

**Christian Ethics And Traditional Akan Ethics:
A Comparative Study**
**CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND TRADITIONAL AKAN ETHICS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

PAUL APPIAH-SEKYERE, JOSEPH OPPONG AND AUGUSTINE MARY MENSAH¹

ABSTRACT

Some people are of the view that the advent of Christianity has taught Africans what is morally right and/or wrong. Using the Akan of Ghana, the authors endeavour to compare Christian ethical values with those of the Akan, identifying some similarities and dissimilarities with the objective of contributing towards the effort to rectify the aforementioned wrong impression and further affirm that the traditional Akan culture has its own precious ethical values.

INTRODUCTION

Christian ethics is primarily a study about how God invites the person to share in his general plan for salvation in Christ. It studies in the “light of Christian faith and of reason the guidelines which man must follow to attain his final goal.”² Christian ethics can be defined as that part of “theology whose object is the foundations, attitudes, and guidelines which enable a person to attain to his or her final goal in the light of Christian faith and reason.”³ According to Bernard Haering, the first concern of Christian ethics should not be with individually distinct acts nor with decision-making. Rather, “its basic task and purpose is to gain the right vision to assess the main perspectives, and to present the truths and values which should bear upon the decisions to be made before God.”⁴ It studies also the free acts of man in his response to God’s invitation. Its context includes all humans and created values and norms based on God’s revelation and their consequences for Christ-like living. Its ambit extends from revelation about man’s destiny and personal dignity before God to such specific applications as war, racial justice, abortion, lying and divorce.⁵

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Christian ethics, deals with the norms observed, the presuppositions and ideas expressed in the behaviour that Christians endorse and believe about God, Christ, the world, each other, the history of Christian salvation and the hope of eternal redemption.⁶

Characteristics of Christian Ethics

A distinguishing characteristic of Christian ethics is that it is “a form of divine-position.”⁷ It is based on God’s will. Christian ethics begins with the bible and so the Holy Scripture becomes a vital source

¹ PAUL APPIAH-SEKYERE, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Ethics at the Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast. JOSEPH OPPONG, PhD is a Lecturer in Ethics at the Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast and AUGUSTINE MARY MENSAH, PhD is a Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast.

² Karl Peschke, *Christian Ethics*, (Alcester: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1981), xv.

³ Karl Peschke, *Christian Ethics. Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996), 1.

⁴ Bernard Haering, *Free and Faithful in Christ, Vol. 1*, (Middlegreen, Slough: N.J.: Paulist Press, 1978), 6.

⁵ G. M. Regan, *New Trends in Moral Theology*, (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 3-5.

⁶ K. Peschke, (1996), 4-6.

⁷ N. Geisler, *Christian Ethics. Options and Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001), 22.

for Christian ethics. Hence, biblical examples and norms, rules and ideas, revelations of judgment, promises and leanings are considered the foundations of morality in Christian ethics.

Geisler is right in pointing out that Christian ethics is absolute.⁸ It is absolute in the sense that since God's moral character does not change (*Malachi 3:6; James 1:17*), moral obligations that flow from his nature are absolute. Hence, they are binding everywhere on everyone. Thus, Christian ethics is universal in character.

Furthermore, Christian ethics is pointing out what God, the lawgiver, expects of his people. Since "moral rightness is prescribed by a moral God, it is prescriptive."⁹ Therefore, Christian ethics is prescriptive and not descriptive. From a Christian perspective, a purely descriptive ethics is no ethics and is not helpful for the Christian way of living. In fact, when we describe human behaviour that is sociology but when one attempts to prescribe human behaviour then one enters into the arena of morality. For some Christian ethicists including David Bohr,¹⁰ George V. Lobo,¹¹ John Paul II,¹² Christ is the concrete and universal norm of moral life.

