1.1. Statement of the Problem

A systematic approach of the relation between the Akan ideas about menstruation and the exclusion of women from church leadership is still lacking. What holds true for the Akan people holds also true for the ideas of many in the history of Christianity. S. Cohen articulated this lacuna as follows: ‘The history of menstrual taboos in Judaism and Christianity remains virtually unexplored.’¹ T. Buckley and A. Gottlieb also argue that ‘For all the significance attributed to menstrual symbolism by anthropologists and others, and all the fascination with which its origins and functions have been pursued, little has been established.’² J. Frederic also postulates that even the little research on menstruation that has been conducted in the past is often inconclusive.³

The average woman will menstruate almost a quarter of her fertile life. Yet there are many religions which, to this day, hold discriminative ideas and beliefs regarding this common phenomenon. The concept of menstruation as somehow “unclean” and “impure” is found principally, in the teachings of both the Jewish faith and the Akan religious culture. According to Jewish tradition, a woman’s monthly flow of blood puts her regularly into a state of ritual defilement.⁴ When a woman was menstruating, she was seen as a physical and spiritual danger to all men. The Jewish code of law, Halakha, details strict rules governing every aspect of the daily lives of Jews, including their sexual lives. Jewish law expressly forbids literally any physical contact between males and females during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter.⁵ According to

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stipulated ritual, an Orthodox Jewish wife is responsible for immersing in the Mikvah, the ritual bath, following these two weeks. This entire period of time, from the beginning of the “bleeding days” until the end of the 7 “clean days,” when the woman immerses herself in the ritual bath, is called Niddah (“ritually unclean”) period.6

Cohen states that menstrual impurity is at the centre for the exclusion of women from the sacred in Jewish and Christian religions.7 J. Stephenson writes that ‘The concept that menstruation is somehow “unclean” and “impure” is found principally in the teachings of the Jewish faith and based solely on the premise that one must be essentially “clean” and “pure” before one can be holy.’8 According to the Hebrews, women were seen as impure because of the savage reality of the flesh: childbirth and menstruation, which forbid participation in religious rituals.9 A. Green contends that women are unavoidably associated culturally with the earthy, with immanence rather than transcendence, with maternity, and with the creation of a stable and nurturing domestic order.10

R. Owanikin in her article, ‘The Priesthood of Church Women in the Nigerian context’ – a context that fits perfectly with the Akan context – observes that women are sometimes seen as ritually unclean. The church is a holy place, as are the sacraments administered there. The duties of officiating at worship and church administration are usually the exclusive prerogative of holy people. The flow of blood during menstruation as well as during childbirth is regarded as unclean. In some churches, women who have just experienced these are usually required to undergo purification rites to ensure their fitness to worship in church. On the basis of the above, opponents of women’s ordination advance the argument that, because they are occasionally unclean, women, (when compared to men who always maintain a constant biological state), cannot be qualified to serve as priests.

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7 Cohen, ‘Menstruant and the Sacred’, 274.
In Akan society menstrual blood is regarded as impure. Until recently, menstruating women used to be segregated from the community and were forbidden to touch objects of ceremonial usage. Below I refer to the experience of some early Basel missionaries in Akanland in Ghana:

*The chief fetish cum herbal priest at Tutu, a friend of George Lutterodt and Riss, accommodated and fed us for the night and breakfast the next day, which was a Sunday. There was a slight cultural mishap. The priest host discovered that a woman, unidentified in the party, was in her ordinary menstrual period. By native custom in the pre-Christian era, menstrual women had to stay outside their house and be fed there, etc. for the duration. Our priest demanded a sheep and a bottle of brandy for atonement. The fact that the host did point this out as a customary or cultural taboo surprised us the Diaspora Africans and the three European pastors. As the pioneering Christian settlement communities brought new ideas and new ways of living, some of the antiquated ideas and customs gave way to positive change.*

Menstruating women in Akan society in Ghana are, in recent times, still forbidden to enter certain ceremonial shrines during their periods. Among the Akan menstruation is viewed negatively as messy, revolting and polluted – something to be avoided. As a result of this, menstruation, a recurrent event in human life, can totally not be mentioned among Akan speaking people in conversations. Menstrual huts and other taboos were common among Akan societies in the past. Oduyoye observes that among the Akan,

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food and drink for the spirit world must be prepared by persons who are free from any flow of blood, which is sacred. Blood in Akan society has a dual character. It is holy but it is also inauspicious when found where it should not be. As a result, women’s participation in this ritual, as in others, is often limited. In addition, women in Akan culture are prohibited from sitting in the male section of the royal house during their menses. This is considered a kind of antipollution measure and is intended to avoid the ritual contamination of that which is holy. In many Akan religions where women are priestesses, such women priestesses, who are menstruating, are not allowed to minister to their gods. Women who are not priestesses are also not allowed, during their periods, to enter a shrine for consultation. R. Edet has also said that, in connection with puberty and birth, women, during menstruation and birth, carry a contagion and require ceremonial cleansing. Because of this Akan belief, women are usually excluded from cultic leadership.

