

SAMPLE GRADUATE SYLLABUS

THEO 545

AI, Moral Agency, and Theological Ethics

3 Credit Hours • Graduate Level • Fall / Spring

The credential is what you get when this is over. The formation is what you carry.

Faculty Portfolio Sample — This syllabus is intentionally university-neutral and can be adapted for divinity schools, departments of religion or theology, ethics programs, leadership programs, HBCUs, and interdisciplinary AI initiatives.

Course Description

Algorithms increasingly shape decisions about employment, credit, healthcare, education, policing, public benefits, communication, and institutional life. Those decisions are not merely technical. They carry assumptions about human beings, distribute power and risk, and create consequences for which someone must remain answerable.

This course brings classical and contemporary theological ethics, Black Church thought, moral philosophy, legal reasoning, and current AI ethics scholarship into sustained conversation. Students will learn to analyze AI systems not only for bias or compliance, but also for the accounts of personhood, responsibility, formation, and human relationship embedded in their design and use.

The course is not a computer science course. Students do not need to code. They need to think carefully, interpret traditions rigorously, evaluate institutions honestly, and lead where technological capability outruns moral clarity.

Recurring Analytical Lens: ReHuman

Across cases and assignments, students return to four questions. The framework functions as an analytical lens rather than a substitute for the theological and ethical traditions studied in the course.

Domain	Recurring Course Question
Personhood	What account of the human person does this system assume, represent, or flatten?
Answerability	Who has the authority to decide, who bears responsibility, and who remains answerable when harm occurs?
Formation	What human capacities, habits, judgments, or practices are strengthened, displaced, or weakened by this use of AI?

Presence	Where does consequential value require human attention, encounter, accessibility, or relationship rather than mere technical performance?
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Learning Objectives

- Articulate theologically grounded accounts of human dignity, personhood, conscience, moral agency, and responsibility in relation to AI systems.
- Interpret classical theological ethics, Black Church and liberation traditions, legal reasoning, and contemporary AI ethics scholarship in relation to shared moral problems.
- Analyze how algorithmic systems reproduce, amplify, interrupt, or redistribute racial, economic, social, and institutional power.
- Distinguish technical performance from moral legitimacy, and identify where responsibility and authority are misaligned.
- Evaluate how AI use affects human formation, professional judgment, pastoral practice, and relational presence.
- Develop and defend a constructive theological-ethical framework for responsible AI use in a real institutional or community context.
- Use AI tools critically and transparently without outsourcing the student's own reasoning, judgment, or authorship.

Intellectual Conversation

The course is designed around a four-way scholarly conversation. No single stream is treated as self-sufficient.

Classical / Traditional Augustine, Aquinas, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr; virtue, conscience, responsibility, power, institutional ethics.	Black Church & Liberation Thurman, Cone, Cannon, Townes, Jennings; dignity, survival, prophetic witness, liberation, race, social power.	Contemporary AI Ethics Noble, Eubanks, Benjamin, Crawford, Floridi and current governance / policy materials.	Applied Institutional Reasoning Legal cases, ministry dilemmas, healthcare, education, public-sector and organizational AI deployments; ReHuman as a recurring integrative lens.
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Course Texts and Readings

Core Books

- Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.
- Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality*.
- Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*.
- James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.
- Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

Selected Readings Packet

- Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, selected readings on moral agency, virtue, and responsibility.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, selections from *Ethics*.
- Howard Thurman, selections from *Jesus and the Disinherited*.
- Katie G. Cannon and Emilie M. Townes, selected readings in womanist ethics and social analysis.
- Reinhold Niebuhr, selections from *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.
- Kate Crawford, selected chapters from *Atlas of AI*.
- Luciano Floridi et al., “An Ethical Framework for a Good AI Society.”
- ProPublica, “Machine Bias” and related materials on algorithmic accountability.
- Selected denominational, ecclesial, governmental, and professional guidance on artificial intelligence.
- Selected Scripture: Genesis 1–2; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:8; Luke 4:16–21; Romans 13; Revelation 13.
- James R. Andrews, selected chapters from *InnerShift: Spiritual Care in the Age of Distraction* and selected ReHuman materials.

Note: Most books are assigned in selected chapters rather than cover-to-cover. Instructors may substitute comparable texts to fit institutional tradition, program level, or student population.

Course Architecture

UNIT I — Foundations: What Is AI, and What Is a Human Being?

Weeks 1–3. Technical baseline, theological anthropology, moral agency, virtue, power, responsibility, and the ReHuman analytical lens.