Christian ethics is deontological in that it is duty-centered. Deontological ethics "looks to one's obligations to determine what is moral."¹³ Deontological ethics objectifies one's obligations or moral duties, thereby answering the question what should I do? Actually, deontological ethics regards duty as the basis of morality. Christian ethics as a form of deontological ethics underscores the importance of assessing human actions by "reference to particular rules, duties, or norms which ask primarily whether the *means* constitute or violate such duties."¹⁴ The Ten Commandments and Kant's Categorical Imperatives¹⁵ are examples of deontological ethics.

There are no qualms of doubt as regards the significant place that community plays in morality. In fact, Birch and Rasmussen affirm that "it is true with even greater force for the Christian moral life, and for Christian ethics. The reason is this community is at the very heart of Christian faith itself."¹⁶ The Christian community is known as the people of God. Thus, "the beginning experiences for both Jewish and Christian ethics are the experience of God as the One who generates community as the One who is experienced in community, as its deepest source and meaning."¹⁷ Birch and Rasmussen rightly infer that one of the basic questions for Christian ethics is as follow: "what character and conduct is in keeping with who we are as a *people of God*?"¹⁸ Hence, Christian ethics can be said to be communal and theocentric.¹⁹

⁸ Geisler, *Op. Cit.*, (2001).

⁹ Geisler, *Op. Cit.*, (2001), 33.

¹⁰ D. Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, Revised, (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998), 33.

¹¹ John Paul II. *Encyclical Veritatis Splendor, (The Splendour of Truth Shines - Vatican Translation)*, AAS 85, 1133 – 1228, (*Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1993*), No. 15.

¹² John Paul II, *Op. Cit.*, (1993), No. 15.

¹³ Shannon & Kockler, *An Introduction to Bioethics*. Fourth Edition. (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁴ Shanon & Kockler, *Op. Cit.*, (2009), 30.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, (ed. & trans. Allen W. Wood), (New Haven, CT:, Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ B. C. Birch, B.C. & L. L. Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, (Minneapolis MN.: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 19.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Birch, & Rasmussen, *Op. Cit.*, (1989), 20.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Christian ethics is closely related to philosophical ethics or moral philosophy. Philosophical ethics is the study of human conducts or behaviour employing human reason to judge its rightness or wrongness.²⁰ Ethics is traditionally concerned with analyzing, evaluating and developing criteria for dealing with moral problems. Just like Christian ethics, philosophical ethics also endeavours to mould a person's character and to establish guiding principles for the moral life.²¹

Christian ethics, however, differs from moral philosophy which excludes the positive revelation of the Old and New Testament as source of its moral knowledge and guidance.²² Philosophical ethics perceives the person as she/he really exists, but only as known from man's personal and collective experiences accumulated through centuries. Hence, Peschke avers that moral philosophy gains its insight only from reason and from that general revelation which is granted every person by the universal presence of the divine spirit.²³

TRADITIONAL AKANS

Traditional Akans are Ghanaians on the African continent. An insight into the Akan people and their tradition can help us to have a good understanding of Akan ethics.²⁴

Who are the traditional Akans? By "traditional" Akan people, "we mean the Akan who in spite of the inroads of western civilization and religions such as Christianity and Islam, have still not abandoned the indigenous religion bequeathed to them by their forebears."²⁵ The Akan form the largest ethnic group in Ghana.²⁶ According to the 2010 census, the Akan represent (47.5%) of the total population of Ghana.²⁷ They are in the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions; Greater parts of the Western and Eastern regions; the whole of Central region except the Efutu and Awutu districts around Winneba; and a small area in the Northern part of the Volta region. They include the Asante, Bono, Denkyira, Twifu, Assin, Wassaw, Sefwi, Akwamu, Akwapim, Akyem and Adansi. The main languages they speak are Twi and Fanti.²⁸

Traditional Akan Ethics

Scholars such as Christian Abraham Ackah, Peter Sarpong²⁹ and Joseph Buakye Danquah³⁰ have written much on the ethics of the Akan people of Ghana. Scholars, including John S. Mbiti,³¹ Geoffrey

²⁰ Cf. A. Fagothey, (1979). *Right and Reason. Ethics in Theory and Practice*, (Saint Louis: Mosby Company, 1979).

