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St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades and its implications for African Ancestor Christological discourse

ABSTRACT

The statement "he [Christ] descended into Hades" in the Apostles' Creed has generated theological debate concerning the nature and purpose of the descent and the relationship of Christ to ancestors. Given St. Thomas Aquinas' outstanding contribution to the development of this doctrine, this article explores Aquinas' contributions to the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades. It then critiques ancestor Christology through the lens of the descent doctrine. A desktop research approach is used to gather and analyse data from journal articles, books, and theses. The article argues that Christ died in place of sinful humanity and bore the total punishment for sin; therefore, there is no sacrifice for salvation except that which Christ offered. This emphasises that salvation is solely through Christ, and no rituals, sacrifices, or ancestors can replace His redemptive work. The article also asserts that Christ, as the Son of God, surpasses any human ancestor in importance and power, making ancestor Christology invalid. It encourages Akan Christians to place their faith solely in Christ.

1. INTRODUCTION

The early church, much like its contemporary counterpart, faced challenges from heresies that endangered the teachings of the Apostles (Allison 2021:4). Amidst rapid growth and the inclusion of

individuals from diverse backgrounds with varied perspectives, the church encountered different interpretations of Christianity (Allison 2021:4). While many of these interpretations were accepted, some were deemed dangerous to the fundamental doctrines of the faith and were labelled as heresies.

Gnosticism and Marcionism emerged as two significant heresies before the 3rd century. Gnosticism taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, the Christian doctrine of incarnation is unreasonable because it is not proper for the Son (being God and spirit) to add matter to his nature and get trapped in the material being. Marcionism considered the God of the Old Testament as a wicked God who differs from the God of the New Testament, the loving and merciful Father of Jesus Christ (Allison 2021:4). These and other heresies became the major driving forces behind the formulation of Christian creeds within the first five centuries of the existence of the church.

Among such creeds is the Apostles' Creed which is believed to reflect the faith of the Apostles (or the Christian faith in the Apostolic Age) developed through various stages until reaching its current form. This is an early articulation of the core of the Christian faith that served to combat heresy among the faithful (Allison 2021:4). Catechumens were taught this creed which they recited during their baptism. The tradition of reciting at baptism and during worship services has survived since the early centuries until the present. Many contemporary churches take their new converts through the Apostles' Creed as part of preparations toward baptism. It is recited at various worship services, at marriage ceremonies, and at other Christian gatherings. Thus, the Apostles' Creed continues to inform and guide Christianity against unorthodox tendencies.

At the heart of the Apostles' Creed is the statement "he [Christ] descended into Hades" which suggests that Christ spent the time between his death and resurrection in Hades. Many scholars have discussed, and are still discussing, the historical, theological, and biblical basis for this popular expression. This statement is still part of the Apostles' Creed used by most of the contemporary Christian denominations. Rather than debating the validity of this expression as a Christian belief, this article aims to examine St. Thomas Aquinas' perspective on the doctrine of the descent. The choice of Aquinas was informed by his huge influence on the descent doctrine among various Christian traditions. As a contribution to the ongoing African Christological discourse, the article evaluates the doctrine of ancestor Christology in light of the descent doctrine. The article emphasises Christ's unique sacrifice for salvation and hence encourages Akan Christians to focus solely on Christ for their salvation.

With the above brief introductory notes, the article now proceeds to examine how the descent doctrine emerged and developed prior to Aquinas' time.

2. ANTECEDENTS TO THOMAS AQUINAS

The notion that Jesus spent the period between his death and resurrection in Hades features prominently in the Christology of the Apostolic Fathers and those who came afterwards. Two main questions engaged the Church Fathers on this subject: "Did Christ actually descend into Hades/Hell?" and "What was the purpose of his descent?" (Abdelnour 2021:46). The idea of Christ's descent was almost unanimously affirmed by the Church Fathers, including Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Origen, Hermas, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexander, Athanasius, Ambrose, and Augustine (Bloesch 2001:339). However, there was no consensus regarding the purpose for the descent. Some Church Fathers (including Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Tertullian) taught that Christ's descent into hell was meant to redeem Old Testament patriarchs and prophets (Bloesch 2001:339). Other scholars such as Origen and the Alexandrian theologians argued that those who died before the global flood (see Gen. 6-9) also benefited from the descent (Bloesch 2001:339). Still, other scholars, including Melito, Gregory of Nazianzus, Marcion, and Ephraem, argued that Christ descended into Hades to redeem all the dead, except the very wicked ones. In line with this thought, Cyril of Alexandria spoke of Christ as "spoiling all Hades", "emptying the insatiable recesses of Death", and "leaving the Devil desolate and alone" (Bloesch 2001:339). The patristic view of the descent doctrine also brought John the Baptist into the picture. For example, Hippolytus (who died in 235 CE) taught that John the Baptist served as Jesus' precursor not only on earth, but also in the underworld (Harris 1988:3). This means that both John the Baptist and Jesus extended their ministry to the realm of death. In addition, Hermas suggested that deceased apostles and teachers continued the Lord's ministry in the underworld, baptising those who converted (Harris 1988:3). Clearly, patristic tradition held that Christ's descent into Hades had a salvific purpose. The above summarises the patristic view on the descent doctrine. In what follows, the view of a few patristic scholars is considered further.

Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. 110 CE) was the first to mention Christ's descent into Hades in his 2nd-century epistle (Bloesch 2001:339). In his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius underscores that the prophets of the Old Testament faced persecution because they "lived in accordance with Christ Jesus" (Ignatius 1999:155). Matthew 27:52-53 indicates that, following Jesus' resurrection, many deceased saints were resurrected, came out of their tombs, and appeared to numerous people in the holy city. With reference to this text, Ignatius asserts: "Because of this he [Christ] for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when he came" (Ignatius 1999:155). Writing to the Trallians, Ignatius employs the same text (Matt. 27:52-53, Phil. 2:10-11, and Eph. 2:14) and then asserts that Christ descended into Hades alone. He

arose accompanied by a multitude; and rent asunder that means of separation which had existed from the beginning of the world, and cast down its partition-wall (Ignatius [n.d.]:1.70).

Clement of Alexander also argues that Christ's descent into hell was meant to convert the inhabitants of this place (Abdelnour 2021:47). He reasoned that, since Christ had preached the gospel to those in the flesh, he taught it necessary to also preach to the dead (Abdelnour 2021:47). His teachings were based mainly on The Shepherd of Hermas, a 2nd-century Greek text from Rome, and 1 Peter 3:18-21. The Shepherd of Hermas depicts the apostles as preaching in hell after their death to save those who had been worthy in this life (Toscano 2016:32). Combining these two sources, Clement taught that Christ preached only to the Jewish souls, and transferred them to a better place (Matt. 27:52); later, the best among the apostles and the teachers also descended into hell to preach, convert, and baptise dead Gentiles (Vitto, cited in Abdelnour 2021:47). Thus, for Clement, God desires to offer the salvation message to everyone, whether in this life or in hell (Abdelnour 2021:47).

In the 3rd century, Origen of Alexandria, who became Clement's successor, continued the discussion of Jesus' descent. Origen's aim was to establish the salvation of the wicked in Hades and to contend for the extension of Jesus' salvific ministry from the living to the dead (Abdelnour 2021:47). He argues

when [Christ] became a soul unclouted by a body he conversed with souls unclouted by bodies, converting also those of them who were willing to accept him, or those who, for reasons which he himself knew, he saw to be ready to do so (Toscano 2016:34; Abdelnour 2021:47).

Origen taught that Christ's journey to Hades was similar to his earthly journey. According to Hosea 6:2, "God will revive us after two days, and on the third day we will arise and live in his sight." Origen interprets this text as follows: "The first day is the passion of the saviour for us. The second is the day on which he descended into hell. The third day is the day of resurrection" (Heine 1982:278). He argues that sinners are able to repent, even after death. He considers Hades as the place where the souls of all the people who died before Christ's descent went. All souls, whether righteous or wicked, had to go to Hades after death because of the effect of Adam's sin (Toscano 2016:34; Trumbower 2001:101). The descent, according to Origen, was meant to transfer these souls to paradise, just as righteous people who die today enter paradise (Toscano 2016:34; Trumbower 2001:101).

Origen further notes that Christ did not enter *Gehenna*, a place of torment and unquenchable fire. Based on 1 Peter 3:18-21, he argues that Jesus' descent gave the wicked people of Noah's days the opportunity to repent. At times, Origen taught some kind of universalism, that all rational individuals

will eventually see the light and be saved (Toscano 2016:35). For Origen, universalism was possible, though not a definitive doctrine. Even though Origen sometimes understands Hades as a metaphorical representation of death, he often understands Christ's descent in literal terms (Trumbower 2001:101).

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394), a 4th-century theologian, furthered Origen's teachings by his spiritual interpretation of the descent (Abdelhour 2021:48). He considered Hades more of the condition of the soul after death than a place of abode (Toscano 2016:35). Therefore, any interpretation of the descent in terms of a place is unacceptable within Gregory's theological framework. Gregory wrote a book with a focus on the whereabouts of Christ from his death to resurrection, rather than focusing on who was saved (Trumbower 2001:101). Like Origen, Gregory taught that physical death is not an end to salvific hope because some people will experience salvation posthumously (Trumbower 2001:101).