UNIT II — AI in Public Life: Where Systems Meet the Vulnerable

Weeks 4–7. Criminal justice, healthcare, hiring, finance, housing, surveillance, and the institutional distribution of benefit and harm.

UNIT III — AI, Ministry, and Human Formation

Weeks 8–11. Pastoral care, preaching, congregational data, attention, digital discipleship, professional judgment, and the limits of automation.

UNIT IV — Constructive Ethics: Designing an Answerable Future

Weeks 12–15. Liberation and public theology, institutional AI governance, constructive ethical frameworks, public witness, and student capstone responses.

Assignments and Grading

Assessment	Weight	Primary Capacity / Course Alignment
Theological Anthropology Paper	15%	Personhood; theological interpretation
Case Study Analysis: An Algorithm in the Wild	20%	Ethical analysis; Answerability; institutional power
Prophetic Response Project Proposal	0%*	Formative checkpoint; project scoping
Community Impact Assessment	15%	Contextual judgment; Presence; stakeholder analysis
Prophetic Response Project	30%	Formation; institutional action; constructive ethics
Weekly Reading Responses and Participation	20%	Interpretation; argument; dialogical reasoning

*Required but ungraded. A proposal must be submitted before the capstone project can receive a grade.

Assignment Descriptions

1. Theological Anthropology Paper (5–7 pages; due Week 4)

Choose one AI system in current public or institutional use. In light of a theological tradition's account of human personhood, conscience, dignity, and moral agency, evaluate what the system presupposes about human beings. Use at least one classical or traditional theological source and one Black Church, liberation, or contextual theological source. Conclude by identifying what the system represents well, what it cannot know, and what forms of human judgment must remain live.

2. Case Study Analysis: An Algorithm in the Wild (8–10 pages; due Week 7)

Analyze one documented AI deployment in criminal justice, healthcare, hiring, housing, education, financial services, or another approved sector. Use at least three ethical frameworks from the course. One must arise from Black theology, liberation theology, womanist ethics, or another contextual tradition. Identify who has decision authority, who bears risk, what evidence is available to affected persons, and who remains answerable when the system fails.

3. Prophetic Response Project Proposal (1 page; due Week 9; required / ungraded)

Identify the capstone problem, the real institution or community addressed, the form of the response, the stakeholders affected, and the evidence you will need. The proposal is a formative checkpoint designed to permit revision before the final project becomes costly to change.

4. Community Impact Assessment (5–6 pages; due Week 10)

Identify an AI-enabled system affecting a ministry, profession, institution, or community you know. Assess who benefits, who bears the costs, what forms of relational consequence are at stake, and whether human accessibility or presence is being reduced where it carries consequential value. Recommend one concrete institutional response.

5. Prophetic Response Project (Week 14 presentation + substantial final submission)

Design an original theological-ethical response to an AI challenge and address it to a real audience. Formats may include a policy brief, sermon series with theological rationale, community education curriculum, institutional AI-use framework, or another approved public-facing artifact. Every project must include a substantial written rationale that explains the theological argument, evidence, institutional stakes, and intended action. Peer review and revision are part of the grade.

6. Weekly Reading Responses and Participation

Submit a 250–400 word response before class. Do not merely summarize. Identify the author’s central claim, what the argument reveals or obscures, where you agree or resist, and one question the reading raises for institutional or theological practice.

Assessment Philosophy

The course evaluates more than the production of polished artifacts. Students are expected to demonstrate development in reasoning, interpretation, judgment, revision, and transfer. A strong final product does not erase weak formative work; conversely, visible growth matters. Major assignments therefore include checkpoints, discussion, peer response, or revision so that learning leaves evidence behind.

15-Week Course Schedule

Wk	Topic	Focus	Readings / Milestones
1	How Machines Decide	AI basics; machine learning; prediction; classification; the myth of technical neutrality.	Crawford selections; ProPublica, “Machine Bias.”
2	Made in Whose Image?	Imago Dei; personhood; conscience; representation; theological anthropology.	Genesis 1–2; Jennings selections; Augustine/Aquinas selections; Andrews selections.