²¹ Peschke, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 4.

²² Peschke, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 3.

²³ Cf. Peschke, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 4.

²⁴ According to Danquah (1944) religion is not the sole determinant of the ethics of the Akan people however, it forms an important aspect of Akan ethics. Danquah affirms that Tradition is the determinant of what is right and just, what is good and done. See Paul Appiah-Sekyere, *The Lifeboat Ethics and Traditional Akan Ethics: A Critical Comparative Study*, in *International Institute for Science, Technology and Education*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2014), 28.

²⁵ P. Appiah-Sekyere, & S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Teenage Pregnancy in the Life and Thought of the Akan: Moral Perspectives*, in *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2012), 129.

²⁶ P. Appiah-Sekyere, *Humanist Ethics: Its Relevance for Ghana Today*, in *Integrative Humanism Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2011), 9; See also P. Appiah-Sekyere, & S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Op. Cit.*, (2012), 129.

²⁷ The Akan. See http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics_profile.html, Retrieved on (31st May, 2017).

²⁸ 2010 population Census statistics. See <http://www.niica.on.ca/ghana/people.aspx>, Retrieved on (31st May, 2017).

²⁹ 2010 population Census statistics.

³⁰ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944), 3.

³¹ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (2nd rev. ed.), (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989), 1.

Parrinder,³² Bolaji Idowu³³ affirm that “Africans are notoriously religious” and that the ethics of the African, is based on religion. Ackah, however, cites Danquah to argue that religion is not the sole determinant of the ethics of the Akan people, albeit it forms an important aspect of Akan ethics. According to Danquah, tradition is also a strong determining factor for what is right, just and good. Ackah therefore asserts that Danquah seemed to accept the fact that social custom is also a very influential factor in the ethics of the Akan people of Ghana.³⁴

As regards the sources of the moral/ethical principles among traditional Akans, Asare Opoku states that

Moral principles and norms indeed influence the conduct of members of a society. These notions about right and wrong, good and bad usually have some force or forces behind them which compel people to accept and obey them. This force, in the life and thought of the traditional Akan people, is overwhelmingly a supernatural one - God, gods, ancestors and other spirits. It is because of this that those who go contrary to the moral and customary norms that are spelt out in the societal code of behaviour are severely dealt with.³⁵

Traditional Akans believe that if any of the codes of conduct is infringed upon, it affects the relationship between humans and the deities or spirits. This implies that among the Akan, morality has religious undertone.³⁶ Even though the religious foundation features significantly in Traditional Akan ethics, it’s sources also include social custom/culture, taboos and proverbs.³⁷

Examples of Traditional Akan Ethical Values

The sacredness of human life, hard work, communalism, hospitality, respect for the elderly and authority are examples of Traditional Akan ethical values. It is worth noting that, Traditional Akan ethics abhors laziness, individualism, abortion, suicide and mischief against fellow humans.³⁸

Malice against a neighbor

To do evil to one’s neighbour is also abhorred by the traditional Akan. Traditional Akan ethical principles detest performing a malicious act against a neighbour. Varied traditional Akan proverbs attest to the abhorrence of being wicked to one’s neighbour (among the Akans). The following traditional Akan proverbs are just a few examples:³⁹

“*Otwe bebre, na obofoo so bebre*” is an Akan proverb which literally means “the deer will suffer but the hunter will also suffer.” The deer in this proverb is the victim of the hunter and just as the deer runs away for its life and suffers from the attack of the hunter, the hunter also suffers by running after his victim

³² E. G. Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 28-29.

³³ B. E. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longmans Group Ltd., 1962), 146.

³⁴ C. A. Ackah, *Akan Ethics. A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behaviour of the Akan Tribes of Ghana*. (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1988), 7.

