**Christianity in Micronesia** (for Edinburgh Companions Encyclopedia of Christianity)

*The Advent of Christianity*

In June 1668, six Spanish Jesuits along with a group of some 30 lay helpers landed on Guam to begin evangelizing the people of the Mariana Islands. Guam is the largest of the numerous islands scattered throughout the western Pacific north of the equator, an extensive area known as Micronesia. The area includes what today are known as the island nations of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands, along with US-affiliated Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The term AMicronesia@ is sometimes extended to the nations of Nauru and Kiribati as well, but these latter islands will be treated in a separate entry.

The arrival of the missionary band not only marked the beginning of evangelization in Micronesia, but it represented the earliest sustained attempt to bring Christianity to any part of the Pacific. Only at the close of the eighteenth century, more than 100 years later, was any serious missionary effort made elsewhere in the Pacific.

The launch of this initial mission to the Marianas was marked by a serious population decline resulting from the diseases that the Europeans introduced as well as a long series of hostile encounters popularly known as the AChamorro-Spanish Wars.@ By the end of the century, virtually the entire population was converted and concentrated in towns on the two southernmost islands of Guam and Rota. Both the flag and the faith were planted, and Spain retained the Marianas as a colony for the next 200 years. Later, Augustinian Recollects took responsibility for the mission and regularly dispatched priests from the Philippines to continue work until the end of the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the rest of Micronesia remained unevangelized. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that Christianity was introduced to the other island groups of Micronesia. Islands such as Pohnpei and Kosrae (located in the eastern part of what is now known as FSM), which served as popular recreation ports for American whaleships, were already gaining the attention of mission groups. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which had successfully brought Christianity to Hawaii a generation earlier, founded a mission in these islands in 1852.

Over the course of the next few decades, the missionaries established flourishing Congregational churches on Pohnpei and Kosrae, and extended their work to the Marshall Islands through Hawaiian-born pastors. In the latter group it was Kaibuki, a paramount chief who had been renowned for his unprovoked attacks on Western ships, who became the patron of the new mission. By the early 1870s, the American Board missionaries had opened a pastoral school and trained a group of Pohnpeian mission teachers, a few of whom were deployed to Chuuk in the west (also part of FSM) to bring the church there. By the end of the century, the Congregational Church was solidly established throughout the eastern part of Micronesia: the Eastern Carolines (Pohnpei, Kosrae, and Chuuk) and the Marshall Islands,

When Spain pressed its claims for formal title to the Caroline Islands in 1885 against the counter-claims of Germany, the islands were awarded to Spain by papal arbitration. Within a year or two, Spanish Capuchin missionaries were stationed on most major island groups in an effort to establish the Catholic Church there. In the Western Carolines (Yap and Palau) this was to be the initial contact of islanders with Christianity. In the east, Catholic missionaries would contest the fields in which American Protestant missionaries had already labored for two or three decades.

*Building Churches under Changing Flags*

At the end of the Spanish-American War in 1899, the political map of Micronesia was redrawn, as it would be a few more times during the twentieth century. When Germany acquired the islands that the Spanish had once ruled, German Capuchin priests and brothers replaced their Spanish confreres in their effort to extend Catholicism throughout the region. Their field included the Northern Marianas, which had been brought under German rule at the same time. In 1911, German priests were sent to Chuuk, where they rapidly gained adherents. Meanwhile, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart took up work in the Marshalls, focusing mainly on the islands of Jaluit and Likiep. The Congregational churches were by this time operating largely on their own under local pastors. The number of American and Hawaiian missionaries had dropped sharply over the years and fell off even more in the early twentieth century.

Meanwhile, German evangelical Liebenzell missionaries entered the region in 1907. They first established themselves in the Eastern Carolines, and then, in1929, expanded their work to include the Western Carolines. Their mission soon spread throughout the area from Palau to the outer islands of Chuuk, serving in effect as a counterbalance to the Catholic efforts there.

Guam, after the Spanish-American war, was annexed as a territory of the United States and administered by the US Navy. Soon afterwards, in 1910, the first Protestant church (Methodist) was established on Guam. Yet, Catholics continued to make up the vast majority of the island population of this island, originally evangelized two and a half centuries earlier. The Catholic Church remained the center of village life, as was the case in many other former Spanish colonies. This close integration of cultural and religious features continues even to the present day and is expressed in many distinctive ways: the observance of religious feast days by means of the traditional fiesta and procession following the statue of the patron saint, the importance of veneration of saints, and the recital of the rosary in common. Especially important is the remembrance of the dead through the novenas celebrated by family and friends. All Souls Day on 2 November is marked by prayers at grave sites and masses held in the cemeteries of the island.

