stockham, 2008). In fact, in the Maghreb countries, as in the rest of the world, the situation of Islam has become more and more delicate and uncomfortable since it has transformed into a sign of terror, indignation and incomprehension among others (Patwari, 2016).

Of all the states of the Maghreb, Tunisia is undoubtedly the most atypical (Camau, 1987). In fact, despite the modernization efforts that the country has experienced during the modern and contemporary era, the intellectual elite today finds itself worried about the paradox of the desired and the repressed (Zeghal, 2008 ; Zeghal & Frégosi, 2005), in other words, torn between the refusal to the West, generally oppressive, and the attraction of Modernity supposed to change society (Chabchoub, 2000). For its part, the State also finds itself incapable of harmonizing traditional Tunisian society with the precepts of modernity (Ben Achour, 2000). Consequently, the Tunisian social space oscillates, nowadays, between adherence to the reformist movement forced by Bourguiba and Islam represented by the Islamic tendency movement (Robert, 2008).

Faced with this less pessimistic reading, a more positive perception of the problem of modernity gives more hope and has its origins in the thoughts of Arkoun (2005) and Charfi (1998). She considers that "the emerging reason" of reform thinkers will constitute a parallel counter-power and questions archaic institutions (Benaziz, 2019).

This debate was addressed in Algeria in 2008 by Benali who proved that young students marked by the black decade found themselves dominated by a traditional vision of modernity, with a semi-liberal vocation (Benali, 2008).

In Tunisia, after 2011, asking people about religion becomes a very delicate issue, which explains the reduced number of empirical research in this area. We can cite the survey carried out in 2014 among young people from two working-class neighborhoods of Tunis, Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen (Lamloum .& Ben Zina, 2015), and that carried out the same year by the National Youth Observatory (Najar, 2014). The results of these two studies, as well as other academic research, point to the rise of extremism and Salafism among youth since 2011 (Andersen & Brym, 2017 ; Ratka & Roux, 2017 ; Melliti, 2015).

Today, in a fragile Tunisian national political and socio-cultural context (Lefèvre, 2015), it once again becomes necessary to discuss the religious question and reveal the perceptions of Tunisian society, in this case those of young people about Islam and Modernity.

Really, after the Revolution of January 2011, the socio-cultural situation seems more vague than ever (Boubekeur, 2018). The new atmosphere of freedom that reigned made it possible to liberate all the structures previously burdened. In fact, in the name of freedom, several unknown actors are beginning to produce a common sense that sows ideas of dogmatism and violence with the aim of manipulating the social representations of Tunisian youth and transforming them into future jihadists (El Haddad, 2021). It was during this period that radicalization, regimentation and recruitment operations in jihad camps took off in full swing (Kouttoub, 2017; Lachal, 2021 ; Marks, 2013).

Given that the teacher is always considered the force that drives the educational system, and since the primary school presents itself, throughout the world, as the foundation on which educational systems are built, our interest will focus on the study perceptions of young students of the new Education and Teaching degree in the Tunisian university who will be the future primary school teachers in the country.

In Quebec, teachers generally have a secularized relationship to religion, including Islam. This relationship is built throughout the teacher's personal and professional life (Triki-Yamani *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, in France, most often, the representations of the Muslim religion among French teachers feed on a negative vision of the community (Bozec, 2020).

The essential questioning that preoccupied us was then the perceptions of future school teachers in Tunisia about their religion, other religions, secularism, civil status and modernity. To what extent does their way of thinking indicate evolving minds, minds freed from the shackles of traditional Islam or worried beings torn between an Arab-Muslim identity and a modern-secular mind ?

II. Materials and Methods

Really, the idea of this problem was built from institutional facts in which we are involved by our position as teachers of these future primary schools teachers applied within the framework of the license in Education and Teaching created in 2015 by the Ministry of Higher Education in partnership with the Ministry of Education with the aim of training future primary school teachers.

We then start in this research from our observations made during three years of teaching in this license. Guided by these prerequisites, we assume that these young students mobilized distorted representations of Islam and modernity.