³⁵ K. Asare Opoku, *Op. Cit.*, (1978), 152.

³⁶ *Ibid...*

³⁷ Cf. K. Asare Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs*, (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1997).

³⁸ See P. K. Sarpong, *Aspects of Akan ethics*, in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 4, 3, (1972), 40–54.

³⁹ For the ethical implications of other similar traditional Akan proverbs, see P. Appiah-Sekyere, *The Lifeboat Ethics and Akan Traditional Ethics: A Critical Comparative Study*, in *International Institute for Science, Technology and Education*, Vol.4, No. 2, (2014), 31. Akans deplore doing evil/malicious acts against a neighbour confer “*Se woto aduro bone a, ebika w’ano*” which literally means, if you employ bad ‘juju’ on a neighbour, the repercussions will invariably affect you. A similar traditional Akan proverb also says “*Se amma wo nyenko anntwa akron a, wonso renntwa du*” which literally means, if you prevent a friend from achieving nine (9), you will never achieve ten (10). See P. Appiah-Sekyere, *Op. Cit.*, (2014), 31.

to hunt it down. Thus, if one plots to do evil against a neighbour, the neighbour will suffer from the attack but the evildoer will also suffer from actualizing his/her evil plot.

Another Akan proverb, “*Wo fa wansena ho ebufuo a, wo bere wo kuro*,” literally means “if you get angry with the house fly, you will worsen your sore.” Flies like to prey on sores and if one plans to hit a fly to kill it, one may end up hitting one’s sore and worsen the pain from the sore. Invariably, this proverb says, in doing evil to a neighbour, one may end up experiencing evil.

“*Dee wobedua no na wo bebu*” which literally means “what you sow is what you reap” in other words if you sow malice, you reap malice and if you sow goodness, you reap goodness.” Hence, to avoid doing malice to others so that no malice will befall you is an ethical value of great importance among traditional Akans. According to the traditional Akan, if one does evil things against one’s neighbour, the consequences of the evil will not only come upon the victim but also on the evildoer himself or herself.

Environmental care

Traditional Akans also employ taboos⁴⁰ for the protection and preservation of the natural environment. Examples of such taboos, to mention but a few, include, not defecating along river banks; not walking across a river with one’s footwear; not cutting trees at the river banks and not going for hunting in sacred groves.⁴¹

Hard work

Hard work is of great importance to the Akans. Hard work brings about success. Therefore, the Akan youth is raised to work hard. The Akan expression: “*Adwuma, adwuma*” (Work, work) and its response “*adwuma ye*” (work is good) demonstrates that laziness is abhorred and rather hard work is exhorted in the society that one finds oneself.⁴² In fact, the ethic of hard work is not only found among the Akan but also among Africans as a whole. Gyekye (1996) cites the rhyme that the Yoruba people employ to educate their children on the importance of hard work which states:

Work is cure for poverty
 Be hard-working my friend
 For one can become great
 Only through hard work.
 When we have no supporter
 We may appear lazy
 But in such a situation
 It only pays to
 Keep on working hard.⁴³

⁴⁰ According to Sarpong, the word taboo is derived from the Polynesian term “tabu” which simply means forbidden and applies to any sort of prohibition. See P. Sarpong, *Op. Cit.*, (1974), 51-58.

⁴¹ P. Appiah-Sekyere, *Environmental Care in Ghana: A Moral Duty for Ghanaian Christians*, in *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*, Vol. 3, 11, (2016), 55-61. Cf. also S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the environmental crisis in Ghana: The role of Traditional African Religion and culture with special reference to the Berekum traditional area*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, (2014).

⁴² K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 101-102. See also P. Appiah-Sekyere, *The Lifeboat Ethics and Akan Traditional Ethics: A Critical Comparative Study*, in *International Institute for Science, Technology and Education*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2014), 29.

⁴³ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 102.

