

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

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PAGES

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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 explore the possibilities of artificial intelligence to perpetuate epistemic domination and existential indigence, but also to offer possibilities for the promotion of justice and access. This article was first delivered at the INCHE-HGU 2025 conference in Pohang, South Korea, but it has since been developed for publication. 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

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. 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. 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 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 formation is related to other issues the church is currently experiencing, such as political polarization, moral failure, consumerism, and the collapse of community life. When formation is only about learning theological ideas, leaders may graduate with a lot of knowledge but not much spiritual growth, or they may be good at technology but not good at being a pastor. Hence, the challenge is not just to sustain theological education as an institution. The challenge is to return to its original purpose of forming people who are characterized by wisdom, humility, courage, and justice in God's mission.

In this context, the future of theological education is not about restructuring and more about clarifying what formation means. If seminaries want to make the world a better place, they have to teach integrated formation. This means they have to integrate doctrine, spirituality, community life, and public engagement. Theological education can only resist the pressures of commodification and reclaim its role as a place where hearts, minds, and practices are put in order for the reign of God.

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.¹ In educational contexts, AI-driven systems influence what is prioritized, how learning pathways are structured, and whose voices are amplified.² Consequently, the integration of AI into theological education cannot be reduced to technical implementation; it must be examined as a theological and anthropological decision.

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.³

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, etc. Within

¹ 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.

² Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 45–67; Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 39.

³ 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.

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.

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

⁴ Neil Selwyn, *Should Robots Replace Teachers? AI and the Future of Education* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 74–89; 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), 41–64.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

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.”⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ His analysis resonates with broader liberationist traditions that understand salvation as encompassing social, historical, and anthropological restoration.¹⁰ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation,” 159.

⁹ Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation,” 158–163.

¹⁰ 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.

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 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 world authorities eloquently yet be unsure that the stories of their own communities have theological significance. The problem is not one of intellectual poverty but of existential vulnerability—a formation that refines analysis but does not cure historical wounds. If the indigence of being continues, theological education may well produce leaders who can speak theologies of liberation but be personally bound by the stories of 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.

Artificial Intelligence as Threat and Opportunity

AI can easily reinforce a surface level approach—producing students who master digital tools, generate sermons, or translate texts, yet remain uncertain of their core—their identity and vocation. If used without careful thought, AI risks reducing theological education to data points and efficiency metrics, flattening diversity and eroding relational formation. But if engaged thoughtfully, AI can help us move beneath the surface: adaptive platforms can support language

learning, translation tools can open access to marginalized voices, and analytic systems can free faculty to invest more deeply in pastoral care and weaving together the social fabric of their academic community. There is a hopeful possibility that AI can be integrated into theological institutions as a means to practice justice and honor dignity, rather than it being new colonizer that reinforces people's indigence of being.

Thus, AI is revealed both as a threat and an opportunity. It may act as a digital colonization tool through which the theological status quo is codified in a way that further marginalizes Majority World theologies. Alternatively, AI may act as a tool of access through which Majority World theologies are enabled, in which oral theologies are preserved, and in which the scope of theological discourse is increased. The difference lies not in the technology itself but in the theological imagination through which the technology is deployed.

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 commodify 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.

Emmaus as a Model for AI Engagement

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. 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.¹¹ 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: 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 serves to reinforce the point that theological education is ecclesial before it is institutional.¹² 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 commodify formation contradict this process.

¹¹ Bruce G. Allder and David A. Ackerman, *The Emmaus Model: Discipleship, Theological Education, and Transformation* (Lenexa, KS: Global Nazarene Publications, 2019), 41–45

¹² Allder and Ackerman, *The Emmaus Model*, 21-38.

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.

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 businesses. AI

shouldn't 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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