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## Integrating Ethics, Faith, and Medicine in a Global Context at the University of Puget Sound

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Hajung Lee—associate professor of Religion, Spirituality, and Society; and director of the Bioethics Program at the University of Puget Sound—draws on her impressive array of expertise to research questions that arise at the intersections of religion, health, law, and ethics. Though Lee’s work draws on her science literacies, it is at its heart focused on core Humanities disciplines of Religion and Ethics. She grapples with fundamental questions of the human condition.

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Lee has carefully assembled experiences and credentials to richly support her work in the interdisciplinary field of bioethics, which Britannica defines as a “branch of applied ethics that studies the philosophical, social, and legal issues arising in medicine and the life sciences.” Lee began her academic career by earning a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Engineering—with a minor in music—then attained a JD with a concentration in Health Law, followed by a Master of Arts in Theology. The skills and information she acquired from each of these programs all continue to inform

her research at the intersections of religion and bioethics, as well as her work with ethics and policy decisions in healthcare settings and in the classes and topics she covers as a university educator.

With these clear interests already established, Lee was the first applicant when Harvard Medical School (HMS) inaugurated its Master of Bioethics degree program. Lee completed her degree in that program in 2017 and is now an affiliate of the HMS Center for Bioethics. To round out her credentialed expertise, Lee earned her PhD in Religion and Society, specializing in Social Ethics—with a Graduate Certificate in Teaching Writing—in 2019. Her dissertation considers social ethics relating to end-of-life care, or, in her words, “what it means to have a good death.” This theme continues to play out in her research and pedagogy.

Cate Margiloff—University of Puget Sound senior who is graduating with a Bioethics minor and planning to attend the University of Washington School of

Public Health—appreciates Lee’s distinctive research agenda, which includes projects such as her study of traditional Korean prenatal care. Lee’s body of work demonstrates the unique positionality of her research inquiries; she has also published papers focusing on the spiritual meaning of organ donation as well as vaccine religious exemptions, and her current research spans immigrant prenatal care, morality and religious teaching relating to reproductive ethics, and artificial intelligence in healthcare.

### Working Toward a Global Bioethics Framework

In Fall 2024, Lee was granted a sabbatical term and served as a visiting associate professor of Global Health and Social Medicine at the HMS Center for Bioethics. In summer 2025, She joined a delegation to Asia from the HMS Center for Bioethics; her roles on the trip included keynote speaker, moderator, and trainer. Rebecca Weintraub Brendel led the delegation; she is the director of the HMS Center for Bioethics, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, and Francis Glessner

Lee Associate Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine in the Field of Legal Medicine. The group traveled to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Indonesia to meet with university faculty members in each locale, collectively studying the question of “What would it mean to globalize bioethics in ways that would bring people together rather than using it as a means of social control?” in Brendel’s words. Participants in each event that the delegation hosted considered how they might realistically begin to develop an approach to global bioethics that recognizes values, practices, and ethical frameworks that lie outside of the Western tradition.

Even though Asia is a vast and diverse area—and each site was distinct from the others—Brendel noticed that Lee found ways to connect with people at every location they visited; Lee had a habit of learning a few words of the local language and finding out about local customs. Brendel is amazed by the power of Lee’s quiet, humble,

collaborative way of meeting and working with others, and she admires that Lee “can connect to the heart of a matter in a way that is contagious and brings out the best in people.”

**Innovating as an Educator**

In offering a Minor in Bioethics, the University of Puget Sound is unique among undergraduate liberal arts colleges. As director of the program, Lee teaches a variety of bioethics classes, and she sees many possibilities for developing additional content and courses, since the real-life applications of bioethics are seemingly endless.

Lee hopes to revive the Clinical Ethics course to better serve UPS’s many pre-health students, including those who will go on to careers as physical therapists, doctors, nurses, and public health professionals. Lee notes that a grounding in bioethics helps these students to be prepared for issues that may come up their future school settings and *continued...*

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professional lives; they can think through their responsibilities and how they might respond in certain situations. Former students have told Lee that they were surprised by the level of preparation that even one bioethics course gave them for program and job interviews as well as professional work in healthcare settings.

In working with pre-health students, Lee highlights the need for them to have compassion for their patients and the patients' families. While hospitals and other clinical settings offer cultural competence training to meet this need, Lee points out that no one can be competent in all cultures; a grounding in bioethics provides more effective and adaptive tools to work with each individual. Additionally, she notes that many people have hybrid religious practices—for example, some Asian people might simultaneously hold Christian, Buddhist, and Taoist views. Instead of making blanket assumptions about a person's religious and ethical beliefs

based on their cultural identity—as a cultural competence model might encourage—Lee stresses the importance instead of having cultural humility—talking to patients and their families and getting to know them, human to human. In this way, healthcare practitioners can avoid mistakes that can arise from assuming one knows another's point of view.

