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Artificial Intelligence and The Indigence of Being: Toward a Liberative Model of Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

The present article contends that theological education in the era of artificial intelligence must embrace a liberative perspective that is informed by the restoration of human dignity. To this end, the article engages with the notion of the "indigence of being," developed by Engelbert Mveng, to demonstrate the possibilities of artificial intelligence to perpetuate epistemic domination and existential indigence, but also to offer possibilities for the promotion of justice and access. The article adopts a postcolonial perspective because contemporary AI systems often inherit and amplify colonial patterns of knowledge production, linguistic dominance, and unequal access to technological resources, realities that continue to shape theological education in many Majority World contexts. By engaging with the postcolonial context, the present article advances the narrative of the encounter between Jesus and the two disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) as a criterion for Christological discernment in the era of artificial intelligence, with particular emphasis on the need to relate to others, to be recognized by others, and to restore the anthropological self, so that the mission of God is not subverted by the pursuit of technological innovations in ministerial formation.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Theological Education; Indigence of Being; Human Dignity; Emmaus.*

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping higher education, including theological education. From AI-assisted research and automated assessment to adaptive learning platforms and theological chatbots, seminaries increasingly face decisions not merely about adopting new technologies but about how these technologies reshape the formation of future Christian leaders. While much of the current discussion has focused on the efficiency, accessibility, and ethical governance of AI, less attention has been given to its deeper anthropological implications. Because theological education is fundamentally concerned with the formation of persons rather than simply the transmission of information, AI raises questions that are not merely technological but profoundly theological. How does AI shape the ways students know, relate, discern, and understand themselves before God? More fundamentally, can technological innovation contribute to the liberative mission of theological education, or might it unintentionally reinforce new forms of domination and dehumanization?

This question is particularly significant within postcolonial contexts, where theological education continues to negotiate the enduring legacy of colonial epistemologies. Contemporary AI systems are largely developed within global technological infrastructures that privilege dominant languages, cultures, and knowledge traditions. Consequently, they risk reproducing historical patterns of epistemic exclusion by amplifying already dominant theological voices while marginalizing indigenous perspectives and Majority World scholarship. In this context, the challenge is not simply whether AI can improve theological education, but whether it can do so in ways that promote epistemic justice, restore human dignity, and strengthen the church's participation in the mission of God.

This article employs a constructive theological methodology that brings into conversation theological education, artificial intelligence ethics, postcolonial theology, theological anthropology, and Christology. These disciplines are intentionally integrated because the central challenge posed by AI is fundamentally one of human formation. AI influences not only the production and distribution of knowledge but also the formation of identity, agency, and communal relationships. Accordingly, the discussion draws upon Engelbert Mveng's concept of the *indigence of being*as a theological diagnosis of the ways technological systems may reinforce forms of existential and epistemic impoverishment. It then develops the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35) as a Christological framework for discerning whether AI serves or undermines authentic theological formation. Christology, therefore, functions not as an additional topic but as the theological norm that integrates the article's discussion of technology, anthropology, and theological education.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, the article examines the contemporary crisis of theological formation and argues that the primary challenge facing seminaries extends beyond institutional sustainability to the formation of persons. Second, it explores how artificial intelligence reshapes knowledge production and raises new questions concerning epistemic justice, particularly within postcolonial contexts. Third, it employs Mveng's concept of the *indigence of being* to interpret these developments as fundamentally anthropological concerns involving dignity, recognition, and agency. Fourth, it evaluates artificial intelligence as both a potential instrument of domination and a means of liberation, depending upon the theological imagination guiding its use. Finally, the article proposes the Emmaus narrative as a Christological criterion for technological discernment, arguing that AI should be employed only insofar as it

deepens relational formation, restores human dignity, and participates faithfully in the liberative mission of God.

This article employs a constructive theological methodology that integrates theological education, artificial intelligence ethics, postcolonial theology, theological anthropology, and Christology. These disciplines are brought into conversation because the central question posed by artificial intelligence is not merely technological but formative: AI shapes how knowledge is acquired, how persons understand themselves, and how communities are formed. Accordingly, the discussion proceeds from the institutional context of theological education, to the epistemological challenges introduced by AI, to Engelbert Mveng's concept of the *indigence of being* as an anthropological diagnosis of epistemic domination, before culminating in the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35) as a Christological framework for discerning technologies that serve rather than diminish human dignity. In this way, Christology functions not as an additional topic but as the theological norm that integrates the paper's preceding discussions.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for education, emphasizing both its pedagogical potential and its ethical challenges. Studies have shown that AI can enhance personalized learning, automate assessment, facilitate language translation, and improve access to educational resources. At the same time, scholars caution that AI is not merely a neutral educational technology but a socio-technical system that shapes how knowledge is produced, distributed, and legitimized. Consequently, discussions of AI have shifted beyond questions of efficiency toward broader concerns regarding human agency, justice, bias, and educational purpose.