Sarpong affirms the importance of hard work among the Akan youth in the following words, “It often happens that a boy is so hard-working that his mother, sister, and sometimes even his father, come to be dependent upon him for their means of livelihood.”¹

Communalism

Gyekye avers that communalism is “the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society.” Gyekye further reiterates that communalism lays “emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of, the individual.”² For Gyekye, “communalism as conceived in Akan thought is not a negation of individualism; rather, it is the recognition of the limited character of the possibilities of the individual, which limited possibilities whittle away the individual’s self-sufficiency.”³ Gyekye asserts that

The African and the Akan society place a great deal of emphasis on communal values. For him, these values underpin and guide the type of social relations, attitudes and behaviour that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a social life and having a sense of common good.⁴

The spirit of sharing that characterizes communal life among the Akan is so remarkable that Ackah underscores the fact that “for life to be worth living, it must consist of members of a community helping each other especially in times of difficulties”.⁵

In a similar vein, Bujo states that “Africans of which the Akan are inclusive do not think in ‘either/or,’ but rather in ‘both/and’ categories”.⁶ According to Bujo, “for Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo summus* (“I am related, therefore we are”) that is decisive.”⁷

Hospitality

Hospitality is another important ethical value among the Akans. For the Akan, hospitality connotes generosity and it is very much interrelated with Akan communal spirit that has been discussed above. Sarpong opines

The abhorrence of disgrace may well be the underlying rationale for the Akan sense of generosity, especially to strangers. The Akan may not like a person originating from a particular ethnic group, but this will never prevent the Akan from treating with kindness a guest from that particular ethnic group. Some ethnic groups in Ghana have been described as warlike, troublesome, bloodthirsty, yet they are, as we see them, among the most hospitable people anywhere in the world. It must be emphasised that among the Akan and Ghanaians as a whole, if a stranger is polite

¹ P. Sarpong, *Op. Cit.*, (1977), 10.

² K. Gyekye, *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, rev. ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 155.

³ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1995), 156.

⁴ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 35.

⁵ C. A. Ackah, *C. A. Op. Cit.*, (1988), 52-53.

⁶ B. Bujo, (2001). *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil. (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 2001), 1.

⁷ B. Bujo, *Op. Cit.*, (2001), 4.

See also B. Bujo, (1999). *Utamadunishona Kanisa La Mazingira [Inculturation and Basic Christian Communities]* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1999), 9.

enough to “greet” and is not suspected of foul intentions, that stranger is given all the assistance he requires, including free shelter, food and sometimes money. This sense of hospitality is considered a duty and one cannot ignore it without losing face badly.⁸

For Gyekye, the moral value of hospitality affirms the *notion of human brotherhood*. In other words, the *idea of brotherhood* involves such social and moral virtues as hospitality, generosity and the like among the Akan people of Ghana and Ghanaians as a whole. For Gyekye, “brother” in the *notion of brotherhood* is not limited in scope to only blood ties but also to persons with whom there are no blood ties at all.⁹

The Akan proverb “*Dɔdɔɔ nna abɔnten so,*” literally means “the stranger does not sleep on the street,”¹⁰ attests in a crystal way to the nature and magnitude of the moral value of Akan hospitality.

Egoism

Notwithstanding the fact that there is some modicum of individualism among traditional Akans, Akan ethics abhors egoism/selfishness. In fact, Gyekye rightly affirms that the “Akan community is a communalistic type but not individualistic.”¹¹

Akans have proverbs that express the negative effects of selfishness/egoism on community life. One of such Akan proverbs says “*Onipa baako didi mee a ekuro mu nnye de,*” that is, “if only one person has food to eat in a village, there is no joy in the said village.”¹² Hence, for the village community to experience joy, peace and harmony, members ought to share and care for each other. In fact, the abhorrence for egoism among traditional Akans demonstrates that human beings are interdependent and therefore egoism is ethically unacceptable.