Augustine of Hippo in North Africa (ca. 354-430) also made a significant contribution to the descent doctrine. Much of Augustine's contribution to the doctrine of Jesus' descent is found in his letters to Bishop Evodius of Uzalis in which he interprets 1 Peter 3:18-21; 4:6 in relation to the Bishop's enquiries. Evodius' letter to Augustine affirms that, during Augustine's era, the belief in the emptying of all in Hades and the complete destruction of Hades by the resurrected Christ was prevalent (Trumbower 2001:131). Augustine's discussion on 1 Peter 3:19-20 begins with the issue of whether Christ preached solely to those who perished in the days of Noah or to all the captives. He rejects the idea that Christ descended to Hades in the flesh, arguing that such a teaching contradicts scripture:

If holy scripture had said Christ after death came into the bosom of Abraham, without naming Hell and its sorrow, I wonder if anyone would dare to affirm that he descended into Hell? (Trumbower 2001:131).

He argues that Christ liberated all individuals in Abraham's bosom, where the righteous dead such as Lazarus were kept. He also argues that Christ rescued some people in hell from their sorrows; they were the people that Christ considered worthy according to his mysterious justice (Trumbower 2001:131).

Concerning 1 Peter 4:6, Augustine opposed the idea of Christ preaching into hell. He quizzed:

If Christ preached to people who died before his incarnation, what happens to those who died and are dying after his resurrection who never heard the gospel? (Trumbower 2001:132).

He rejects the idea of universal posthumous salvation, stating that since those who died after Christ's resurrection without hearing the gospel are not excused, so are those who lived and died before Christ. Some people argue that Christ's preaching in hell will be heard by all who died after the resurrection. In response, Augustine mentioned that, if that be the case, then it is unnecessary for the church to preach the gospel on earth because everyone will eventually die and hear it (Trumbower 2001:132). Augustine considers it absurd and illogical to think of a posthumous salvation. He then argues that the 1 Peter passages might not refer to hell or Christ's descent into hell at all. He gives a spiritual interpretation of the text (1 Pet. 4:6) and argues that the "spirits shut up in prison" denote those who are alive but unbelievers (imprisoned by sin or the spiritually dead), as in Christ's saying "let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt. 8:22) (Trumbower 2001:132). Furthermore, since the text references "the days of Noah", Augustine asserts that the mentioned proclamation occurred through Noah, who conveyed the message to his contemporaries under the influence of the Spirit of Christ residing within him (Augustine of Hippo [n.d.] *NPNF 1*, 1.517-20). Augustine insists that one has to express belief in Christ, in order to be saved because Christ is the sole mediator of the God-human relationship. His point is that Old Testament saints believed in Christ prospectively, whereas New Testament believers believe in him retrospectively. He defined the faith of the Old Testament as a hidden mystery (*sacramentum*), and that of Christians as evident mystery (Turner 1966:176). He cautions his audience not to value the latter more highly than the former. Augustine concluded that only a few persons experienced the hidden mystery and most of such people were Jews (Turner 1966:176).

Given the foregoing, one may conclude that Augustine's teachings marked a remarkable shift in the patristic view on the descent doctrine. After Augustine's era, St. Thomas Aquinas became the next influential person in terms of Catholic theology, more so the descent doctrine. The next section focuses on Aquinas' contribution to the development of this doctrine.

3. THOMAS AQUINAS AND HIS CONTEXT

St. Thomas Aquinas, a prominent figure in medieval Christian theology and philosophy, lived during the 13th century. Aquinas lived in a historical period positioned between the decline of the Roman Empire in 476 CE and the establishment of the nation-state in 1648. Born in roughly 1225 in the Kingdom of Sicily, Aquinas became a Dominican friar and later earned the title "Doctor Angelicus" because of his profound contributions to scholastic thought. The 13th-century witnessed the rise of scholasticism, an approach to learning that sought to reconcile faith with reason, particularly within the framework of Christian theology. Aquinas' work reflects his engagement with

classical philosophy, especially the works of Aristotle, and the synthesis of Christian doctrine with philosophical principles. His commitment to integrating faith and reason, coupled with his extensive writings, has left an enduring impact on Christian theology and philosophy.

In what follows, the article outlines key aspects of Aquinas' doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades. The discussion is done under three thematic areas, namely the fact of the descent, Jesus' passion, and the soteriological significance of the descent.