Within theological and religious education, the conversation has likewise begun to expand. Recent studies have explored the opportunities AI offers for biblical and theological learning, including improved accessibility to theological resources, multilingual learning, and personalized educational support. At the same time, scholars warn that excessive reliance on AI may weaken the relational, dialogical, and spiritual dimensions that have traditionally characterized theological formation. These discussions consistently argue that AI should remain a supportive pedagogical tool rather than replacing the embodied relationships between teachers, students, and ecclesial communities that are central to ministerial formation.

Parallel developments in AI ethics further challenge the assumption that algorithmic systems are objective or value-neutral. Kate Crawford argues that AI reflects the political and economic structures within which it is developed[1], while Safiya Umoja Noble demonstrates how search algorithms frequently reproduce existing social inequalities.[2] Likewise, Luciano Floridi contends that AI should be evaluated not merely in terms of technological capability but according to its effects on human flourishing, justice, and responsibility.[3] Together, these scholars suggest that AI inevitably carries epistemological and ethical assumptions that influence whose knowledge

[1] Kate Crawford. *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press, 2021.

[2] Safiya Umoja Noble. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York University Press, 2018.

[3] Luciano Floridi. *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities*. Oxford University Press, 2022

is amplified, whose voices are marginalized, and how authority is constructed in digital environments.

Although these studies provide important pedagogical and ethical insights, relatively little scholarship has examined AI through the combined lenses of postcolonial theology, theological anthropology, and Christology. Existing discussions often focus on educational effectiveness or ethical governance but pay less attention to how AI may reinforce forms of epistemic domination or existential marginalization within theological education, particularly in Majority World contexts. This article addresses that gap by bringing Engelbert Mveng's concept of the *indigence of being* into dialogue with contemporary AI ethics and by proposing the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35) as a Christological framework for discerning the role of artificial intelligence in theological formation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

I. Theological Education and the Crisis of Formation

The role of theological education in realizing the mission of God as well as its vital role to shape a just and humane society cannot be understated. Despite the unravelling crises that many theological institutions face today both in the Minority and Majority world nations, seminaries and Bible schools remain strategic drivers in articulating and working toward the vision of a world filled with shalom.

The volatile and unplanned shifts to make theological institutions sustainable are palpable. Over the past years, we hear of seminary-owned properties being sold to cope with the economic burden of theological education.[4] Nevertheless, the Christian community continues to depend on seminaries for quality theological training. Seminaries remain an advantageous place to form thoughtful and justice-oriented leaders for the church and society. Theological education significantly shapes not just our God-thought and God-talk, but it also shapes the ethical, social, and spiritual engagement of Christians with the world. When theological education is approached with intentionality and depth, it is not merely an intellectual exercise but a transformative and liberative experience.

Theological education have always emphasized that formation, not information, is the heart of ministerial education. Theological schools are not merely institutions but communities that form the imagination, character, and vocation of the students.[5] Thus, the present pressures facing seminaries are not only financial or structural—they are profoundly formative, raising questions about what kinds of leaders are being shaped for the church in a rapidly changing world.

Theological institutions across the world are facing challenges such as dwindling enrollment, changing ecclesiastical expectations, technological disruptions, and an increasing lack of trust in institutional religions in multiple contexts. These issues, in a way, reveal the underlying concerns we have about who we are, why we are here, and where we fit in. What is the purpose of a seminary? Is it a place to get credentials, a professional guild, a place to relax and pray, or a place

[4] Chris A. Meinzer and Deborah H. C. Gin, "Mission, Models, and Money: An Empirical Analysis of Graduate Theological Education," *Christian Higher Education* 24, no. 2 (March 2025): 106–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2025.2462292.

[5] Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001); Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

to learn how to be a prophet? The answers to these questions, in turn, have an impact on the curriculum, the faculty, and the institutional culture.