It becomes apparent from the above that the ancient purification rites, the restriction of women from the sanctuary, and the present opposition to the ordination of women all derive, in some degree, from this myth of separating that which is holy from that which is unholy. The Church fathers also aggravated the fears of women’s ritual uncleanness. Church leaders were anxious that such uncleanness might defile the holiness of the church building, the sanctuary and, mainly, the altar. Theologians considered that an “unclean creature” such as a woman could not be entrusted with the care of God’s sacred realities. Consequently, prohibitions based on the presumed “ritual uncleanness” of women have remained in official Church Law for the last 700 years. M. Sandra observes that the root of the exclusion of women from the realm of sacred things and actions in ritual taboos related to menstruation and childbearing is fairly generally

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recognized today. The practice of considering women ritually “unclean” during the time of their menstruation therefore has a long history in the church, though there seems to be some variety of practice as to what this entails. Some would say that women during this time may enter the church temple but not receive Holy Communion; some would say menstruating women may not enter the temple at all. According to Owanikin, doctrinal and structural positions on the issue of women’s ordination differ so much so that there is no uniform position and practice with regard to the priesthood of women that represent the view of the church in general. All of these views presuppose that menstruation makes a woman ritually unclean while it lasts.

Especially in the last two decades, Akan Christian women have felt the need for a critical theological analysis of religion and culture through women’s experiences and perspectives. Akan Christian women seem dissatisfied with both historical Christianity and Akan religious culture which associate the phenomenon of menstruation with concepts of impurity, taboos and rituals which have been used to exclude women from full participation in church leadership.

Churches in Ghana are of different denominations. There are the mission churches (which are usually referred to as the mainline churches) dating back centuries and imported into Ghana from overseas. These include the Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, among many others. With the exception of the Methodist, the Presbyterian and, very recently, (June 2010) the Anglican Church, the other denominations do not have women priests. Although the Presbyterian Church in Ghana, for example, accepted the entry of women into the ministry in 1979, it had taken the church more than a 100 years after its establishment in the then Gold Coast to ordain

26 N. T. Clerk, A short centenary Sketch: The Settlement of West Indian Immigrants on the Gold Coast under the auspices of the erstwhile Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1843-1943, Basel: Basel
women. It is also worthy of note that for the first 15 years after accepting women into the ministry, female pastors were usually given chaplaincy work in schools, prisons and hospitals; or they were assigned roles as teacher pastors, assistant pastors and in fraternal work. The situation in the Methodist Church is not different from that of the Presbyterian Church. Some Akans believe that women pastors are kept from serving in the congregations mainly because of the “impurity” associated with menstrual blood. A lot of Akans are of the view that the blood that is issued during a woman’s menstrual period renders her unholy and they, therefore, do not see it fit for a woman to administer baptism and the Eucharist to them. F. Larbi wrote in the *Christian Messenger* that the ordination of women as ministers is unjustified as their menstrual periods make them unholy. Again, in a paper presented at the 20th Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, Cape Coast, it was said that women’s psychological and anatomical structure put them through various cycles of body and emotional changes and feelings (e.g. periodic blood flow, pre- and post-natal changes due to conception and delivery, thus making them unholy). As a result of this, women are not deemed fit to be ordained as priests.