4. JESUS' DESCENT INTO HADES

The early church considered the Hebrew term "Sheol" and the Greek term "Hades" as the dwelling place of the deceased (Abdelnour 2021:46). Thus, *sheol-hades* denotes an underworld where the spirits of the dead share a common fate, rather than a location of punishment. Many of the Church Fathers interpreted *Gehenna* as the place of punishment or damnation after death. Origen, for instance, often referred to *Gehenna* as "a place of fiery torment for the wicked", while he explained Hades as "the place where all the dead went before Christ's descent". Augustine also made a distinction, attributing *Gehenna* the meaning of "a permanent abode" and Hades the significance of "a temporary dwelling place".

Building on the works of his forebears, Aquinas provided a systematic viewpoint of the descent doctrine for his audience. He gave a four-part description of hell, namely purgatory (*purgatorium*), where sinners experience punitive suffering; the hell of the patriarchs (*infernum patrum*), the place where the Old Testament saints inhabit; the hell of unbaptized children (*infernum puerorum*) and the hell of the damned (*infernum damnatorum*) (Alfeyev 2009:97; Goris 2018:94-95). Aquinas opines that Christ might have descended into all the compartments of hell or only to the one inhabiting the righteous who he was to rescue. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas discusses Christ's descent into hell within the context of his broader theology of the incarnation, passion, and atonement.

Aquinas' descent doctrine is rooted in his anthropology. In line with Aristotle's philosophy, Aquinas had a hylomorphic view, which emphasises the unity of the human soul and body. Thus, the body (matter) and soul (form) together constitute a single, unified substance. Aquinas' stance falls between the extremes of dualism and physicalism. The soul is not a separate entity but the animating principle that gives life and identity to the body. He explains that, in comparison to the human body, the human soul is "the more noble part, by virtue of its spiritual nature created by God" (Torrell 1996:250). Aquinas

highlights that, after death, the human soul (being inherently immortal) persists in separation from the body. He notes that the human body's immortality was initially a result of divine grace, prior to original sin, not a natural attribute (Hause & Pasnau 2014:190). Given the above, Aquinas' creedal statement, "He descended into Hell", essentially means that Christ's soul went into hell, while his body was in the tomb (Ayo 1988:79). This is reflected in the Catholic Catechism which states that Jesus "experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead" (Catholic Church 1999:144).

4.1 The passion/suffering of Christ

The concept of penal suffering links Christ's descent into hell to the broader theology of redemption in Aquinas' teachings. Aquinas' understanding of Christ's passion and descent into hell is deeply rooted in his interpretation of Isaiah 53:4. The text reads: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." Aquinas asserts that Isaiah 53:4 speaks to Christ's experience of suffering as a true human. He interprets the passage to mean that Christ endured human infirmities such as hunger and carried our sorrows. He further suggests that Christ took our sins upon himself, suffering in our place, as indicated by the phrase "he bore our sins in his body upon the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24) (Aquinas 2020:np). Aquinas opines that to have "borne" our infirmities entailed suffering on behalf of humanity. Similarly, the sorrows he carried included suffering and sadness. The immediate context of the text is about suffering (Isa. 53:3-5) and the entire chapter is part of the suffering narrative in Isaiah. Reading through the lens of Isaiah 53, Aquinas understands the passion as an event full of suffering. In Question 49 of his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas avers that Christ's passion delivered humankind from the debt of punishment for sin, individually, and for the human race, corporately, because "[h]e paid the penalty on our behalf" (Aquinas ST III, q. 49, art. 3, ad 2). Aquinas notes that individual sinners are delivered from their sin through baptism which brings them in union with Christ's passion (Aquinas ST III, q. 49, art. 3, ad 2).

Concerning the redemptive value of the passion, Aquinas gives four points. First, Christ, serving as the leader of the collective church, earned salvation on our behalf through the endurance of suffering for the sake of justice (Aquinas ST III, q. 48, art. 1). Secondly, Christ's passion served as an atoning offering to God with the effect of saving humankind (Aquinas ST III, q. 48, art. 2). Thirdly, the passion was Christ's voluntary and authentic sacrifice, giving due honour to God in order to appease him (Aquinas ST III, q. 48, art. 3). The fourth comes from Aquinas' redefinition of atonement as redemption. Humanity, entangled by sin, faced a dual captivity: bound to the devil and indebted with a punishment to God. However, Christ redeemed us from this twofold captivity by paying the ransom, which was himself (Aquinas ST III,

q. 48, art. 4). The last three points underscore that, through sin, humankind incurred some debt or some deficit which has to be made up. Within such a context, Christ's passion served as adequate payment for whatever debt humanity owed due to sin.