The crisis of theological formation cannot be separated from the broader challenges confronting the contemporary church, including political polarization, moral failure among Christian leaders, consumerism, and the erosion of meaningful communal life. These realities have prompted theological educators to question whether ministerial education has become overly focused on the transmission of theological knowledge while neglecting the formation of character, virtue, and pastoral wisdom. As Edward Farley argues, theological education is fundamentally concerned with the formation of persons rather than merely the mastery of academic disciplines.[6] Similarly, Craig Dykstra contends that theological education must cultivate pastoral and ecclesial imagination through practices that shape faithful Christian living.[7] Consequently, the central challenge facing theological education is not merely institutional sustainability but the recovery of its formative vocation: nurturing leaders characterized by wisdom, humility, courage, and justice for participation in the mission of God.

In this context, the future of theological education is not primarily about institutional restructuring but about recovering a clear vision of formation. If seminaries are to contribute faithfully to the mission of God, they must cultivate integrated formation that brings together theological knowledge, spiritual maturity, communal life, and public witness. Such a vision also enables theological education to resist the commodification of ministerial education, whereby theological training is increasingly treated as a marketable product, students as educational consumers, degrees as professional credentials, and learning as the efficient acquisition of competencies rather than participation in a lifelong process of discipleship. In an age increasingly shaped by digital technologies and performance metrics, theological education must reclaim its vocation as a formative community where hearts, minds, and practices are ordered toward the reign of God.

II. Artificial Intelligence and the Reshaping of Knowledge

Yet theological education now stands at a critical juncture. Apart from the issues of financial burden and structural change, seminaries face the challenge of technological change, which is, in turn, influencing the nature of epistemology itself. Artificial intelligence is not merely another educational tool; it is a cultural force that influences how knowledge is generated, distributed, and authorized. Therefore, theological institutions must ask not only how AI can be used, but what kind of human beings its use is forming.

Contemporary scholarship in artificial intelligence ethics emphasizes that algorithmic systems are not neutral instruments but socially embedded technologies shaped by power, data selection, and institutional priorities.[8] In educational contexts, AI-driven systems influence what is prioritized, how learning pathways are structured, and whose voices are amplified.[9] Consequently, the integration of AI into theological education cannot be reduced to technical implementation; it must be examined as a theological and anthropological decision.

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[6] Farley, *Theologia*.

[7] Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination" 41-64.

[8] Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 8–12; Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*(New York: New York University Press, 2018), 1–15.

[9] Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 45–67; Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 39.

Artificial intelligence is not merely making information more accessible but is, in fact, influencing the nature of acquisition and the validity of knowledge itself. If answers can be provided instantaneously and with such certainty, the nature of discernment can quietly shift from the collective means of acquisition and tradition to the incomprehensible nature of artificial intelligence. In this situation, habits of efficiency and optimization may slowly replace the epistemic habits learned in theological school, such as reading slowly—with the mind and heart, engagement in dialogue, critical reflection, spiritual attentiveness, and theological imagination.[10]

There is no neutral ground with AI—it can either deepen the fragments of our society or it can help us resist discord and move to wholeness. AI is now among the most vital transformative drivers of the 21st century, reshaping many aspects of life: health, finance, social life and others. Within religious education, AI offers personalization of learning, instant feedback, and administrative efficiency. But it also poses important ethical questions, such as whose theology is actually represented in the algorithms? Whose voices are amplified, and whose voices are silenced?

The prospect of personalization may unintentionally disrupt communal learning if students increasingly interact with theological content in isolation from embodied classroom discourse and ecclesial accountability.[11] Additionally, automated feedback systems may favor quantifiable results over intangible aspects of development, such as wisdom, moral fortitude, and pastoral sensitivity—learning dimensions that defy quantification yet are essential to ministerial vocation.[12]

These issues assume added significance in a postcolonial setting in which theological knowledge has been mediated through the epistemological hegemony of the West. Theological knowledge in the Majority World has had an added challenge of claiming its equality in the world academic order. If AI systems are trained mainly on Western theological datasets, they could be perpetuating epistemological hegemonies in the guise of technological advancement.

In these contexts, algorithmic outputs may inadvertently perpetuate colonial hierarchies, normalizing specific doctrinal focuses, interpretive traditions, and methodological presuppositions while sidelining indigenous theologies and contextual hermeneutics.[13] Yet, what may appear to be objective technology may actually be concealing issues of unequal power relations that are embedded in training data and platform infrastructures.

