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Abstract

## **Historicizing Faith – Controlling Conversion: Ethiopian Empire and its Legislation on Foreign Missions**

Ethiopian Empire as the field of missionary endeavor remains an exception in the mission history due to both its century-old heritage of political independence and unique religious landscape marked by presence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – the only still existing pre-colonial Christian community in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although being – until 1974 – an Orthodox Christian Empire, Ethiopia tolerated an increasing number of foreign missionaries from various denominations working within its domain.

The situation was however quite ambiguous: On the one hand the missionary activities in the field of education and public health were instrumental for modernizing policy of the Ethiopian state, on the other hand the increasing number of local converts inevitably led to tensions with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This situation led to establishment of special instruments controlling the process of religious transformation, the main part of which was manifested in the new legislation on foreign mission appeared in 1944. Attempting to establish state control over the religious conversion and to set a framework for relationships between the indigenous and the foreign missionary Christianity in Ethiopian Empire the so-called “Mission’ Decree” used an elaborated narrative strategy, which is to be discussed in the paper. Special attention thereby is to be given to its historical and socio-religious contexts as well as to its influence on further development of legislation on religion in the Ethiopian Empire.