In Question 46 of his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas attempts to answer the question of why God chose the passion as the means of salvation. In Article 3, he argues that Christ's Passion was most appropriate for human salvation because the "means employed" were inherently "helpful" to the desired outcome (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 3). Aquinas explains that it enhances human dignity that, as human beings deserved death, a man would overcome death by dying (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 3). Because of sin, humanity was destined to succumb to death, but through Christ, humanity now triumphs over death (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 2). Aquinas acknowledges that there were alternative ways of achieving redemption; yet, redemption achieved through reversal is fitting because it elevates human dignity by making them the conqueror. He notes that redemption involves more than a mere reversal. It also involves an exchange in which Christ bestows on us victory and takes our punishment upon himself. Christ took our sadness and gave us joy.

Aquinas categorises suffering into three groups. First, there is the suffering inflicted by human beings (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 5). In the case of Christ, this comprises rejection from various groups such as Gentiles, Jews, men, women, and individuals from both upper and lower classes. The second category of suffering complements the first, not based on sources but on effects (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 5). It includes the loss of social connections, damage to social standing, deprivation of possessions, soul distress, and physical pain. Christ's experience within this category involves the abandonment of friends, insults, mockeries, garment removal, soul sadness, fear in his soul, and bodily harm due to wounds (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 5). The third category of suffering has to do with Christ's bodily members such as the head pierced with thorns or the hands and feet punctured by nails (Aquinas ST III, q. 46, art. 5). Aquinas notes that Christ underwent all three categories of suffering, although not necessarily every individual instance within each category. For instance, Christ experienced harm to his bodily members during the crucifixion, but not a beheading or death by a firing squad. The crucial point is that Christ freed humanity from all forms of suffering, even if he did not endure every possible manifestation. Consequently, to redeem us from both death and hell, Christ had to undergo both death and the descent into hell, without necessarily experiencing every potential pain associated with these conditions.

How did Jesus' descent into Hades contribute to the accomplishment of his salvific mission? The next section answers this question.

4.2 The soteriological significance the descent

Aquinas attributes salvific significance to Christ's descent into hell, arguing that in the descent the union between the divinity and humanity of Christ was so inseparable that it means a soteriological descent (Oakes 2011:211). Aquinas supports his argument with at least three points, outlined below.

4.2.1 To bear our penalty for sin

According to Aquinas, Christ descended into hell, first, to endure the full punishment in order to expiate the sins of humanity (Aquinas, ST III, q. 52, art. 1; Aquinas 2005:79). That is to say, Christ had to descent into hell to experience the penalty of all human sins, in order to take away the guilt of sin. Aquinas cites Isaiah 53:4 to support his point. He argues that, as Christ was required to die, in order to free humanity from the penalty of sin, so it was necessary for him to descent into hell, in order to deliver humanity from going down into hell. The reason is that sin not only made humanity victims of physical death but also necessitated the descent of the human soul into hell (Aquinas, ST III, q. 52, art. 1). In other words, sin affects not only the physical body, but also the immaterial soul. Thus, Christ experienced a twofold punishment for sin, namely metaphysical separation of body and soul, and psychological pain in his soul over the loss of his body (Goris 2018:105; Beale 2022:27).

Prior to Christ's coming, the human soul descended into hell after death. Therefore, to experience the full penalty of sin, Christ desired not only to die, but also to journey to hell (Aquinas 2005:79), to ensure that humankind would enjoy salvation to the fullest. Aquinas further argues that the manner of Christ's descent into hell differs from the manner in which the fathers of old descended into hell. Whereas the ancient fathers were conducted and quarantined in hell by necessity, Christ went into hell powerfully and on his own violation and initiative (Aquinas 2005:79). The souls that were in hell were there as slaves but Christ's soul went there as a free soul. He states thrice that Christ did not experience any punishment in hell; being in hell simply meant being in a different place (Goris 2018:105). On the cross, Christ paid the full satisfaction for sin; therefore nothing remained to be paid in hell. Thus the descent into hell "fulfils" the atonement, signifying that it is an outcome of Christ's crucifixion. The descent is not an additional element but rather an integral part of it, inherently connected to the cross. Therefore, the theologies of the cross and of the descent into Hades are inseparable.

4.2.2 Defeat of the devil

Furthermore, Christ descended into hell, in order to achieve a complete victory over the devil. Aquinas clarifies that the triumph on the cross over the devil extends to the very core of the devil's kingdom through Christ's descent into Hell (Aquinas 2005:81). He had defeated death on the cross, and now needed to conquer hell in his descent. He reasons that it does not suffice to defeat someone in an open (neutral) field, but also to go to their own dominion, conquer them, and snatch their home. Christ defeated the devil on the cross and said: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world [Satan] be cast out" (John 12:31 RSV). To triumph completely over Satan, Christ desired to seize the heart of Satan's kingdom and to bind him in his own abode, hell. Aquinas considers hell as the heart of Satan's kingdom such that to have a complete victory over him requires visiting hell to turn the kingdom upside down and bind Satan and his hosts (Aquinas 2005:81). Therefore, Christ descended into hell, looted all of Satan's possessions, bound him, and deprived him of his own spoils: "Undoing the principalities and powers, he disgraced (them) with ease" (Col. 2:15) (Aquinas 2005:81). Having ruled sovereignly in heaven, Christ also wished to reign sovereignly in hell, so that all knees would bend to him, in heaven, on earth or in hell (see Phil. 2:10) (Aquinas 2005:81).

