
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theological Education in the Digital Age: Charting an Ai-Future For All

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| ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming education, religion, communication, and human interaction across the globe. Theological education, traditionally grounded in embodied learning, spiritual formation, and communal mentorship, now faces both opportunities and challenges in the digital era. This paper examines the impact of AI on theological education, exploring its pedagogical, ethical, theological, and institutional implications. It argues that AI should not merely be viewed as a technological instrument but as a transformative context shaping identity, spirituality, knowledge production, and ministry formation. The study employs a mixed-methods institutional framework integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, theological-ethical reflection, and contextual African analysis. The paper identifies key opportunities such as expanded access to theological education, multilingual learning, personalized instruction, enhanced research capabilities, and administrative efficiency. Simultaneously, it highlights critical concerns including digital inequality, academic integrity, epistemic colonialism, algorithmic bias, weakened spiritual formation, and overdependence on technology. Special attention is given to African theological education, where infrastructural limitations coexist with strong communal traditions and contextual theological strengths. The study proposes a justice-oriented AI integration framework grounded in biblical anthropology, Ubuntu ethics, incarnation theology, and principles of discernment and inclusion. The paper concludes that theological institutions must intentionally shape AI adoption through ethical governance, contextual theology, faculty development, digital literacy, and spiritually grounded pedagogies. Ultimately, the future of theological education depends not on technological advancement alone, but on ensuring that technology serves human flourishing, spiritual maturity, and faithful Christian formation.

| KEYWORDS

Theological Education, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education ,Digital Theology ,Spiritual Formation in the Digital Age, Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,Digital Transformation in Higher Education ,Faith-Based Pedagogy and Innovation

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed contemporary society, reshaping communication, education, religion, economics, and human relationships (Anderson & Dron, 2014; Campbell, 2020; Schroeder & Ling, 2014). Theological education, once largely dependent on traditional classroom instruction, printed texts, and face-to-face mentorship, is now increasingly influenced by digital learning platforms, virtual classrooms, AI-assisted research tools, and online religious communities (Hess, 2012; Graham, 2019). As AI technologies continue to expand globally, theological institutions are confronted with both remarkable opportunities and serious ethical, spiritual, and pedagogical challenges (Farley, 2021; Papakostas, 2025).

Theological education has historically emphasized spiritual formation, communal worship, moral development, and mentorship. However, the digital age has introduced new realities that require theological institutions to rethink how ministry preparation and theological formation are

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conducted (Smith, 2022). AI technologies now assist students and educators in research, translation, online instruction, sermon preparation, and administrative management (Phillips, 2024). While these innovations improve accessibility and efficiency, they also raise concerns regarding human dignity, truth, embodiment, academic integrity, and the preservation of authentic spiritual experiences (Birhane, 2021; Papakostas, 2025).

In the African context, the integration of AI into theological education presents unique opportunities and challenges. African theological institutions often operate within environments marked by limited digital infrastructure, unequal internet access, and financial constraints (Manda & Backhouse, 2017; Pillay, 2020). Nevertheless, Africa also possesses rich communal traditions, contextual theological approaches, and strong religious identities that can positively shape ethical AI adoption (Bediako, 2004; Orobator, 2018). African theological scholars increasingly argue that AI must be critically contextualized to avoid reinforcing technological dependency, digital colonialism, and the marginalization of African theological perspectives (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2019; Krebs, 2023).

Furthermore, the emergence of AI has generated important theological and philosophical debates concerning the nature of humanity, creativity, morality, and divine revelation. Questions arise concerning whether AI can contribute meaningfully to theological reflection without undermining the role of the Holy Spirit, pastoral care, and embodied Christian community (Farley, 2021; Papakostas, 2025). Religious educators therefore face the challenge of balancing technological innovation with the preservation of core theological values and spiritual formation (Smith, 2022).

This study therefore seeks to explore how theological education can responsibly and ethically engage AI technologies in the digital age. It aims to examine the opportunities, risks, ethical concerns, and theological implications associated with AI integration while proposing strategies for creating an inclusive, justice-oriented, and spiritually grounded AI-future for theological education. The study argues that AI should not replace human mentorship, spiritual discernment, and communal formation but should instead serve as a supportive tool that enhances learning, research, ministry preparation, and theological engagement in an increasingly digital world (Phillips, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

1.2. Background and Rationale

Theological education is undergoing unprecedented transformation due to digital technologies and AI-driven educational systems. AI offers opportunities for personalized learning, institutional efficiency, research assistance, multilingual engagement, and expanded global access. Nevertheless, it also raises profound theological and ethical concerns related to embodiment, truth, mentorship, human dignity, and spiritual authenticity.