There are also the Classical Pentecostal denominations in Ghana and subsequently in the Akan society. These churches were originally set up under the auspices of foreign Pentecostal missions but now operate under indigenous leadership. These include the Assemblies of God Church, the Apostolic Church, The Christ Apostolic Church and the Church of Pentecost. A large number of these have come under the umbrella of the Ghana Pentecostal Council (GPC) which, in 1993, had 66 member Churches. The Assemblies of God Church is the only one among these churches that has women priests. In fact, in most of these Churches, men and women do not even sit or dance together. Some Akans believe that this is connected with menstrual “impurity.” Despite the lack of

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27 Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) Minutes of the 52nd Synod, 1981, 36
29 *Christian Messenger*, 4/5 (1976) 5. The *Christian Messenger* is a monthly publication by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.
30 Methodist Church Annual Congregation Session Agenda, Accra, 1981.
firm statistics, a cursory observation reveals that, in most of these churches, women form a majority of the membership and in attendance at services and other programs. More women than men give testimonies, lead choruses, are members of the choirs, and are subject to healing or deliverance sessions. Although women predominate over men in all the churches in Akan society in Ghana, the leadership of these churches is dominated by men. Paradoxically, the Pentecostal emphasis on spiritual equality opens new avenues for self-expression, and for increased interaction for women in the churches. David Roebuck asserts that the baptism of the Holy Spirit qualified women to preach and prophesy.\(^{33}\) Pentecostal understanding of glossolalia led to their understanding of the qualifications of women ministers.\(^{34}\) Glossolalia is perceived to be a supernatural gift, and the actions of one who had been baptized in the Spirit were considered the actions of God rather than the actions of a human speaker. Because a woman minister preached under the control of the Holy Spirit, early Pentecostals were able to ignore the traditional qualifications for ministry. They saw authority vested in the manifestation of the Spirit, rather than in the human speaker.\(^{35}\) In spite of the above, menstrual taboos still keep women from leadership positions in the Pentecostal Churches.\(^{36}\)

There are also the African indigenous churches instituted by African prophets, initially under the inspiration of the evangelistic efforts of the Liberian Kru prophet, William Wade Harris, around 1914.\(^{37}\) In Ghana, these churches have come under the epithet *Sunsum Sore*, “spiritual churches.” In general, these Churches are Pentecostal in nature. Typical of this category are the Aladura (Praying Churches), the Apostle Revelation Society, the Deeper Life Church, Apostle Continuation Church, Musama Disco Christo Church, and many more. These churches are often founded by women and have numerous leading prophetesses. As a result, women are most visible in their structure of


authority. This notwithstanding, traditional menstrual taboos still exclude women, including women founders of the Churches, from sacramental roles.38

The Charismatic ministries are the newest and the fastest growing members of the Pentecostal family.39 Among these are the Christian Action Faith Ministries, the International Central Gospel Church, Word Miracle church, Victory Bible Church, International Bible Church, Solid Rock Chapel International and many more. A few of these churches are founded by women. An example is the Solid Rock Chapel International, the first Charismatic church in Ghana founded by a woman, Rev. Christie Doe Tetteh.40 Apart from those churches founded by women that ordain women, like the Solid Rock Chapel International,41 most charismatic churches in Ghana are patriarchal and do not generally ordain women with the exception of the wives of founders of the church. Women however, are given other leadership roles to play.

The complex concept that menstruation is somehow “unclean” and “impure” and so has been associated with rituals and taboos make a powerful statement to women about their self-worth and self-esteem. This has affected women in all the various denominations in Ghana. Since the uncleanness and impurity associated with menstruation is part of our social engineering and socialization, some women in the mainline churches, for example, fail to read the Bible in church or receive the Holy Communion when they are in their menses while some do not attend church for months after childbirth. Rev. Doe-Tetteh, the first woman to found a Charismatic church in Ghana, has said that she refuses to preach in her own church whenever she is menstruating.42 Owanikin mentions that there are some lay leaders who support and affirm the pastoral leadership of women. Others are worried and confused.43

39 G. ter Haar. ‘Standing up for Jesus’, 23.
42 In private conversation, Brigid Sackey communicated to the researcher on April 14, 2006 at her office in University of Ghana Legon, that in an interview with Rev. Christian Doe-Tetteh, Rev. Doe Tetteh had said she refuses to preach in a Church that was founded by her whenever she is menstruating.
In order to increase and acknowledge women’s role in the church, the status and role of women as a result of menstruation have been more and more recognized in Akan churches, and many changes have been achieved. There has been greater participation of women in the church in their capacity as lay people and as pastors in some denominations. Despite these strides, however, the church is still structured patriarchally. Though the non-ordination of women is not a problem common to all the churches, but is one experienced by only some, women priests in Akan churches are usually not allowed to take charge of the sacraments as men do. Up till now, some churches, like the Apostle Revelation Society, insist that women should not preach, or deliver the Eucharist during menstruation because they are considered “ritually impure”. In some churches, particularly the African instituted churches, women who have just experienced menstruation and childbirth are usually required to undergo purification rites to ensure their fitness to worship in church.

