SUMMARY

This thesis investigates the reasons why the biological reality that women regularly menstruate is one of the main justifications for their exclusion from cultic functions and leadership in both the Judeo-Christian and the Akan traditions. Moreover, it investigates the possibility of finding some positive aspects of menstruation and the taboos associated with it in both traditions that can be used to develop a theology and a culture that foster female empowerment for full inclusion in church leadership.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 (Introduction) contains a general introduction of the thesis and discusses the research question. It points to the fact that Akan Christian women are dissatisfied with both historical Christianity and Akan Religio-cultural tradition that have excluded women from cultic leadership because of the association of impurity with the regular flow of menstrual blood.

In Chapter 2, we give a general introduction to the Akan traditional religion and then a brief explanation of the set of beliefs and practices that form the basis of the convictions. These beliefs will be our focus for finding solutions to overcome the negative views of menstruation in Chapter 5 of the thesis. In Akan religious culture, there is a strong belief in ancestral veneration and a belief that a common ancestress exists in every family to whom every member of the extended family is linked through the mother-child bond. (Here we are talking about blood bond since it is believed that every child receives her/his blood from the mother). Women are therefore highly valued for this connection and also for the fact that it is women that give birth to children who are a blessing from the ancestress. This is precisely where the positive aspect of menstruation can be found in the Akan religion. The position of women in Akan society is however ambivalent as a menstruating woman is believed to be “ritually impure” because menstrual blood is considered to be “impure” and “dangerous”. In the light of this, women who are highly valued for their reproductive functions are at the same time considered impure and so are left out of cultic leadership because the Akan believes that menstrual blood makes women “impure.” Akans also base their categorization of objects and beings as sacred or profane on the spirit as well as the blood essence. Blood is thought of as a spiritual force which is used as a basis of categorizing biological beings as sacred or profane and menstrual blood, according to this categorization, render women as dangerous and impure.
Chapter 3 is devoted to a reflection on Jewish and Christian ideas on “ritual purity”. The results of anthropological reflection are applied to the ideas about “purity” and “impurity” in Ancient Judaism, Talmudic Mishnah, and later Judaism as well as the New Testament. In the tradition of Israel, the words associated with holiness connote “set apart”, and the importance attached to this concept and to the practice of sanctification is basic to Israel’s belief in Yahweh as the God who has ordered the universe. The people of Israel also have an obligation to maintain their special relationship to God by keeping their covenant with him and observing all his commandments to avoid calamities from the hand of God. The divine order is central to this understanding of the world and any deformity or violation of that order or any transgression of the categories of creation violates the sacred boundaries. Ritual and “purity” are therefore essential to the ordering of life. They are by no means dispensable decorations imposed on the basics of human existence. The ground of the ordered life is in the divinely ordered cosmos, so that ritual creates one single, symbolically consistent universe. We have found that a clue to the evaluation of blood as either “pure” or “impure” lies in the place or order where it is, who touches it and how it is utilized.

Jesus’ idea of purity in the gospel of Mark differs from that of the purity laws of Judaism. Jesus is viewed as a liberal egalitarian that reforms “purity” laws for a more compassionate view that eschews any form of social and religious exclusion based on “purity” or gender. Jesus did not criticize Judaism as such but the way in which the Law was understood and applied by many of those in power. He emphasized the spirit rather than the letter, the attitude behind the action, not merely the action itself. Jesus’ new approach was liberating those who had previously felt unable to approach God in an acceptable way; the “ritually impure” like the menstruating woman. Jesus opposed the regulations which restricted or excluded people. “Purity,” “impurity” or gender did not matter. In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. This applies to all aspects of ecclesia life and activity.

In chapter 4, we analyze and summarize the results of our survey. The survey demonstrated the following:

1. Although a majority of respondents (64%) answered that menstruation has nothing to do with impurity and church leadership, a significant minority forming 36% of church
members from all the Christian denominations we included in the research still associate menstruation with impurity and so believe that women should not be included in church leadership.

2. 51% of respondents from the denominations we researched into responded that women do not handle all aspects of church leadership. This includes those churches that ordain women and those that do not. 39% said women handle all aspects of church leadership while 10% of respondents did not respond to the question.

3. At least 38% of respondents said they would not accept to receive Holy Communion from a menstruating woman if they happen to know that she was menstruating while 62% said they would accept to receive it.

