A Religio-philosophical Excursion into A.N. Akwanya's Poetry

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Abstract

There is no doubt that religion and literature share close affinity. Long before now, the metaphysical poets – John Donne, Andrew Marvel, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins of the Victorian era have drawn our attention to the inextricable link between religion and literature in their writings. The focus of this paper is on the nexus between religion and literature and how they interact within the poetry of a Nigerian scholar-priest-poet A.N. Akwanya. In our reading of his collection of poems entitled *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems,* it is discovered that the religious background of Akwanya as a Catholic priest as well as his literary background as a scholar of literary studies plays a crucial role in his poetic character and development. He crafts and re-clothes his religious ideas and understanding with fresh and scintillating but mesmerising imagery ranging from the celebration of the birth of Jesus to the celebration of His resurrection from the dead to Mother Teresa of Calcutta – a famous Catholic nun – who championed everything Christ meant and stood for as the saviour of human-kind. In dwelling on this subject in his poetry, Akwanya commands our attention with religious-cum-literary exegesis to attest to the fact that religion and poetry are intrinsically linked. Thus giving vent to the significance of religion and literature in our quest to improve our lives in creation. The essay concludes that Akwanya is a significantly profound Nigerian religious poet that deserves to be studied.

Theology and literature are two intellectual fields that intertwine and share intrinsic affinity. Although each field possesses its own vast possibilities, yet the inextricable link that connects both fields rests with the fact that there is an acknowledgement of the place of humanity and the use of the imagination in the quest of humans to improve their lives in creation. This is what Susan Felch subtly puts forward when she asserts that, "[r]eligion and literature are not identical spheres of human endeavour; they may not always be allies… but they join hands to engage [us] in encounters with that which can be said, but not plumbed or exhausted, and with that which lies beyond expression" (2016, p. 16). In this regard, the critic acknowledges the amplitude of wisdom and knowledge rooted within the intellectual fields. Religion is a subject that is conveyed through the agency of language and literature and this thought reminds one of the religious ideas and thoughts that are conveyed through the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, and so on. It thus means that our quest for the reformation of mind through religious devotion is first generated from literary and literacy perspectives. This understanding reminds us of the Renaissance era in Europe that triggered the reformation movement in Christendom through massive production of religions materials with the aid of the printing press. The exposure of humans to the printed materials increased their literacy and literary levels in religion, education and politics that engendered the reformation of the Roman Catholic Church with Martin Luther spearheading the revolutionary onslaught. Of course, Martin Luther has universally gone down in

theological and secular history as the revolutionary creator, founder and father of Protestant Christianity that dominates Christendom today.

Fundamentally, this background information is quite instructive to the idea of religion and literature as well as religion in literature as demonstrated by the metaphysical poets such as John Donne, Andrew Marvel, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw as well as the Victorian Gerard Manley Hopkins – who to a very large extent are members of the clergy of the Church of England. These men, some of whose poetry are alluded to in this essay, laced their poetry with biblical allusions and with what Samuel Johnson described as "discordia concors" (1858). In a recent essay entitled "The Cosmos in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Niyi Osundare", Tony E. Afejuku dwells pertinently on this concept in what he calls "harmonious discord"(2020, p. 34). This perspective is not an essential focus here, but it helps to narrow this critical discourse to Christianity and Literature or Christianity in Literature because just like some of the metaphysical poets, Akwanya is also a clergyman who takes delight in using the exegesis of his Christian background to fashion his poetic thoughts and ideologies. From poem to poem, it is observed that Akwanya uses imagery that is consistent with his Christian background and biblical knowledge to emphasise as well as awaken and re-awaken the curiosity of his readers to the significance of religion (Christianity) and literature, the idea of evangelisation of the gospel of Christ and the inherent value derivable from our commitment and recognition of the Christ-life.

Critics have made critical comments on the poetry of Akwanya. Tony Afejuku and Edafe Mukoro see the poetry of Akwanya as an "autobiographical recreation [of] his phenomenological being-ness…" (2022, pp. 167-182). Abba Abba elucidates "human suffering and tragic contradiction in Akwanya'a *Pilgrim Foot* (2020, pp. 1-17). In another place, the critic examines "postcolonial ambivalence" in Akwanya's poetry (2022, pp. 153-166). Besides, Andrew Bula considers the poetry of Akwanya from the formalist perspective" (2018, pp.476-480). On their part, Ibrahim Bello-Kano and Ralia M. Abdulahi fix their critical lenses on "deconstructive-spectral conjuring" in Akwanya's poetry (2022, pp. 137-152), while Florence Orabueze explores "the echoes of genocide and other mass atrocities in Akwanya's poetry" (2022, pp. 183-202). What is clear from these critical comments is that none of the critics has considered Akwanya as a religious poet. It is, therefore, the intent of this essay to examine religion in the poetry of Akwanya. This is to give vent to the idea of the fall and redemption of man.