The question is why menstruation — the natural flow of blood — is associated with ritual impurity and taboos and whether there are positive aspects both in the Jewish, Christian and Akan tradition that could serve as a basis for the re-interpretation of the relation between menstrual blood and ritual impurity? The purpose of this research, therefore, is:

- To explore why menstruation, the natural flow of blood associated with procreation – something that is highly valued in the Akan society – is also an important reason for women’s exclusion from some major aspects of church leadership.

- To analyze the Jewish and Christian interpretation of impurity and purity.

- To study the attitude of contemporary Akan Christians to female church leadership vis-à-vis menstrual impurity.

- To articulate conclusions and suggestions that can improve the position of women in the church.

To a large extent, this research is original, since there seems to be no work done in this area of menstruation and impurity. To acknowledge research conducted on a related, yet
different, area, we recognise work done on the menstruant in Jewish religious tradition.\textsuperscript{44} From such a study, Sackey argues, that the niddah laws should be seen not as inferior but as an elevation of women, without which the purity of the covenant with God cannot be achieved. We are also aware of H. J. Ofosuhene’s dissertation on ‘The Kwahu Traditional Concept of the Sacred and the Profane.’\textsuperscript{45} In his work, he points out that blood is used in assessing and categorizing beings as sacred or non-sacred, profane or non-profane. He states, however, that blood, which flows out of the body or is accumulated in it, represents pollution or contamination. Thus, by virtue of the natural flow of blood, women are considered to be a source of defilement or a source of “danger.”

### 1.2 Objectives

Our research objectives are as follows:

1. To contemplate on the religious culture of the Akan in order to consider their world view and practices and taboos associated with menstruation in this culture (Chapter 2). We deal here with the first of the above mentioned (sub) questions.

2. To review the concept of impurity and purity in Ancient Judaism and in the New Testament and to compare these two concepts. The result of this review and comparison will be related to the findings in the Akan tradition. Here we deal with the second research sub question.

3. To analyse the findings from the data collected from interviews and questionnaires. This relates to the third research question.

4. To integrate the findings of the four chapters into final conclusions which give a new input to the discussion on the position of women in the church.


\textsuperscript{45} H. J. Ofosuhene, \textit{The Kwahu Traditional Concept of the Sacred and the Profane}, A dissertation submitted to the department or the study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon in partial fulfillment the Master of Philosophy Degree, March 1993, 2.
1.3 Scope

We have limited our research to the Akan society so as to avoid the danger of overgeneralization. From a more general perspective, Ghana appears so similar in terms of culture and religion that we can discover certain ‘Africanness’ in terms of religious ideas and culture. Our second reason for choosing the Akan is that they represent a homogeneous, ethnic West African group. Language, social institutions and religion link the Akan together in many ways. They can be found in three West African countries, namely Ghana, the Cote d’Ivoire and Togo. The Akan therefore constitute a sizeable presence in the West African coast. In Ghana for example, the Akan form about half the entire population. Furthermore, cultural anthropologists, historians, sociologists and others have written much on their religio-cultural traditions. This means that one does not lack the means or information to deal scientifically with the Akan, since, from such writings, we can easily discern the religious ideas, practices and assumptions the Akan hold about menstrual impurity, taboos and rituals. Thus, limiting our research to the Akan is hardly a limitation regarding the ability of this research to respond to the questions of continuity and its associated problems found throughout Africa.

1.4 Structure

This study has been divided into five chapters.

Chapter one is an introductory chapter that outlines the research question, the purpose, aims and objectives, and significance of the study, the method used for the study, and the general organisation of the study.

Following from the research question which examines why impurity is attached to the natural process of a woman’s physiology by both Akan religious culture and Christianity, chapter two delves into the Akan religious cultural setting and contemplates the Akan world view, practices and taboos associated with menstruation. This chapter seeks to give a general background to the context within which the research is conducted. For this purpose, reference is made to Kofi Asare Opoku,46 Mercy Amba Oduyoye,47 John

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Pobee 48 Emmanuel Asante, 49 Kwesi Dickson, 50 Peter Sarpong 51 and H. J. Ofosuhene as the principal writers on Akan religious culture.

