

Punishing Hurtful Words in the Western Mediterranean: Blasphemy and “National” Religions

Relying on court documents, interviews, and public debates, this paper compares the prosecution of “hurtful speech acts” against a religion in the Western Mediterranean, specifically in Tunisia, Morocco, France and Spain. It examines how these particular nation-states, former colonizers and colonies, explain the contemporary identification and punishment (or non-punishment) of acts seen as violating a “national” religion. How are these acts framed as crossing (or not crossing) a “national” line, when the religious traditions themselves are much bigger than any national border? And, if blasphemy is regularly framed as “hurting” some members of the nation, why does this hurt concern the state? From what kinds of injury do citizens across the Western Mediterranean expect the state to protect them? In so doing, this paper destabilizes the link between blasphemy and Islam, both by examining European blasphemy cases against Christianity and by interrogating European conceptions of blasphemy as a right or duty.