Therefore, the pertinent question for theological education is not whether AI is useful, but whether it is useful in ways that contribute to epistemic justice. Thus, if theological education is committed to forming leaders who are able to discern truth in multiple and contested settings, it must carefully examine how AI contributes to theological imagination, to its mediation of sources, and to its establishment of criteria of credulity. The remaking of knowledge with artificial intelligence calls for theological awareness of how digital infrastructures shape our minds and our moral worlds.

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[10] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8–15; Andrew Root, *Theological Education in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 101–120.

[11] Neil Selwyn, *Should Robots Replace Teachers? AI and the Future of Education* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 74–89; Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,"craig41–64.

[12] Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 1–18; Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 87–102.

[13] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 1–24; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8–22.

III. From Indigence of Being to a Liberative Anthropological Framework

This is why theological education and its use of AI must be intentional and liberative at its core—liberating people from the shackles of the worst kind of poverty—the kind that damages the soul and continues to hurt generations. The Cameroonian Jesuit Engelbert Mveng calls this the indigence of being:

> "When persons are bereft of identity, dignity, freedom, thought, history, language, faith, and creativity—deprived of their rights, hopes, and ambitions…—they sink into a poverty that strikes at the very essence of the human person. This indigence of being…fuels industries of misery and forges chains of new enslavement. And the chains grow heavier by the day."[14]

Mveng's diagnosis of poverty moves beyond economics into ontology. He names a condition in which colonization, systemic injustice, and cultural erasure corrode a people's sense of self. Indigence of being is not merely deprivation of resources but deprivation of recognition, agency, and voice. It is a wound to personhood itself.

Mveng's language is intentionally theological and anthropological. Poverty, according to Mveng, is more than just a lack of material resources. It is the corruption of the "imago Dei" in experience—the gradual loss of a people's sense of itself as bearing the image of God and being part of God's story.[15] Indigence of being speaks of a condition of people living with the narrative of inferiority within, with boundaries placed upon their imagination, and struggling to imagine themselves as agents of change.

Emerging from African liberation theology, Mveng's concept reframes poverty as an ontological assault rather than merely an economic condition.[16] His analysis resonates with broader liberationist traditions that understand salvation as encompassing social, historical, and anthropological restoration.[17] When applied to theological education, indigence of being exposes how institutional systems may unintentionally reinforce internalized marginalization even while offering academic advancement.

The classroom itself may also become a subtle location of this reinforcement if dominant theological discourses are posited as universal, if local histories are reduced to footnotes, or if the experiences of students are seen as illustrative rather than normative for theological reflection. In such a location, students may learn to excel academically while also learning to repress their linguistic, cultural, or spiritual particularities in order to meet the perceived standards of theological legitimacy.

Many seminary students, faculty, and even seasoned scholars continue to suffer with this indigence of being. The overwhelming poverty, the oppression that comes from broken systems, and our shared trauma of colonization burrowed deep in the collective consciousness of people contribute to this condition. In other words, it is possible to produce academically competent scholars, but still miss the mark in forming leaders who are sure of who they are and their place in

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[14] Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 158.

[15] Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation," 159.

[16] Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation," 158–163.

[17] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 102–36; Leonardo Boff, *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 24–48.

the world, who are resolute in calling for compassion and justice, and whose joy and hope stand obstinate against oppression and all forces that rob others of their inherent dignity from God.

These scholars may be able to speak theological languages fluently yet be reluctant to trust their own voices; they may be able to cite global authorities eloquently yet remain uncertain that the stories of their own communities possess genuine theological significance. This reflects not an absence of intellectual ability but the continuing effects of what Mveng describes as the ***indigence of being***: an existential condition in which historical experiences of domination diminish confidence, agency, and the capacity to recognize oneself as a legitimate theological subject. If this indigence of being remains unaddressed, theological education may produce leaders who can articulate theologies of liberation while remaining personally constrained by narratives of inferiority and historical diminishment.

This diagnosis raises a pressing pedagogical concern: if theological education does not intentionally address indigence of being, it risks reinforcing it. Institutions may confer degrees while leaving existential insecurity untouched. They may transmit information while failing to cultivate rootedness, courage, and moral imagination.