It is important to point out here that we will also start in our analysis from the opinion of Rateau (1999) who argues that representations are social. Consequently, we also put forward the hypothesis that a good part of these would be social since they would be entertained towards a not very rigid Islamist thought because of the effect of the new political and socio-cultural reality of the country.

For the purposes of this research, the new political and sociocultural reality of the country is considered as an independent variable, and the diversion of future teachers' perceptions of Islam and modernity constitutes the dependent variable.

This research is based on a quantitative survey technique which is a questionnaire with eleven open and semi-open questions and which is subdivided into three sections: Six questions seek to discern representations about the concept of modernity in Islam, thinkers who have dealt with this question, political modernization and social modernization. Two questions are about the definition of the Muslim religion. Three relate to attitudes towards other religions (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Items and questions concerned.

Items	Questions
Representations of modernist thought	Questions 9-10
Representations of political modernisation	Questions 6-11)
Representations of social modernisation	Questions 7-8
Essence of Islam	Questions 1
References of Islam	Questions 2
Relationship with other religions	Questions 3-5

Actually, the survey targeted second and third year students. These are young Tunisians born in 2000-2001.

At the time of the January 2011 Revolution, they were 10 or 11 years old. They belonged to different Tunisian governorates.

This questionnaire was completed with 200 students of this license of Education and Enseignement belonging to the different Tunisian governorates and belonging to the different Tunisian university institutes which host this license.

We can admit that this is a mixed population, predominantly female (81% girls and 19% boys). Their

socio-economic background is generally average.

75% of students in the different institutes are baccalaureate graduates from the scientific sections: mathematics section, experimental sciences section and technical section. Literary baccalaureate graduates and those who belonged to the economics-management section represent only 25%. Access for these students to this license requires passing the baccalaureate exam with good averages and passing the oral interview within these institutes.

We can say that 62% of them are students who came from the scientific sections and who had an average of 12/20 to 15/20 in the baccalaureate (Tab. 2).

Table 2. Averages of students in the baccalaureate exam.

From 11 to 12/20	From 12 to 14/20	From 14 to 15.5/20	From 15.5 to 18/20
30%	42%	20%	8%

These are brilliant students in the disciplines of mathematics, physical sciences, natural sciences, technical and computer sciences, but who have not received solid and in-depth training in social sciences during their secondary education because of their orientation towards the scientific sections.

The choice of the population surveyed is explained by a probability sampling method which can be defined by cluster sampling. This choice is explained by the relationships we have with these students or with their teachers and the conditions that facilitated the experimentation. It is important to note that the survey was carried out throughout the two academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, precisely in February 2020 and 2021.

It is important to note here that this survey took place during a pivotal year: ten years after the January 2011 Revolution which allowed the Islamists to rise to power and one year after the October 2019 elections which guaranteed the majority of the latter in parliament and government .

During the questionnaire, we contacted 5 teachers among our colleagues who work in the different institutes which host the applied license in Education and Teaching. They welcomed our survey project with understanding and enthusiasm.

A large part of the investigation was therefore carried out by our teaching colleagues. The other part was carried out by ourselves with the students of the institute where we were a member of its teaching staff and with students who belong to other establishments.

We decided that the questionnaires would be put online on the Google Forms platform because of the advantages it presents:

- Possibility of reaching the maximum number of students regardless of their geographical location;
- Significantly reduced delays thanks to the automation of the steps;
- Reduced costs.

Descriptive statistics analyses were used to summarize data in an organized manner. However, causal statistics analyses were done to establish the relationship between independent and dependent variables (Snedecor & Cochran, 1957). All statistical analysis was carried out using the commercial statistical package software for social sciences (SPSS version 23.0, IBM, USA) and MedCalc Statistical software version 17.9.7 (MedCalc bvba software, Ostend, Belgium ; [http:// www.medcalc.org](http://www.medcalc.org) ; 2017).

III. Results

After describing the methodological framework of our experiment, we plan to analyze the data collected. In reality, we will highlight the most significant results and discuss them later based on our initial hypotheses.

