Are my religious beliefs anyone’s business? A framework for declarations in health and biomedicine

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ABSTRACT
Conflicts of interests (COI) are typically divided into those that are financial and those that are not. While there is general agreement that financial COIs have a significant impact on decisions and need to be declared and managed, the status of non-financial COIs continues to be disputed. In a recent BMJ feature article it was proposed that religious beliefs should be routinely declared as an interest. The article generated over 41 responses from the medical community and health researchers, which put forward diverse and opposing views. In this paper, we analyse the discourse to shed further light on the reasons put forward for and against declaring religious beliefs. We argue for a middle path in which only material beliefs should be declared, and then only when there are no extenuating circumstances. To this end, we present a framework to help evaluate the materiality of interests that can be used for both financial and non-financial interests.

NON-FINANCIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN HEALTH AND BIOMEDICINE
Those working in health and biomedicine occupy many social roles—both professional and personal. Each of these roles is associated with a set of ‘interests’—which, in the context of organisational and professional ethics, refers to commitments that emerge from, or are relevant to, social roles. Although interests may at times align with, and even support, each other, health and biomedical professionals inevitably find themselves in ‘multiple entangled’ roles, in which interests ‘pull the individual concerned in two, or more, different directions’ simultaneously or over time. In these instances, they can be said to have a ‘conflict of interest’ (COI).

COIs can be either financial (associated with the possibility of financial or other material gain) or non-financial, with the latter stemming from personal (religious and secular) beliefs and intellectual commitments, personal and professional relationships, professional ambition, and so on. Although the problem of financial COI has received much attention in the health literature, non-financial COIs have been almost entirely neglected.

Some see this exclusion of non-financial COIs as entirely appropriate, either because they believe that non-financial COIs are unlikely to systemically distort health and biomedicine or because they believe that efforts to manage them will lead to a ‘flood’ of meaningless declarations and result in unwarranted exclusion and discrimination. We have argued elsewhere that these views are misguided because non-financial COIs can have just as much impact on attitudes and behaviours as do financial COIs, and because non-financial COIs can be managed selectively, sensitively and without necessarily excluding people from their professional roles. Additionally, we have proposed that drawing attention to non-financial COI and exploring strategies for their management can teach us how to better manage both types. In this article, we will use a recent debate from a high-impact medical journal about declaring non-financial COIs stemming from religious beliefs to further articulate our position.

SMITH AND BLAZEBY’S PROPOSAL
In 2018, the BMJ published a feature article by Richard Smith and Jane Blazeby, in which they argued that religious beliefs strongly influence people’s attitudes and decisions—pointing to abortion and assisted suicide as examples of situations in which a person’s religion may both ‘require them to take a particular view’ in a debate and their decision-making. On this basis, they argued that such beliefs can create COIs and should be routinely declared—as this enables others to evaluate what these individuals have to say and consider the ‘full context’ of their positions and decisions.

Smith and Blazeby defended their position primarily by pre-empting possible counterarguments. In response to the possible counterargument that individuals’ views should be judged on the strength of the arguments they present and not on their beliefs or commitments—that is, that ad hominem judgements should be avoided—Smith and Blazeby countered that this would nullify the entire project of considering and managing COIs which is always, by definition, focused on the individual rather than on their arguments. In response to the argument that religion is a personal matter that people should be able to keep private, they again argued that this would preclude a wide range of COIs—both financial and non-financial—from being disclosed. And in response to the argument that declarations of religious beliefs may be misleading because people who identify with a religion may not agree with the orthodox position of their faith, they argued that religious beliefs ‘clearly are relevant’ to a number of debates and that people can indicate when their views do not conform to orthodox positions.

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO SMITH AND BLAZEBY
Smith and Blazeby’s article generated 41 mostly critical—responses from the medical community. Critical responses to Smith and Blazeby’s article fell broadly into three categories: (1)
Smith and Blazeby assume an artificial distinction between religious and secular beliefs; (2) that routine declaration would lead to oversimplification and stereotyping of religious beliefs; and (3) that routine declaration would lead to discrimination and exclusion on the basis of religious identification.

**Artificial distinction between religious and secular beliefs**

Many respondents took exception to the idea that religious beliefs should be singled out as being somehow different from other personal beliefs. One observed that everyone approaches judgements and decisions on the basis of a ‘raft of presuppositions and assumptions [ie, commitments] which have their roots in our fundamental worldview [ie, beliefs about the world].’ 12

Another argued that secular ideological commitments are no more objective than are religious beliefs despite the common assumption that:

The rest of us [ie, non-religious people] approach difficult ethical issues with a cool, detached neutrality … [and] presumably these ‘religious beliefs’ need to be seen for what they are—unscientific, irrational and dangerous.13

It was also noted that those who lack religious beliefs may have ‘faith’ in their secular ideological commitments as powerful as any religious person might have—a libertarian commitment to the value of autonomy being given as a case in point.