In the poem entitled "Christmas," Akwanya uses his knowledge of Christianity about the celebration of the birth of Christ to espouse a religio-philosophical exploration of the idea in the *beginning* of rebirth in creation. The poem's second stanza is instructive in this sense:

> To think of such a time
> of crying in a rough manger
> set in straw and manure
> there's a man
> who couldn't start too soon
> to toughen up
> and test his body's familiarity

with hardship
ahead of all that monstrous fate would surely fling his way!
(*Visitant on Tiptoe 48)*

The idea of "Christmas" in Christianity relates to the celebration of the birth of Jesus – which is acknowledged world-wide every December 25. The significance of the birth strengthens the faith of Christians concerning the in-carnation, that is, the idea of God taking residence in human flesh (divinity in humanity) in his quest to save and redeem human-kind from the fall at the Garden of Eden. This thought is foretold by the Prophet Isaiah in (Isaiah 7:14) and re-emphasised by Apostle Matthew in Matthew 1:23: "Behold, a Virgin shall be with a child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." This event signals the beginning of the redemptive process and it is this idea of "the beginning" that is skilfully related in the extract above. In this poem, Akwanya stimulates our minds "to think of such a time" as instructive to our understanding of the "fate" of humanity. The speaker's plain use of language in the second line of the quoted extract appeals to our appreciation of biblical allusion. The instance draws attention to Luke 2:11-12: "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

As the poem continues in the fourth line, the status of the redeemer is revealed as that of "a man" that is *subject to like passions as we are* – and whom God will "test his body's familiarity/with hardship" as the sacrificial lamp for the redemption of the world. From all indications, the birth of Jesus at "Christmas" is the beginning of Peter's revelation concerning "the suffering of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1 Peter 1:11). With the speaker's use of the monstrous image in the last line of the extract, one is not ignorant of the gigantic responsibility that is "ahead" of the birth. To put it in simple terms, the celebration of "Christmas" is by implication, the acknowledgment of the "monstrous fate" that challenges the "way" of salvation. This is a naked observation as well as a naked vision of the fate of man in creation. It imbues in us the poetic as well as the religious philosophies of a man, a writer, a creator, with profound interest in human emotions in less abstract forms.

In another part of the collection, Akwanya takes us from the time of the birth of Jesus (Christmas) to the time of His sufferings, death and His eventual resurrection from the dead (Easter). The poem entitled "Easter 1 (of God and His Works)" shows us in graphic terms the sacrificial role of the Christ as instituted by God himself. The lines are lucid:

of God and his works even those with faith
may be as unsure as those who have none
and all are excused till they are favoured
with knowledge of terror
the day the key to the storehouse is lost
where all the defensive weapons
cleaned, oiled, and checked
are carefully stacked
and the one trusted friend

who would surely have forsaken all and come
out of the country (*Visitant on Tiptoe 52*)

The opening lines of the poem let us recognise that the "works" of salvation through the sufferings of Christ are fashioned by "God." He is the designer of the "works" and this alludes to the fact that He is "the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). His Grace covers "even those with faith" as well as "those who have none." In the context of the poem, Akwanya's depiction of Christ's passion in the performance of His sacrificial role for the salvation of the world is rooted in the gracious disposition of God through the extension of His grace to face the horrifying "knowledge of terror." The metaphor in this case is rich as it stretches the mind to capture the "terror" that Christ endured in the course of His sacrificial performance. It reminds us of the scene at Gethsemane as Christ agonises and broods over the "knowledge of terror" that awaits Him just hours before Judas Iscariot consummated His betrayal. His prayers in Luke 22:42 capture the terrifying scene vividly: "… Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." As a result, we see in verses 43-44 of the same chapter that "… there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." The interesting thing here is that the agonising moment of "terror "is confronted with grace and the knowledge that the superiority of God's will is beneficial for the salvation of human-kind.