4. Although menstruation is considered to make women ritually impure for cultic leadership, most church members (66%) do not appear to be too concerned about menstrual impurity as they see the perception as old fashioned and something that must be discarded. However, a significant minority of 34% still consider menstruation to render women impure and so not fit for cultic leadership.

5. Doctrines of some Christian denominations studied in this research seem to either hinder women’s inclusion or enhance women’s exclusion in church leadership. Respondents from some denominations that base their doctrines of women and church leadership in the Old Testament strictly hold on to purity laws and either do not ordain women or do not give women access to all aspects of church leadership.

6. Although women are generally depicted as their own enemies, this survey shows that 54% of the female respondents answered that they are at ease with other women in the church. Many women are very comfortable with women leading the church and that women administrators are effective and efficient. However, there was a considerable minority (24%) of women who say otherwise.

7. 65% of respondents said women prefer men’s leadership to women’s leadership while 15% said women prefer women’s leadership. Reasons such as man was created first, it was a woman (Eve) who was deceived, purity laws and Paul’s injunction in 1 Timothy 2: 12-15 etc. were cited as why people prefer male leadership even though most congregants’ affirm that female administrators are effective and hardworking. Some women, long taught by what they truly consider to be the authentic teaching of
Christianity, feel bound in their consciences to abstain from Holy Communion and Church service when they are menstruating.

8. Respondents’ opinions on menstruation and purity in some cases did not depend on gender, age range, level of educational, Christian denomination and dwelling place. This proves that the problematic linking of menstruation to “impurity” cuts across gender, age, education, Christian denomination and even dwelling place although there are variations.

We conclude in Chapter V by summarizing the research and coming out with some positive ways to view ritual purity in the Akan religious and biblical cultures. We believe that the Akan can easily identify with the fact that menstruation links a woman to the ancestors who need blood in order to communicate with the living. The menstruating woman can thus be seen as supplying sacrificial blood to the ancestors who would in turn bless her with children. This, we argue, is the reason why a young woman enters womanhood only after menarche. That is to say, a woman is able to have children only after she has been able to sacrifice menstrual blood to the ancestors. If menstrual blood is seen this way, it can no longer be seen as dirty and impure and the menstrual woman will also be seen as one fit for cultic leadership.

Again, in Akan belief, blood poured on the ground as a sacrifice for the ancestors (just as menstrual blood is poured on the ground) is the only way that ancestors are pacified on behalf of the community. The Akan therefore can be made to reason that menstruation is a monthly sacrifice that women (who are believed to be the link between the individual and a common ancestress) make on behalf of the community so that the community as a whole can receive blessings from the ancestors. Viewed this way, the state of the menstruating woman rather renders her more fit for cultic leadership than any other time of her life. The seclusion during menstruation can be viewed as a time of spiritual retreat, a time for the woman to receive “eggs” from the ancestors to be turned into babies later on. Over against this, Christianity views childbirth as a sacred event, one with theological significance, not simply biological. Therefore this research applies the concept of the woman’s mediatory role in Akan religious culture to the Christian God. Since it is women who get pregnant and give birth to children and since Christianity believes that children are from God, it is suggested that the menstruating woman be seen as shedding human blood as a sacrifice to the Christian God so that procreation can take place. Seen this way, the menstruating woman becomes a mediator in partnership with God to
procreate as she receives both the bodies and souls of new babies created in the image of God. Since this act is sacred, the state of the menstruating woman makes her more fit for church leadership than any time of her life. She can therefore handle things of God like the Holy Communion and so should be allowed to participate fully in church leadership. In order for women to move from representation to true inclusion in the church, the church must embrace pastorally and ritually the Akan puberty rites menstruation and childbirth. The church should also take on the responsibility to educate its members on the positive aspects of these experiences of Akan women and their importance to the society at large.

In biblical context, we find that Jesus reinterprets the purity laws to include the ritually unclean in the worship of Yahweh. Christians therefore are without excuse to exclude women from church leadership on the basis of ritual ‘impurity’. We stress the importance of a ‘critical consciousness’, which questions the status quo and the use of systematic and structured analysis of biblical texts and culture by all church members and Christian educators. Bible reading is not devoid of ideology which results in political, cultural and gender bias. These biases need to be unmasked in order to ensure that the hermeneutical process is liberating and not oppressive, inclusive and not exclusive.