Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (3) Regular Issue (2026)
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Teaching Missiology in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Opportunities

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https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.3010

Abstract

The study was conducted with the aim of examining the teaching of missiology in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) as a new perspective in learning. A theoretical review was carried out to explore the evolution of AI and its impact on the teaching of missiology in the digital age. Premised on a narrative and framework for assessing AI identified from a preliminary analysis, the study was limited in its scope to the application and effects of AI in missiology. A qualitative research approach was employed, leveraging a literature review as the research design was employed effectively facilitated the realization of the study purpose.The advent of AI technologies has revolutionised sectors such as education, health care and the mission field. The researcher explored the possibility of teaching methods in missiology in the age of AI, which offers new opportunities for expansion but also poses significant problems that must be resolved in order to ensure that the core mission of Christianity remains central. The concept of missions in the age of AI provides a critical lens, calling for relevance and the use of AI to advance God's mission to marginalised societies, focusing on challenges and opportunities related to the potential of AI to reduce exclusion in learning institutions and religious sectors.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; Information computer technology; Missiology; Contextual mission; Creative mission; Digital ecclesiology.

Introduction

The study reported on in this article focused on artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, which have transformed missiology in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) refers to the ongoing transformation of industries driven by the integration of modern technology. Oxford Languages (2024:xiii) defines AI as 'the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages.' Several gender studies (Payton et al., 2007:37). AI can be understood as the capacity of computer systems to imitate certain human cognitive functions. This may include algorithms that learn from data (machine learning, complex architectures, mirroring brain processes, neural networks, and deep learning), as well as expert systems capable of providing specialised guidance. I have shown the main users of ICT (especially computers, the internet, and artificial intelligence) to be young males, and that women are marginal users, suggesting a gap between the discourse and the reality of women's empowerment through The environment in which we live and work is marked by inequality between men and women and an absence of gender awareness. This environment is further characterised by a lack of participation of women in decision-making, no efforts to eradicate digital illiteracy, and no attempt to remove the constraints that women experience related to the triple gender roles. In this context, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the capacity to

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empower women through enhancing their participation in economic and social development and facilitating informed decision-making. Adding to this assertion,that AI has the potential to enhance missiology, making it possible to reach those who cannot be physically reached. It builds on the digital revolution and is distinguished by the convergence of the physical, digital and biological worlds. Technologies driving this transformation, such as AI, have changed the way missions are understood. Missiology, the study of missionary work and the theology related to missions, increasingly finds itself at the intersection of faith and technology. As AI tools become more sophisticated and integrated into everyday life, it is crucial to explore how they can enhance the teaching of missiology. AI offers powerful tools to enhance mission work by creating new avenues for creativity and outreach; we are experiencing a technological super cycle that disrupts and creates new power structures (De Klerk & McLean, 2024:14–17). However, it is essential that AI should serve rather than replace uniquely human creativity, which fosters deep connection, beauty and truth.

Missiological approaches are often focused on practical methods and community engagement. In this article I argue that AI, when critically framed within the *missio Dei*, offers a number of transformative pedagogical possibilities for missiology, while simultaneously demanding renewed theological discernment concerning key issues such as embodiment, justice and community.

Methods of teaching missiology in the age of AI

In conducting the study reported on in this article, my aim was to assess the impact of AI on refer to the teaching of missiology, I undertook qualitative research, with an emphasis on what extend has the method of teaching missiology should be understood.. More particularly, my aim was to ascertain how AI has affected missions, and to examine various aspects of mission practice, including praxis in missions and the theory and learning of missions in the classroom. Learning technology is defined as the wide range of communication, knowledge and associated technologies used to assist in learning, teaching, and assessment (Parry & Bret Elzinga, 2000:91). Buskens and Webb (2009:67–70)highlighted differences among women in online learning, especially regarding inequalities among female students, everyday learning experiences at the university, and the social construction of gender in relation to their access to and use of computers. The rapid changes brought about by the explosion of AI challenge theologians and mission scholars to examine both the opportunities offered by and potential pitfalls of the incorporation of AI-driven tools into missiology and missional praxis. The concept of homo digital highlights the evolving nature of human identity in a digital context, where individuals increasingly interact with AI in their daily lives (Chaudhary, 2020:361–381). In conducting the study, my aim was to broaden the conversation by providing a concise overview of AI and highlighting why interpreting these technological developments through a missional lens is crucial. Recent research has indicated that institutions of higher learning have initiated the use of AI to accelerate the research process in missiology, generating patterns and insights that may be difficult to discern manually.

