Francis X. Hezel

Interview by Fred E. Woods and Devan Jensen, July 8, 2020

Fred Woods: Today is July 8, 2020, Mountain Standard Time. This is Fred Woods and Devan Jensen from Brigham Young University conducting a Zoom interview with Father Francis Hezel. First question: what does Micronesia encapsulate geographically and culturally?

Francis Hezel: As you know, the Pacific was divided into three parts: Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia. Micronesia stands in the middle of these three areas. Some people contest that division, but there seems to be a factual basis behind it. First of all, Melanesia. Parts of Melanesia were settled early. There’s a darker people and a people that goes back, at least in Papua New Guinea, to about several thousand years BC. So that’s a significantly older population than here. Micronesia and Polynesia were settled much later. Polynesia was first settled about 1,000 BC, we are told, when Fiji and Tonga and Samoa were first populated, but the expansion out to more distant islands continued throughout the following two millennia.

Most of Micronesia was settled, we think, just a couple of centuries before the time of Christ. With the exception of Palau and Yap, that is, which were settled probably earlier. The languages of these two island groups are very different, and early settlement happened earlier and probably from a different part of southeast Asia, although we’re not sure where. When we talk about Micronesia, we’re generally talking about Kiribati, Nauru, and then the Carolines, the Marshalls, and the Mariana Islands. Those places constitute the cultural entity known as Micronesia. There was certain features that were common in this area. One of these features was matrilineality, with people tracing their descent from their mothers’ side. It’s quite different from Polynesia, where it’s a more patrilineal type of society. This is not to say that women don’t have any authority in Polynesia, but the social organization is very different from traditional Micronesian societies. That’s cultural Micronesia. When we talk about political Micronesia, what we mean is the Caroline, Marshalls, and Marianas because of their long postcontact association with one another and with the US.

Woods: What are the major ways of colonization, and how did they affect the various peoples of Micronesia?

Hezel: Well, of course, the early settlement was made by seafarers in Micronesia about a couple centuries before Christ. There’s what they call “Nuclear Micronesia,” which includes the Marshalls, and probably Kiribati too, as well as Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk, and the outer islands extending to Yap. That’s called “Nuclear Micronesia because the islands of this area were closely related in their languages, which seemed to be derived from a common language once upon a time. They also shared common cultural features. Among these is a dependence on breadfruit as a staple crop, except in Kiribati and the Marshalls where originally breadfruit trees didn’t grow because of the high saltwater content. Saltwater resistant types of breadfruit were only introduced later during what some authors call the “Breadfruit Revolution,” occurring perhaps around 1000 AD. The low coral atolls instead depended on pandanus, which strangely enough is their staple crop.

The wave of colonization didn’t come until much later, well after Magellan’s brief visit to the Marianas in 1521. So this coming year we’re celebrating the 500th anniversary of Magellan’s visit to Guam. But that was the only place in Micronesia at which he stopped before he was killed in the Philippines on tiny Mactan Island just off Cebu. Thereafter Guam was visited almost yearly by the Spanish galleon en route to the Philippines. Meanwhile, other Spanish explorations continued, with ships now and then happening on one of the islands in Micronesia. One was captained by Pedro Ferdinand Quiros, a Spaniard, who named the island he discovered Quirosa. Another island visited by the Spanish was named Matelotes because the people on the island greeted their visitors with the word “matelotes,” which means “sailors.” This was a word the islanders had learned from a previous Spanish visit, we can assume. So you had occasional visits like these, but no substantial long-lasting contact between Europeans and islanders.

Intense contact started with the Marianas in the late 1600s, when the first mission project was launched out of the Philippines. That was the first religious mission project not just in the Marianas but in anywhere within what we today call the Pacific Islands. The Spanish Catholic mission began in 1668, a good century or so before any of the other missions in the Pacific was started. Fr. Diego Luis de San Vitores arrived in the Marianas with five Jesuit companions and thirty-one lay catechists and teachers from the Philippines and Mexico. Over a thirty-year period, sometimes described as the Chamorro-Spanish wars, they planted the church, but at a cost to islanders and foreigners alike. That term is a misnomer, as I tried to point that out in my booklet on the subject entitled “When Cultures Clash.” First of all, the contending parties weren’t divided simply by ethnicity. Some of the local people strongly supported the mission for one reason or another; on the other hand, some of the so-called Spaniards actually were married to Chamorros at that time and, in times of armed conflict, were passing guns out the window to their islander wives and relatives. So, as usual, the term *warfare* and the division of the sides along purely ethnic lines is an oversimplification. In any case, the loss of life through violence, which may have amounted to 150 or so, was eclipsed by the loss suffered through the host of contagious diseases introduced by the Spanish. The local population sank from about forty thousand to forty in a forty-year period. The survivors were grouped into larger villages, converted to Catholicism, and began a two-century period of Spanish rule.

