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Conversions and Transformations: Missiological Approaches to Religious Change

Children, youth and conversion in Africa – a socio-historical overview

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Africa is a restless place with masses of people on the move – within, into and from the continent. This creates the opportunity for people to engage and adopt other cultural and religious expressions. Consequently the continent is a treasure trove of information about religious change and conversion. This paper explores the conversion of African children and youth, focusing on four socio-historical contexts.

Classic Western missions engaged traditional African communities, often closely related to the process of colonisation. At the heart of most of these initiatives was the church school where children were inducted into Western culture and beliefs.

Islam is itself an aggressive mission movement focusing on conversion. Where Christianity and Islam have both been established in African communities, conversion to Islam usually means facing rejection and persecution from the family and community of birth.

Christians participate in humanitarian aid in Africa through the provision of resources and services. While the conversion of children may be discouraged if not prohibited in this sphere, subtle forms of Christian witness is still common and conversion may be linked to integration into a Christian family, church or community.

In urban Africa children and youth have access to a variety of outside influences, religions included. This provides the opportunity for more individualised and private engagement with, and acceptance of the Christian message.

On the basis of findings from these four general contexts, the article concludes with a number of general statements about the conversion of African children and youth.

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