Academic integrity, which is a foundational principle in education, faces unprecedented challenges in the contemporary digital era. The widespread availability of information, the prevalence of online learning platforms, and the transformative role of GPT detectors demand further comprehensive exploration of the issues (Van den Berg & Oliver, 2025:18). Furthermore, AI in all its varied dimensions, from machine learning and neural networks to generative and predictive applications, has emerged as a transformative influence on modern society. Kim et al. (n.d.) note that the Lausanne Movement, as an example of just one global missionary organisation, states that AI is changing the way in which people connect in both positive and unsettling ways. Kim et al. (n.d.) express the conviction that ‘AI presents the church and Christian ministries with a special chance to advance and better our work’. In the discussion on AI, the Lausanne Movement concludes:

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> Overall, the state of AI in 2050 is likely to be characterized by rapid technological advancements and growing awareness of the ethical and societal implications of AI. It will be important for Christian researchers, policymakers, and the public to work together to ensure that AI is developed and used in a way that is centred on human dignity. (Kim et al., n.d.)

My research as reported on here sought to examine how AI might be a medium through which divine purposes unfold. By examining AI through a missional framework, I considered fresh avenues for sharing the gospel, nurturing discipleship, and envisioning new forms of contextualised mission practice. In particular, I sought to address the following questions as a way of bringing pedagogical perspective on the method of teaching missiology within the context of AI : Anthropological Perspectives in Mission Education – What factors contribute to our understanding of culture that enhance or challenge our roles as mission educators? How do interfaith relationships affect teaching and learning in mission? How does social media impact mission teaching in a world where cross-cultural workers often maintain constant connections to home and are not pressured to adapt?

Technological Innovations in Mission – What historical changes have occurred in mission work (e.g., from radio to TV to Internet)? What are some case studies where technological innovations have changed how we do missions? How can one better incorporate technological innovation into the teaching mission without distorting the praxis and theory in learning. Although little has been highlighted on the issue of gender, justice and diversity, Social justice concerns are increasingly prominent among students. How can we help them navigate these issues? Despite the numerous benefits of online teaching, several factors deprive online learning of joy and fun, especially during a period of crisis (Norheim & Weber, 2024:210).

Missio Dei and artificial intelligence conceptualised

Christian theology has ceased to be theology in a unique sense. It has become a sub-section of the history of religions, perhaps something like the anthropology of religion. From a Christian perspective, AI need not be considered an alien or a threatening force outside of God's redemptive activity. The concept of *missio Dei* – that the Triune God is continually at work in creation – opens the door to viewing technological developments such as AI within God's providential care.

The life-giving work of the Spirit is closely associated with God's living and life-giving Word (see Wright 2010:208; Kim & Fitchett-Climenhaga 2022:11). Bosch (1991:400) argues that mission belongs to God: "God is a missionary", and asserts that God himself is involved in mission in the world. Thus, Bosch asserts that God's concern is for the entire world; mission is God's turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption, and consummation (Bosch, 1991:400, 401). He then highlights the historical dimension of mission: it takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church, since "God's own mission is larger than the mission of the church…" (Bosch 400). The *mission Dei* is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate (Bosch, 1991:400, 401).

Although Bosch does not explicitly mention AI, he does, however, speak of the emergence of a postmodern paradigm, and traces the development of the theology of Christian mission from New Testament times up to the modern era, noting that during each historical epoch of the past two millennia the missionary idea has been profoundly influenced by the overall context in which Christians have lived and worked. This is an ecumenical definition of mission which encompasses humanity, and one of the most inspiring discoveries is that mission is not primarily the activity of men and women; mission is God's work (Kitzinger et al.,1994:40).