In order to answer all our questions and validate our hypotheses, we will begin our work by delineating the meaning of modernity among the students surveyed. The second part of our analysis will be reserved for the definition of Islam. In the third part, we will try to reveal their relationship with other religions.

Perceptions of modernity in Islam

Perceptions of modernist thought

In Arab-Muslim thought, there have been broad discussions, among others in philosophy and history, about the best way to understand and explain modernity. This discussion continues to produce, until today, very diverse and infinite definitions. These definitions are disseminated in society through the media, school curricula, the contents of university studies, etc. In order to reveal the representations of these young students about this major concept, we asked two semi-open questions:

- *Can you define modernity in Arab-Muslim thought?*

The results of our survey made it possible to deduce that 58% among future Tunisian primary teachers could not define the concept of modernity (non-responses). In addition, 19% of this population gave incorrect answers. Indeed, the definitions considered correct did not exceed 23% of all responses. These accepted

answers sum up the meaning of Islam's openness and its conformity with current events.

- Can you name thinkers who have dealt with the issue of modernity in Islam?

Statistics revealed that 96% of students did not answer this question. Indeed, only 4% were able to list thinkers who have dealt with the question of modernity (Fig. 1).

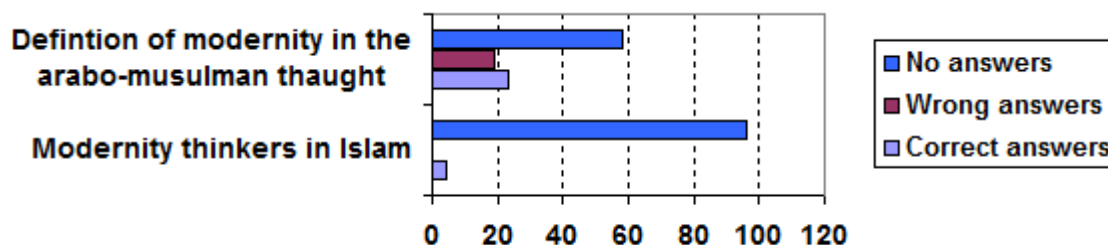


Figure 1. Representations of modernist thought in islam.

Perceptions of political modernization

In Tunisia, after months of deadlock and successive crises, the new Constitution was voted on January 26, 2014. The main secular achievements of Tunisian modernity were then preserved.

Detecting the opinion of future primary school teachers in this constitutional text which has kept the civility of the Tunisian State inherited from that of June 1, 1959, required us to ask them two major questions:

- What is your opinion on the January 2014 constitution sharia blackout? I refuse / I agree.

The statistical results of this first question showed that 58% of these student-teachers refuse the separation of the religious from the political and the occultation of the Sharia' from the constitutional text. 42% appreciate the decision to separate religion from the political power and support the idea of the concealment of the Sharia from Tunisian political life.

- Which political regime do you prefer in Tunisia?

The results of the survey showed that 7% of these same students admitted that they prefer a secular political system similar to the French one, which separates the politics from the religious and who considers the religious matter as being a personal matter. While only 4% who are for the establishment of an Islamist political regime that refers to the Sharia' in the constitutional text and which even grants punishments to Tunisian citizens non-Muslims. The majority among them, representing 89% of the population surveyed, support the idea of a civil state that separates religion from politics and guarantees freedom of worship.

It is important to point out here that the statistical crosses revealed that 47% among the population of the 89% who support the idea of a civil state refuse, at the same time, the idea of the separation of the political from the religious. The contradictory answers of these students who represent 47% of the total of students surveyed prove that they do not know the true meaning of the state civility (Figs. 2 and 3).

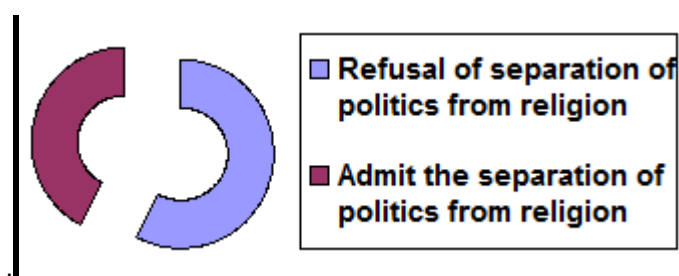


Figure 2. Relationship to the religion and politics.