In consecutive lines of the poem, Akwanya further shows us the spiritual significance of Easter Friday – that is, the "day" of Christ's death on the cross at Golgotha. The pains, agony and sadness of that "day" are related with poise and shrewd handling of metaphor. In the language of the speaker, humanity suffered a loss on that eventful "day" as "the key to the storehouse went missing." The linguistic choice is quite instructive as our understanding of the symbolic value of the word "key" in biblical terms is critical. In the Bible, the word "key" suggests "authority and access" (Munroe, 2006, p.164), and in the context of the poem, the day of Christ's death espouses "the day the key to the storehouse is lost." The critical insight surrounding this understanding invariably explains why it was critical for Christ to resurrect from the dead. For the resurrection (on Easter Sunday) brought restoration of that which was "lost." No wonder He gave the victory cry over death in Revelation 1:18: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive forevermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death." And by virtue of the restored power, authority and access, He could boldly proclaim in Matthew 16: 19 thus: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This sense of victory, power, authority and access is closely linked with our identification with "Easter" and emphasises the finished works of Christ as Akwanya acknowledges in the poem's closing stanza:

You will have learned
just like Jesus
from what you have suffered,

your unhealable bruises
and disorders after-trauma,
that he is indeed with you always
according to his promise (*Visitant on Tiptoe 53)*

The sacrifice is consummated and the fellowship between humanity and divinity is restored. From the diction of Akwanya, there is evidence that humanity has identified with the sacrifice of "Jesus." They have become partakers of His sufferings, "unhealable bruises," "disorder" and "after-trauma." This poetic analogy casts our minds to the substitutionary teaching of Paul in Galatians 2: 20: "I have been crucified with Christ," which is in reality a product of the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ in Isaiah 53: 5: "… He [Christ] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him…" and in verse 12 of the same chapter he says, "and He was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." These sacrificial realities show the boundless love of Christ in demonstrating the restoration of fellowship between divinity and humanity so that we stand free from condemnation in the eyes of our Creator. Indeed, the identification of humanity with the finished works of Christ guarantees our sense of righteousness and confidence as partakers of His "promise" that Christ enunciated after His triumphant resurrection. "…lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28: 20).

Similarly, in "Easter II," which is sequel to the poem "Easter I," the beauty of Christ's triumph over death and the grave is also stressed. This time Akwanya paints a graphic picture of the miscarriage of justice by the Jews, to ensure that Jesus was crucified by the Roman authorities. The poem is cast in a narrative manner:

… They had the law
and stood firmly on it before Pilate
himself a custodian of justice and right order:
'we have a law', they told him,
'and according to that law…' (Jn 19:7)
so God himself cleared him (Ac 3: 15),
with Peter and his other friends as witnesses
in a way only he can clear orchestrated infamy.
(*Visitant on Tiptoe* 55)

This is the demonstration of the Excellence of God and His works, His sovereignty over the affairs of humans in His quest for the salvation of the world. One could say that this is a clever manipulation of humans – Jews and Romans – by God Himself. But this perspective can only be offered by, or can only come from anti-Christians (which we are not) whose every word is an indictment of Christianity. In the poem, the reference to "the law" in relation to the Jews has to do with blasphemy – that Jesus calls Himself God – and the penalty for such a legal breach is death by Crucifixion. But in the eyes of the Roman authorities led by Pontius Pilate, "no fault" was found "in him" (John 19: 6). Yet the Jews insisted that He must be crucified because "whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar" (John

19:12). The implication of the Jews' assertion means that Pilate who is "a custodian of justice and right order," appointed as Governor by Emperor Caesar over Israel, must execute justice to protect the Empire. It could be seen, therefore, that the situation assumes a complex dimension that is beyond the wisdom of men to clear Jesus of the accusations. Pontius Pilate therefore "took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying "I am innocent of the blood of this just person… then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:24-25).

It is important to state at this point that the cry of the people that "His blood be on us, and on our children " is quite significant to the sacrificial role of Christ for the sins of humans because "without shedding of blood [there] is no remission [of sins]" (Hebrews 9: 22). One is therefore not surprised that God Himself demonstrated His sacred sovereignty in the affairs of man and "cleared him" of all accusations by raising Christ from the dead, "in a way only he can clear orchestrated infamy." This is the crux of Easter as testified to by Peter and his other friends as witnesses (Acts 3: 13-15). Amazingly, the religious insight of Akwanya in his poems on Easter aligns with that of the metaphysical poet George Herbert entitled "Easter Wings" (1961:121). The sense of loss redeemed through the sacred path of our identification, re-echoes the sound of victory, freedom, power, authority as well as salvation which are the fruits of the resurrected life. In the instance of Herbert's thought, he carefully reconnects the loss to the fall of man at the garden of Eden – "Decaying more and more,/Till he became /Most poore[.]" In contrast to the loss, however, Herbert uses the visual form of poetic articulation as well as the bird's to draw our attention to the flapping wings of bird spread out wide in the sky as suggestive of the victory and freedom that salvation in the resurrected life of Christ brings to human-kind. The atmosphere becomes one of freedom laced with "harmoniously" choreographed "victories" that "further the flight" of our new life in Christ.

