Disclosure of religious beliefs

Surely after more than 200 years, psychiatry has become reasonably sophisticated and we can assume that there is no such thing as an unbiased comment. Professor Cooper’s attack on Professor Casey for being ‘a sincere member of the Roman Catholic Church’ is only justified if he also states, as the Editor does, that the other comment comes from Dr Oates, who is a ‘representative of the pro-choice group’. These senior psychiatrists were asked by the Editor to comment because they had both a special interest and special expertise.

There is a more general issue at stake here. It seems a sad reversion to attitudes in psychiatry of the 1960s when taking a religiously inspired position was seen as being unacceptably prejudiced, whereas taking a non-religious stance, even at the expense of the patient’s discomfort, was regarded as normal practice. Professor Casey has been asked to wear her religious belief publicly, like some yellow Star of David, with the intention to undermine the validity of her professional opinion.

As a former chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group, I would hope that we could now give equal value to the viewpoints of psychiatrists with different philosophical and religious backgrounds. Dr Oates should be permitted, even in your august pages, to express a personal position, and so should Professor Casey. Yes, I do express a personal interest.


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Cooper states ‘we all start from a position determined in part by personal background, and readers will not fully understand comments unless such things are known,’ referring to Casey’s commentary on Fergusson et al and her Catholic faith. This seems to suggest that however sound our reasoning may be, it must be taken with a pinch of salt because one is a Catholic. Perhaps a Black man’s arguments against racism would be similarly invalid. No doubt Professor Cooper would not want an upsurge in anti-Catholic bigotry, but his suggestions may not prevent it.