



The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared

Augustine Kojo Peprah¹  & Richmond Osei Amoah¹ 

¹ Department of Social Sciences, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana.



ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of sin and reconciliation is extant in many religions and as a result, elaborate teachings and rituals are documented around them. The same however cannot be said about the Akan traditional religion. This can be due to the no or late documentation of the theology of the African traditional religion. The problem created is that the Akan perception of sin and its removal in particular and the African Traditional Religion, in general, is often seen as lacking authenticity. This article with the help of comparative theology examines the Akan concept of sin and reconciliation and elucidates how they share some similarities with the Catholic doctrine on sin and reconciliation. The authors used the literary approach and questionnaires to gather data. Twenty (20) Catholic priests in the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi were purposively selected to answer eleven questionnaire items on the similarities between the Catholic and the Akan theology of sin and reconciliation. The findings and discussions on the problem elucidate that, the two religious traditions have a doctrine of original sin. They conceptualize sin as a stain, that sin offends God and humanity. Sin is moreover, categorized into serious and less serious offenses. They also agree that contrition, confession and penance are necessary conditions for the forgiveness of sins. Reconciliation again they concur restores the penitent to full communion with the divine and humanity. The article recommends that the Akan concept of original sin which is sketchy must be developed further. It also advocates that integrating the Akan and Catholic concepts of sin and reconciliation in the education of Akan Christians and pastoral agents would be a good enterprise. The paper fills the vacuum created that the Akan has a poor notion of sin and reconciliation. It shows evidence of the Akan concepts of sin and reconciliation, which are comparable to the teachings of the Catholic Church on sin and its removal.

Correspondence

Augustine Kojo Peprah

Email: frpeprah6@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

There have been attempts by certain writers of Western origin to discredit African religion and its practices over the years. They posit that African religion has no or a poor concept of sin and reconciliation. One such writer is A.B. Ellis who for instance has erroneously asserted that among the Akan tribe of Ghana, morality is not linked to religion in any way. He was also of the belief that religion and morality merge when humanity is socialized by a higher culture like Christianity and western civilization.¹ To him, the African perception of sin

¹ A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 10-11.

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and reconciliation can be made better through the influence of a higher civilization. J. K. Parrat for instance insists that, the Yoruba-(a tribe in Nigeria) idea of sin cannot be compared to the Christian hamartiology.² Joseph Omosade Awolalu however refutes his claim. He faults those who would like to see a documented concept of sin in the African religion as expressed in the Christian traditions. Awolalu underscores that this kind of comparison is not a good undertaking.³ The documentation of the philosophy and theology of the Africans started late but that does not deny the existence of an original African theology of sin and reconciliation.⁴ The rather early attempts to put into writing some aspects of the life of the African were done by “outsiders”, Europeans who measured the African cultural heritage with their European principles.

Roman Catholicism is one of the influential Christian denominations in the annals of the European culture. It is one of the three main branches of Christianity with Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Roman Catholics account for nearly 1.1 billion of the world’s population.⁵ The Catholic history, organization, beliefs and practices are imperative elements of cultural literacy and they answer some fundamental and enigmatic questions in life in relation to death, sin and faith. The Catholic Church has a rich theological tradition that has stood the test of time for over two millennia.⁶ The Catechism, (the teachings) of the Church gives one a clear panoramic view of the most important aspects of sin and reconciliation in the Catholic Church.⁷ The traditional religion of the Akan is used in this article to expound the fact that Africans have their own religious concept of sin and reconciliation which is comparable to the Catholic doctrine of sin and reconciliation.

Conceptual framework

Conceptually, the article is founded on Comparative Theology which uses the comparative method. Comparative Theology is considered as a subset of the broad discipline, Comparative Religion. Comparative Theology is where the theologies of different faiths are studied.⁸ Francis Xavier Clooney an ardent patron of this conceptual framework is of the strong conviction that viewing many religious and theological traditions become Comparative Religion only after comparison.⁹ The comparative method focuses on the commonalities so that it would help diminish a “theological conflict” caused by religious exclusivism. It does not look too much at variations because it might place a premium on one religion over the other.¹⁰ The scope of comparison in the comparative method refers to the geographical distance between the religions compared in the study. The comparison between the Akan culture and the Catholic traditions is a cross-cultural study. While the former is African, the latter is European in relation to cultural boundaries.¹¹ The goal of Comparative Religion and comparative method “is to settle the religious and theological boundaries that have smartly divided theologians according to their religions.”¹² This conceptual framework would adequately address the questions, objectives, purpose and methodology of this article.