4.3 Liberation of souls

In addition, Christ's descent into hell was meant to completely free all good people and saints who died over the past generations, his friends who died during his lifetime (Aquinas 2005:79). Not all Christ's friends were in the upper world; some of them were in the underworld. Christ's friends, in this context, refers to people who had charity. People such as Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, and David and other just and good people, who had died with charity and with faith in the Promised Messiah, were in the underworld and needed to be rescued (Aquinas 2005:79). Therefore, just as Christ visited his own friends in this world and then delivered them through his death, so he wished to visit his friends in the underworld to free them from death as well. This point is supported by Ecclesiasticus 24:45:

I will penetrate to all the lower parts of the earth, and will behold all that sleep, and will enlighten all that hope in the Lord (Douay-Rheims Bible) (Aquinas 2005:81).

Responding to the argument that “hell” is an evil place where no righteous soul enters, Aquinas articulates that “hell” signifies an evil of punishment (punitive evil), not an evil of guilt (a guilt-based evil) (Aquinas, ST III, q. 52, art. 1). Christ’s descent into hell was not meant to punish him for sin but to free those who were there. That explains how Christ can bear the punishments and sorrows of hell without taking on the deficiencies of grace that would contradict his innocent and sinless nature.

Aquinas argues further that Christ did not all together destroy hell, as he totally destroyed death (Aquinas 2005:81). If Christ entered the compartment for the unrighteous, then he did so not to convert them but to shame them for their unbelief and wickedness (Aquinas, ST vol. 52 1965 art. 2, 6, 7; Bloesch 2001:339). Rather than emptying hell, he stung hell. Not everyone was freed from Hell, but only those who died without mortal sin and actual sin. Those souls were there because of the effect of Adam’s sin which they were (by nature) not in the position to reverse. He left Hades with those who were taken captive on account of their mortal sins and children who were not baptized (Aquinas 2005:81). For those in purgatory, Christ gave them the hope of glorification. Aquinas clarifies that Christ, through his passion, reopens the gates of heaven that were permanently shut due to Adam’s sin (Aquinas, ST vol. 54 1965 art. 3a.49, 5). However, this does not imply universal salvation for all in hell. According to Aquinas, entry into the heavenly kingdom requires “faith in Christ’s Passion”, meaning only those already connected to Christ’s passion through faith and charity can be saved by his descent into hell (Aquinas, ST vol. 54 1965 art. 3.52, 7).

Aquinas’ view forms the basis of the Roman Catholic Church doctrine about Christ’s descent into hell. Some key points that are emphasised in the Catholic Catechism are summarised as follows. First, it asserts that Christ’s resurrection from the dead inherently implies his sojourn in the realm of the dead. The Catechism states,

Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens (Kim 2021:97).

Secondly, Christ’s descent was an act of salvation through the proclamation of the Good News to souls imprisoned in Hades (Kim 2021:97). Thirdly, the Scripture refers to the abode of the dead as hell (*Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek), where souls are bereft of the vision of God (Kim 2021:97). Lastly, Christ’s descent is understood as entering the *limbus patrum* to free the Jewish patriarchs (Kim 2021:97).

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR ANCESTOR CHRISTOLOGY

Aside examining Aquinas' view on the descent doctrine, the article also aims to offer an Akan eschatological reflection on Aquinas' view. In this instance, the main issue is to examine ancestor Christology through the lens of the descent doctrine. Before delving into this issue, the article first conducts a linguistic and eschatological analysis of the Akan word *Asamando* which is used to translate Hades/hell.

5.1 Hades and the Akan concept of *Asamando*

Anthropologically, the Akan of Ghana, like many other Africans, believe that the human person is made up of material and immaterial parts. For the Akan, the material part, *nipadua* (body), includes the flesh, bones, water, and blood, while the immaterial components include *kraa* (soul), *sunsum* (an individual spirit), *honhom* (spirit), and *ntoro* (semen, a symbol of fatherhood or character resemblance) (Owusu-Gyamfi 2020:66-67). The Akan consider death as a transition from this world into another world. When one dies the person's soul survives even though the body is left to decay in the grave. This notion of the existence of the soul after death agrees with Aquinas' view about death. According to Aquinas, the immortality of the human soul is based on divine grace. The Akan also believe that the soul cannot exist on its own apart from God. Thus, its continual existence relates to the immortality of God. The dependence of the human soul on God for its immortality is underlined by the Bono-Twi saying "*Nyame nwu na mawu*" ("God does not die, so I will not die") meaning, "If God dies, I shall die, but since God does not die, I shall therefore not die" (Opoku 1978:95).

