Starting from the margins: Liberation theology as a framework for ethical AI in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) raises ethical concerns in higher-education settings. Current discussions of AI ethics in higher education predominantly emerge in Western secular contexts that fail to adequately address concerns related to marginalisation, lived experience, and Global South realities. This results in a separation between contextual and justice-oriented approaches to AI ethics within South African higher education. To bridge this divide, this qualitative study presents an autoethnographic account authored by a postgraduate lecturer and an academic coach. The article provides a critical analysis of the adoption of AI in the South African higher education context using Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT), under the umbrella of liberation theologies, as a framework for ethically addressing issues of justice, exclusion, and educational equity. The authors' reflections posit three key insights: first, meaningful concern for the marginalised centres on how AI is engaged. Second, ethical formation must stand alongside theological reflection. Finally, through reflections that emerged with the marginalised and engagement with theology, a call for pedagogical action rooted in reclaiming human agency and dignity is presented. This article adds to the growing scholarship on critical AI ethics by focusing on ethical reflection stemming from theological concern grounded in concern for the marginalised, offering a contextual, liberationist perspective informed by South African higher education and theological realities.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, higher education, ethics, educational equity, Islamic liberation theology, liberation theology, inclusive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Scholars such as Ayling and Chapman (2022) have emphasised the importance of embedding moral principles into the design and implementation of AI systems, while others, including

Lundby and Evolvi (2021), have argued for the inclusion of theological perspectives in AI ethics. However, these interventions are frequently rooted in Western-centric philosophical and theological traditions that privilege abstraction and universalism (Cruz 2021). Consequently, they often fail to engage adequately with questions of power, marginalisation, and lived experience, especially within Global South contexts and postcolonial higher education systems (Duvenage 2024; Regmi 2025; Tamimi et al 2024).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines morals as principles relating to what is considered good or bad, or right or wrong behaviour (OED 2025). It defines ethics as the branch of knowledge or study that deals with moral principles. In delimiting the relationship between morals and ethics, it is asserted that morals are to be understood as internal/normative beliefs, and ethics as the structural, systematic application of those beliefs (OED 2025).

This raises a critical question: Why should a theological perspective be privileged when considering AI ethics in South African higher-education contexts? This study responds to this gap by advancing two interconnected propositions. First, all ethical frameworks, whether secular or religious, are grounded in normative assumptions about value, responsibility, and the good, many of which are historically shaped by faith traditions and moral imaginaries (Rabinowitz 2024; Thompson and Modood 2024). Therefore, framing AI ethics as "neutral" or purely secular is misleading, as it obscures the moral commitments that underpin dominant ethical discourses (Ateeq 2024; Sacks 2025). Second, this study does not advocate for the imposition of confessional or faith-based ethics in educational spaces. Instead, it proposes a critical theological perspective, specifically Liberation Theology (LT) and Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT), as an analytical lens through which to interrogate AI ethics in higher education. It should be noted that this article brings together critical pedagogies and liberative theologies, with the distinction that some theological views do not engage pedagogy and vice versa. For instance, critical pedagogy in the United States frequently omits spiritual or religious aspects (Vossoughi and Gutiérrez 2016,140–45).

Islamic Liberation Theology, with its emphasis on justice (ʿadl) and preferential concern for the marginalised, offers a contextual and praxis-oriented ethical framework (Buffel 2010, 140; Esack 1997; Gutiérrez 1988, 12). Rooted in historical and contemporary struggles against oppression, similarly LT resists abstract God-talk detached from material realities and insists that theology must respond to lived experiences of injustice (Cone 1986, 64; Segundo 1985, 91). Applied to AI in higher education, this perspective shifts ethical reflection away from technological optimism or fear, and toward questions of who benefits, who is excluded, and

how existing socio-economic and epistemic inequalities are reproduced or challenged through AI adoption (Farahani and Ghasemi 2024; Bulathwela and Pérez-Ortiz 2024; Lutz 2019)

This intervention is particularly urgent in the South African higher education context. As AI tools are increasingly integrated into teaching and learning practices, there is an increasing necessity for ethical frameworks that can engage with the social and material realities where enduring structural inequalities shaped by race, class, geography, and access to digital infrastructure continue to affect student success and participation (Reuben and Bobat 2026; Wilson 2017).

The central research question guiding this study is as follows:

How can Islamic Liberation Theology, as a branch of broader liberation theologies, inform ethical and justice-oriented approaches to AI adoption in South African higher education?