² J. K. Parratt, “Religious Change in Yoruba Society,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 2, (1969):118, accessed 21/05/ 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1594906>.

³ J. Omosade Awolalu, “Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Oxford University Press, June, 1976):276, accessed: 21/10/2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1462340>.

⁴ Christopher M. Okoro, “Dating of African Philosophy,” *West African Journal of Philosophical Studies*, V 6(2003): 19.

⁵ Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Roman Catholicism*, accessed 05/05/2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism>.

⁶ Pelikan, *Roman Catholicism*.

⁷ Emily Reimer- Barry, *Catholic Commentary – Sin*. 2012, accessed 21/04/2021, <http://www.catholicmoraltheology.com>.

⁸ Definition of Comparative Theology. Accessed 18/05/22. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/theology-comparative-theology>,

⁹ Francis X. Clooney, “Current Theology: Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)”, *Theological Studies* 56(1995):522. Accessed 18/05/2022. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/theology-comparative-theology>

¹⁰ Oliver Freiberger, *Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion*, (2018):4, accessed 16/05/2022. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/2/38/pdf/1>

¹¹ Freiberger, *Elements of a Comparative Methodology*, 7.

¹² Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God, How Reason helps to Break Down the Barriers between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

The Similarities between the Akan Religious and Catholic Concepts of Sin

The first point of convergence between the two religions on sin is the notion of original sin. The doctrine of original sin of the two religions is mythological. The doctrine teaches that, there was a time in the history of humanity when they enjoyed a state of happiness; God was very close to humanity.¹³ John Mbiti illustrates this state by saying that the relationship between God and humanity was so intimate that the heaven, the abode of God and the earth, the habitat for humanity were united. This friendship with God was broken as a result of sin.¹⁴ The Akan traditional religion teaches the doctrine of original sin in their popular myth that says that, the constant pounding of *fufu* (a local Ghanaian dish made from pounded boiled cassava with green plantain or cocoyam/yam) by a woman was a nuisance to God. God's persistent admonitions to the woman to stop her actions fell on deaf ears. This caused him to move to the skies far away from humans.¹⁵ Catholicism also teaches that humanity was created good, in the image and likeness of God and had a friendship with him. However, when man's first parents Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they lost their friendship with God.¹⁶ Humanity lost the grace of holiness and became afraid of God. The harmony within them was lost and death finally entered the history of humanity.¹⁷ The two religions blame original sin on the disobedience of humanity to the commands of God.

Catholicism and the Akan traditional religion again conceive sin as a stain that renders the body and soul of the sinner dirty and ugly whereas the soul of the righteous is considered clean and beautiful. Sin among the Akan is regarded as *fi*, (stain) and *tan*, (ugly/filthy). A person with a bad and a good character is rendered in the Akan language as *Ne suban nyɛ fɛ* and *Ne suban yɛ fɛ* respectively.¹⁸ The stain of sin on an individual also makes the community impure, and this is expressed in the Akan language as *ɔdi efi aka abusua no*. The purification rite, *odwira* is performed during the reconciliatory process to cleanse the pollution of sin and forgiveness is sought for the penitent by calling on God, the divinities and the ancestors. This rite makes the body and soul of the sinner clean and beautiful once again.¹⁹

The Catholic tradition also perceives sin as a stain that puts out the light of God's grace from the soul of man. The soul of the sinner is also rendered spiritually ugly.²⁰ Liturgically the Church expresses the concept of sin as a stain that must be washed in the rite of asperges and in the sacraments of baptism and penance. The rite of asperges is founded in Psalm 51:2 "wash me more and more from my sins" and Psalm 51:7 "purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow". The sacrament of baptism is also celebrated to wash away both personal sins and original sin which stains the soul of the sinner and the sacrament of penance washes only personal sins.²¹

Another striking similarity between the two religions is that sin offends God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church establishes that every sin foremost offends God; sin disrupts the bond between the sinner and God.²² The Akan also believe that because God is the moral custodian of their life, every bad act of humanity offends him. God, the Akan believes abhors sins²³ and sees every action of humans and judges rightly according to the behaviour of an individual.²⁴ The Catholic church teaches that, "harmony between all humanity, living and dead, which is established on the communion of saints, the least of our acts

¹³ John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975), 33-34.

¹⁴ Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 55.

¹⁵ J. Omosade Awolalu, and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonjo Press & Book Industries (Nigeria) Limited, 1979 282.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (C. C.C.) Popular and Definitive Edition, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000), # 396.

¹⁷ C.C.C., #399, 400.

¹⁸ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998),101.

¹⁹ Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (New York: E.J. Brill, 199), 65.