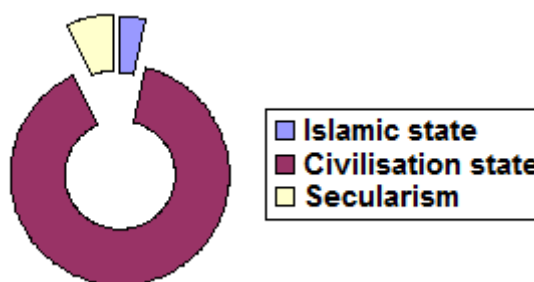


Figure 3. Preferred polical regime.

Perceptions of social modernization

The questions of wearing the veil and the equality of women to men in Tunisian inheritance do not cease to occupy Tunisian society to this day. It is therefore important to identify the attitude of future Tunisian teachers about these two issues, especially since the Tunisian Constitution of January 2014 is in the Arab and Muslim world, the law which offered the most guarantees for women's rights.

Faced with the question of equality between women and men in inheritance, the overwhelming majority of prospective students were against it. In fact, 78% of all future Tunisian primary school teachers refuse equality for women; they consider the woman in a lower position than man. Indeed, only 22% of these young students accept total equality between men and women.

Regarding the turbulent issue of wearing the veil, opinions are diverse. 15% see that it is a requirement, 7% think it is preferable, 65% admit that it is a personal freedom, while 3% see it as humiliating for the woman. 10% of these future teachers had no answer to this question. In fact, 2% do not know the answer and 8% refused to answer (Figs. 4 and 5).

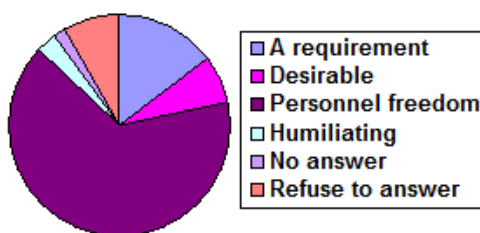


Figure 4. Representation of wearing to veil.

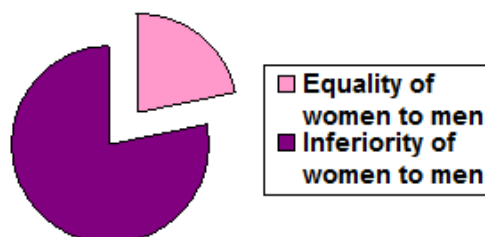


Figure 5. Representation of equality of women to men in inheritance.

Definition of Islam

What is Islam? Is it faith or divine law? Is it based solely on the Quran or Fiqh? How much do we believe in the 'Ulema?

Here are questions that, today, are not without risk and to which we have posed them to future teachers of the primary in Tunisia.

Essence of Islam

- How do you define Islam?

To this major question, the answers were diverse and multiple.

Almost a quarter of these young people (22%) think that Islam is Sharia: it is a divine law that organizes human life. Such a definition conceals it from its spiritual dimension and prescribes it in the sense of a divine law which dictates to humans their way of life by codifying all individual and collective rights and duties. The remaining three quarters see in their religion another spiritual and relational dimension. , the students who see that Islam is defined as a spiritual matter even reach 13% of the whole population. 35% define it as a feeling that connects man to God. The others (30%) consider it a faith (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Definition of Islam.

The references of Islam

Who has the right to interpret the Quran? Do ordinary Muslims have the right to explain a verse of the Quran? This is a burning question that arises in Arab-Muslim society and which remains without a precise answer. In order to know the opinion of future Tunisian teachers about this issue, we asked them the following question:

- *What do you accept as a reference for interpreting Quranic verses?*

In order to interpret a Quranic verse, 47% of all the students questioned refer, in the first place to their own personal interpretation and in the second place to the works of the Ulemas. 52% of these students refer only to the works of the Ulemas and conceal their own understanding of the Quran. Therefore, we can assert that 99% of future primary school teachers admit that the interpretation of the Quran requires reference to the thought of the Ulemas. 1% of this population believes only in their own understanding.