Japanese acquisition of all the islands in Micronesia except Guam at the outbreak of World War I in 1914 had little negative impact on church work initially. Local pastors in the Congregational church were encouraged to continue their work Although Germany Catholic missionary priests and sisters were soon repatriated, Japan appealed to the Vatican for replacements. Spanish Jesuits arrived in force in 1921 to assume control of the field, and two years afterwards one of their number, Msgr Santiago de Rego, was named the first bishop of the mission area (which had been expanded to include, in addition to the Carolines, the Marshalls and Northern Marianas). Mission schools remained closed to permit children to attend the mandatory public school system, but otherwise, churches were granted freedom to operate as they had under Spain and Germany. Indeed, a handful of Japanese Methodist pastors were sent to the islands to work in the Eastern Carolines. It was only in the late 1930s, as World War II loomed closer, that the Japanese government imposed restrictions on the movement of missionaries. After war broke out, foreign missionaries were confined, and later, as Allied Forces were poised to launch their decisive attack on the islands, six Spanish Jesuits were executed in Palau.

With the transfer of the islands from Japan to US at the end of the war, churches were again obliged to make administrative and personnel changes. For Catholics, the Northern Marianas was placed under the jurisdiction of Guam, while American Jesuits took over responsibility for the mission of the Caroline and Marshall Islands. Congregations of sisters soon entered the field: Maryknoll Sisters in Palau and Yap, and the Mercedarian Missionaries of Berriz (MMB), who had begun a mission in the islands even before the war. Catholic mission schools were reopened and island girls were soon entering the MMB convent.

Meanwhile, German missionaries from Liebenzell resumed work in the Western Carolines. The most well-known was probably Rev. Edward Kalau, who founded Pacific Missionary Aviation during his long service on Yap before continuing his work for years on Pohnpei. In the eastern part of Micronesia, the Congregational churches continued under local pastors, even as American representatives from the United Church Board worked with them to develop schools and stronger links between local churches.

The post-war years also saw the arrival of a number of smaller churches in the region. Seventh Day Adventists began a mission on Guam in 1950; within a few years the church had spread to all the major islands throughout the area, opening schools at the same time. The Baptist Church and the Assembly of God also became established during this time, with the Assembly of God becoming especially strong in the Marshalls. The Church of the Latter Day Saints initiated work on Saipan in 1975, soon afterwards extending its ministry to nearly all major islands in Micronesia.

*Local Leadership*

From the outset of its missionary activity in the nineteenth century, the American Board set as its goal the establishment of churches in the islands that would be Aself-financing, self-governing, and self-propagating.@ Accordingly, the Congregational training school continued to turn out pastors, deacons and teachers to provide leadership for the church over the years despite the frequent changes of colonial government. Liebenzell, soon after its return to the Western Carolines and Chuuk, also offered training programs for local pastors so that these pastors could soon staff all the churches.

Things were much different in the Catholic Church, which remained reliant chiefly on missionaries through much of the twentieth century. Indeed, there was just one single priest ordained in the region prior to that time: Fr. Jose Palomo, trained in the Philippines and ordained in 1859, who served his people on Guam for 60 years before his death in 1919. Two other Guamanian priests were ordained before World War II: Fr. Oscar Calvo and Fr Jesus Duenas. Fr Duenas was executed by the Japanese just months before the end of the war.

After World War II, as American Capuchins assumed responsibility for the church in Guam and Northern Marianas, the first Catholic seminary there was opened. Over the next few decades local vocations to the priesthood multiplied sufficiently to staff many of the island parishes, with Capuchin missionaries providing pastoral assistance as needed. The Catholic Church on Guam reached another landmark in 1970 when Msgr Felixberto Flores was consecrated as the first local bishop. Not long afterwards, the Northern Marianas was constituted a diocese in its own right with an island priest, Msgr Tomas Camacho named as the first bishop.