**Oversimplification and stereotyping**

A second objection to Smith and Blazeby’s proposal was that declarations of religious beliefs may not illuminate debates, but rather ‘confuse’ and ‘misdirect’ them, because individuals who profess allegiance to a particular religion may in fact have widely divergent beliefs. Furthermore, it was noted that those to whom declarations are made would interpret religious designations in different ways. As one respondent argued:

Doctors declaring themselves ‘Christian’, does not automatically mean shared value with a patient identifying as ‘Christian’ as well, nor must it mean the clinicians must have opposite views to an agnostic person.14

Hence, it was considered naïve to suggest that declaring a religious position would, in fact, ‘provide full context for interpretation’.

**Discrimination and exclusion**

The final objection to Smith and Blazeby’s argument was that requiring individuals to declare their religious convictions could be discriminatory (and perhaps even illegal) in the same way as it would be considered discriminatory to force someone to declare their age, ethnicity or sexual orientation. As one respondent noted:

There are nine characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010 … Discrimination on the basis of any of these characteristics (eg, religion or belief) is unlawful.15

It was also argued that, even if not the source of overt discrimination, a requirement that religious beliefs be declared may lead to the exclusion of the ‘religious’ from debates and decision-making. In this regard, one respondent noted that ‘religion’ is:

[a] term used too often to sideline or dismiss the views of a substantial minority, thereby allowing an assumption that a secularist viewpoint is the new normal.16

Others noted that forcing people to declare their religious beliefs could potentially undermine the quality of debate since real or perceived discrimination may deter many from participating:

Again they [people with religious beliefs] are less likely to contribute [if they were demanded to declare them]. This move will suppress debate, not encourage it.17

**RESPONSE TO CRITICISM**

In their responses to critics, Smith and Blazeby note that impartiality is an illusion, that everyone is conflicted and that we must recognise this and ‘declare accordingly’.18 19 While the focus of their article was on religious beliefs, Smith and Blazeby consider their views to hold for ‘all conflicts of interests’, whether religious or not. In lieu of requiring authors to make available full biographies for scrutiny by peers (which they consider the ideal, but acknowledge is clearly impractical), Smith and Blazeby make two concessions: that declarations need to be made ‘if in doubt’, and ‘when relevant’.

In response to criticism that requiring individuals to declare religious beliefs is discriminatory and illegal, Smith and Blazeby claim the two issues are distinct, but provide little elaboration. Their succinct explanation on this point is that ‘[t]he point of declaring conflicts of interest is to give readers information that will help them evaluate an article’. 18 Presumably, the distinction they allude to is teleological: that is, when the aim is not to discriminate, but to inform, requiring the provision of personal information is justified.

**BELIEFS, INTERESTS AND MATERIALITY**

The Smith and Blazeby debate highlights many important issues in relation to the declaration of religious beliefs1—and personal beliefs more generally—that call to be further unpacked. While Smith and Blazeby, and like-minded individuals, would argue that ideally all religious beliefs (and indeed any factor that can influence our decisions) should be declared under all circumstances, even they acknowledge this is highly impractical. On the other hand, it is clear that at times religious (and other) beliefs may influence decisions in ways that conflict with other interests. To ignore such influences also seems unreasonable. In what follows, we propose three criteria that should be fulfilled in order for the claim to be made that a belief should be declared: (1) the belief must generate an interest, (2) the interest must be material, and (3) there must be a clear justification for declaring the material interest.

**When does a belief generate an interest?**

To answer this question, it is necessary to articulate further what is meant by an ‘interest’. As stated above, we consider interests to be people’s commitments that arise in relation to social roles or practices. These commitments may relate to the self (eg, a doctor wanting to earn a living) or to others (a doctor wanting to care for her patients). Beliefs are not interests in and of themselves—they

1There are a number of related terms used to describe religious beliefs, including ‘belief’, ‘commitment’, ‘faith’, ‘preference’, and so on. In this article, we use the term ‘beliefs’ to refer to specific perspectives that can impact upon specific judgements and decisions. This is distinct from faith, which we understand to be a more general belief, confidence or trust in something—in this case a religious system or doctrine—or someone—in this case an entity such as ‘God’.
Box 1  A framework for considering the ‘materiality’ of belief-related interests and circumstances that may warrant their declaration.

Is the situation one in which personal belief-related interests are likely to be material?
1. How much authority does the person have in this context?
2. Has the person been required to justify their position and to what extent has this justification been open to scrutiny?
3. How morally contentious is the topic, issue or practice?

Which specific interests are likely to be material in this context?
4. Is the belief-related interest relevant to the issue at hand?
5. Is it likely to change role-related judgements, decisions or actions?
6. Is the underlying belief strongly held (as opposed to being readily changeable)?
7. Does this person possess minority beliefs that are inconsistent with those of the broader community?
8. Would non-declaration of the interest undermine the (real or perceived) integrity or moral authority of the process at hand?
9. Are there other moral goods that may be considered more important to protect under the particular circumstances? (eg, right to privacy, concerns about discrimination)?

Should a material interest be declared?
10. Would declaration of the interest provide meaningful information that will change our judgement about a person’s decision or arguments?
11. Would non-declaration of the interest undermine the (real or perceived) integrity or moral authority of the process at hand?

When should material interests be declared?