Respect for the elderly

Among the Akans, respect is a great moral value. One has to respect not only one’s parents but also other people’s parents, the elderly, chiefs, authorities and even one’s subordinates. For example, Sarpong describes the traditional education of the Ashanti (Akan) girl (and the boy is not excluded) as follows, “From her mother the Ashanti girl learns how to be... submissive to her father, brothers and any older person, and respect everyone...”¹³ Ackah reiterates Sarpong’s view by saying “respect for and the obedience to the elderly are inculcated and observed in every Akan family.”¹⁴ Ackah buttresses his point by referring to the Akan proverb, “*esen w’agya tsentsen a, nna nnye wopen bi a*” which literally means “if you are taller than your father, it does not mean that he is your equal”.¹⁵ Ackah further asserts that this

⁸ P. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974, reprint 2006), 66.

⁹ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 26-27.

¹⁰ P. Sarpong, *Op. Cit.*, (1974), 66.

¹¹ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 35-37.

¹² Another good example of such proverbs is quoted by Ackah, namely, “*esen me edzidzi a, esen me nsaman hunu*” which literally means - If you surpass me in eating, you surpass me in seeing ghosts. Ackah explains this proverb as follows: “ghost seeing refers to the fact that over-eating (which is an aspect of egoism because there are some hungry human beings nearby) can cause a purging of the stomach and that obviously will necessitate going (out) to toilet several times in the night when ghosts are believed to be operating. See Ackah, *Op. Cit.*, (1988), 58.

¹³ P. Sarpong, (1977). *Girls’ Nubility Rites in Ashanti*. (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977), 10; See also P. Sarpong, *Op. Cit.*, (1974), 65-66.

¹⁴ C. A. Ackah, *Op. Cit.*, (1988), 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

proverb is employed to educate Akans that however well off a person is in life, he/she has the moral duty to respect all those who are superior to him in age.¹⁶

For the Akan, the moral value of respect, most especially for parents, the elderly (chiefs, old men and women, opinion leaders, family heads and their kind) is seen in how the elderly is treated in society. A few examples include how the elderly is the first to be offered a seat in the midst of a gathering; helping the elderly person when found carrying a heavy load and removing one's hat from one's head before greeting the elderly.

Abhorrence of Abortion

For Traditional Akans, the destruction of innocent human life such as abortion is a serious sin against *asaase yaa* (the earth goddess).¹⁷ In fact, Traditional Akan norms ensured that abortion was prevented. Thus, Osei-Adu opines,

These traditional norms and rites were effective means of preventing premarital sex and teenage pregnancy in the society. According to traditional law no woman is allowed to get married without having gone through the puberty rites and every young woman must remain a virgin prior to this. These laws ensure that young women grow up disciplined enough to control their sexuality and to prevent them from premature motherhood and unwanted babies. So important are these laws that any woman who gets pregnant or breaks her virginity before the rites are performed is sometimes ostracized together with the man responsible for it.¹⁸

Actually, Traditional Akan society encourages early marriage especially among the females. Among the reasons that account for this fact is that giving birth to many children is cherished very much. In fact, for the traditional Akan, children are considered gifts and blessings from God, the gods and the ancestors.¹⁹

Suicide

Just like abortion, suicide is also frowned upon among the Akans. Affirming how much Akans abhor suicide, Sarpong reiterates that

One who killed himself was assumed to have committed a heinous crime ... One who kills himself proclaims himself an enemy of everybody. He refuses to confide in anybody in times of difficulty. Suicide therefore is an anti-social act.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A sin against *asaase yaa* (the earth goddess) could bring great misfortunes and disasters including famine, drought, epidemics to the sinner and his/her community.

¹⁸ Osei Adu, David. "Puberty Rites." from <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/pubertyrites.php>. Retrieved (20th June, 2017).

¹⁹ See P. Appiah-Sekyere, & S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Teenage Pregnancy in the Life and Thought of the Akan: Moral Perspectives in Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2012), 131.