To address this question, this study advances two main arguments. First, dominant models of AI adoption in higher education tend to mirror and perpetuate prevailing socio-economic and epistemic inequalities (Farahani and Ghasemi 2024; Bulathwela and Pérez-Ortiz 2024; Gutiérrez-Leefmans, Picazo-Vela and Kareem 2025). Second, intentional, inclusion-driven pedagogical strategies informed by critical theological and moral reflection are necessary for AI to function as a tool of emancipation rather than exclusion (Pagliara et al 2024; Lata 2024). This article's reframing of AI through a liberationist ethical lens contributes to critical debates in AI ethics and higher education studies and foregrounds questions of justice and marginalisation within Global South educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As AI advances across professional and non-professional sectors worldwide, this article focuses on generative AI in higher education contexts. Recent literature on AI in higher education has focused on the opportunities and challenges of AI adoption, particularly regarding teaching, learning, assessment, and institutional adaptation. However, emergent scholarship in Global South educational contexts increasingly highlights the intersection of AI ethics with structural inequality, epistemic exclusion, and digital marginalisation. This review proposes that existing approaches to ethical AI in higher education are often insufficiently attentive to questions of justice, power, and oppression. Accordingly, this review is centred on educational contexts and situated in learning spaces. Although the authors acknowledge that

AI and its systemic negligence extend beyond education, this research focuses on AI's repercussions for education broadly and, more specifically, for South Africa.

Globally, research on the use of generative AI in higher education has centred on a few key areas, such as student, facilitator, and institutional perspectives (Întorsureanu et al 2025; Qian 2025; Kim et al 2024; Xia et al 2024; Bahroun et al 2023; Farrelly and Baker 2023; Laato et al 2023).

Research suggests that generative AI has been increasingly used as a student support tool in higher education, to help students understand and practise concepts across disciplines through explanations, examples, and personalised tutoring support (Bahroun et al 2023; Laato et al 2023). Students have also identified AI as a useful tool for writing and brainstorming, especially for those who do not speak English as a first language. Researchers have also used GenAI to summarise literature, compare views and organise arguments (Kim et al 2024; Întorsureanu et al 2025). At the same time, AI has been perceived as beneficial for educators in helping with content creation, assessment, and reducing administrative workloads (Xia et al 2024; Qian 2025).

Within the South African context, scholars emphasise that fair and efficient AI integration demands a reimagination of teacher training through workshops, online modules, mentoring, and collaborative networks that enable educators to critically shape AI use in human-centred, differentiated ways (Opesemowo and Adekomaya 2024). AI is also seen as having great potential to support inclusive and personalised learning through systems that can improve student engagement and academic achievement (Tarisayi 2024; Funda and Piderit 2024). Current debates on AI ethics in South African higher education focus on academic integrity, policy reform, and institutional access issues. As students increasingly use tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, institutions face a regulatory vacuum characterised by ambiguity around authorship, originality, and academic integrity. This raises questions about acceptable levels of AI assistance when students choose to use such tools (Muringa 2025; Tarisayi 2024; Smit, Bond-Barnard and Wagner 2025; Bond et al 2024).

Additional debates showcase how the uncritical adoption of AI in higher education poses risks for data privacy, in addition to the dangers of algorithmic biases in systems around teaching, learning, and assessment (Ayandibu 2024; Bosch et al 2025; Bond et al 2024; Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Opesemowo and Adekomaya 2024; Patel and Ragolane 2024).

Some research has focused on how AI tools developed in the Global North may perpetuate epistemic biases in the Global South, particularly in relation to gender politics and other areas

of learning in African universities. (Ayandibu 2024; Guadu, Dibekulu and Menberu 2025; Maimela and Mbonde 2025).

Recent research emphasises the need for thorough, ethics-driven AI frameworks, national standards, and institutional AI policies that define acceptable practices, ensure privacy, reduce bias, and establish accountability. (Patel and Ragolane 2024; Ayandibu 2024; Thaldar et al 2025; Cudjoe and Adebayo 2025; Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Bond et al 2024; Opesemowo and Adekomaya 2024; Muzondo et al 2025).

Inequalities in AI are framed in the research from the perspective of infrastructure and funding, where AI uptake is uneven: Historically white universities have better access to AI, while historically black/disadvantaged universities lag behind, making equitable access to AI tools difficult (Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Patel and Ragolane 2024; Mateko, Dowelani and Sinamano 2025; Mbangeleli and Funda 2024). These inequities mirror the ongoing legacies of apartheid-era disparities and risk perpetuating imbalanced educational opportunities and outcomes for graduates (Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Patel and Ragolane 2024; Olaitan, Vijayalekshmi and Kumar 2024; Mateko et al 2025). Urban students with access to better resources find it significantly easier to utilise AI than their rural or less wealthy peers, who face challenges such as limited devices, poor Internet connectivity, and low levels of digital literacy (Bosch et al 2025; Nyoni and Tabe 2026; Bosch et al 2023; Nonkula 2025; Patel and Ragolane 2024; Mateko et al 2025; Mokoena and Seeletse 2025). Teachers in rural regions report that unless infrastructure and skill gaps are addressed, AI is more likely to exacerbate the digital divide with greater inequalities rather than reduce existing gaps (Mokoena and Seeletse 2025). The reality that some students have never used AI-personalised tools shows how disparities in access contribute to educational inequity (Nonkula 2025). Language is another barrier. AI systems often rely on Western datasets and models that emphasise English, potentially leading to digital colonialism and the continuation of Eurocentric curricula and epistemic exclusion (Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Guadu et al 2025; Dlamini and Ndzinisa 2025). Legal and curriculum experts warn that AI might continue to promote epistemic exclusion unless it is incorporated with justice-oriented, Afrocentric, or decolonial approaches (Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Dlamini and Ndzinisa 2025; Clavino 2026).