Thus, a liberative theological education must have not only cognitive competence as its goal but also anthropological restoration. It must provide a space where students can recover their memory, reclaim their voice, and rediscover their place within God's redemptive story. In this context, even the application of artificial intelligence must be assessed in light of a fundamental question: Does this technology enhance students' awareness of their dignity, agency, and belonging, or does it quietly substitute their confidence in their own theological work? If AI is another system through which the powers of external authorities continue to dominate the interpretive space, it may further contribute to the indigence of being; but if critically subverted, it may help in lifting up the marginalized voices and increasing access to theological resources. The task that confronts theological education, therefore, is fundamentally anthropological: to form persons who know who they are before God and thus resist every system—technological, economic, and ecclesial—that seeks to reduce their being.

IV. Artificial Intelligence as Threat and Opportunity

AI can easily reinforce a surface-level approach to theological education—producing students who master digital tools, generate sermons, or translate texts, yet remain uncertain of their identity and vocation. If used uncritically, AI risks reducing theological education to data points, efficiency metrics, and automated content generation while neglecting the relational and spiritual dimensions of ministerial formation. More significantly, AI may also reinforce existing structures of epistemic inequality. For example, large language models are predominantly trained on English-language and Western-produced digital corpora, making Western theological traditions substantially more visible than indigenous, oral, or Majority World theologies. Consequently, when students ask AI theological questions, they are more likely to receive answers shaped by dominant Euro-American perspectives, while contextual theological voices remain underrepresented or absent. Such patterns risk reinforcing the assumption that authoritative theology originates primarily from the Global North, thereby perpetuating the very "indigence of being" that Mveng describes by weakening confidence in local theological traditions.

Yet AI also offers significant opportunities when employed within a liberative framework. Machine translation technologies can increase access to theological resources in minority languages, speech-recognition tools can preserve oral theological traditions that have historically been excluded from academic publishing, and retrieval systems can intentionally foreground

African, Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous theological scholarship that has long remained difficult to access. Likewise, AI-assisted administrative tasks may free faculty from routine work, allowing greater investment in mentoring, pastoral accompaniment, and communal formation. In this sense, the theological significance of AI lies not in the technology itself but in whether it is intentionally designed and employed to expand participation, restore dignity, and strengthen the voices of historically marginalized communities rather than reproducing existing epistemic hierarchies.

Thus, AI presents both significant risks and important opportunities for theological education. On the one hand, AI may function as an instrument of digital colonization by reinforcing existing epistemic hierarchies. Because contemporary large language models are trained predominantly on English-language and Western-produced digital corpora, theological queries often privilege Euro-American theological traditions while providing limited engagement with African, Asian, Latin American, or Indigenous theological voices. For example, students seeking theological resources on contextual ecclesiology, mission, or biblical interpretation may receive responses heavily weighted toward Western authorities, while the contributions other contextual theologians are less visible due to their comparatively limited digital representation. In this way, AI may unintentionally reinforce the perception that authoritative theology resides primarily in the Global North, thereby perpetuating the epistemic inequalities that Mveng describes as contributing to the *indigence of being*.

On the other hand, AI also possesses considerable liberative potential when intentionally designed and employed for epistemic justice. Machine translation systems can make theological resources available in indigenous and minority languages that have historically lacked access to theological literature. Speech-recognition and transcription technologies can assist in documenting oral theological traditions that are rarely represented in academic publications. Likewise, AI-powered digital archives and retrieval systems can increase the visibility of contextual theological scholarship by making African, Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous theological resources more discoverable for students and researchers worldwide. In these ways, AI can broaden participation in theological discourse and strengthen rather than diminish the voices of historically marginalized communities.

The decisive issue, therefore, is not the technology itself but the theological imagination that governs its design and deployment. AI neither inevitably colonizes nor automatically liberates; its impact depends upon whether theological institutions intentionally employ it to reinforce existing hierarchies or to cultivate epistemic justice, human dignity, and mutual recognition.

Technological determinism must therefore be resisted. AI does not determine its own path in terms of what is morally right or wrong. Its path is determined by the theological values and practices through which its deployment is governed. The debate is not whether AI is already affecting theological education. It is already doing so. The debate is whether the effect is one of indigence or dignity.

AI is both context and challenge for us in theological education. On one side, it is possible that adaptive learning technologies may aid students in learning biblical languages at their own pace. AI-driven exegesis, for example, like that found in Logos Bible Software, enables students to explore intertextual connections throughout scripture at unprecedented speed. Language translation technologies may also be used to break down barriers, allowing indigenous language resources to be made available that were previously excluded from academic discourse.