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Historical Development of AI in Missions

Overview of AI in Missions

The teaching of missiology in the age of AI not only offers new opportunities for expanding knowledge and understanding but also poses significant challenges that must be overcome to ensure that the core mission of Christianity remains central. The emergence of AI in education has prompted a re-evaluation of traditional pedagogical methods. The innovation is particularly beneficial in missiology, where diverse cultural contexts and languages play a significant role in understanding the mission field. There has been limited information on the current teaching of missiology in the age of AI within the scope of digital media and mission. My study was therefore conducted in an effort to provide new insights and perspectives in this area. Before the introduction of computers and other related technologies, instructors and students engaged in instruction and learning mechanically, or through the pure application of natural human effort. My theoretical review was therefore conducted to explore the evolution of AI and its impact on teaching missiology in the digital age, and synthesises theoretical frameworks, empirical studies and emerging trends, and I drew on constructivist, socio-cultural and cognitive learning theories in order to analyse the implications of AI for missiological practices.

The integration of AI in missiology has been a gradual yet transformative process, reshaping the dynamics of community and culture (Jackson, 2019:158; Luckin et al., 2016:67; Russel & Norvig, 2010:137). An overview of AI in education establishes the context for exploring how these technologies have evolved, addressing the intersection of pedagogy and technological innovation (Russel & Norvig, 2010:143). Ecological perspectives on missiology ascertain the biblical-theological factors seem to be developing because of the increasing global interaction However missiological understanding of God changed in the global, technologically enhanced by Ai some theological insights have developed due to technological advances How have developments in world interaction impacted the way we teach mission theology and other theological issues? (Danielson, 2018:17). This new reality presents challenges. The digital space, while rich with potential, demands careful theological reflection. Questions emanating from issues of embodiment, community, power and authenticity in virtual interactions require consideration. Can AI be a substitute for deep spiritual connection? How does the church maintain its identity and mission in a world where relationships are often mediated by screens? The church's imagination must expand to embrace this continuum as part of its spiritual mandate. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) recommend that believers' imagination should intentionally be shifted towards a new understanding of their own online activities as being an integral part of their spiritual lives.

Evolution of AI Technologies

The development of AI and communication technologies is transforming the long-standing socio-economic and cultural landscape of human societies. AI in education is evolving from rule-based systems to more sophisticated, adaptive algorithms that analyse large amounts of data to customise educational content and experiences for individual learners (Chan, 2015:143–150). These advancements push the limits of human action and are often seen as solutions to the problems faced by humanity, sparking both hope and fear. For a long time, AI as a transformative element in socio-economic relationships was overlooked by economic development theorists. Now, AI is viewed as a tool to help nations create wealth and advance broader goals. Friedman (2016:6–8) notes that three factors converged to foster innovation: machines powered by internal combustion engines replaced human labour, standardisation and interchangeable parts made specialisation possible, and the railway system provided a common, accessible transportation network. Each one of these had an individual influence on

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society, but together they reshaped political issues, family and work life, educational approaches, and economic priorities. As Friedman states, these aspects are nevertheless rarely examined in the literature on AI. The church is being called to pause and reflect on the disruptions challenging its norms and beliefs so that it can continue to faithfully witness to the gospel. The Digital Revolution is one of today's major disruptors. Aside from their economic benefits, digital disruptive technologies have the potential to significantly improve consumers' lives and achieve broader societal good, while providing businesses with new opportunities for value creation and capture. Digital disruptive technologies can promote social inclusion by creating better access to quality education and offering new opportunities for skills development. Digital learning environments can enhance education in multiple ways, for example by expanding access to content to people from low-income backgrounds or disadvantaged areas; supporting new teaching methods with learners as active participants; fostering collaboration between teachers and between students, and making faster and more detailed feedback on the learning process possible. New digital technologies can better connect disadvantaged groups For example, mobile connectivity is helping to reach both remote and low-income populations (Vagadia, 2020:5). Navigating this transition into the digital age is essential, and missiology can serve as a resource for the church as it prepares for the future.