In yet another poem entitled "Mother Teresa of Calcutta" the religious sentiments of Akwanya is again recognised. The poem is a eulogy that centres on the famous Catholic nun – Mother Teresa of Calcutta – whose demonstration of love, sacrifice, service and empathy for humanity aligns with everything Christ meant and stood for as the Saviour of human-kind. The opening stanza of the poem is vivid:

> Was Mother Teresa created
> for a cause; for this cause given three
> or four times
> the normal size of soul,
> eyes that light up only for ragged slum-dwellers
> and the helpless sick
> and the will
> kept back
> so that in the face of the assignment
> no decision need be made
> no thought exercise? (*Visitant on Tiptoe* 10)

This poem is dotted by rhetorical questions deliberately to emphasise the idea of love, sacrifice, service and candour to humanity which forms the main focus of the Saint. From the linguistic choices in the opening couplet, there is evidence that Akwanya admires the relentless focus of Saint Teresa as one that is "created/ for a cause," the cause of reputable Christian behaviour that could and should guide our fellow humans, and our fellow creatures towards the right respect for the natural world without discrepancies. Moreover, it is further stressed in the poem that the religious zeal in the "soul" of the Nobel Laureate for Peace has attained an unprecedented level of energy that is "three or four times" positively charged. This insight is quite striking, as it gives us a vivid picture of her determined commitment to service for the poor and humanity in general. This is further illuminated in the extract where the speaker's use of the electromagnetic imagery in the fifth line makes us see the luminance of her focus on the "ragged slum-dwellers /and the helpless sick." This goes to confirm that "the will" of the Saint is aglow and afire "in the face of the assignment" she was created to fulfil in life. In the closing lines of the quoted extract, we see that the enthusiasm in fulfilling "the assignment" is never dampened as every "decision" and "thought" is channelled towards the "cause."

At this juncture, it is important to stress that the fulfilment of "a cause" epitomises the lifestyle of Jesus Christ – who in the fulfilment of His "assignment" as the sacrificial "lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev.13:8), makes a profound comment in his dialogue with Pontius Pilate, when the latter asks him a probing question concerning His assignment and the fulfilment of it, Jesus boldly proclaims "… to this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice (John 18:36). And in another place, he corroborated this truth concerning His "assignment" thus: "for this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1John 3:8). These instances clearly show that Jesus is the inspiration of the fulfilment of an "assignment" of which Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a product. One could see that that "will" of Teresa's inspiration is intrinsically tied to the inspiration of Christ's demonstration of sacrifice and service for humanity. It should be noted that Mother Teresa is/was a female, meaning that in the eyes of God there is no discrimination between male and female and vice versa in creation. God ceded some of the work of creation to Teresa, a woman, in order for us to pay more than little attention to His ways. God wanted to raise us from our "fallen" state to that of sufficiency in wholeness, harmony and understanding. Through the work of Mother Teresa, Akwanya wants us to see and know that God disapproves of anti-feminists and anti-feminism in our world. God created both man and woman and none of the two is more or less important than the other. None in any sense is independent of the other, man or woman is not less than the manifestation of God's hidden being. Akwanya's poetry makes this manifest – even if by inference. In reading "Mother Teresa of Calcutta," one gets the impression that modern Christianity should not gloomily or solemnly fold its hands "why so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed," to borrow Wendell Berry's words (2002, p. 309).