On the other side of the coin, AI is also fraught with potential dangers. AI may be used to perpetuate existing theological biases, silence Majority World voices, and erase theological

diversity. AI may be used to create a new form of colonization, or what I term "digital colonization." It may be used to commodity education, reducing spirituality to data-driven metrics. It may even be used to undermine pastoral care if students come to rely on chatbots for spirituality.

In conclusion, it is evident that theological education must critically address AI. We must continue to ask ourselves whether or not this technology serves humanity's dignity. Does it free or enslave humanity? Does it empower communities, or does it enslave them? Does it liberate, or does it replicate oppression—only now not with chains and whips but with algorithms and data insight?

These questions are not optional add-ons to curriculum design; they are theological imperatives. Any technology that reshapes learning also reshapes formation. If seminaries fail to theologically scrutinize AI, they risk adopting practices that subtly reconfigure discipleship according to market logic, efficiency culture, or epistemic dominance.

Therefore, this article argues that artificial intelligence should be used in theological education through a liberating framework based on restoring dignity and building relationships. This study posits that the critical issue lies not in technological capability but in theological orientation, by juxtaposing Mveng's concept of indigence of being with contemporary AI ethics.

V. Emmaus as a Model for AI Engagement

The Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35) has been widely interpreted as a paradigmatic account of Christian formation, discipleship, and ecclesial identity. Biblical scholars have emphasized that the narrative depicts the transformation of the disciples through Christ's accompaniment, scriptural interpretation, and communal recognition rather than through the mere transmission of information.

In his commentary on Luke, Joel B. Green argues that the Emmaus journey portrays the restoration of disciples through a process of dialogue, reinterpretation of Scripture, and participation in table fellowship, culminating in renewed vocation and witness.[18] Similarly, Bruce Allder and David Ackerman propose the Emmaus narrative as a model for theological education in which formation occurs through relationships, shared practices, and participation in the life of Christ rather than simply through the acquisition of theological knowledge.[19] More recently, digital theology has revisited the Emmaus narrative to explore the meaning of Christian presence within technologically mediated contexts. For example, *Reimagining Presence and Absence: Luke 24 as a Model for Christophanic Multipresent Church* argues that the Emmaus story provides a theological framework for understanding Christian presence in the digital age, emphasizing that technological mediation should serve rather than replace embodied communion.[20]

Building upon these contributions, this article argues that the Emmaus narrative offers not only a model of Christian formation but also a Christological criterion for discerning the appropriate role of artificial intelligence in theological education. The question, therefore, is not

[18] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 836–858.

[19] Bruce G. Allder and David A. Ackerman, *The Emmaus Model: Discipleship, Theological Education, and Transformation* (Lenexa, KS: Global Nazarene Publications, 2019), 21–45.

[20] David Alinurdin, *Reimagining Presence and Absence: Luke 24 as a Model for Christophanic Multipresent Church,* International Conference on Theology, Humanities, and Christian Education (ICONTHCE 2021)

merely whether AI enhances learning, but whether it participates in Christ's own pedagogy of accompaniment, interpretation, recognition, and restored vocation.

How can theological education be liberative in the AI era, what does it look like? The book of Luke invites us to a narrative found in Luke 24:13-35—on their way to Emmaus, two disciples were disempowered, their calling, purpose, hopes, and identity seemed obscured by crisis and loss. Yet, Jesus meets them on the way—the Lord listens, walks alongside them, and reinterprets Scripture in a way that speaks to their needs and transforms their understanding. Christ's teaching energized their hopes; they were able to capture an alternative vision—the crucifixion was not the end, nor was it defeat—it was for triumph and freedom. With Christ's truth their hearts were set aflame with new revelation. Their eyes were opened when He broke bread, and suddenly, they saw, understood, and were transformed—from a people whose hopes are bound, to a people who are set free.

The story of Emmaus is often used to illustrate the paradigm of post-resurrection revelation and ecclesial recognition.[21] However, apart from its liturgical importance, the story also reveals a theological anthropology of formation that is profoundly relational, interpretive, and incarnational in nature. The transformation of the disciples is not through the imparting of information but through presence, dialogue, and table fellowship.

The Emmaus narrative provides more than pastoral comfort; it offers a theological framework for formation. First, Christ practices accompaniment. He draws near before He instructs. Second, He reinterprets Scripture in light of lived crisis. Third, recognition occurs in embodied community through the breaking of bread. Transformation follows relational encounter.