Digital ecclesiology

One of the most significant developments in this sphere is the emergence of digital ecclesiology, the study and practice of church life in digital spaces. Campbell and Dyer (2022:14) define digital ecclesiology as "the study of the structure and practices of the Church in online or digitally enhanced contexts, and the theological implications of the online/offline or hybrid church experiences this creates." With the development of AI, digital ecclesiology is undergoing a transformative shift. Digital ecclesiology has been substantially influenced and enhanced by AI, reshaping the concept and practice of the church and expanding from physical gatherings to include virtual communities. Virtual communities, online worship and AI-mediated ministries challenge traditional understandings of the body of Christ and the Christian community. Digital technology is part of the technology that evolved from the First Industrial Revolution (1IR) to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a product of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Three views about AI and 4IR follow. (Mzondi, 2025:4) Bergquist and Crane (2018:296–298) argue that community is either one or the other, but not both, and that community consists of several key features: (1) shared history; (2) permanence; (3) proximity; and (4) shared imagination of the future. Virtual communities have these features, but the fourth, shared imagination of the future, is the most difficult to achieve The problem is that the virtual community lacks the first feature. The primary aspect of digital ecclesiology is how congregations connect and engage with their members online. The global digital transformation is an ongoing process that requires much more consideration. Whereas digital ecclesiology is geared more closely towards the practical side of ecclesiology, it cannot escape theological reflection on the nature of the church and its mission. Doing so suggests that theological reflection happens best within a particular context (digital culture), while reading the Bible through a particular theological tradition (theological context).

> [T]he digital age, enhanced by AI, is reshaping the concept and practice of the church – expanding from physical gatherings to include virtual communities. Virtual communities, online worship, and AI-mediated ministries challenge traditional understandings of the body of Christ and the Christian community. This section will explore a broader perspective on ecclesiology. (Niemandt, and Niemandt 2025:5)

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Adding to the assertion, the critical issue raised so far help orient the discussion on teaching missiology in the age of artificial intelligence particular what church is like and what it is called to do within the context of digital ecclesiology. As those whose daily lives are part of digital reality, the church must continuously reflect on its nature and mission. The conversation in terms of digital ecclesiology explores a wide range of issues, including how digital technology is changing concepts such as identity, authority, and community. On the other hand , we have noted that the nature of the church is timeless; yet its mission must be concrete within the lives of people. The first digital landscape provides an opportunity for the church for missional engagement of the unengaged members. Digital space presents an opportunity for the church to go to the community. This means that the church must design digital strategies that allow the ministry of the church to reach out the community in the context of the digital world.

A New Paradigm

Challies (2011:87, 91) makes the observation that digital culture, driven by AI, affects the way we see, what we hear, how we interact with the world around us, and how we communicate with others. Missional theologians such as Bosch (1991:421), Pears (2009:2) and Bevans (2002:3) have long argued that faith is inherently contextual – meaning that theological reflection and Christian witness must engage each new socio-cultural environment. The church has faced internal and external challenges over many centuries, with influences being either embraced or denounced. Currently, it is facing the dilemma of either embracing or denouncing digital technology, which is rapidly influencing every aspect of human life and the church's liturgy (Mzondi, 2025:1). A virtual community has presented us with the challenge of presenting ourselves differently. Bergquist and Crane (2018:297) express the view that a virtual community is not a true community, as in order to create genuine community, proximity is needed. In similar vein, we could say that human beings live in a cultural context and may react to information or an experience by not wanting to engage further because what is said or done and by whom run counter to their own cultural norms. The point here is that human beings engage with the world in a multi-faceted way. Moreover, communities make connections between data, ideas and phenomena that are sometimes not obviously connected at all and often also are disparate in form.

Human intelligence (or intelligence) is therefore a complex field, but is the key counterpoint to the current focus on AI. Technology can be a tool to enhance community building, but we cannot rely solely on it. Although the digitisation of church services has been discussed previously (Dreyer 2019:1-7), the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave rise to strict lockdown measures in various countries, provided an opportunity for African theologians to reflect more on churches moving online (digital ecclesiology), as highlighted by Amenyedzi (2024:28).