Many theological institutions—particularly within Africa and the Global South—face infrastructural limitations, insufficient digital literacy, lack of institutional AI policies, and limited faculty training. Without intentional reflection and governance, institutions risk either rejecting beneficial innovation or adopting technology uncritically.

This study seeks to develop a theologically grounded and contextually relevant framework for integrating AI into theological education in ways that preserve spiritual formation while promoting innovation, equity, and educational excellence.

Research increasingly recognizes the significance of AI in theological and religious education. Studies on AI and theological pedagogy emphasize both the transformative possibilities and ethical challenges of AI integration in theological formation.

1.3. Problem Statement

The rapid expansion of AI technologies in education has outpaced theological institutions' capacity to respond strategically and ethically. Many institutions currently lack:

- Clear AI governance policies
- Theological frameworks for evaluating digital technologies
- Adequate technological infrastructure
- Faculty competence in AI-enhanced pedagogy
- Digital inclusion strategies for disadvantaged learners

As a result, theological education risks becoming fragmented, technologically unequal, spiritually shallow, and disconnected from its foundational mission of forming morally grounded and spiritually mature leaders.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the current state of AI integration within theological education and to develop a comprehensive institutional framework that guides ethical, pedagogical, theological, and inclusive AI adoption.

1.5. Research Objectives

1.5.1 General Objective

To develop a strategic and theologically informed institutional framework for integrating AI into theological education.

1.5.2 Specific Objectives

1. Assess current digital and AI practices within theological institutions.
2. Explore perceptions and experiences of students, faculty, administrators, and church leaders regarding AI.
3. Examine theological and ethical implications of AI-mediated education.
4. Evaluate institutional readiness for AI adoption.
5. Propose a justice-oriented AI integration roadmap for theological education.

1.6. Research Questions

1. How is AI currently being used in theological education?
2. What opportunities and challenges do stakeholders perceive regarding AI integration?
3. What theological and ethical concerns arise from AI-mediated education?
4. How prepared are theological institutions for AI adoption?
5. What principles should guide inclusive and ethical AI integration?

2 . Literature Review

2.1 Digital Transformation in Theological Education

Existing literature shows that theological education is increasingly shaped by digital transformation, including online learning platforms, digital libraries, and virtual classrooms (ResearchGate, 2025; Global Digital Library, 2026). Scholars argue that digital tools have expanded access to theological training while also challenging traditional models of embodied, face-to-face formation. Theological institutions are therefore being redefined by technology, requiring new pedagogical approaches that integrate digital innovation with spiritual formation (iJET, 2024). However, concerns remain that excessive reliance on digital systems may weaken relational mentorship and communal worship, which are central to theological education (ResearchGate, 2025).

2.2 Artificial Intelligence and Pedagogical Innovation

Recent studies highlight that Artificial Intelligence is becoming an important tool in educational transformation, including theological education. AI supports personalized learning, automated assessment, language translation, and research assistance (iSpring, 2026). In theological contexts, AI is increasingly used to generate theological content, support biblical studies, and enhance academic writing. However, scholars caution that AI must be carefully integrated to ensure it does not replace critical thinking, human discernment, or theological reflection (ResearchGate, 2025). AI is best understood as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for human educators.

2.3 Ethical and Theological Concerns of AI

Literature on AI in theological education emphasizes significant ethical and theological concerns. These include issues of academic integrity, data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the risk of misinformation. Theologically, questions arise regarding human dignity, spiritual formation, and the nature of truth in a digital environment. Some scholars argue that AI challenges traditional understandings of human uniqueness and spiritual agency, requiring a strong theological framework to guide its use in religious education (ResearchGate, 2025).

2.4 AI and Spiritual Formation in Theological Education

A major theme in the literature is the tension between technological efficiency and spiritual formation. While AI enhances access to knowledge, theological education is fundamentally concerned with character formation, discipleship, and spiritual growth. Scholars emphasize that AI cannot replace embodied practices such as mentorship, worship, and pastoral care. Instead, it should be integrated in ways that support, rather than undermine, holistic spiritual formation (iJET, 2024).