²⁰ Summa, 86., <http://www.catholictheology.info/summa-theologica/summa-part2A.php?q=509>, accessed 17/05/2022.

²¹ C.C.C. # 1263.

²² C.C.C. #1440.

²³ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 153.

²⁴ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 154, 155.

done in charity rebounds to the profit of all and every sin harms this communion.”²⁵ Catholics ask for the intercession of the saints so that they will not live in a state of sin but in a state of grace. This is evident in the Hail Mary prayer and in the Confiteor.²⁶ The Akan doctrine on ancestral veneration is very akin to the Catholic teaching on the Communion of Saints. The ancestors are the spirits of the dead that led exemplary lives and live in the spiritual world. They reward and punish the good and wicked respectively.²⁷

The two religions delving into the fact that sin also affects humanity believe that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God and any sin committed against man is against God. The theology of the “Image of God” of the Catholic Church and in the Akan traditional religion values the dignity of humans. They believe that humanity must be treated with respect and dignity as they would treat God.²⁸ The Akan and Catholics perceive sin and reconciliation as also having a communal character. In Catholic theology, sin affects both the community, and the Church.²⁹ The evils of a person offend the community. Sin severs the cordial relationship between the offender and the Church. It is for this reason that reconciliation is not done only between the penitent and God but also with the community. The community at prayer during the celebration of Holy Mass is called to pray for the sinner. Jesus’ mandate that gave power to the apostles to bind and to loose sins on earth, which shall be considered bound and loosed in heaven, means the sinner is expelled from the fellowship with the community in heaven and on earth. However, when one is forgiven of the sins committed, he or she is received back into the community through the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.³⁰

The Akan clearly depict sin as affecting the life of the community, when they perceive that the sins of a person pollute the family and the society. Vices like murder, suicide and serious sexual offences are examples of sins that affect the community and the individual.³¹ The sins of an individual alienate the sinner from the communal life and jeopardize the life of the society.³² The communal dimension of sin among the Akan stems from the fact that, to them, an action is judged right or wrong when it leads to the common good or deviates from it.³³ Offenders are sometimes punished in the form of the death penalty; heavy fines and ostracization for their offenses threaten the well-being of the community.³⁴

The fact that sins are weighed by the seriousness of the offenses cannot be glossed over when comparing the two religious traditions under study. The Catholic Church and the Akan traditional religion are explicit when they evaluate sin as serious and less serious. Mortal sins in the Catholic Church are grievous sins like murder, blasphemy and slander which are all against the commandments of God. They are mortal sins because they turn the sinner away from God and lead to death.³⁵ The Akan also distinguishes between serious and less serious as sin *mmusuo* and *bɔne* respectively. They do not have Catholic terms as mortal sins and venial sins but they are implied in *bɔne* and *mmusuo* and also in minor and major taboos. *Bɔne* and minor taboos are venial sins. They are less serious offenses that do not affect the community adversely.³⁶ *Mmusuo* (major taboos) are mortal sins. They are serious offenses against the divine and the community and they make the offender ritually polluted.³⁷

²⁵ C.C.C. # 953.

²⁶ C.C.C. # 1474, 1475.

²⁷ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 155, 156.

²⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 113, C.C.C. # 357.

²⁹ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium. 11)*, (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2001), 330.

³⁰ C.C.C. # 1445.

³¹ Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool Veneration in Asante, A Catholic View* (Kumasi: Goodshepherd Publishers Ltd, 2011), 162.

³² Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

³³ Motsamai Molefe, “A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality”, *Acta Academica*, vol 1(2016):.1, 95, accessed 16/05/2022.. https://www.academia.edu/35274007/A_critique_of_Kwasi_Wiredus_humanism_and_impartiality

³⁴ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 53, 54.

³⁵ C.C.C.# 1855.

³⁶ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

³⁷ Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974) 52, 53.

The Similarities between the Akan Religious and Catholic Concepts of Reconciliation.

Conditions necessary for the forgiveness of sin are the first areas of affinity between Catholicism and the Akan religious concept of reconciliation. The two religions underscore the fact that three actions namely, contrition, confession and penance must be in place for the penitent to have sins committed to be forgiven. The Catholic Church stresses that the penitent must make a conscious effort to confess all sins committed and should not deliberately leave out some sins. This would not make a good confession and the penitent would not be forgiven the sins.³⁸ The Akan have a similar view, especially during reconciliation at the Antoa Nyamaa shrine. It is believed that if a penitent intentionally forgets to confess all sins committed, the forgiveness of sins would not be able to take place unless all sins are confessed to the letter.³⁹