In order to orient and guide them, we presented them with three items Fig. 7).

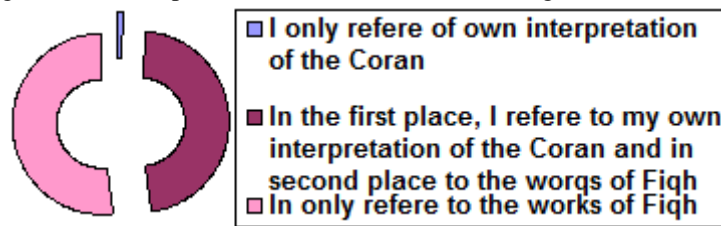


Figure 7. The references of Islam.

Relationship with other religions

- *Do you believe in the existence of religions other than Islam?*
- *Do you believe that the other religions are equal to Islam?*
- *What is your attitude towards people who convert from Islam to another religion?*

In fact, through these questions, we sought to know if the future teachers of the primary are tolerant towards the non-Muslim other.

Statistical cross-checks showed that 96% of future teachers believe in the existence of other religions. Only 84% of them think that these different religions are inferior to Islam.

About the conversion of Muslims to these religions, only 18% of these future teachers refuse this attitude. 82% support people who have converted from Islam towards Christianity or Judaism and respect the freedom of their religious choices (Fig. 8).

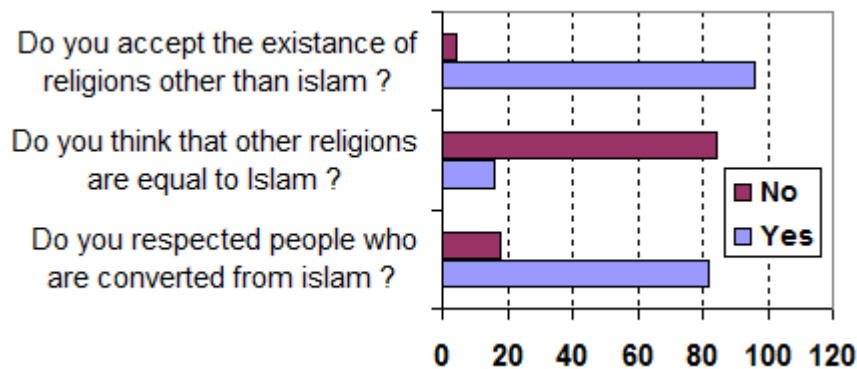


Figure 8. Relationship of Islam with other religions.

IV. Discussion

In short, the empirical research that we carried out allowed us to identify the perceptions of future teachers about two key concepts: Islam and modernity.

Regarding Islam, statistics have revealed that they adopt a tolerant, open and spiritually inspired Islam, in other words, a Tunisian Islam which manifests the openness and tolerance of the Zeitounian school and spirituality of Sufism still alive in the minds of Tunisians. However, among these future Tunisian teachers, this Islam must depend a lot on the Ulemas and must be wary of Ijtihad.

Really, the most important result of this survey consisted in highlighting that the future Tunisian primary teachers are mostly unable to represent the concept Islam modernity and that they are torn between adherence to reformist ideas and the appropriation of Islamist thoughts. In fact, their responses show that three

quarters among them are unable to define of the definition of this concept and that more than 95% fail to cite of the thinkers who addressed this major issue. Ignorance of this key concept then leads them to problems of adherence to political and social modernization. In short, half among them cannot assimilate the true meaning of state civility. Three quarters refuses equality between woman and man in inheritance. Only 3% refuse to wear the veil for women, two-thirds are not against and a quarter calls for it to be carried.