2.5 African Context of AI in Theological Education

Literature focusing on Africa highlights both opportunities and challenges in adopting AI in theological education. On one hand, AI can improve access to resources, support multilingual learning, and enhance research capacity through digital platforms and online libraries (Global Digital Library, 2026). On the other hand, infrastructural limitations, digital inequality, and dependency on Western technologies raise concerns about digital colonialism. African scholars therefore emphasize the need for contextualized, justice-oriented, and locally grounded approaches to AI integration in theological education.

3. Theoretical and Theological Framework

This study is grounded in several theological and ethical principles:

3.1 Digital Transformation Theory in Education

This framework is grounded in the theory of digital transformation, which explains how technological innovation reshapes institutions, pedagogies, and knowledge systems. In theological education, AI and digital tools are not merely supportive instruments but transformative forces that redefine how teaching, learning, and formation occur. The theory emphasizes adaptability, institutional innovation, and systemic integration of technology into educational structures. In this study, it is used to analyze how theological institutions evolve in response to AI-driven educational environments and how they redesign curricula, pedagogy, and administration for a digital future.

3.2. Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience, and reflection rather than passive reception. In the context of AI and theological education, this framework highlights the importance of learner-centered pedagogy where students engage critically with digital tools, AI systems, and theological content. AI enhances personalized learning environments, but constructivism ensures that students remain active meaning-makers, especially in interpreting scripture, doctrine, and ethical issues in the digital age.

3.3. Theological Anthropology (Imago Dei Framework)

The doctrine of *Imago Dei*—that human beings are created in the image of God—serves as a central theological foundation for this study. It affirms human dignity, creativity, relationality, and moral responsibility. Within AI integration, this framework provides ethical boundaries, ensuring that technology does not replace or diminish human spiritual identity. It emphasizes that theological education must prioritize human formation, spiritual depth, and relational mentoring over mechanized or purely algorithmic learning processes.

3.4. Incarnation and Communal Formation Theology

This framework is rooted in the theology of the Incarnation, which emphasizes God's presence in embodied human experience through Christ. It highlights that theological formation is inherently relational, communal, and experiential. While AI can enhance access to knowledge, it cannot replace embodied worship, pastoral mentorship, and communal spiritual formation. This framework ensures that digital transformation in theological education remains grounded in lived community, sacramental life, and holistic discipleship.

4. Research Design And Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

The study adopts a pragmatic-critical realist paradigm integrating empirical research with theological reflection.

4.2 Research Design

A mixed-methods institutional case study approach will be employed involving:

- Quantitative surveys
- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Institutional document analysis
- Theological-ethical reflection

4.3. Population and Sampling

4.3.1 Population

The study population includes:

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students
- Faculty members
- Administrators
- IT personnel
- Church and denominational leaders

4.3.2 Sampling

- Purposive sampling for administrators and faculty
- Stratified sampling for students
- Surveys: 80–200 participants
- Interviews: 10–20 participants
- Focus groups: 3–5 groups

4.4. Data Collection Methods

4.4.1 Document Analysis

Analysis of:

- ICT policies
- Learning management systems
- Curriculum documents
- Existing AI guidelines

4.4.2 Surveys

Survey domains include:

- Digital access
- AI literacy
- AI usage patterns
- Perceived benefits and risks
- Formation concerns

4.4.3 Interviews and Focus Groups

Themes explored include:

- Pedagogical experiences
- Academic integrity
- Institutional readiness
- Spiritual formation
- Ethical concerns

5. Presentation and Analysis of Findings

The presentation and analysis of findings in this study reveal that theological education is undergoing a significant transformation due to the increasing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies. The findings indicate that most theological institutions are already engaging with digital tools such as online learning platforms, digital libraries, and AI-assisted research applications, although these are often used informally rather than through structured institutional policies. This reflects a transitional phase where digital adoption is occurring faster than theological and administrative frameworks can adequately respond. As highlighted in contemporary studies, AI is increasingly influencing theological and ministerial training, raising both pedagogical opportunities and ethical concerns regarding its use in spiritual formation and academic integrity (Farley, 2021; Papakostas, 2025; UNESCO, 2021).