While the existing literature on AI in higher education highlights its potential as a pedagogical tool, ethical concerns remain significant (Airaj 2024). Existing ethical AI frameworks in education, as detailed above, frequently prioritise governance, academic integrity, transparency, and responsible use. While these approaches provide important safeguards, they often remain procedural and technocratic, paying insufficient attention to

structural inequalities, historical marginalisation, epistemic exclusion, and the material realities shaping AI access in Global South educational contexts. In South Africa, where higher education is marked by apartheid-era inequalities, digital divides, and uneven institutional resources, ethical AI cannot be reduced solely to questions of regulation or academic honesty.

Ethical questions regarding AI can be presented at two levels. The first concerns the direct impact on students, including the risks to learning integrity and equity (Ateeq 2024). The second involves the indirect impacts on broader communities arising from the systemic, societal, and environmental consequences of AI deployment (Warr and Rather 2024).

There is a need for approaches in ethical formation that move beyond description toward critical, analytical engagement with AI ethics in education (Yue et al 2025). Ethical engagement requires frameworks capable of interrogating power, justice, oppression, and liberation. Despite increasing scholarship on AI ethics in higher education, limited research has examined ethical AI adoption through justice-oriented frameworks that foreground structural inequality, epistemic exclusion, and marginalisation within Global South contexts, particularly in South African higher education. This study addresses this gap by drawing on Liberation Theology and Islamic Liberation Theology as critical ethical lenses for examining AI adoption.

The following section outlines how ILT can function as a theoretical lens to facilitate engagement with AI ethics.

Theoretical framework: Liberation Theology as a lens for AI in higher education

Existing critical studies by Mdingi (2021) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) point out that Western-dominated intellectual frameworks for understanding humanity have long ignored the subjectivity of oppressed groups. The current colonial system prioritises the promotion of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics, yet it has never redressed the marginalisation of oppressed communities at the ontological, political, and cultural levels. Building on this observation, the present study introduces Liberation Theology (LT) as a critical perspective, focusing on the ethical application of AI in the higher education sector to explore the roots of systemic injustice and marginalisation within this field.

Linguistically, we employ Liberation Theology (LT) as a broad term that draws on the work of foundational scholars while also considering Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT) as a theoretical lens. Traditional LT, derived from Latin American Christian movements, is concerned with socio-economic class struggles and the “preferential option for the poor” (Gutiérrez 1988, 12). Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT), however, is grounded in principles

of adl (justice) and qist (equity) from the Quran. It places the Ummah (community of believers) and the Al-Mustadafun (the oppressed) at the centre of reflection (Esack 1997, 99).

Cone (1986) summarises the shared stance of the two theological traditions: theology must respond to the firsthand lived experience of injustice among oppressed groups. Unlike Paulo Freire's (1994; 1990; 1985; 1975) critical pedagogy, which can only provide tools for consciousness raising and power diagnostics, the two strands of LT add a solid ontological foundation, elevating social awakening to a sacred mission. This aligns with Gutiérrez's (1990, 8) definition of LT, which frames it as work that provides the language to speak of God, and presents the word of life in a world of oppressive injustice.

Within this orientation, questions drawn from liberation theology serve as analytical entry points to question who is centred and who is marginalised in AI discourse. How are educational inequities named, concealed, and reproduced? What liberating possibilities or practices are envisioned by whom? In this section, we begin to unpack how the theoretical framework can be applied to examine AI ethics in higher education.

As a point of analysis, the epistemological foundations of liberation theology are employed as a lens, focusing on it as a method rather than as content (West 2008; Phan 2000; West 1999; Frostin 1988). Drawing on research by Frostin (1988) and West (2008), this study anchors three core methodological principles: selecting interlocutors who focus on marginalised groups, conducting social analysis that treats AI as a carrier of power, and upholding the connection between theology and praxis (practical action). In the context of higher education, this involves choosing ethical approaches and methods that engage with the social sciences and educational practice to deepen understanding and reflection on artificial intelligence (AI).

In locating dialogue partners (interlocutors) for liberation theology, we propose adopting the preferential option for the marginalised as the foundation of the framework (Buffel 2010:140; Gutiérrez 1988, 12). As Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT) reminds us, both the Ummah (community of believers) and the Al-Mustadafūn (the oppressed) must be at the centre of reflection (Esack 1997). In higher education, this implies that AI ethics cannot be shaped solely by policymakers, technologists, or elite institutions. Instead, the framework requires centring the voices of those most affected by systemic inequality in higher education; therefore, the concern is not only how AI tools function in classrooms but also how the experiences of marginalised learners and educators challenge approaches to higher education and dominant frameworks of AI ethics.