3	Moral Agency, Power, and Answerability	Virtue, duty, responsibility, authority, systemic sin; ReHuman framework.	Bonhoeffer; Niebuhr; Floridi et al.; Luke 4:16–21.
4	Criminal Justice	Predictive policing, sentencing, bail, carceral systems, due process.	Eubanks; Benjamin; selected legal materials. Theological Anthropology Paper due.
5	Healthcare and Human Services	Triage, insurance, eligibility, diagnostic support, care, and relational consequence.	Eubanks; selected healthcare AI guidance.
6	Hiring, Credit, Housing, and Economic Access	Résumé screening, credit, housing, digital redlining, contestability.	Noble; Benjamin; Micah 6:8.
7	Surveillance, Attention, and Institutional Power	Mass surveillance, platforms, manipulation, data extraction, digital colonialism.	Crawford selections; Revelation 13; Case Study Analysis due.
8	Pastoral Care in the Digital Age	Presence, attention, AI-generated care, grief, counseling support, limits of automation.	Campbell selections; Andrews, InnerShift.
9	The AI-Assisted Minister and Professional	Research assistance, sermon preparation, counseling support, decision support, disclosure.	Practical workshop; current AI-use cases. Project Proposal due.
10	Congregational Formation, Data, and Privacy	Digital discipleship, member data, formation, surveillance, institutional trust.	Noble selections; selected privacy and church-tech materials. Community Impact Assessment due.
11	Preaching and Prophetic Public Witness	Prophetic ethics, proclamation, public theology, technological power.	Amos 5:21–24; Cone; Thurman; student workshop.
12	Liberation, Womanist Ethics, and AI	Black theology, womanist ethics, decolonial critique, survival, justice, and hope.	Cone; Cannon/Townes selections; Benjamin; Jennings.

13	Building Answerable Institutions	AI governance, responsibility-authority alignment, recourse, documentation, preservation/redesign decisions.	Selected institutional AI policies and governance materials; student framework workshop.
14	Prophetic Response Workshop	Student presentations; peer review; critique; revision planning.	No new readings. Capstone presentations.
15	Synthesis and Commission	What should institutions preserve, redesign, refuse, or reclaim? The theological leader in public life.	Final reflections and synthesis. Final written project due after the final class session.

Course Policies

Use of AI Tools

Because this course examines artificial intelligence, students are expected to engage AI systems directly. The governing principle is simple: tools may support inquiry; they may not replace the student's own reasoning, judgment, or authorship.

Category	Course Standard
Permitted	Brainstorming, question generation, tool experimentation, comparison of outputs, research leads, and other exploratory uses authorized by the assignment.
Disclosure Required	Any substantive AI assistance used in developing an assignment must be disclosed in the manner specified by the instructor, including the tool and the nature of its contribution.
Not Permitted	Submitting AI-generated arguments, analysis, theological interpretation, citations not personally verified, or prose represented as the student's own work.

Student Responsibility	Students remain answerable for every factual claim, source, citation, interpretation, and judgment submitted. An AI output does not transfer responsibility away from the student.
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Academic Integrity

Students are expected to comply with the academic integrity policies of the institution in which the course is offered. Plagiarism, fabrication, unauthorized collaboration, and undisclosed submission of work not authored by the student undermine both academic trust and the formation this course is designed to cultivate. When uncertain about a source, collaboration, or AI use, ask before submitting.

Difficult Conversations

The course requires direct engagement with race, poverty, institutional power, technology, faith, and disagreement. Rigor and respect are not opposites. Students should expect to be challenged, to support claims with evidence, to listen seriously, and to remain open to revision.

Late Work

Extensions may be available when requested before a deadline or when institutional policy requires accommodation. Late work without prior arrangement may be penalized. Communication is expected.

Accessibility and Student Support

Students requiring academic accommodations should use the institution's established accessibility process. Students facing personal crisis, mental-health challenges, or academic difficulty are encouraged to use available support services and to communicate with the instructor when appropriate. Course expectations will be applied consistently with institutional policy and approved accommodations.

Grading Scale

Grade	Range
A	93–100
A-	90–92
B+	87–89
B	83–86
B-	80–82

C+	77–79
C	73–76
F	Below 73

Graduate program minimum-grade requirements should be adjusted to match the adopting institution's policy.

A Note from the Instructor

“I have worked across law, military chaplaincy, ministry, education, and institutional leadership. Across those settings, one lesson recurs: the people who bear the costs of bad institutional decisions are often not the people who made them. AI does not erase that problem; it can accelerate and obscure it. This course asks future leaders to recover the habits of judgment, answerability, formation, and presence that responsible institutions require.”

— Dr. James R. Andrews

Instructor / Course Information

Instructor	Dr. James R. Andrews, J.D., M.Div., D.Min.
Contact	jra2esq@gmail.com • 480.600.7567
Office Hours	By appointment — in person or virtual
Format	Adaptable for in-person, hybrid, or online delivery with asynchronous support
Prerequisites	Graduate standing or permission of instructor; adaptable for advanced undergraduate use