

Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Theological Publishing

Credibility, Stability, Affordability, and Access in the Contemporary Scholarly Environment

By Christopher Crawford and Thomas E. Phillips

ABSTRACT: This article examines the transformative impact of artificial intelligence on theological publishing, focusing on the DTL Press initiative *Theological Essentials*. It critiques the traditional textbook model as economically exclusionary, slow, and structurally inequitable, particularly for students in the Global South. It argues that AI-assisted publishing, when rigorously supervised by subject-matter experts trained in prompt engineering, can produce credible, stable, and pedagogically reliable introductory texts. By fixing a finalized version for publication, the project addresses concerns about generative variability, while open-access distribution and rapid AI translation expand global accessibility. Although acknowledging that AI-generated work is largely synthetic rather than original, the article contends that this limitation is appropriate for introductory genres. Ultimately, the essay situates AI-assisted publishing within broader debates about authority, authorship, equity, and the future ecology of theological education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is reshaping nearly every dimension of intellectual life, and theological scholarship is no exception. For centuries, theological discourse has been centered on the printing press—and those who owned the presses established the rules. Even now, after decades of post-print availability, theological education has remained structurally tethered to publishing models (print and digital) characterized by needlessly extended timelines, unsustainably escalating costs, and immorally limited access. AI-driven text generation and editorial systems now introduce the possibility of a new scholarly ecology in which the needs for academically credible books (especially textbooks) can be completely rethought.

The DTL Press is attempting to assist this revisioning of the textbook industry with a new AI-assisted publishing initiative, *Theological Essentials*. The aim of this initiative is to produce introductory level textbooks that are credible (supervised by scholarly creators), stable (published as pdfs and print books), affordable (Open Access) and accessible (quickly translated into multiple languages).

This essay explains the *Theological Essentials* project of creating and publishing AI-generated introductory theological texts. After examining the traditional publishing paradigm and the structural inequities embedded within it, this essay addresses the pedagogical challenges posed by generative AI and the strategies required to ensure credibility and stability. It also addresses concerns regarding originality and derivative scholarship while situating AI-assisted publishing within broader debates about authority, authorship, and access in contemporary academic discourse.

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THE TRADITIONAL MODEL OF THEOLOGICAL PUBLISHING

For centuries, theological education has relied upon a model of textual production that presupposes scarcity and profit in every stage of textbook production. In this paradigm, a scholar with demonstrable expertise would devote months or years to composing an introductory textbook. The manuscript would then go to a publisher, whose internal processes could extend publishing times by additional months or years. Each step likewise added production and distribution costs that were ultimately passed on to students as higher textbook prices.

The consequences of this model are not evenly distributed. Students in economically privileged contexts often pay inflated prices for introductory texts, while students in developing nations frequently lack access to such materials altogether. In many parts of the world, theological education relies on donated or discarded books that may be decades out of date. The delay between publication and global accessibility can span generations. Thus, what was once justified as a necessary cost of quality assurance has become an instrument of structural exclusion.

It is important to acknowledge that the traditional model arose in response to genuine needs: the need for expert authorship, rigorous review, and durable printed formats. However, the assumption that these goals require high cost and limited access no longer applies in the digital age. AI systems capable of generating, revising, and translating text introduce new possibilities for production efficiency while preserving scholarly oversight.

USING GENERATIVE AI TO REIMAGINE SCHOLARLY PRODUCTION

AI's capacity to generate coherent prose based on structured prompts challenges inherited assumptions about authorship and text production. Rather than replacing the scholar, AI functions as an accelerant—an instrument that amplifies human expertise. In AI-supervised publishing models, the expert does not merely “approve” a machine-generated text; rather, the expert actively engages in iterative prompting, reading, regenerating, revising, and refining. The final product emerges from a dynamic collaboration between algorithmic pattern recognition and scholarly judgment.

This approach reframes authorship. The scholar whose name appears on the cover is not the sole generator of prose in the traditional sense but serves as the intellectual architect and guarantor of the work's content. The scholar designs the conceptual framework, formulates prompts, evaluates outputs, and revises text to ensure accuracy and coherence. The resulting volume is “created under the supervision of” an expert whose authority derives not from exclusive authorship but from disciplined oversight.

Such a model invites reflection on the nature of scholarly labor. The conventional author spends extensive time producing first drafts; the AI-assisted scholar spends comparable intellectual energy guiding, shaping, and refining generated text. The locus of expertise shifts from manual composition to critical orchestration. The intellectual responsibility remains firmly human, but the preface to each volume in the *Theological Essentials* fully acknowledges the role that AI played in the creation of the text.

CREDIBILITY IN AN AGE OF GENERATIVE SYSTEMS

Perhaps the most pressing concern regarding AI-generated texts is credibility. AI systems are known to produce inaccuracies, fabricate citations, or replicate biases embedded in their training data.

Unsupervised AI-generation is therefore insufficient for seminary- or university-level textbooks. However, supervised AI-generation can produce high quality seminary- and university-level textbooks. The credibility of AI-generated textbooks is entirely dependent upon the quality of the training data and the expertise of the scholar directing the AI.

Two primary sources of error had to be addressed: (1) limitations inherent in training datasets and (2) deficiencies in prompt engineering. While no AI system has access to exhaustive or perfectly curated knowledge, the AI training data in all of the major commercial AIs is now entirely sufficient to generate high quality introductory texts. The primary limitations with contemporary Large Language Models (LLMs) arise from user errors, that is, poorly constructed prompts that fail to guide the system appropriately. Effective AI-assisted publishing therefore requires that scholars be trained not only in their academic disciplines but also in prompt engineering.