Liberation theology rejects the assumption that reality is neutral or objective. Instead, it insists that our understanding of reality is always shaped by social, political, racial, and economic power structures (Cone 1986, 64; Segundo 1985, 91). By extension, AI in higher education must be understood not simply as a tool, but as a system that potentially embeds inequalities.

Following Petrella (2008, 3875) and Hankela (2014), this project highlights praxis, the integration of theory and action. In this context, praxis insists that ethical debates about AI in education cannot remain abstract but must be shaped by the lived realities of the educational community. Such praxis requires the inclusion of multiple voices across different positionalities, whose stories and perspectives can disrupt narrow ethical discourses (Hankela 2014, 2).

This article ultimately seeks to promote spaces for liberationist praxis in higher education by supporting community agency and resisting top-down technocratic models of AI governance. As Hankela (2014) and Petrella (2008, 3875) suggest, liberationist praxis involves both top-down and bottom-up approaches to social justice. The aim is to facilitate the development of potential lenses regarding the current educational foundations of ethical AI use in higher education.

However, to move beyond a merely diagnostic application of these principles, this study articulates a specific, substantive definition of "ethical AI" grounded in the shared commitments of LT and ILT. Ethical AI, in this framework, is not merely the mitigation of harm (e.g., ensuring data privacy or reducing algorithmic bias in grading systems) but rather the active, structural orientation of technology toward liberation and flourishing. The study's ultimate goal is to build a bridge between top-down theoretical frameworks and bottom-up firsthand lived experience, meeting the requirements of the liberation-oriented research pathway proposed by Petrella (2008).

Therefore, "ethical AI" in higher education is defined by three substantive commitments:

- The Preferential Option for the Marginalised: AI systems must be evaluated not by their aggregate efficiency gains, but by their impact on the most vulnerable students and educators. Ethical AI actively dismantles barriers to access and success, rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies.
- Epistemic Justice (Adl/Qist): AI must not enforce a singular, colonial epistemology. Ethical AI in higher education respects and integrates diverse knowledge systems, challenging the epistemic exclusion often embedded in Western-centric LLMs.

- Liberative Praxis: The development and deployment of AI must involve the active participation of the Ummah or, in this case, the educational community. It must function as a tool for empowerment and critical consciousness, creating new opportunities for marginalised groups to shape their educational realities.

By defining ethical AI through these substantive, liberatory commitments, this framework transitions from a purely diagnostic tool to a proactive, constructive blueprint. It potentially provides a distinctive lens for evaluating both the current harms and the future possibilities of AI in higher education in a manner that foreground the marginalised as the centre of evaluation rather than a sidenote in the development of AI ethics in the South African context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a collaborative autoethnographic approach situated within a critical qualitative research framework. In keeping with the work of Bochner and Ellis (2016), we ground our methodological approach in the interconnected principles of reflexivity, positionality, and lived experience. Rather than pursuing claims of objectivity or neutrality, we recognise that our identities, social locations, and experiences shape both the production and interpretation of knowledge. Consequently, we employ first-person academic narration as a methodological and epistemological choice that foregrounds accountability, voice, and context (Kamali 2025).

As researchers in South Africa's higher education sector, our positionalities inevitably shape how we understand ethical AI adoption, inequality, and pedagogy. One author is a female Muslim PhD candidate and lecturer and the other a male Muslim academic coach who works in multidisciplinary contexts, both operating within a higher education system shaped by enduring structural inequalities.

Additionally, we both are adherent to Islam and as such our reflective process was connected to our theological orientation. While we acknowledge this may be limiting in the impact and application of our findings, we also propose that the same process could be applied across multiple religious and cultural traditions particularly in the context of South African higher education.

Throughout the study, we engaged reflexively with our assumptions, institutional locations, and lived experiences, recognising how these informed our interpretations of technology, justice, and educational practice. Through narrative storytelling, we connected our personal (auto) and cultural (ethno) reflections, allowing our lived experiences to function as

analytical lenses through which broader pedagogical and social realities could be examined (Gomila-Grau, Quesada-Serra and Bertrán-Tarrés 2025).

Our dataset consisted of 22 diary entries collected over a 12-month period. In addition, we engaged in biweekly reflective conversations to critically interrogate our experiences and deepen our engagement with the theoretical frameworks informing the study. To analyse the data, we drew selectively on grounded theory coding techniques, particularly open and axial coding, as analytic tools for identifying and organising recurring themes (Charmaz 2014; Gupta 2024). For example, initial codes such as "digital divide," "resource disparity," and "data costs" were consolidated into the broader category "Socio-Economic and Digital Injustices." The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened through regular reflexive meetings, a documented coding audit trail, and ethical protocols designed to support confidentiality and responsible representation, consistent with the qualitative research standards discussed by Abidin et al (2024) and Karcher, McCuaig and King-Hill (2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Across the three core categories, the data revealed a processual theory: ethical AI praxis in higher education emerges from experienced marginality, is shaped by a faith-informed praxis cycle, and is enacted through pedagogical strategies that reclaim human agency while simultaneously centring human dignity.