After death, the human soul travels a long distance – crossing rivers, climbing and descending mountains – before arriving at the realm of the dead (Bono-Twi: *Asamando*). The Akan version of the Apostles' Creed translates the expression "hell" as "*Asamando*". In the Old Testament, *Asamando* translates *Sheol* (e.g. Ps. 116:3) and in the New Testament *amanehunu kuro* (a city of suffering; see Matt. 23:15; Mark 9:43) translates *Gehenna* in the Asante-Twi Bible, while the Bono-Twi adopts the Greek *Gehenna*. In everyday life, the Akan use the expression *Bronsam gyam* (Satan's fire or fire prepared for Satan) to denote the word "hell". Thus, one can say that the concept of *Bronsam gyam*, is similar to that of *Gehenna*, a place of everlasting torment. Even though the Akan *Asamando* does not mean exactly what the Hebrew *sheol* means, *Asamando* is more appropriate for *sheol* than *Gehenna*.

The Akan *Asamando* does not have different compartments as that of Aquinas' Hades. *Asamando* does not inhabit the wicked; only the righteous can enter and stay there after their death. For the Akan, the soul of a dead

person either enters *Asamando* or is denied entrance into *Asamando*. Not all dead people qualify to enter *Asamando* and become ancestors. Certain qualifications are required. The ancestor should have reached adulthood in life, married with children, and died a natural death (Sarpong 1974:34). A person who dies as a child or unmarried does not ordinarily qualify to be an ancestor. Death through accidents or contagious diseases disqualifies one from becoming an ancestor (Sarpong 1974:35). To qualify as an ancestor, one should have lived an exemplary and blameless life to serve as a good example for their descendants (Sarpong 1974:35). The souls of such people enter *Asamando* and become divinised as *nananom nsamanfo* (ancestors). The souls of those who fail to attain ancestorhood become wandering ghosts (*saman twentwen*) that may reincarnate into the world to begin the process again. At the same time, the divinised soul may return to earth to be reborn, in order to complete an unfinished assignment. The Akan, therefore, believe in the reincarnation of the soul. Ancestors play key socio-religious and political functions in Akan society. First, ancestors act as guardians of social and moral order, looking after family matters, property, customs, morals, and activities (Opoku 1978:155; Quarcoopome 1987:130). They are believed to punish evildoers and reward good deeds. People strive to behave well out of fear of punishment by the ancestors. In addition, ancestors mediate the divine-human relationship and are considered givers and sustainers of life.

The translation of “Hades” as *Asamando* rather than *Bronsam gyam* (or *amanehunu* kurom) underscores the Akan Christian belief that Christ did not enter a place of torment after his death. He entered *Asamando*, a place of bliss, joy, and happiness, where no one is punished. This is an acknowledgement of Christ’s righteousness, as only the righteous enter *Asamando* after death. Therefore, if Christ really entered *Asamando*, then he is a good person, one whose life can be emulated.

Does this make a legitimate case to consider Christ as an ancestor? The next section considers this issue.

5.2 Does the descent doctrine support ancestor Christology?

The designation of Christ as an ancestor is a common perspective among African functional Christologists. Different African Christologists have used different ancestor designations for Christ. For example, John S. Pobee (1979:94) calls him “our Great and Greatest Ancestor”, Lwasa “the Universal Ancestor”, Charles Nyamiti “our Brother Ancestor”, thus distinguishing him from God the Father, “our Parent Ancestor” (Nyamiti 1984:8), “Proto-Ancestor”, that is, “Ancestor par excellence” Bujo (1982:77), and “Ancestor and Elder Brother” Francis Kabasele (1991:121). These designations emphasise Christ’s role

as a mediator and guide akin to traditional ancestors. Ancestor Christology seeks to achieve two main goals – adapting Christianity to African cultural contexts (inculturation) and making it relevant to African realities (praxis). It highlights the intersection of Christianity and African culture through Christ's death, which symbolises the attainment of ancestorship, a crucial concept in African spirituality.

Writing from an Akan perspective, Pobee considered Christ to be the "Greatest Ancestor" and attributed to him the authority to judge and guide human affairs. Pobee (1979:94) opines that

[o]ur approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor – in Akan language *Nana*. With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil.