Scholars know their academic disciplines. They can evaluate theological claims, correct distortions, remove unsupported assertions, and ensure that arguments reflect current scholarly consensus. However, they usually need training in prompt engineering in order to deepen content, shape prose and adapt for pedagogical purposes. The scholar's name on the cover functions as a public guarantee not only of factual accuracy, but also of scholarly judgement. With proper expertise in the discipline and proper training in the technology, scholars can produce AI-assisted introductory texts with parity to traditionally authored works, provided that supervision is rigorous and transparent.

Transparency is essential. Readers must know that AI contributed to the text's generation. Concealment would undermine trust; disclosure fosters ethical clarity. By explicitly identifying the role of AI and the supervising expert, such initiatives preserve academic integrity while embracing technological innovation.

STABILITY AND THE PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGE OF VARIABILITY

Generative AI systems produce unique responses to identical prompts across different instances. This variability poses a significant pedagogical problem. Instructors require stable texts to ground classroom discussion. Without textual stability, students might reference divergent versions of the same content, undermining shared analysis.

The *Theological Essentials* addresses this problem by publishing a particular generated and edited version as the authoritative text. While the AI's generative capacity remains dynamic, the published volume provides a stable reference point. Professors and students engage the same set of ideas, ensuring pedagogical coherence. The stability of a fixed text does not negate AI's generative nature; rather, it harnesses it. The initial generation and revision process may involve multiple iterations, but once finalized, the text functions like any conventional publication. Thus, generative variability is transformed from a liability into a developmental stage within the editorial workflow.

AFFORDABILITY AND THE ETHICS OF ACCESS

One of the most compelling justifications for AI-assisted publishing lies in its capacity to reduce costs dramatically. By eliminating much of the labor-intensive drafting process and streamlining production workflows, the DTL Press can lower prices substantially. When digital editions are distributed freely and print copies are sold at nominal cost, barriers to theological education (both domestically and internationally) diminish.

The ethical implications are profound. Theological knowledge—particularly introductory materials designed for students—should not be restricted to those with economic privilege. If AI allows publishers to decouple quality from cost, then affordability becomes not merely an option but a moral imperative.

Furthermore, AI's translation capabilities enable immediate multilingual distribution. Rather than waiting years for commissioned translations, AI-assisted workflows can generate draft translations rapidly, which are then reviewed for accuracy. This accelerates global access and promotes cross-cultural theological engagement. In this way, AI-assisted publishing aligns technological innovation with theological commitments to justice and inclusivity. Access to knowledge becomes a concrete expression of solidarity with underserved communities. The *Theological Essentials* are generated in the scholar's first language and currently published in English, Spanish, French, German, Haitian Creole and Portuguese. We plan to add Korean and Chinese in the near future.

DERIVATIVE SCHOLARSHIP AND THE QUESTION OF ORIGINALITY

Critics frequently argue that AI can only produce derivative work which is limited to aggregating and reorganizing existing ideas rather than generating genuinely original scholarship. Although this critique is becoming less and less accurate as models continue to improve (again, user error is a significant factor), the critique is not entirely inaccurate. AI excels at synthesis, but it does lack independent intentionality or experiential insight.

However, the genre of introductory textbooks rarely demands groundbreaking originality. Introductory works aim to present established discourse clearly and coherently. In this context, AI's strength in summarization and organization becomes advantageous. Moreover, AI can serve as a catalyst for original scholarship. By rapidly generating structured overviews, comparative analyses, or preliminary drafts, AI frees scholars to focus on conceptual innovation. In this sense, derivative aggregation becomes a foundation upon which creative interpretation can build.

It is also worth noting that traditional introductory textbooks are, as a genre, typically designed to be more synthetic than innovative. They distill decades of scholarship into accessible form. AI-assisted production does not fundamentally alter this function; it accelerates it. For advanced monographs requiring novel argumentation, traditional authorship and peer review remain indispensable. A diversified publishing ecosystem can accommodate both AI-assisted introductory texts and conventionally authored scholarly works.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Theological education increasingly operates within a global framework. Institutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America seek access to high-quality resources without prohibitive cost. AI-assisted publishing offers a mechanism for addressing long-standing disparities. Immediate multilingual availability allows instructors to teach in local languages. Digital distribution ensures that remote communities can access materials without shipping delays. The democratization of introductory theological texts has the potential to reshape global theological discourse.

However, global access must not entail cultural homogenization. AI systems trained primarily on Western datasets risk reproducing Eurocentric perspectives. Supervising scholars must therefore attend carefully to contextual diversity and incorporate global voices into generated texts. The scholars who create the works must be trained to prompt engineer in ways that minimize cultural bias.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A REIMAGINED SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE

Artificial intelligence does not eliminate the need for human scholarship; it reconfigures it. In theological publishing, AI-assisted introductory texts supervised by experts offer a pathway toward greater affordability, accessibility, and global inclusion without sacrificing credibility or pedagogical stability.

The transformation underway is not merely technological but structural. It challenges inherited economic models, expands the reach of theological education, and invites renewed reflection on authorship and authority. If implemented responsibly, with transparency, expert oversight, and commitment to global justice, AI-assisted publishing can contribute to a more equitable scholarly environment.