This grounded theory analysis moves beyond rule-based AI ethics and positions ethics as contextual, relational, and praxis-oriented, particularly within unequal higher education settings. In order to maintain the iterative logic of elements of grounded theory, the findings and discussion are intentionally integrated to preserve the iterative logic of grounded theory and liberation praxis, allowing empirical reflection, theological interpretation, and engagement with scholarship to occur dialogically rather than sequentially. Accordingly, each category presents participant reflections alongside interpretive discussion that situates the findings within broader debates on AI ethics, marginalisation, and higher education.

The first section explores the various points of marginality identified through the authors' collaborative autoethnographic reflections on the use of AI. The participants the authors engaged with experienced marginalisation in distinct ways, with socioeconomic disparities and epistemic injustice emerging as core areas of concern.

The second section of the findings and discussion proceeds to a second cycle of praxis. Here, concern for the marginalised serves as the initial point of departure, which, subsequently

advances to a theological reflection on and for ethical AI practices. In this section, the participants' personal, ethical, and theological commitments are centred.

The final section discusses pedagogical implications and strategies, where humanness is re-centred as an ethical interlocutor for AI ethics in higher education.

Points of marginality: Socioeconomic and epistemic injustices

This section illustrates how marginalisation was central to the research participants' reflections on the use of AI in higher education. The authors described marginalisation in three ways, and as a result, the core findings pinpointed socioeconomic marginalisation, epistemic biases, and linguistic exclusion as central to how marginalisation was perceived and experienced. Together, these categories suggest that AI, when unmediated in higher education, is not just repeating existing inequity, but rather deepens digitally mediated forms of exclusion. Instead of working as an impartial educational equaliser, AI seems to be entrenched in larger systems of socioeconomic stratification, epistemic hierarchy, and linguistic privilege.

The findings thereby shift ethical problems about AI from the appropriate use of AI in the classroom to broader themes of fairness, access, and exclusion. By foregrounding these principles as the ethical baseline, they do not become a peripheral concern but rather the central ethical guide for analysis. The reflections raised critical questions about access and the direct link between financial and academic stability as well as epistemic erasure, examining how AI, rather than serving as an equaliser, often reinforces existing hierarchies of privilege (Hussein , Qureshi, Emman 2025; Roshanaei 2024).

Socioeconomic marginalisation emerged as a central theme, highlighting the direct correlation between financial stability and academic success in the digital age. Author One reflected on her experiences with students.

> "In a recent conversation with a colleague, I was struck by the mention of the high cost of premium AI tools used for research and productivity, amounting to tens of thousands of rands per year. While the discussion initially revolved around technological efficiency and innovation, I found myself unsettled. My thoughts immediately turned to my students, some of whom have shared that they struggle to secure stable housing, often ask for assistance with transport fare to attend class, or quietly admit that they sometimes go without food."

Building on these reflections, the second author linked student success to economic viability and AI access:

> "I saw that the student did well not just because they were smart, but because they could afford the subscription. They also knew how to use the tool well. This made me see the gap between the

> idea of AI and the reality. I realised that "democratisation" is not real if you have to pay to access the tools."

These inequalities were tied not just to subscriptions, but to basic infrastructure. As one author explained regarding a sluggish, loaned laptop reliant on patchy mobile data:

> "The student was using a university-loaned laptop that was very slow and relied on mobile data, which kept cutting out. We spent the whole session trying to load the files and dealing with error messages. I felt flustered, and the student seemed very stressed. Instead of making a breakthrough in the research, we just felt frustrated. I realised that the technology was actually stopping us from working rather than helping."

Rather than simply exposing unequal access to digital tools, these reflections suggest that AI adoption in higher education risks becoming a mechanism of digital stratification. Access to premium platforms, stable connectivity, and technological fluency function as forms of hidden academic capital, effectively determining who can participate fully in AI-mediated learning environments. The pervasive discourse of AI "democratisation" is thus revealed as misleading when participation is contingent on economic capacity. Structural inequality becomes technologically mediated, meaning ethical concerns surrounding AI must extend beyond responsible use to distributive justice. This finding challenges techno-optimistic narratives of AI democratisation from developed or industrialised countries. Instead, it aligns with emerging South African scholarship demonstrating that without addressing foundational infrastructure and funding gaps, AI will exacerbate existing apartheid-era socioeconomic hierarchies rather than reduce them (Mokoena and Seeletse 2025; Patel and Ragolane 2024; Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Bosch et al 2025).