When is an interest material?
The mere fact that an interest exists does not mean that it is ‘material’, that is, that it is likely, if acted on, to have a relevant and meaningful impact. To determine whether an interest is material, it is first necessary to identify the kinds of situations in which interests of any kind are likely to be material (box 1).

We propose that interests would be most likely to be material in situations where people have significant authority and power, and when the reasons for their positions or decisions are not provided or not subject to scrutiny. For instance, interests are highly likely to be material in a situation where a person with anonymous voting rights sits on a committee making public policy decisions that are morally contentious. In contrast, interests may be less material when arguments are public and explicit and where there are processes in place for peer review, as is ideally the case in biomedical publication (although even here there could be a case for knowing where an argument is ‘coming from’—especially when there are steps in the analysis that are not transparent).

The second step in determining the materiality of an interest is to assess whether a particular interest is likely to be contextually relevant or salient to the issue at hand. For example, an interest stemming from the belief that all life is sacred is likely to be relevant to questions about the moral status of an embryo and the permissibility of providing termination of pregnancy services within a hospital but is not to a decision about whether the same hospital should fund an expensive medicine for a patient with cystic fibrosis. In this regard, it is important to be specific about beliefs and associated interests—as noted in the Smith and Blazeby debate, simply knowing that someone identifies as a ‘Christian’ does not necessarily tell us that they would privilege sanctity of life over a woman’s autonomy. Nor does a person being an atheist necessarily entail that they privilege personal autonomy in all circumstances.

Having decided that a particular belief-related interest is relevant to the situation at hand, it might also be important to consider whether the underlying belief is strongly held (as opposed to being readily changeable in the course of ordinary discussion) and whether it is likely to differ substantially from the beliefs of others involved in, or affected by, a judgement or decision. For example, if those involved in public policy decision-making hold minority beliefs about abortion, it might be considered unreasonable for them to impose these beliefs on the public they serve. This is not to endorse populist approaches to moral reasoning, but rather to acknowledge the importance of ‘extended peer review’ by the relevant community when dealing with problems characterised by significant moral, political or ideological disagreement.

Importantly, the likelihood that belief-related interests will be material does not depend on whether the issue at stake is ‘moral’ or ‘technical’ because these concerns are not readily separable. For example, a Jehovah’s Witness may be reluctant to approve a policy encouraging more liberal use of blood transfusions in surgery, and an oncologist, or group of oncologists, committed to an egalitarian ideology may be reluctant to prescribe new, high-cost medicines, even if they work better than current practice, in order to preserve public resources.

When should material interests be declared?

While consideration should always be given to declaring material interests, it does not follow that all material interests need be declared all the time. We propose that declarations should only be demanded if: (1) it could reasonably be concluded that the declaration would have the potential to change the way that others evaluate the attitudes and decisions of the interest holder and/or (2) non-declaration would undermine the (real or perceived) integrity or moral authority of the process at hand.

It is also important to consider whether there are any other moral goods—such as ensuring the right to privacy or protecting individuals against potential discrimination—that might be considered sufficiently important to preclude, or temper, the need for declaring even material interests in a particular circumstance. This is especially the case if, for instance, declarations are made publicly available and will form a permanent part of the public record. Where interests are material and there are no good reasons for not declaring beliefs, it could be reasonably argued that an individual may be held more morally culpable if ethical violations arise from known but unacknowledged COIs.

RELEVANCE TO OTHER KINDS OF COIs

Although this analysis has focused on the declaration of interests associated with personal beliefs, we believe that it is instructive for the declaration of any type of non-financial interest (and, indeed, for the declaration of financial interests). For example, in deciding whether or not a personal relationship should be
declared, it makes sense to systematically consider whether the relationship is creating any role-related commitments or obligations (ie, whether it is the basis of an interest); whether the person in this relationship is in a position of unconstrained power; whether the relationship is relevant to the issue at hand (eg, having a child with a rare disease is more relevant to decision-making regarding the allocation of the funding of a medicine that could treat the disease than it is to a decision about an unrelated drug); and whether declaration of the interest would result in meaningful change without causing undue harm to the person making the declaration. The approach we specify here requires a shift in focus from types of interest (eg, financial, non-financial, religious beliefs, non-religious beliefs, relationships, intellectual commitment, and so on) to the concerns that all interests raise and the common steps that can be taken to manage them. Insofar as different interests raise similar concerns, there is no good reason to think about or treat them differently. Somewhat paradoxically, this approach will make relevant differences more visible and more actionable.

CONCLUSION

While personal beliefs can lead to interests and, in turn, to COIs, there is no strong argument to defend their routine declaration. Careful consideration of the materiality of the interest and the existence of factors that may justify or preclude declaration is required. It is also crucial that declarations of belief-related interests do not distract us from the legitimate justifications provided by individuals for their points of view, and that we are not lulled into thinking that maximum transparency is an end in itself that satisfactorily addresses the substantive issue of harm. The same broad argument can be applied to all types of interests, which challenges the claim that attempts to manage non-financial COIs will inevitably result in a ‘flood’ of meaningless declarations.

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