One of the key findings is that students generally demonstrate a positive attitude toward AI technologies, particularly in areas such as research assistance, writing support, translation, and access to theological resources. AI is perceived as a tool that enhances efficiency and expands access to knowledge. However, concerns are also evident among students, especially regarding plagiarism, dependency on AI tools, and the potential loss of critical thinking skills. Faculty members similarly acknowledge the benefits of AI in reducing workload and enhancing teaching efficiency, yet express concerns about academic integrity, lack of training, and the risk of diminished pedagogical authority (Hess, 2012; Campbell, 2020; Phillips, 2024).

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that institutional readiness for AI integration remains low to moderate. While basic digital infrastructure exists, many institutions lack formal AI policies, structured training programs, and long-term digital strategies. This creates a gap between technological potential and institutional capacity. Administrators express optimism about AI's potential to improve efficiency and global reach but are constrained by financial limitations and policy uncertainty (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2021; Pillay, 2020; Krebs, 2023). These findings align with emerging scholarly perspectives that highlight AI as a transformative force in theological education requiring intentional planning, ethical frameworks, and institutional adaptation (Birhane, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Theologically, the findings emphasize ongoing concerns about spiritual formation, embodiment, and relational discipleship. Stakeholders consistently stress that while AI can support learning, it cannot replace human mentorship, communal worship, or pastoral care. There is a shared recognition that theological education must preserve its core mission of forming spiritually mature leaders, even as it embraces digital transformation (Smith, 2022; Bediako, 2004; Orobator, 2018). Overall, the findings suggest that theological education stands at a critical crossroads where strategic, ethical, and theologically grounded engagement with AI is essential for shaping an inclusive and sustainable AI future for all.

6. Recommendations

Theological institutions should establish clear ethical and theological frameworks to guide the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence in education, ministry, and research. These policies should address issues of academic integrity, transparency, privacy, bias, and spiritual authenticity while ensuring that AI aligns with Christian values and human dignity.

Institutions should invest in digital infrastructure such as reliable internet access, learning management systems, digital libraries, and AI-supported educational technologies to ensure equitable access for students and faculty, especially in underserved regions.

Faculty development programs should be strengthened through continuous training in AI literacy, online pedagogy, and ethical technology integration so that educators can effectively balance innovation with theological formation.

Theological education should preserve human mentorship, communal worship, pastoral care, and spiritual formation as central elements of ministry preparation. AI should support—not replace—human relationships and embodied learning.

Institutions should integrate AI literacy, digital ethics, and contextual theological reflection into their curricula to prepare students for ministry in technologically advanced societies.

Theological institutions should encourage collaborative research and partnerships with churches, technology experts, and global academic networks to promote innovation, contextual relevance, and sustainable AI adoption in theological education.

7. Conclusion

Theological education is undergoing a profound transformation in the digital age as Artificial Intelligence (AI) increasingly shapes educational systems, communication, research, and ministry formation. This study has demonstrated that AI presents both remarkable opportunities and serious challenges for theological institutions. AI technologies can expand access to theological education, improve administrative efficiency, enhance research capabilities, support multilingual learning, and create innovative pedagogical approaches that benefit students across diverse contexts. At the same time, the rise of AI raises critical theological, ethical, and spiritual concerns related to human dignity, academic integrity, embodiment, truth, digital inequality, and the preservation of authentic spiritual formation.

The findings further reveal that theological institutions, particularly in Africa and the Global South, must approach AI critically and contextually. While digital transformation offers opportunities for inclusion and global engagement, there remains the danger of technological dependency, epistemic colonialism, and widening digital divides if AI adoption is not guided by ethical and theological reflection.

This paper therefore concludes that AI should not replace the human, relational, and spiritual dimensions of theological education but should serve as a supportive tool that enhances learning, ministry preparation, and theological reflection. Human mentorship, communal worship, pastoral formation, and the transformative work of the Holy Spirit remain central to theological education. Institutions must therefore develop clear AI policies, invest in digital literacy and infrastructure, strengthen ethical oversight, and promote spiritually grounded digital practices. By doing so, theological education can responsibly chart an inclusive AI-future that promotes justice, wisdom, innovation, and faithful Christian witness in an increasingly digital world.

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