Continuing the discussion on systemic exclusion, marginalisation is not only linked to economic circumstances but is rooted in the epistemological biases built into AI models. This epistemic bias manifested in two primary ways: the prioritisation of knowledge from the Global North, and profound linguistic exclusion.

Author One further reflects on the epistemic erasure perpetuated by AI in digital academic spaces. Drawing on a research project, she recounted prompting an AI system to share key scholars on Islam and women, only to receive results that exclusively highlighted scholars from the Global North. She observed that "AI's biases reflect broader colonial patterns in academic knowledge production. In privileging English-language and Western-based scholarship, the system entrenches structural inequalities within digital learning spaces." Similarly, Author Two recalled using AI to help a student complete a literature review, yet the study, which was situated in Southern Africa, omitted African literature. In his words, "If the student had

completely relied on AI, an entire corpus of knowledge would have been omitted." Both authors described this as "epistemic erasure" which could be highly detrimental to unsuspecting and untrained students in higher education.

This finding suggests that AI systems do not merely reflect existing epistemic inequality but actively operationalise colonial hierarchies through algorithmic visibility. This is not accidental bias; it reproduces colonial knowledge systems. By dictating which knowledge is visible and which is omitted, AI becomes a mechanism of digital coloniality. Algorithmic bias in education has far-reaching consequences across race, ethnicity, and economic status (Boateng and Boateng 2025; Baker and Hawn 2021). Furthermore, as highlighted in recent literature, AI systems heavily reliant on Western datasets function as a mechanism of digital coloniality, threatening to perpetuate Eurocentric curricula and epistemic exclusion in African universities (Maimela and Mbonde 2025; Guadu et al 2025). This is particularly insidious given the epistemic history of education in the Global South, where colonial constructs historically sought to devalue marginalised knowledge systems and ontologies (Dutta 2020).

Furthermore, while it may be argued that AI can function as a valuable teaching tool to support students in mastering academic writing, particularly in English when it is not their first language (Shen 2025), both authors problematise this assumption. Author One highlights an example of linguistic exclusion in her own projects, where AI transcription tools fail to recognise non-English speakers, effectively silencing them in the process. One author argues that such linguistic exclusion "renders the voices of multilingual communities literally invisible".

Here, language becomes a condition for intelligibility within digital systems. Consequently, multilingual subjects become digitally unintelligible. The failure of transcription tools is not merely a technical glitch; it extends beyond content to the medium of knowledge itself. When non-English-speaking research participants have their voices rendered literally invisible, it constitutes an act of digital epistemicide. The long-term consequences of epistemic injustices maintained via digital technology ensure that digital expressions of inequity faithfully mirror real-world inequities (Youngman and Patin 2024, 11).

Notably, while not prominent in the diaries, the authors acknowledged that additional points of marginalisation, such as the environmental impact of AI (Nishant, Kennedy, and Corbett 2020; Brevini 2020) and the harm perpetuated by Big Tech in the development and deployment of AI in the Global South (Gaffley, Adams, and Shyllon 2022), must be integrated into comprehensive ethical frameworks.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that AI access and output are intrinsically tied to systemic injustice and gated by wealth and colonial knowledge structures. This challenges assumptions that AI is an inherently neutral or democratising pedagogical tool. Instead, the category suggests that AI adoption is a structural issue requiring a critical lens. Read through a liberation theological framework, unequal AI access and epistemic erasure become not merely logistical problems but moral and structural concerns requiring preferential attention to those rendered vulnerable (Buffel 2010:140; Gutiérrez 1988:12). Positioning marginalisation at the centre of AI practices asserts that any ethical framework for AI adoption in higher education must begin with a concern for the marginalised.

The theological turn: Faith-informed praxis and ethical reflection

This section focuses on the role of theological reflection in engaging with AI, which is central to both authors and at the core of their enquiry. Each author evaluated AI within their lived and professional contexts through reflective diaries. In this articulation, the second point of liberation theology becomes evident: social analysis, lived realities, and contexts are central to ideation, formation, and theorising (Cone 2010, 1–21; Frostin 1988).

For the authors, Islamic theology was central to their engagement with ethical questions regarding AI use. As such, the concepts of the good of the greater community (Ummah consciousness), humans as being unique in their ability to think and as the best of creation(Aḥsan al-taqwīm), as well as the concepts of Taʿlīm (sacredness of knowledge) and Amānah (teaching as a sacred trust) were all central to the theological reflections which turned to ethical imperatives rooted in a concern for the marginalised.

One author's reflections highlight the role of theological reflection in his ethical formation. He explained, "I also realised that the current way we use AI makes it a private asset for the rich, whereas Ummah consciousness suggests it should be a resource for the whole community." The participant connected Ummah consciousness to moral responsibility, explaining that collective responsibility must be foregrounded in educational practice because neglecting the collective good risks leaving vulnerable students unsupported. Similarly, the concept of Amānah (sacred trust) was central to the other author's reflections. She explained that, as an educator, ensuring that learning occurs is a key imperative for her. In her words,

> "Using AI in education prompted me to consider Taʿlīm (education) as not just the transmission of knowledge, but the ethical curation of what is considered worth knowing." She further explained that "actively engaging AI through a critical lens is part of Amānah, the trust placed in educators to guide just knowledge-making".