Three quarters of the population refuse equality between women and men in terms of inheritance. Concerning the wearing of the veil, we found that only 3% refuse it. Whereas, two thirds are not against it, while a quarter of this same population calls for it to be worn. Given that 81% of this surveyed population is made up of young girls, we can conclude that we are facing a new generation of women who accept the supremacy of men in matters of equality (Brym & Andersen, 2016). We can also conclude that we are facing a revival of the wearing of the veil in Tunisia. It seems that they interpret it as a sign of the islamisation of society and that they seek to assert their identity as Muslims (Matri, 2014).

It is safe to say that the results of this empirical research validate our first hypothesis which supposes that these young students would mobilize distorted representations of Islam and modernity. From the above, we can admit that these statistical results match the experimental researches carried out in 2017 by Andersen and Ratka which proved that the student environment (Andersen & Brym, 2017; Ratka & Roux, 2017). They also overlap with the works of Ayari (2021) and Marks (2013) who analyzed the factors in the development of violent extremism among Tunisian youth after the 2011 revolution (Guérin-Pace & Kassar, 2022; Souli, 2022; Han, 2021; El Haddad, 2021; Mokhefi, 2015).

Our results also match those deduced in Algeria in 2008 by Benali who showed that despite being fascinated by the principles of modernity, young Algerian students are very attached to the traditional values of Algerian society (Benali, 2008). The results of our empirical research also validate our second hypothesis which supposes that a good part of these representations would be social since they would be entertained towards a loose Islamist thought because of the effect of the new political and socio-cultural reality of the country. In fact, in Tunisia, the atmosphere of freedom which reigned following to the Revolution of January 14, 2011 gave rise to an extremely pluralistic and at the same time deeply fragmented political scene is indeed divided into two great contradictory poles: A modern progressive pole which fiercely defends the secularism of the State and the freedoms of women and a classical religious current which sees in these ideas a danger that seriously threatens the Arab-Muslim identity of the country. Young Tunisian people then found themselves under the influence of these two currents (Denieuil & Laroussi, 2017). They believe in the values of openness, tolerance and democracy of the modern progressive movement. Only, they are at the same time under the influence of the classical religious current which has succeeded in propagating among them the ideas of sanctification of the Ulema, the dependence of the religious on the politics, the refusal of secularism, the need for women to wear the veil and the refusal of their equality the man in the inheritance.

Really, our results favor the thesis defended by Ben Achour and Benaziz (2019). They also support the thesis defended by Chabchoub (2000) about the influence of common sense on Tunisian students.

In short, we can advance that because of the incomplete teaching of the question of modernity in Islam in the Tunisian education system, these students mobilize social representations diverted from political and social modernization.

V. Conclusion

Today, young Tunisians find themselves at the heart of the fierce conflict that has not ceased to worsen after independence between the Islamists and the modernists. Our empirical research which has attempted to reveal the representations of future teachers of primary about Islam and Modernity, allowed us to know if the Tunisian school succeeds today in freeing the spirit of the Tunisian citizen from the residue of traditional Islam conveyed by society and relived again by the new political conjuncture of the country.

We were able to deduce that the teacher of tomorrow of this school is open and tolerant towards the other, but dominated by a traditional vision of Modernity.

But these results can in no way be generalized to all students of the Education and Teaching license in Tunisia, because we were not able to work on all the undergraduate students. Therefore, being aware of the limits that our investigation can reveal, we can say that it was more interesting to raise the number of students surveyed.

It was also more advantageous to relate the variables of sex, geographical belonging and the socio-economic level of the students surveyed with their representations of Islam and modernity.

In order to better detect the origins of the problems of the representation of the concept Islam modernity, a study should have been carried out on the teaching content of the religious question in high schools and in the study program of the license education and teaching in Tunisia.

This research as it stands with the contributions it has underlined and the limits it has presented, encourages us to better think about the teaching of religion and to reflect on the place of the social sciences in

the curricula of education in Tunisia. It also encourages us to think about the impact of these representations of future teachers on those of the students they will teach. Certainly, they will be among the factors most likely to influence political and civic awareness and the relationship to religion among young children in Tunisia.

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