It cannot be gain-said that it will be delusional for the world of Christianity not to pay heed to the purely human and extra-human as well as to the spiritual and extra-spiritual life that Akwanya's poetry focuses on. Long ago, Gerard Manley

Hopkins enjoined us to see what he himself depicted in his poem "God's Grandeur" as "The world [that] is charged with the grandeur of God"/"The dearest freshness deep down things"(1963, p. 27). Akwanya inevitably allows our minds to see this in his religious poems even though we are seemingly blind to them out of human weakness, postulations or arrogance or hubris. Akwanya's poems "Vision and Mission" captures this perspective - although from the angle of colonial/post-colonial Christian missionaries who became, unlike Mother Teresa, religious and economic exploiters of the unnamed people of Enugu, in Nigeria, whose habitat, rich in natural mineral, has been transformed into consumptive environment that has perverted the people's age-old dream of undisturbed or uncaged human lives under the Almighty's protection. A knowledge based economy has altered the lives of the people negatively. Christianity should not be and ought not be compatible with an exploitative industrialisation and economy of murderous iniquities. This is a subject that Akwanya's poem "The Prolific World and Gold digging" (2012, p.28) records and condemns in the demeaning activities of iniquitously inspired Christian "revolutionaries,"/great souled individuals /who gave their lives…/in the name of the Father/and the Son/and of the Holy Ghost." The poem is clearly a mockery of modern day Pentecostal evangelising "revolutionary ministers of God." Its gentle irony and humour cannot escape the reader's lens of interpretation.

It is therefore not for nothing that the idea of love, service, sacrifice and inspiration continues to dominate the language of Akwanya as he eulogises Mother Teresa in the successive stanza and other pertinent poems:

> Was it a joy always
> to give
> or was there a cost to count
> and a pang to be mastered
> just to go on,
> were there fear's poison fangs
> guarding the doorway
> on evil days
> to be dared only with eyes tightly shut?
> (*Visitant on Tiptoe* 10)

One could sense in the above lines that Akwanya is thrilled by the sources of the inspiration behind Teresa's demonstration of commitment towards service for human-kind. The mastery of "joy" and "pang" in giving selflessly is acknowledged as the speaker emphasises the uniqueness of the saintly amazon "to go on" in the face of "fear's poison fangs/ guarding the doorway." It is quite striking that the speaker's use of serpentine imagery in this case throws up two pictures. In the first case, our mental power is stimulated to capture the picture of a serpent lurking at "the doorway" of Teresa's path, thus serving as an obstacle in her quest to serve humanity "on evil days." In the second case, the picture espouses a daring personality "with eyes tightly shut" walking towards "the doorway" unperturbed by "fear's poison fangs." This is quite inspirational and alludes to Jesus' comment in Luke 10:19: "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpent and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

The practice of the poem of the holiness of life is captured in the quoted lines. Clearly, the practice of the holiness of life is not compatible with unchristian faithlessness. One can only appreciate life of holiness if one is content to live the life of fearlessness from evil and its fangs (like Mother Teresa). To be interested in the practice of holiness is to be interested in culture and in character of Christianity which Mother Teresa manifested fearlessly and without restraint – which is to say to be interested in Christian service, in Christian nature, in Christian love, in Christian sacrifice and in Christian virtue without desiring the economy of gain or reward – which can engender profitable evil deeds which the biblical seven iniquities will firmly hold unto. Mother Teresa is a significant human norm. The holiness of life which she practised and championed until her demise going by the economy of service she offered Indians in Calcutta is nothing short of immortal Christian service. Her example is worthy of emulation by modern Christians and other holy persons of other modern religious faiths and organisations. Her impressive qualities which the poem impressively captures precisely and without obscurities engender the poem to our satisfaction everlastingly. We can make the same claim (and we are making it here) for the other poems whose grammar and diction underscore their genuine artistic purposes side-by-side their religious concerns.

In conclusion, we have tried to emphasise that Akwanya's poetic personality and character, among other things, are dominated by religious exegesis - chiefly from his Catholic Christian background. The poems of this Catholic priest under study are replete with biblical analogies and allusions - which serve as spices to his creative milieu. Akwanya's dedication to religion in his studied poems is fundamental to aligning him with the finest literary and poetic minds, for example, George Herbert as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins, who experimented and more than experimented at the same time with the genre. Whether he is talking about Christmas – the birth of Christ, or Easter – the sufferings, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus – or the saintly amazon, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Akwanya relates with poise and poetic mastery, the values of the Christian faith as exemplified by Jesus Christ Himself – love, service, sacrifice, empathy as well as candour. Simplicity of diction and deft deployment of striking imagery which enhance the reader's perception and understanding of the Christian faith characterise the poems. This style aligns with the simplicity of the Bible. In the end, we affirm that Akwanya's dedication to religion in his poetry is fundamental to his immense prolific creativity and personality as alluded to in our introductory remarks (within the Christian tradition) in contemporary Nigerian poetry.

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The Holy Bible. All references are taken from the King James Version.