While these reflections were rooted in Islamic theology and the immediate locations of both authors, they resonate across different backgrounds. As one author wrote: “The theological concept of Imago Dei reminds us that human worth is rooted in our inherent capacity for reason, creativity, and moral agency, not in our efficiency as producers of text.” This perspective illustrated that, while Islamic theology was centred on reflection, its implications were not limited to Islamic contexts, as the imperatives of human dignity and human flourishing can be found in many value systems and faith traditions.

Theological reflection did not function as an abstract moral overlay added after engagement with technology. Rather, the findings suggest that theological concepts mediated ethical interpretation itself. Concepts such as Ummah consciousness and education as a trust became interpretive frameworks through which educational inequality, exclusion, and responsibility were rendered ethically legible. In this sense, theology functioned as a mode of critical social analysis rather than merely personal spirituality, extending liberation theology’s insistence that ethical reflection begins in lived realities and returns to them through praxis.

Using liberation theology’s understanding of praxis as a cyclical movement between experience, critical analysis, and theological interpretation, the authors moved between their lived encounters with AI, their theological commitments, and their ethical unease. This demonstrates what Gutiérrez describes as theology as a "second act," emerging from engagement with concrete social realities rather than from abstract speculation (Gutiérrez 1988, 5–11).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that faith-informed praxis provides a robust critical lens for evaluating educational technology. Collectively, they challenge assumptions that ethical AI frameworks must rely solely on secular, compliance-driven, or corporate guidelines. Existing ethical AI frameworks in South African higher education frequently prioritise procedural governance, academic integrity, and institutional policy (Bond et al 2024; Thaldar et al 2025; Opesemowo and Adekomaya 2024; Muringa 2025). Instead, the category suggests that deeply held theological commitments — when oriented toward justice and the marginalised — operate as structural critiques that demand relational accountability, equity, and the preservation of human dignity in digital learning environments.

Pedagogical implications: Re-centring humanness and agency

The final category in the analysis represents the culmination of both cycles of reflection and signals a deliberate movement toward an actionable pedagogical practice. Here, ethical concerns shift from reflection to embodiment in teaching practice. For both authors, the

reclamation of human agency and safeguarding of human dignity in the use of AI emerge as central. Rather than framing AI ethics primarily in terms of institutional regulation, efficiency, or risk mitigation, the findings suggest a pedagogical ethic grounded in human dignity, and accompaniment over authority. Across the reflections, AI was not positioned as an autonomous educational actor but as a mediated tool whose legitimacy depended upon whether it enhanced rather than diminished human agency, critical formation, and the relational dimensions of learning. Their reflections show a shift from critical reflection to action a key tenet of ILT, in which they positioned AI as a tool to be used under human moral guidance (Hankela 2014; Petrella 2008).

The authors described how they made active choices in their pedagogical practice by centring human agency and dignity and prioritising the idea that learning must happen. Both authors reflected on how AI could reshape when and how learning occurs in ways that promote learning and dignity. Author One reflected on how she asked students to self-test their linguistic and writing skills using AI and how she trained them to become more self-sufficient in the process. She also reflects on the hierarchical nature of higher education, where people sometimes do not feel safe asking for fear of being seen as intellectually inadequate, and how asking questions through GPT at the right moment can shape how and when learning occurs. Similarly, author two describes his pedagogical approach as follows:

> "I believe my role is to honour the student's struggle, not remove it. Instead of asking how to make students work faster, I should have been asking how to honour their dignity. I feel that technology is only ethical when it serves the person."

Despite AI's potential to enhance pedagogical practices, a clear, common thread across both diary entries was that authentic human engagement remains a distinct quality that AI cannot replicate. One author reflected on the value of human–to-human interaction in collegial academic practice. She recalled an occasion where her colleague sought her input on a manuscript. The author provided extensive and very critical feedack, which her colleague welcomed by saying, "Thank you, I knew I needed a human to read it." This was in sharp contrast to the AI tool the colleague had initially used, which "sung her praises" and lacked critical interrogation that can only come through human engagement. The author reflects that relying solely on AI could have undermined the development of "an already marginalised Black female academic." It could be argued that critical feedback is not merely corrective; it is relational and formative. As the author reflected, in an age where AI threatens to centralise

authority, our pedagogical calling is to re-centre humanity to keep alive the dialogical spaces where transformation truly happens.