Accompaniment, reinterpretation, recognition, and transformation are characteristics of Christ's pedagogy. Knowledge is not simply located in the mind, understanding is contextual, revelation is communal recognition. The disciples' hearts burn not because they are being given new knowledge, but because Scripture is being re-narrated and helps them move from disorientation to a new orientation.

Emmaus and Theological Formation

This Emmaus lens is crucial for us today. Just as Christ walked alongside the disheartened, theological schools must walk alongside the student who is living through the experience of existential poverty and technological disruption. Artificial intelligence must be grasped in terms of the Emmaus paradigm: AI must be integrated in such a way that encourages encounter, dialogical learning, and the emergence of transformative understanding. AI must be a companion on the journey, not the teacher itself. AI must not replace the presence of Christ or the community of faith.

In this sense, the Emmaus paradigm corrects the technocratic model of learning in a way that is almost as if the technocratic model is in direct contradiction with the logic of the story in Luke 24. Emmaus is a story of concrete, embodied companionship.

As Bruce Allder and David Ackerman (2019) remind theological institutions in their book, "The Emmaus Model," theological education is discipleship in community, a journey of being, knowing, and doing.[22] It is not just information transfer; it is transformation through relationship, dialogue, and character development. This is reminiscent of Jesus' actions in the Emmaus story:

[21] François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 376–402; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 836–858.

[22] Bruce G. Allder and David A. Ackerman, *The Emmaus Model: Discipleship, Theological Education, and Transformation*(Lenexa, KS: Global Nazarene Publications, 2019), 41–45

he listens, interprets, and breaks bread. In the same way, AI must be positioned as a technology to enhance our social practices in theological institutions: it must help us listen more deeply and amplify perspectives long silenced. AI can help us faithfully interpret Scripture across languages and contexts—it must serve the burning of hearts and the opening of eyes.

The work of Allder and Ackerman reinforces the argument that theological education is ecclesial before it is institutional. By *ecclesial*, they mean that theological education originates in the life and mission of the church as a community of discipleship, worship, and witness. Its primary purpose is to participate in God's mission by forming persons whose lives are shaped by Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the practices of the Christian community. By contrast, *institutional* refers to the organizational structures through which theological education is delivered—seminaries, curricula, accreditation systems, degree programs, and administrative policies. These structures are important, but they serve the church's formative mission rather than defining it. Consequently, theological education should not be understood primarily as an academic enterprise that happens to teach theology, but as the church's ministry of forming faithful disciples and leaders for participation in the mission of God.[23] It happens in community, and community is not simply a matter of digital interface. Therefore, AI must be subsidiary – supportive rather than controlling, instrumental rather than authoritative.

Emmaus shows us that liberation comes through companionship, revelation, and recognition. AI must be judged by whether it helps us walk together, whether it sets hearts aflame with justice and hope, and whether it opens eyes to human dignity. If it does not, then it is not Emmaus—it is another form of enslavement. But if it does, then AI becomes part of the liberative journey, a servant of shalom rather than a master of control.

The theological significance of such a claim resides in its Christological foundation. The risen Christ does not impose his sovereign power on the disciples, but rather interprets their history within God’s redemptive history. Freedom consists in the discovery of meaning in the sharing of presence. Technologies that fragment, isolate, or commodity formation contradict this process.

In this sense, the Emmaus story functions as a Christological criterion for technological discernment. Technologies that isolate, commodify, or replace embodied community fail the Emmaus test. Technologies that deepen dialogue, expand interpretive access, and strengthen communal recognition may participate in liberative formation.

Therefore, Emmaus transcends metaphor, becoming instead an evaluative norm. No longer is the issue simply whether or not technology makes us more efficient, but whether or not it aligns itself with the pedagogical approach of Christ, who draws near, listens first, interprets, and finally receives communal acknowledgment. Only those technologies that are beholden to this approach are worthy of theological education without compromising its ecclesial integrity.

The culmination of the Emmaus narrative occurs not merely in the disciples' intellectual recognition of the risen Christ but in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30–31). Recognition is inseparable from communion. Christ is known not simply through the interpretation of Scripture but through participation in a shared meal that restores fellowship, hope, and vocation. This Eucharistic moment reveals that Christian formation is fundamentally relational and communal. Theological education, therefore, cannot be reduced to the acquisition of theological knowledge or ministerial competencies; it is participation in a community formed around the presence of Christ.