In the Carolines the transition to local leadership took longer. For a time, the mission had only two local priests, both Jesuits: Fr. Paulino Cantero, a Pohnpeian ordained shortly before the war, and Fr. Felix Yaoch, a Palauan who began his priestly service there in 1967. Then, beginning in the late 1970s, a number of young island men were ordained to the priesthood. The late surge in vocations was aided by the minor seminary, established on Guam in 1968, that Jesuits operated for more than 30 years. Finally, in 1995, with the appointment of Amando Samo as bishop of the Carolines, the diocese had its first local bishop. By this time most of the parishes finally had Micronesian pastors. In that same year the Marshall Islands, where Catholics remained a small minority, was entrusted to the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, the order that had opened the first Catholic mission in the island group a century before. To date there are still no local priests ordained in the Marshalls.

*Contribution to Society: Education*

Formal education represents perhaps the greatest contribution by the churches to society. The first school anywhere in the Pacific was opened on Guam the year after the arrival of the first missionaries. The Congregational missionaries in the Carolines operated small schools throughout the region in the mid-nineteenth century, long before a public school system existed.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, Catholics and Protestants redoubled their efforts in education. Several of the Catholic schools founded on Guam during this period remain among the best on the island. They include Father Duenas Memorial School, a boys high school, and two superior girls schools: Our Lady of Mercy Academy and Notre Dame Academy. St John=s Academy, arguably the best school in the region, was founded by the Episcopalian Church during the same period. Other notable schools opened since are Grace Baptist and Harvest on Guam, as well as St. Paul=s Academy and Mt. Carmel School on Saipan.

After World War II, when American Jesuits assumed authority over the mission, they set up elementary schools and later high schools throughout the Caroline and Marshall Islands. The best-known and most highly regarded were Xavier High School in Chuuk, which was founded in 1952, and Pohnpei Agriculture and Trade School, opened in 1965. Both accepted students from every island group throughout the region. On every major island group today can be found a Catholic high school and an elementary school. Seventh Day Adventists also operate schools in each of the island groups. Today, private church-run schools in FSM, Palau and the Marshall Islands enroll about 10 percent of all schoolchildren in the region, perhaps half of the percentage that they educated during the early 1960s, the heyday of mission schooling.

*Inculturation*

The Catholic Church in the Caroline and Marshall Islands from the early 1970s espoused the goal of indigenization: that is, blending the faith with the cultural practices from the islands. The church consciously began to make liturgical adaptations aimed at making use of cultural symbols. Flower leis were placed on the heads of the newly baptized to signify the title they were receiving with the sacrament, and leis also were presented with the usual gifts of bread and wine to the one presiding at the Eucharistic liturgy. Dances and chants were incorporated into various parts of the services on special occasions. On Pohnpei *sakau* (kava) is used in reconciliation services, as it would have been when forgiveness was being asked of a chief. In Yap, famous for its dignified dances, distinctive island wailing and stately women=s dances were introduced into the Holy Week services.

Congregational churches have also adopted cultural practices, although not to the same extent. During the week before Easter, churches will normally exchange pastors. The visiting pastors are feted during the week and sent off with gifts from the community that hosted them. Christmas celebrations are distinctive in each island group. In Kosrae, the congregation practices months ahead of time for a glittering marching display that is offered in the main church by various subgroups, all performed in beautifully tailored uniforms and dresses.

Church music, in the meantime, had undergone changes of its own. At first it was a cappella congregational singing of numbers translated from the standard European or American hymnals. Soon, however, islanders themselves began composing hymns with a distinctive island sound. Instrumental music, absent at first, was eventually supplied by organs, guitars, and often enough today by keyboards. The richness and variety of religious music today represents Church inculturation at its best.

In Guam and the Northern Marianas, which remain predominately Catholic, inculturation tends to look backward to reflect those practices identified with Spanish Catholicism: that is, the novenas, processions, village feast days, and even the music from an earlier age.

*Church and Society*

To suggest that the Church has become a significant part of the social landscape in the islands is to understate the fact. Indeed, in many places it is the dominant institution in the daily life of the people. The Church calendar regulates much of the life of villagers; its choirs perform at community events; its pastors call down blessings at the onset of projects and the dedication of buildings; its policies are invoked as norms for community behavior.