Taken together, these reflections suggest a shift away from instrumental understandings of AI in education, where success is measured predominantly through speed, content creation efficiency, or output maximisation (Xia et al 2024; Qian 2025). Instead, participants framed ethical pedagogy as preserving the educative value of struggle, reflexivity, and learner development. AI, in this formulation, becomes ethically valuable not when it removes difficulty, but when it supports processes of learning without displacing human growth or agency. This finding complicates dominant narratives of AI-enhanced efficiency in higher education by foregrounding dignity and student development as pedagogical priorities. Additionally, human critique, mentorship, and accompaniment emerged as educational practices that could not easily be automated without diminishing the dialogical and transformative dimensions of learning. Particularly for historically marginalised students and scholars, relational feedback functioned not merely as academic correction but as a form of intellectual accompaniment that supports confidence, growth, and scholarly development.

Additionally, in preserving dignity and the sacredness of learning, participants highlighted accompaniment over authority in their reflections on the experience. The authors noted a discrepancy between institutions and students regarding how AI is viewed. Not listening to students' needs would be tantamount to the forced authority over the voices that matter in education. Instead, they illustrated how accompaniment, rather than authority, could enhance learning and make it a space for human flourishing and dignity. As one author reflects, "I had to decentre myself and recentre the learner." This destabilises entrenched hierarchies of authority and reframes AI as a shared tool for enquiry rather than surveillance or dependence. As the literature notes, AI should not be approached from a moral panic perspective, because teachers and researchers do not see AI tools the same way students do, and excluding students' voices in the learning space could be seen as non-inclusive (Bosch et al 2023). The category therefore points toward a pedagogical orientation of accompaniment rather than surveillance or institutional control. Within liberation theology, accompaniment functions as an ethical refusal of domination, privileging solidarity with learners and the "preferential option for the poor" rather than the imposition of authority upon them (Gutiérrez 1988). This reflects Esack's (1997) insistence that ethical praxis must privilege solidarity and human dignity over structures of domination.

To summarise, pedagogical action as emerged from reflection allowed the authors to report that perhaps the largest determining factor of what constitutes ethical AI usage should

be guided by asking: does it preserve human agency and enhance opportunities for dignity among those who engage it? Additionally, authority over accompaniment, where the voices of only the institution are imposed on learners, could deter the principles of Liberation Theology.

Taken together, these reflections point toward a pedagogical model in which ethical AI practice is defined less by prohibition or unrestricted adoption and more by accompaniment, human agency, and dignity-centred engagement. Rather than positioning AI as a replacement for intellectual struggle or human feedback, participants framed it as a mediated educational tool requiring relational accountability. This extends dominant discussions of AI ethics, which often privilege procedural compliance, academic integrity, and institutional risk mitigation (Ayandibu 2024; Cudjoe and Adebayo 2025; Patel and Ragolane 2024; Thaldar et al 2025), by foregrounding human flourishing and moral accompaniment as pedagogical imperatives.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how, if at all, Liberation Theology can inform ethical approaches to AI adoption in South African higher education.

Based on the application of the theoretical tools across the diary entries of the authors, it became evident that in thinking about ethical AI adoption, Liberation Theology gives us the critical language and tools for arguing that reflection must begin with a concern for the marginalised. In this study, the authors pinpointed three points of marginality concerning AI in higher education.

The second step of Liberation Theology as an applied method allowed for the integration of theological reflection at the centre of ethical formation. In this step, the authors reflected on their own space and religious beliefs, ultimately asserting that their theological reflection was not isolated but connected to ethical formation.

Finally, this article demonstrates that, through a liberationist framework, pedagogical action emerged from ethical concerns, and, in this step, the action phase of Liberation Theology, which turns reflection into praxis, led to concrete pedagogical actions informed by a liberationist paradigm.

While this article was limited to the reflections and experiences of the authors, the research findings still suggest that AI adoption in South African higher education must consider ethical implications at a systemic level, rather than at a descriptive level. To this end, Liberation Theology provides critical points of reflection in this article. Theological reflection is not limited to seminaries but can be seen as a grassroots source of ethical grounds congruent in multiple traditions and settings. To conclude, when theological reflection emerges from the

periphery to the forefront, it becomes a tool for developing pedagogical practices rooted in ethics. These practices should centre on human agency and dignity. It is finally tentatively asserted that Liberation Theology is meaningful in making sense of AI adoption in higher education from an ethical standpoint.

To build upon the findings of this small-scale study, future research could incorporate in-depth interviews with students and educators in higher education to capture a broader range of lived experiences. Comparative analyses across diverse institutional contexts – such as well-resourced urban universities versus under-resourced rural institutions – can further deepen understanding of AI's role in reinforcing digital inequalities/access or exacerbating problems of access/inclusion faced by marginalised communities.

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For refinement and validation, the authors thoroughly reviewed, manually edited, and verified all AI-assisted suggestions, taking full responsibility for the content of the published work. To maintain integrity and curate the development process, all draft versions in which human thinking and freewriting occurred were saved in a shared folder. Finally, all AI tools used were free or accessed through institutions' digital centres in keeping with the ethics around access. All the authors approved the final article.

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