In her Public Health Ethics class, Lee has her students grapple with a fraught question: in a given scenario, “what would be the best policy?” The question of “best” complicates any simple avenue for providing an answer. Students must think through whether the public trusts the government on the issue as well as the impacts on specific stakeholders regarding the public health policy. The students quickly understand that making such decisions is complicated, but they also begin to grasp key questions that need to be considered in making public health policy decisions.

In most of her classes, Lee teaches major Western ethical frameworks such as Principlism and moral theories to offer students practical strategies and a skill set for analysis. While these methodologies can be useful, they do have their limitations; Lee again points out that every patient comes from a different context, and every family has different traditions. Because of this reality, Lee emphasizes the need for healthcare practitioners to respect and honor the individual's context, background, and values. Any one way of thinking about bioethics on its own is not sufficient to address all situations, particularly complicated ones. Once students learn the major frameworks, she says, it is helpful to then expand beyond them by considering specific cases and how they might interact with a patient's religious and spiritual concerns. Lee's experience in serving on a hospital's ethics committee and on institutional review boards helps to inform this approach with her students. Considering the complexities of specific cases helps students

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develop stronger critical thinking skills, giving them more effective tools for analyzing and responding to a given situation. As Lee points out, building such critical analysis abilities is an essential element of a liberal arts education.

One concrete consideration that Lee brings to her classes is the idea of advanced directives, which are legal documents that outline the patients' wishes if they are not able to speak for themselves. To connect the practice with her students' lives, Lee asks them to answer questions like, "When do you feel most alive?" and "What do you prioritize?" Lee has seen that people who have considered these issues are better and more compassionate caregivers—and, more broadly, more thoughtful members of society. Since bioethics topics occur frequently in news pieces and public forums, Lee wants to give her students effective means of communicating to members of the public, not just with

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healthcare specialists. Her classroom tactics invite her students into respectful engagement with other people’s thoughts, and they can then apply these skills in any setting.

Margiloff recalls that she took bioethics with Lee “on a whim,” then “fell in love” with the subject because of Lee’s passion for and knowledge of the field of bioethics; Margiloff says that Lee gets students excited about the discipline through her teaching style. Margiloff appreciates that Lee explains ideas in ways that make the information accessible, and she is able to guide open conversations and difficult discussions while helping students understand their own independent thinking. Margiloff makes a habit of telling other students to take Lee’s classes because Lee’s class was so different from any other that she has taken. Margiloff’s perspective aligns with Brendel’s observation that Lee is a “transformative and sought-after teacher.” Because of Margiloff’s positive experience in Lee’s class, she asked to conduct summer

research with Lee as her advisor; her study examined questions of pediatric assent in clinical cancer trials. Margiloff states that Lee’s supportive mentorship made the process incredibly rewarding.

Having met Lee when they were students in Harvard’s Master of Bioethics program, Kaarkuzhali Babu Krishnamurthy now particularly enjoys attending Lee’s presentations at professional conferences they both attend. Krishnamurthy—vice-chair, Department of Neurology, and division head, Epilepsy and EEG, Boston Medical Center-Brighton/BMC Healthcare—is always impressed by Lee’s innovations in teaching students and helping them to deeply understand the relevance of bioethics in daily life. At the recent American Society for Bioethics and Humanities Annual Conference, Krishnamurthy was struck by Lee’s presentation to a packed room on the last conference day in which Lee discussed an assignment which encouraged students to find an innovative way to teach bioethics to

others. As Lee reported at the conference, one of her students created a board game which had people think through what support and interventions they would want to have at the end of their lives. Krishnamurthy admires the way that this approach takes “deep, complicated, morally fraught issues” and translates them to a method that anyone could interact with, even those who are unfamiliar with bioethics as a term or field.

With this sort of teaching tactic, Krishnamurthy notes, Lee creates space for her students not just to memorize and regurgitate information but to “figure out how to make principles relevant”; the students become teachers themselves. Krishnamurthy says that, with all of the challenges facing those working in higher education, it can be rare to find an accomplished researcher like Lee who is also “the epitome of an educator.” Brendel echoes these points, stating that Lee’s “deep commitment to spirituality, religion, and humanity, along with her experiences as an immigrant navigating between cultures, give her a deep appreciation for the power of education to transform lives.”

For her part, Lee continues to be fascinated with the many possibilities for research in and application of the developing and expanding field of bioethics. By grounding her work in sincere listening to others, centering human connections and complexities, and drawing multiple disciplinary strands together, Lee offers both inspiration and model to other interdisciplinary scholars and pedagogues; she also demonstrates the opportunities open to other institutions of higher learning for developing their own programs in this vital, Humanities-based field.

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