Church involvement in social issues, however, must be understood in the light of cultural practices rather than modern political rights. The Congregational Church in the Eastern Carolines struggled to limit the obeisance to chiefs, opposed the use of kava in traditional ceremonies and curtailed the trafficking of young women to foreign ships. The Catholic Church in the Western Carolines opposed traditional clubhouses with their prostitution and attempted to stamp out spirit mediums. Perhaps its most generally lauded contribution was to bring peace to islands embroiled in local warfare. In accomplishing this, the Christian churches altered the cultural landscape in an effort to make it more compatible with the tenets of Christianity.

In recent decades, many of the churches have engaged in public education to assist the local population to make enlightened choices on contemporary issues. The Catholic Church, for instance, instituted mobile teams to make yearly visits to villages to lead reflection on social issues. In some island groups Baptists and Catholics produced weekly radio programs on contemporary life issuesBalthough this has fallen off in the past 20 years. Social justice workshops brought together Christian leaders from different parts of the region to reflect on what the church might do to assist its members in responding to today=s concerns. The recent focus of some of the church efforts have been on casino gambling, proposed by some governments as a means of expanding tourism. Another is environmental protection, particularly in the light of global warming and the danger that rising sea-level presents to the low islands of the area. The churches are not so much spearheading the campaign against climate change, however, as supporting the efforts of the government to deal with the issue. In Guam and the Northern Marianas, most Christian churches openly oppose abortion and same-sex marriage, both of which have been legalized under US law.

One of the dominant issues has been change resulting from social and religious pluralism. Guam and the Northern Marianas, along with Palau, have seen their population become more ethnically heterogeneous. Meanwhile, smaller church groups, most of them evangelical, have sprung up nearly everywhere in the region. This was happening just as a new spirit of collaboration was reached among older denominations, with Catholics and Congregationals working together to translate the bible into the major local languages. Attempts by some small islands to preserve their social and religious unity by forbidding other denominations were overruled by the new constitutions. Although the adherents of these newer church groups remain relatively fewCrepresenting a combined four to ten percent of the total populationCthe older denominations are clearly challenged to extend the ecumenism that they have achieved with one another to these newer groups.

*Current Status of Christianity*

All the island groups in the region today remain overwhelmingly Christian. Although Bahai centers can be found in a few of the islands and Buddhist shrines have been built on Guam and Saipan, the percentage of non-Christians in the islands is tiny. Hence, the relationship between Christians and other world faiths remains a non-issue in the region.

Guam and Northern Marianas both remain heavily Catholic (80%), with a scattering of smaller churches: Baptist, Congregational, Episcopalian, and Iglesia Ni Kristo with a membership almost exclusively Filipino. Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah Witnesses are also represented, along with a number of small evangelical churches. Since the 1970s, growing secularization has cut into church membership, although the majority of non-practising members continue to identify as Christians.

Marshall Islands remain predominately Congregational (90%), although the Congregational Church split into two factions some years ago. The remainder of the population includes a small Catholic minority (7%) and a few smaller evangelical churches. Assembly of God has shown the fastest growth of any of the smaller church groups over the past few decades.

The status of Christianity in the Caroline Islands, which includes Palau and Federated States of Micronesia, varies with the island groups, each with its own history and culture. Kosrae, at the eastern end of FSM, is heavily Congregational (87%), although five smaller churches are also found there, the largest of which is Latter Day Saints with almost 4% of the population. In both Pohnpei and Chuuk, the largest states of FSM, Catholics make up 55% of the population, while the Congregational Church follows, with 41% in Chuuk and 36% in Pohnpei. Palau, like Yap, is predominately Catholic, more so Yap (82%) than the former. But versions of the traditional religious belief remain strong through a local religious system (Modekngei) in Palau and in spirit veneration practices still observed in parts of Yap.

Overall, the impact of Christianity on the island groups in Micronesia has been enormous and is recognized as such by islanders themselves. The effects today, however, are not so much represented by institutional battles over issues like gender rights or environmental protection, as might be the case in Western societies. Church-led protest marches and social challenges are generally muted in Micronesia in accordance with cultural practice in small island societies. Even so, the real force of Christianity is unmistakable, not only in the way that it has already altered the social landscape but in the impact it continues to exert on daily life in these island societies today.

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Francis X. Hezel, a Jesuit priest, is pastoral vicar of a parish on Guam. Formerly the director of Micronesian Seminar, he is the author of several historical works on Micronesia.