The two religious traditions also agree that reconciliation for sins is not the same. Serious and lighter offenses require their corresponding reconciliatory rites. The Catholic Church has put in place an elaborate form of reconciliation for mortal sins to be remitted. Mortal sins can only be remitted through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Venial sins on the contrary are less serious transgressions that do not destroy the relationship between the sinner and God and they can be forgiven even without the absolution of a priest.⁴⁰ Reconciliation is often administered by the priests when *mmusuo* (mortal sin) is committed in the Akan society and most of the time removed by the sacrifice of an animal. Less serious sin *bɔne* can be forgiven by mere settlement between disputing parties and does not require sacrificing animals.⁴¹

Reconciliation and health are closely related in Catholicism and in the Akan culture. Sin does not only injure the soul but also causes sickness to the body. It is against this background that the Catholic Church calls the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, the sacrament of healing.⁴² The Epistle of James also calls for the confession and forgiveness of sin for the complete healing of Christians.⁴³ The Akan also share similar views with the Catholics on this issue. They believe that some sicknesses are not caused by pathogens but are punishments due to sins committed. *Duabɔ* (curse) normally causes strange sickness and the sick may be healed only after confession and forgiveness of sins.⁴⁴ The pollution of sin can physically and spiritually make the sinner fall sick, reconciliation restores the penitent to good health with proper contrition, confession and penance.⁴⁵

The convergent views on the effects of reconciliation in both religions are that: Sin is first of all an offence against God; sin destroys the friendship that existed between humanity and God. The sinner is deprived of the grace of God; reconciliation ensures that the penitent is reinstated back as a friend of God and offered the blessings and protection of God.⁴⁶ Sin banishes the sinner either physically or spiritually from communal life and also affects the well-being of the community. Reconciliation unites the penitent to the community and the penitent is reintegrated into the society. The community too is cleansed to forestall peace and harmony.⁴⁷ Sin destroys the harmony within the penitent; reconciliation brings about interior calmness and clear conscience because the sinner is reconciled with the divine, the community and self.⁴⁸

³⁸ *The Code of Canon Law*, Canon 988.

³⁹ Emmanuel Akyempong and David Owusu-Ansah, *Interview with Nana Kwame Owusu Agyeman and Nana Kwaku Tutu at Antoa*, 12/07/ 2008, 3, 4, kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/60/396/3C-18C-17-104-22_Interview%20with%20Nana%20Owusu%20Agyeman-Antoahene_May2009.pdf accessed. 16/05/2022.

⁴⁰ Summa II, 87,2.

⁴¹ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157.

⁴² C.C.C. # 1421

⁴³ James 5:16.

⁴⁴ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 68.

⁴⁵ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 68.; C.C.C. # 1421.

⁴⁶ Sarpong, *Ancestral Stool*, 145; C.C.C. # 1468.

⁴⁷ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 157; C.C.C. # 1469.

⁴⁸ C.C.C. # 146; Opoku, 163.

METHODOLOGY

An open-ended and close-ended questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The open-ended parts of the questionnaire are analyzed quantitatively. The questionnaire was administered to seek the views of some selected Catholic priests on the similarities between the Akan and the Catholic theology of sin and reconciliation. The respondents were to tick if they agreed or disagreed with statements and if possible give comments or reasons for their choice. Twenty (20) Catholic priests in the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi were also purposively selected. They all have at least a degree in religion, theology and sociology. They represent 25.2% of the one hundred and twenty-six (126) Archdiocesan priests working in Kumasi.⁴⁹

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Similarities between the Akan religious and Catholic Concepts of Sin

The priests were asked if they disagreed or agreed with this statement; “J. S. Mbiti says the African Traditional Religion has a doctrine of original sin and J. O. Awolalu believes the Akan doctrine of original sin is expressed in the story of the “*fufu* pounding woman and God.” One (1) priest representing 5% disagreed with the statement. Nineteen (19) priests representing 95% agreed with the statement made by Mbiti and Awolalu. In a follow-up question, the priests were asked whether the Akan concept of original sin is comparable to the Catholic/Biblical doctrine of original sin. In their response, seven (7) priests representing 35% disagreed with the statement. Thirteen (13) priests representing 65% said they agree with the statement.

“Catholicism and the Akan traditional religion conceive sin as a stain which renders the body and soul of the sinner dirty and ugly and the soul of the righteous is considered clean and beautiful” was posed to the priests to ascertain if they disagreed or agreed with the statement. Interestingly all the twenty (20) priests agreed to the statement representing 100%.