In this sense, theological education may be described as Eucharistic. The term does not refer merely to sacramental practice but to a pattern of formation characterized by hospitality,

[23] Allder and Ackerman, *The Emmaus Model*, 21-38.

communion, gratitude, mutual recognition, and self-giving participation in the body of Christ. A Eucharistic vision of theological education understands learning as an ecclesial practice in which Scripture, worship, fellowship, and mission converge to form disciples who embody God's reconciling work in the world.

Such a vision also provides a theological criterion for evaluating artificial intelligence. AI may assist learning, expand access to knowledge, and support educational practices, but it cannot itself create Eucharistic communion. Technologies may facilitate education, yet the formation of Christian leaders ultimately depends upon embodied relationships, shared worship, pastoral accompaniment, and participation in the life of the church. AI therefore serves theological education faithfully only when it strengthens, rather than replaces, these Eucharistic practices of communion and formation.

CONCLUSION

Realistic Promises and a Vision for the Eucharist

The Emmaus narrative provides a Christological criterion for technological discernment. Theological institutions must articulate concrete practices that embody this vision.

First, this vision must influence the pedagogy of curricula and classroom design. The balance that the curricula have to strike is between academic rigor and helping the students find their own identity. It requires that the students not only be proficient in biblical languages but also be able to face adversity with courage and compassion, and find their leadership identity as a justice-oriented leader. This requires that the teacher use AI in a way that mentoring through relationships remains at the center. This requires professors to think ahead about their courses so that the AI can handle the trivial tasks and the professor can handle the more significant tasks of spiritual formation and moral decision-making. This way, the AI serves to make the relational center of theological education stronger rather than replacing it.

Second, the liberative use of AI will necessitate institutional accountability beyond classroom policy. Institutional use of AI must be ethical, with transparent algorithms, diverse training sets, and informed consent. This will ensure that the institutions' use of digital technologies is to set people free, not to exploit them. The policies should also be explicit in stating the institutions' positions on issues of bias and representation, such as whose voices are represented in the training sets and whose voices are not represented at all? Seminaries should make it a requirement that the institutions' use of AI is evaluated for its fairness, that students are aware of the use of their data, and that teachers are equipped to critically examine the use of AI. Without these, AI could be the new colonial power; with these, it could be the new ally in theological education.

Third, the ecclesial nature of theological education requires communal commitments that resist technological commodification. Seminaries need to be careful not to become profit oriented AI should not be used to make students just data points. It should be used in a way that makes life easier for everybody. It especially should be made easier for those who are already outside. Consider translation tools that use AI and make theological resources available in indigenous languages that have been left out of the conversation for a long time. That is a free use of technology. Being committed to the community means that we use technology in a way that amplifies Majority World voices and not in a way that silences Majority World voices. It means that we use AI in a way that digitizes oral traditions and keeps theological ideas safe and accessible

for people all over the world. That is how AI connects people of different cultures and counters the idea that all religions are the same. That is how AI affirms the worth of all communities.

These commitments to pedagogy, policy, and community are an unmistakable church response to the issue of AI. It asserts that theology should be taught before technology. It says, "AI is good for teaching, but you cannot be there for someone if you are using AI. It is good for processing, but it is never good for communion. It is good for making things more easily accessible, but it will never be good for determining who someone is." In combination, these commitments to teaching, policy, and the community make up a clear church response to AI. They say that theological formation should always come before technological integration. AI can help with teaching, but it can't replace being there for someone; it can process information, but it can't be communion; it can make things easier to get to, but it can never decide who someone is.

Beyond structural reforms, however, what ultimately sustains theological education is vision. It is possible for seminaries, Bible schools, and other institutions to become like the road to Emmaus—a place where the lonely are not just given information but are truly supported on their journey; a place where those who are poor and confused in the AI age meet Christ through community, conversation, and revelation.

This vision makes theological education Eucharistic—giving people hope, opening their eyes, and setting their hearts on fire. It is a vision where AI is used as a servant of justice to give a voice to those who are often left out, to free teachers to mentor deeply, and to make different points of view louder, all while never taking the place of Christ's relational presence or the church's companionship. Theological education is where technology is examined from the lens of freedom, where algorithms are tested against the values of dignity and shalom, and where students are taught not only how to be knowledgeable but also how to be leaders who fight against oppression and show compassion.

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