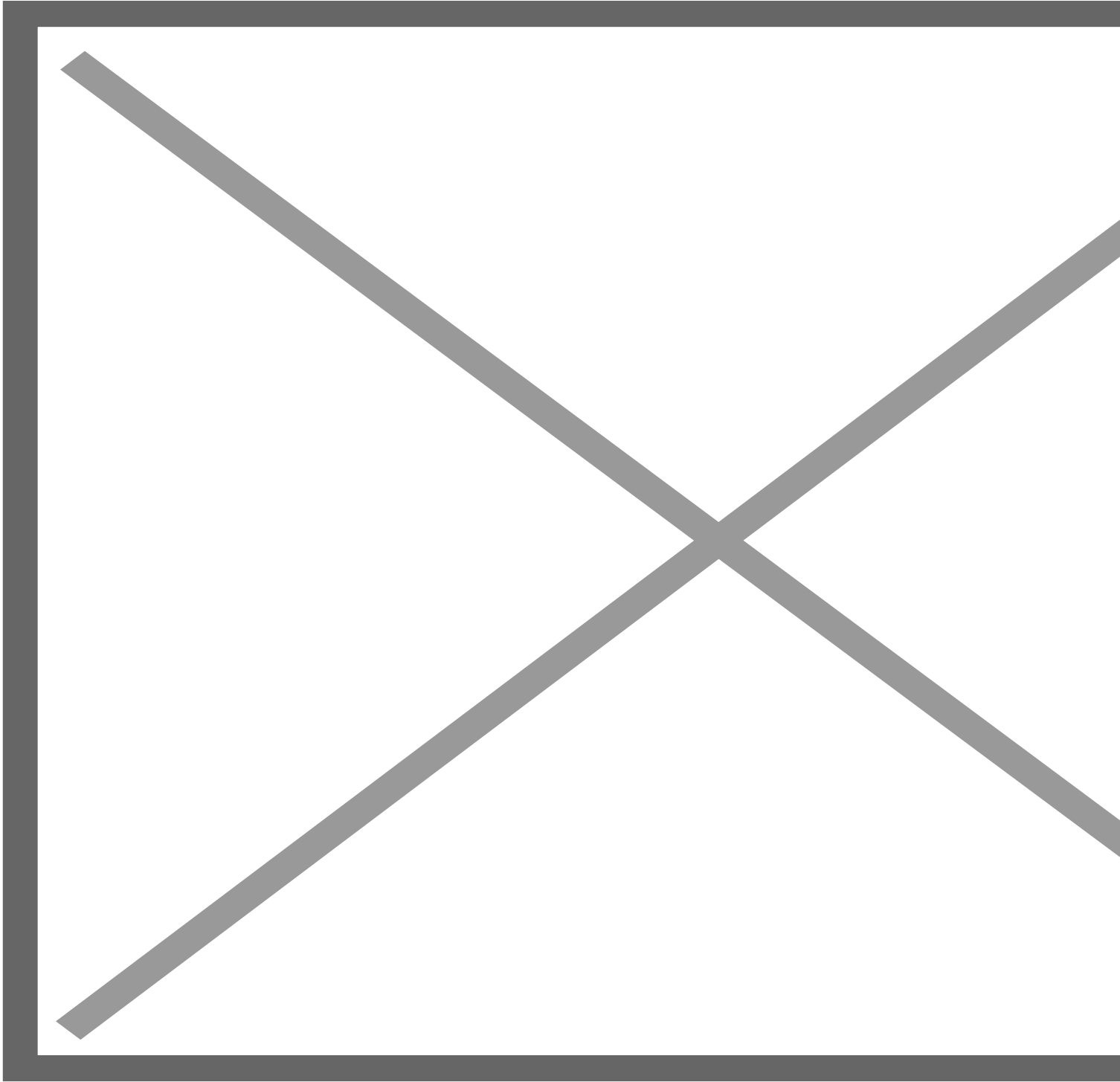


A historic divinity school is offering the first doctoral degree in ‘AI and moral agency’

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, North Carolina (Photo courtesy of Shaw Divinity School)

At the end of the Civil War, a Union soldier and Baptist minister founded a school in Raleigh, North Carolina, to provide formerly enslaved people with religious literacy.