²⁰ P. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974, reprint 2006), 56-57.

Anyone who commits suicide, according to Traditional Akan ethics, cannot be regarded as an ancestor²¹ and his/her name will never be passed on to any child at a naming ceremony. The logical deduction is that if human life is a gift from the Supreme Being or deities or ancestors, then no one can take away or terminate human life except the giver(s). To commit suicide is to bring disgrace and calamity upon oneself and one's family/community.

Points of contact between Akan ethics and Christian ethics

Both Christian ethics and Akan ethics are deontological. Whereas Christian ethics makes reference to God's commandments (Cf. the Decalogue in *Exodus* 20:2-17; *Deut.* 5:1-22) and the Beatitudes (Cf. *Matthew* 5:1-12; *Luke* 6: 20-26) and love commandment of Jesus (Cf. *John*. 13:34), Akan ethics also makes reference to the Supreme Being as the source of morality therefore, we have the moral duty to obey his dictates. God abhors evil (*Onyame mpebone*) is an Akan proverb that speaks to the fact that God is the source of morality and hence one must avoid evil ways since God disapproves of them.²²

Whereas Christian ethics makes reference to the lives of the saints as exemplary in ethical values, Akan ethics also makes reference to the ancestors as members of the community whose lives were exemplary in ethical values. In both cases, the name of a saint and an ancestor is cherished and worth giving to the present and future generations. The saints and ancestors are considered as role models for our day-to-day living. Human though they were, they strived to live above reproach so as to inspire us in our own living.

In response to the Christian God's commandment "thou shall not kill" (*Ex.* 20:13; *Deut.* 5:17), Christian ethics considers the taking of the life of an innocent person (such as murder, suicide, manslaughter, genocide and abortion) as ethically wrong. Similarly, Christian ethics considers human life as inviolable. Human beings are made in God's image and likeness (*Gen.* 1:27). At creation, God created the human person as the last of his creations and humans are seen as the crown of his creation. As Geisler asserts, "human beings both represents and resemble God. It is for this reason that murder is such a heinous crime, for it is killing God in effigy."²³ Akan ethics abhors murder, suicide, abortion and any action that would lead to the destruction of innocent human life. Thus, both Christian ethics and Akan ethics uphold the dignity and sanctity of life.

Just as in Christian ethics the commandment "honour thy father and mother" (*Ex.* 20:12; *Deut.* 5:16) is an ethical value, in a similar context, respect for one's parents and the elderly is an ethical value among the Akans. The Akans have proverbs like "*obi ehwe wo ema wo se fifiri a, wohwe no ma no dee tutu*" (if someone gives you support to enable you grow your teeth, you must in turn support that person till he or she loses his or her teeth).

For both Akan ethics and Christian ethics, egoism is not considered a moral value. Just as Christian ethics endorses altruism and the love of neighbour commandment (Cf. *John*, 13:34), Akan ethics is altruistic and communalistic²⁴

Hard work is considered amoral value both in Christian ethics and Akan ethics. In fact, in Christian ethics it is advocated that one must not be a lazy bone but must work in order to deserve a meal (*2Thes.* 3:10). Similarly, Akan ethics praises hard work as an important moral value for the survival of the individual, his/her family and community.²⁵

Both Christian ethics and Akan ethics abhor sexual aberrations such as pedophilia, bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, polyandry, incest and onanism. Christian ethics and Akan ethics abhor sexual

²¹ P. Sarpong, *Op. Cit.*, (1974), 33-44.

²² K. Asare Opoku, *The World View of the Akan*, in *Akan History and Culture*, (Tarikh 26, Essex: Longman, 1982), 63.

²³ N. L. Geisler, *Op. Cit.* (2001), 181.

²⁴ K. Gyekye, *Op. Cit.*, (1996), 35-37.