The Akan word "*Nana*" may mean a grandparent, an ancestor or a traditional ruler. Pobee designates Christ as *nana* to underscore Christ's status as an ancestor. Pobee's view alludes to Christ's exemplary life as a model for societal institutions, justice, and Christian action. He gives the practical significance of ancestral Christology saying,

To say Christ is *Nana* (Akan for ancestor) is to let his standards reign superior to personal orientation, in the structures of society, in the economic process, and in political forces. It means, in practical terms, personal and social justice and recreation (Pobee 1979:98).

The prevalence of ancestor Christology among contemporary African scholars makes it necessary to critique this popular Christology through the lens of the descent doctrine. The obvious question is: Does the descent doctrine support the ancestral Christological model? To begin, it is important to note that the salvific ministry of Jesus cannot be separated from his personality. Thus, any valid Christological model needs to support the soteriological role of Christ. One of the main functions of the Akan ancestor is mediation. The Akan consider their ancestors as mediating their relationship with the supernatural realm. Ancestors serve as a channel for reaching the Supreme Being. In my view, Aquinas' doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is not aligned with ancestor Christology. Aquinas primarily interprets Christ's descent as a redemptive act, emphasising aspects such as the liberation of souls, the defeat of the devil, and the fulfilment of atonement. His theological framework centres on Christ's salvific mission and the implications of his victory over death and sin. Ancestor Christology, on the other hand, is a theological perspective that seeks to reconcile Christian beliefs with African religious traditions, emphasising Christ's role as an intermediary and guide in the manner of traditional ancestors. Aquinas' view underscores that ancestors have no salvific value and thus cannot be

considered legitimate mediators between God and human beings. Ancestors themselves need mercy from Christ for salvation and cannot be called upon for any salvific assistance. Christ's descent into Hades bestowed on ancestors the opportunity to escape their captivity.

Human ancestors were helpless captives in hell before Christ's descent. They lacked the power to liberate themselves and were under the dominion of Satan. Christ's descent freed them, at least the righteous ones, from their captivity. Unlike human ancestors who went to hell under compulsion, Christ went there voluntarily with the purpose of addressing the salvific needs of his people. Thus, while hell had power over Akan ancestors, Christ possesses the keys to Hades. It, therefore, follows that ancestors have no salvific ministry; ancestors cannot facilitate human salvation. The fact that Christ is the only real mediator between God and human beings (1 Tim. 2:5) underscores that the supposed mediatorial role of the Akan ancestors only served as a shadow before the coming of Christ. Christ's death and resurrection, however, fulfilled what the ancestral practices typified; that is the mediatorial role of Christ which is the ultimate reality. Therefore, in the post-resurrection era, there can be no valid claim of a mediatorial role for ancestors. If the Akan ancestors are considered valid mediators, then Christ cannot be the exclusive Mediator for the God-human relationship and so the uniqueness of Christ in Christianity will be nullified.

Furthermore, the ancestor view of Christ limits him to the state of death, neglecting his resurrection, ascension, and divinity. Christ is distinct from earthly ancestors in that his body has ascended into heaven—a crucial element of Christian soteriology (Agyarko 2009:98). Aquinas' descent doctrine emphasises the resurrection as a historical event that distinguishes Christ from any human being (dead or alive). Without the resurrection, all that Christ did would have been in vain. The resurrection proved the acceptability of Christ's sacrifice on the cross before God. Thus, the resurrection is the foundation of the justification of sinful humanity. Given this understanding, the descent doctrine has no place for the ancestor view of Christ because the latter overemphasises Christ's humanity at the expense of his divinity which is essential for his role as Savior (Mutongu 2009: 66, 99; Agyarko 2009:98). An ancestor is purely human, and an ancestor. Ancestors have no power over death as Christ does. Akan ancestors await the resurrection secured by Christ's resurrection, and they have no power on their own to experience resurrection; it is Christ who will grant them this experience. Christ's dual nature sets him apart from ancestors who are merely human beings. Clearly, the ancestor model necessarily ignores the divinity of Christ. A theologically sound soteriological model must establish a balance between the divinity and humanity of Christ (see John 1:1, 14). Both aspects of his personhood are required to qualify him as savior.

6. CONCLUSION

The article shed light on Aquinas' contribution to the development of the descent doctrine. It also offered a critique of the ancestor Christology based on the descent doctrine. It also highlighted the importance of Christ's sacrificial death as the sole means of salvation, thereby challenging the compatibility of ancestor Christology with Christian doctrine. The article suggests that, although ancestors were respected in biblical times, they were not prayed to or viewed as mediators in the human-divine relationship. Instead, it encourages Akan Christians to focus their faith on Christ alone for salvation, advocating for a shift away from ancestor veneration. This perspective aims to affirm Christian beliefs while respecting the cultural context, urging a balance between faith in Christ and the acknowledgment of traditional practices.

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