Campbell (2020:1–10) examined the way in which selected church leaders and media scholars viewed the shift to online platforms in digital ecclesiology and digital theology during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theological educators often struggle to select the best way to deal with a crisis or tragedy, especially if it does not seem to have an obvious connection to their course content (Norheim & Weber, 2024:210). Notably, 2021 was a year marked by significant technological changes throughout the world. Anderson (2021:14) emphasises that cryptocurrencies, transhumanism, AI and augmented reality (AR) are now central topics in discussions about what life in the “metaverse” might entail. The term ‘metaverse’ appeared for the first time in a novel published in 1992. Since the early 2000s, researchers have been using this term to refer to digital technologies enabling learners to interact with other users by means of avatars. The term came to prominence in around 2020 due to the rebranding of Information Computer Technology (Ng, 2002:190–205).

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To conclude this section, I would like to comment on mission and highlight some key aspects of missiology that could help the church navigate the paradigm shift brought about by the Digital Revolution. Many inside and outside missiology tend to have a simplified view of mission, which is often reduced to three ideas: conversion (or saving souls), church planting (or expanding the church), and service (or caring for people in need and advocating for justice). Although each of these is part of the mission, these perspectives are too narrow. The first limits mission to a single moment in a person's faith journey. The second restricts it to growth in the number of local churches. The third confines it to human actions. Nonetheless, this new reality also presents challenges. The digital space, while full of potential, requires careful theological reflection.

Questions arise about embodiment, community, power, and authenticity in virtual interactions.Jun (2020:297) discusses church planting within virtual reality (VR), exploring both opportunities and challenges. His reflections are based primarily on ecclesiology, which balances the concept of church as both form and essence (Jun, 2020:305). Niemandt (2025:5) proposes that in this new era, the church has the opportunity to creatively engage both virtual and physical realms, fostering a holistic approach to ministry deeply rooted in God's omnipresence and mission. It must connect the physical and spiritual experiences. This shift challenges traditional paradigms while opening the door to creativity, inclusivity, and a broader reach. This evolution naturally paves the way for exploring how mission intersects with creativity and AI, emphasising that technological advancements should enhance rather than detract from the church's core mission and identity.

Digital Pastoral Care

Despite technical constraints and privacy concerns, technology helps pastors reach congregations that are difficult to reach in person. Online streaming platforms, social media and church apps enable churches to reach their congregants despite physical limitations (Simorangkir et al., 2025:3).Technology is perceived as ecological in scope, operating under the assumption that everything, everyone, and everywhere is more connected than ever imagined (Bergquist & Crane, 2018:205). Digital pastoral services are increasingly in demand among congregation members, especially the elderly, the sick, and people on business trips out of town or even abroad. Congregants who are extremely busy enjoy worship via live streaming or the church's YouTube channel. The church has many opportunities to conduct services remotely and usually uses online pastoral services that include singing, prayer, sermons, and Bible verses. This digital service activity is still being carried out to this day, even though the COVID-19 pandemic has come to an end (Simorangkir et al., 2025:4). Technology has been merging with the church for years. Cameras, lights, and mobile devices that turned hard copies of Bibles into handheld electronic Bibles have become the norm rather than being limited to select individuals with this access.

Challenges and opportunities of doing missiology in the age of artificial intelligence

One of the greatest challenges within this revolution relates to ensuring that all those who engage in online worship can be enrolled in some, probably new, way in local or virtual worshiping communities. Embodiment of faith in a relational way with others is and has always been a fundamental part of Christian community life. Equally, those who have been excluded from corporate worship because they lack access to technology need to be affirmed and engaged locally. This will require renewed pastoral activity. Ministers may well discover a different and more fulfilling local role for themselves in this way, less a central personality and more a contributor, mentor, and spiritual guide within this new online world (Malcolm, 2022:28-37).