²⁵ P. Sarpong, (1977). *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977), 10.

aberrations since they dehumanize the person and they are an affront to the law giver (God or *Onyankopon*). Sexual offences could also bring untold hardships to the society in which they are carried out.

Points of differences between Akan ethics and Christian ethics

Whereas Christian ethics has a written source, namely the bible, Akan ethics has no written source but Akan ethical values are transmitted orally and through practical experience.

While both Christian ethics and Akan ethics espouse forgiveness, in the context of the former, the limit could be *ad infinitum* (Cf. *Matt.* 18:22). In the case of the latter, when a particular offence undermines the survival of the entire community²⁶ one would not be forgiven *ad infinitum*.

Whereas Christians form the most widespread group globally, Traditional Akans can be found mostly in Ghana where they form the majority ethnic group.²⁷ Thus, Christians that seek to live by Christian ethical principles far outnumber the Traditional Akans who live by the norms of Traditional Akan ethics.

In Christian ethics, love for the enemy and even to the extent of praying for the enemy is an ethical value (Cf. *Matt.* 6:44; *Lk.* 6:27). In Akan ethics, however, during the pouring of libation, unkind words and unloving expressions are vented on the enemy. Such as “a curse on the evil one and the enemy.”²⁸

Another significant difference is that even though both Christian ethics and Akan ethics place a lot of importance of marriage as very necessary for the family, the former adheres to monogamy while the latter allows polygamy.²⁹

EVALUATION

From the foregoing discussion, one would realize that Akan ethics and Christian ethics have so many things in common. In view of this, it would be unacceptable to claim that the traditional Akan did not have moral/ethical values until the arrival of Christianity on her soil.

Hence, our reflection makes it imperative to accept the view that Akan ethics and Christian ethics are not distant cousins but very similar ethical systems notwithstanding the differences aforementioned. Thus, natural morality and revealed morality are very similar.

From the above discussions and with reference to authors such as Sarpong, Gyekye, Asare Opoku, Osei Adu, Appiah-Sekyere, Awuah-Nyamekye, to mention just a few, it can be deduced that in Ghana, the high level at which Traditional Akan ethical norms were able to curb immoral acts such as teenage pregnancy,³⁰ theft/robbery, premarital/extramarital sex, environmental degradation,³¹ and concurrently sustain moral values like respect for the elderly, marital fidelity, moral discipline, care for the sick, the dying, the dead, the needy, the poor and the stranger, as well as the communal sense of responsibility for what is right, appears to be eluding Christian ethics.

²⁶Examples of offenses that can bring epidemic or punishment on the community include the killing of a totem and becoming pregnant before the performance of puberty rites. See Osei Adu, David. “Puberty Rites,” from , <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/pubertyrites.php>. Retrieved (20th June, 2017); Cf. also P. Sarpong, (1974). *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (Accra- Ghana: Publishing Corporation, 1974, reprint 2006); P. Sarpong, *Girls’ Nubility Rites in Ashanti*. Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977).

²⁷ Cf. footnote 26 above.

²⁸ P. Sarpong, (1996). *Libation*. (Accra: Anasesem Publications Ltd., 1996), 19.

²⁹ P. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (Accra: Ghana. Publishing Corporation, 1974, reprint 2006).

³⁰ P. Appiah-Sekyere, & S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Teenage pregnancy in the Life and Thought of the Akan: Moral Perspectives*, in *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2012), 129-138.

³¹ S. Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of Traditional African Religion and Culture with Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper endeavoured to provide a comparative study of Christian ethics and Traditional Akan ethics. The study posits that notwithstanding the differences in their respective sources, (the former having written literature and the latter oral transmission), the former upholding monogamy, while the latter tolerates polygamy, and the like, both ethics contain, basically, profound similar moral values that are very beneficial and significant to human society. For Christian ethics to achieve its objectives, it needs to avoid downplaying Traditional Akan ethics and instead harness and inculturate the moral values which it shares in common with Traditional Akan ethics.

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