Now that same school—Shaw University—wants to provide literacy of a new kind: AI literacy.

Starting next year, Shaw's divinity school plans to offer a [new degree track](#): a Doctor of Education (or Ed.D) in Artificial Intelligence and Moral Agency.

As AI spreads and performs more and more tasks traditionally done by humans, the divinity school wants to get ahead of the curve and probe its moral implications.

"We say Shaw was created to provide leadership in building literacy," said Mark Harden, dean of Shaw University Divinity School. "We (half) joke this is our second calling because we're building AI literacy for vulnerable communities with an emphasis on social justice and ethics."

In June, the divinity school secured the go-ahead from the regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. It is now working on receiving a seal of approval with the Commission on Accrediting at the Association of Theological Schools, a network of 280 graduate schools of theology across the United States and Canada.

Shaw's AI degree would be the first among the ATS network in either the master's or doctoral level, said Chris Meinzer, ATS's chief operating officer. Several divinity schools have begun offering solo classes in AI and ethics.

In December, Notre Dame's Institute for Ethics and the Common Good received a \$50 million gift from the Lily Endowment to support the so-called [DELTA](#) network that will provide practical resources for pastors, churches, and schools to navigate challenges posed by AI. DELTA stands for dignity, embodiment, love, transcendence and agency—which it believes are the core Christian values.

"Almost everybody we're talking with and working with in higher education right now is just getting really serious about how issues involving artificial intelligence are really shaping a lot of the ethical questions that we want to study going forward, and a lot of the formation work that we need to do with our students," said Meghan Sullivan, a philosopher and director of the Institute for Ethics and the Common Good at Notre Dame.

Sullivan said schools of theology are especially good places to study the ethics of AI.

"One of the most fundamental questions in Christianity is, we were given this power to choose and to develop our consciences and to develop our agency, and we absolutely have the power to use it for good or to misuse it," Sullivan said. "A theological school, which has been deeply rooted in 2,000 years of reflection about what the Christian world thinks about that question of human agency, is going to have a whole lot to say about how we should navigate a world where, for the first time, people have the ability to offload many decisions to commercial software."

Reflection on AI was given a big boost earlier this year when Pope Leo XIV published an encyclical, or letter, *Magnifica Humanitas*, in which he sought to protect human dignity and agency in a time when AI threatens to replace humans in many professional and social roles.

The pope especially wanted to avoid having tech firms establish the ethics for artificial intelligence.

That kind of critical engagement with AI is growing in divinity schools. Philip Butler, an associate professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, helped start an AI institute there in 2018. He teaches a class on AI and theology that looks critically at who AI developers have in mind for their technology and who benefits and who loses from those decisions.

“We raise what does it mean to be human in relation to technology broadly,” said Butler. “Who’s the intended user? What kind of human is that?” That’s because, he said, when developers make AI “something for everybody, you could also argue you make something either for specific groups of people or nobody.”

Those issues are especially important for divinity schools like Shaw, a historically Black theological institution or HBTI.

Shaw University played an important role in the Civil Rights era, educating many of the leaders who shaped the movement. Those included Ella Baker, who co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee on its campus in 1960. SNCC, as it was known, supported student-led sit-ins and nonviolent direct action against racial segregation.

“We have a history of civic mindedness from the beginning that carried its way, even through the 1960s, and so it seemed like a natural outgrowth for us to do that,” Harden said.

So far at least 66 people have expressed an interest in the doctoral degree program, which will begin in January, Harden said. The divinity school, with about 65 students, currently offers two master’s degree programs—a Master of Arts in Theology and Ministry and a Master of Divinity.

The school will accept candidates who have a master’s degree in arts or divinity. It also requires five years of professional experience in pastoral ministry or related fields such as social work. Most students will be bi-vocational, Harden said, meaning that they support themselves with a non-church job. Since COVID, the divinity school has been offering all of its classes online.

The divinity school is now hiring for a few positions for the degree program. Most of its teaching staff will have certificates in AI.

Harden said it would take three to four years to complete the degree. —Religion News Service