Chapter three focuses upon anthropological reflections on biblical and Jewish approaches to purity and impurity, and on Jesus’ idea of purity as deduced from the gospels. Subsequent to this examination is a comparison of the two different ideas of purity. Since Purity and Danger: An analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo by Mary Douglas, 52 ‘The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism’ by Jacob Neusner, 53 and ‘The Idea of Purity in Mark’s Gospel’ by Jerome Neyrey 54 deal with anthropological studies on purity and impurity, they are used as the concentrated bulk in this third chapter and supplemented by ‘The Position of the Menstruant in Jewish Religious Traditions: Women’s Perspective’ by Brigit Sackey. The concepts of purity and impurity in the early and medieval and contemporary Christian Church are not made object of research because of the lack of information about the anthropological background of the opinions of most of the theologians involved. Roughly speaking it can be stated that often central aspects of the Jewish rules were accepted without question. From the Reformation time onwards the subordinated position of women in the church is more frequently justified with references to Paul’s admonitions than to the physical condition of women.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the data collected from questionnaires administered. Akan church members were asked to express their opinions about menstruation and church leadership. The intention was to seek the opinions of such members about biblical texts regarding rituals for emission of body fluids in Leviticus, women in church leadership, how women feel about other women in the church, women  

administrators, preference for male or female leadership, the menstruating woman and the Holy Communion and baptism.

Chapter Five puts forward final conclusions relating to the findings of the research. The researcher suggests that there are particular insights and presuppositions from the Bible, anthropological studies and Akan religious culture that the Church in Akan society can use to liberate women theologically and culturally.

1.5 Significance

Not much attention has been given to the topic of “purity” and “impurity” and women in church leadership. Most of the materials concerning purity and impurity exist in the practice of an acknowledgement of the problem but do not carry out a critical, interpretive analysis of the problem to find a lasting solution to the low position of women in the church and society. There is therefore the need, for it to be addressed in order to have a sustained study from the Akan perspective. The findings made can be used in other fields of theology and culture to augment and supplement studies regarding women’s liberation and other forms of oppression related to anatomical, physiological, psychological and natural bases for exclusion.

1.6 Method of Data Collection

In studying and evaluating a theological issue like purity and impurity and its effects on women in church leadership, a multidimensional approach is advantageous. Consequently, disciplines including history of religions, anthropology, ethnography and systematic theology have been employed to enrich the study.

Both primary and secondary sources are available for the study. Primary sources are especially used in chapter four of this study. The bulk of the data for the study comes from secondary sources. Literature study is here the most adequate research tool.
1.6.1 Primary Sources

The primary sources are used to collect data from members of the various denominations chosen for this study to address the research questions in order to obtain people’s opinions on the research questions. These have been analyzed in chapter four. The objective is to lay bare and utilize the available facts in the interest of critical analysis. In the fact-finding exercise, the researcher and her assistants used additionally the method of participatory observation to study church members’ attitudes in the various churches.

1.6.2 Secondary Sources

Published works on menstruation and ideas associated with its “purity” and “impurity” are regrettably scanty in Ghana. Of the few that could be identified, a selection was made of those that were deemed relevant and specific to this study. These include Daniel Torto’s *Ordination of Women: A New Agenda* which focuses on the enormity of women’s roles and work as recorded in the Old Testament and in the New Testament in relation to those in the contemporary world. Also of relevance is Joseph Edusa-Eyison’s article on ‘Women in Church Leadership: focus on the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Ghana’ which deals with the transference of the traditional roles of women into the Church, thus causing them to be discriminated against for Church leadership. In addition to these is Bridget Sackey’s article entitled, ‘The Position of the Menstruant in Jewish Religious Tradition: Women’s Perspective.’ In this article, Sackey argues that the niddah laws should be seen not as inferior but as an elevation of women, without which the purity of the covenant with God cannot be achieved. H. J. Ofosuhene’s dissertation on ‘The Kwahu Traditional Concept of the Sacred and the Profane’ also touches on menstrual impurity. He points out that blood is used in assessing and categorizing beings as sacred or non-sacred, profane or non-profane. He, however, states that blood which flows out of the body or is accumulated in it represents pollution or contamination. Thus by virtue of the natural flow of blood, women are considered to be a source of defilement or a source of danger.
1.6.3 General Literature

General literature related to the Akan society, Akan religious culture, women’s issues, menstruation, taboos, rituals, purity and impurity and the Bible have been used in this study. The internet has also been used as a source for general information regarding the area of study.