The views of the priests were solicited to know if the saints and the ancestors play major roles in sin and reconciliation in the two religions or not. The outcome was that, two (2) priests representing 10% disagreed with the statement. Eighteen (18) priests representing 90% said they agree with the statement. One of the two priests who disagreed with the statement said his choice was informed by the use of the adjective “major” roles. He suggested that it should rather be “The saints and the ancestors play some roles in sin and reconciliation in the two religions.”

The researcher posed the question, *bɔne* and *mmusuo* can be compared to the Catholic doctrine on venial and mortal sin respectively. In their reply, one (1) priest representing 5% disagreed with the statement. Nineteen (19) priests representing 95% said they agree with the statement. The twenty (20) priests were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “the two religions underscore the fact that, three actions namely contrition, confession and penance must be in place for the penitent to have sins committed to be forgiven”. All the twenty (20) priests agreed to the statement representing 100%. A follow-up question was posed whether it is believed that in the Akan traditional religion and in Catholicism when a penitent intentionally forgets to confess all sins committed, the forgiveness of sins would not be able to take place unless all sins are confessed to the letter. One (1) priest representing 5% disagreed with the statement. Nineteen (19) priests representing 95% said they agree with the statement.

The twenty (20) priests were expected to state if they disagreed or agreed with the claim that, sin and reconciliation are weighed by the seriousness of the offenses when comparing the two religious traditions under study. The results were that, two (2) priests representing 10% disagreed and Eighteen (18) priests representing 90% said they agree with the claim. The researcher wanted to inquire if the priests accept or reject the declaration that *bɔne*, sin in Akan refers to less serious sins that can be settled even between the offender and the offended and *mmusuo* on the other hand are more serious sins that affect the fabric of the society, God, the gods and the ancestors. All the twenty (20) priests again agreed with the statement, representing 100%. A priest explained that for reconciliation and forgiveness of sin to be assured in the case of *mmusuo*, the reconciliatory processes can be too weird or humiliating.

⁴⁹ Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, 2021 Year Book, (Kumasi, Kumasi Catholic Press, 2021), 119.

The priests were to affirm or deny the assertion that, sin and health are closely related in Catholicism and in the Akan culture; sin does not only injure the soul but also causes sickness to the body. The responses were that, one (1) priest representing 5% disagreed with the assertion. Nineteen (19) priests representing 95% said they agree with the assertion.

From the discussion above, there exists some striking semblances between the Akan and Catholic perceptions of sin and reconciliation based on the reviewed literature. The responses of the twenty (20) priests and the comments have clearly indicated that there are some affinities between the Akan and the Catholic concepts of sin and reconciliation with as high as 95% to 100% agreeing with the statements. The only statement that attained the lowest percentage of 65 respondents agreeing suggests that the idea of original sin in the Akan traditional religion has not gained currency and is quite comparable to the Catholic/biblical concept of original sin. The two religions agree on many issues when it comes to sin and reconciliation despite the differences in their religious, cultural and geographical backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Akan idea of original sin is very scanty and underdeveloped; it is suggested that further research could be conducted on this to have a comprehensive African/Akan doctrine of original sin. It is again recommended that the incorporation of the Akan concept of sin and reconciliation into the formation of Akan Christians and Akan pastoral agents would be a good venture. It should be stressed that this approach is not intended to introduce “paganism” into Christianity. It is rather employing St. Paul’s method in Acts 17: 16-32 where he used the culture of the Athenians to teach them about God, the creator.

CONCLUSION

This paper compared the Akan and the Catholic concepts of sin and reconciliation with the help of comparative theology. This was purposely done to dispel the erroneous impression that the Akan tribe has no or poor hamartiology. This article used the literary approach and questionnaire to elucidate on the similarities between the Akan and Catholic concepts of sin and reconciliation. Despite the cultural and territorial differences between the Akan tribe and Catholicism, they all believe in the doctrine of original sin which they also agree is mythological. They also agree that sin is a stain that must be washed and it offends the divine and humans. Both the Akan tribe and the Catholic Church again classify sin as serious and less serious. They again concur that, an elaborate and less elaborate form of reconciliation is needed for the remission of sin for serious and less serious sins respectively. Three conditions namely contrition, confession and penance are needed for the removal of the stain of sin by the Akan tribe and the Catholic Church. Another commonality between them is that, reconciliation restores the broken relationship between the sinner, God and the community. It must be affirmed, that the Akan of Ghana have a rich theology of sin and reconciliation and can be compared to the Catholic doctrine of sin and reconciliation.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Augustine Kojo Peprah and Richmond Osei Amoah are priests of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi and tutors at the Department of Social Science, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana. Their areas of research are Religious and Moral Education.