The most significant challenge will in all likelihood be local outreach and maintaining traditional, important pastoral and welfare work as the ease of access and individualism of

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online participation become more dominant. Campbell (2006:3) describes the fourth wave of research on digital religion, which focuses on how people incorporate media into their daily lives and explores the connections between virtual and physical spaces. Campbell's work has been highly influential in shaping discussions about the impact of technology on religious experiences. He analyses the complex relationships between digital platforms and the tangible world, offering valuable insights into how the virtual realm interacts with and enhances religious practices. Campbell's research is therefore vital for understanding today's religious landscape, where technology plays an increasingly significant role. Technical limitations, privacy concerns, algorithmic biases and the delicate balance between automation and human touch underscore the need for continued research and thoughtful consideration. Future research should focus on overcoming technical challenges to ensure the seamless integration of AI into educational contexts.

By examining how people navigate the intersection of media and spirituality, Campbell provides a nuanced understanding of how digital spaces complement and influence traditional religious practices. Campbell's work remains crucial for understanding the evolving nature of religious engagement in the digital age. His foundational research serves as a source of inspiration and guidance for those exploring the dynamic relationship between digital technologies and religious expression, ensuring that his contributions will continue to shape future scholarship. By studying how users engage with technology as part of their spiritual journey, researchers can gain valuable insights into how digital devotion influences individuals, which may help create more meaningful experiences and offer better support for users in their pursuit of digital faith.

The evolution of religion and social media platforms demonstrate a number of similarities in terms of their growth patterns.

As social media platforms evolved and enthusiasts responded positively to every innovation, there was often an accompanying religious response (Hutchings, 2017:37). For example, when virtual communities such as Second Life came to prominence, an effort was made to use this platform for religious purposes (Jacobs, 2007:14). As some of these platforms and services waned, so did their religious use. New avenues opened up, and further attempts were made to exploit them for religious purposes (Gelfgren & Hutchings, 2014:59–73). Religious groups have embraced cyberspace, where media platforms previously used for this purpose were closed. While these media differ, they have all been used to promote and share religious and spiritual interests, and teaching and learning. Therefore, the evolution of the digital church focusing on how churches use technology to broaden their audience reach and establish connections with individuals who may not have the opportunity to attend in-person services.

Conclusion

AI presents both challenges and opportunities, however the opportunities seem to outweigh the challenges for the *missio Dei*. It is reshaping societies and opening a new frontier for mission and ecclesiology. A discussion of digital ecclesiology offers insights into the church's ability to adapt to both physical and virtual spaces, using these realms to connect, worship, and build community. This duality highlights the church's ongoing commitment to contextualisation and mission in changing landscapes. Mission and creativity, enhanced by AI, provide significant opportunities to break down barriers, deepen scriptural engagement, and inspire new ways to share the Gospel. The advent of AI invites renewed reflection on the question of what it means to be human. As technological advancements blur the boundaries between human and machine capacities, the Christian understanding of humanity's unique nature provides clarity. These tools, while transformative, must remain connected to core principles of relationship, compassion, and the unique role of human creativity in God's mission. The call to discipleship and formation urges the church to utilise AI for holistic spiritual growth, engaging the mind, heart and spirit while fostering authentic relationships.

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Approaching AI with bold humility, rooted in the *imago Dei* and guided by wisdom from the margins, allows the church to navigate this digital frontier faithfully. As Joubert (2020:6) note that Christianity holds a rich reservoir of wisdom in sacred texts, liturgies, memories, and embodied experiences. This timeless resource has guided believers throughout history in understanding what it means to be truly human and how to flourish in God's presence and among others. By emphasising justice, inclusivity and human dignity, the church can ensure that AI serves God's life-giving mission rather than becoming a tool for exclusion or oppression. AI offers the opportunity to shape religious experiences and practices, providing a sense of connection, spirituality, and transcendence. The nexus of social media platforms and the human factor has the potential to form active receivers and listeners. Virtual reality can revolutionise how we interact with the world and enhance our daily experiences, creating a symbiotic relationship between humans and technology. This article thus suggests teaching missiology is the pedagogical intersection between the explosion of AI and human participation in missiology.

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