The other islands were visited, beginning from the very late 1700s and the early 1800s, by different people from various nations. First there were the traders in beche-de-mer, the sea slug that is so prized as an ingredient for soup in China. Then there were the American whalers who visited the islands to take on water and wood. Then, in the later years of the 19th century by coconut traders. In the meantime, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission—or the ABCFM, as it was called—started a mission in the Carolines and Marshalls in the midcentury. They had heard so much about the whalers and their damaging impact on the island that they considered that it was time to start a mission there. And so in 1852, they brought in a few people, started a mission in Kosrae and Pohnpei, and that mission later expanded, a few years later, to the Marshalls and then to Chuuk, beginning from the Mortlock Islands and working their way up to the Chuuk lagoon. Hence, the first missionaries in the eastern part of Micronesia, were all Congregational missionaries who started in the 1850s. Mission work didn’t start in Yap and Palau, on the other hand, until the early 1900s, after colonial rule came in.

Colonial rule was initiated in 1885 with a famous incident. Germany was starting to spread its wings. It had just been united as a country in 1871, and it wanted to show the rest of Europe that it was every bit as good as they. The way people did it in those days was by making colonies—sending out naval ships and planting the German flag. Germany decided that it would move into the Carolines, because it already had big copra interests there. So in 1885 they sent a ship out to take possession of one of those islands. Spain had presumably claimed the Carolines sometime in the remote past but had never acted on it. So Spanish naval vessels and German warships came to Yap to plant the flag just about the same day within a few hours of one another. It looked like there was going to be a firefight as a consequence. The Germans planted their flag first even though they arrived a little after the Spanish. After all, they had that renowned German efficiency even in those days. All through Europe, when they found out about this contest, there were riots. Finally, they called on the pope to arbitrate the matter, since the pope was still called on to do that sort of thing. The German chancellor Otto von Bismarck then served notice to the pope that Germany would be willing to turn the islands over to Spain as long as it was allowed to trade freely in the islands. Spain took all of the Carolines, while Germany took the Marshalls by agreement that same year. Spain held the Carolines until the end of the Spanish-American war in 1899. After Spain’s defeat, it was forced to sell off their island possessions, with the Carolines and Marianas going to Germany. So Germany had the Marshalls, and the Carolines and now the northern Marianas. The US kept Guam, figuring that it was going to be an important base in the future, as of course was the case.

Germany retained possession of the islands for about 15 years. Then in 1914, when World War I broke out, Japan and Britain took over all of Germany’s possessions in the Pacific by a previous agreement. Britain took over the possessions south of the equator through Australia. Japan took over the ones north of the equator, so Japan all of a sudden owned the Carolines, the Marshalls, and the Northern Mariana Islands. This continued up until the Second World War, when the US took over Micronesia after Japan’s defeat. Finally, about 1980, most of these islands became independent. Only Guam and the Northern Marianas remained territories of the US.

I said something about the early Christianization of the Marianas, how that happened in the late 1600s. I said something about the ABCFM missions in the eastern Carolines and the Marshalls. I didn’t say anything really about the Catholic operation in the Carolines and Marshalls, which really began in about the late 1800s, after Spain took over the Caroline islands. Spain set up two administrative centers: one in Pohnpei and one in Yap. Catholicism, then, was introduced to Pohnpei, an island that had already been Christianized. Much of the island had been converted to Protestantism. All of Kosrae had been converted to Protestantism as well, and that remained unchanged pretty much to the present day. There’s a small group of Kosraens who’ve become Catholics, but the latter are largely Filipinos or Catholics from other islands who have married into the population.

In the western Carolines, the two mission movements were the Catholic one that began in the Spanish period and was continued through German times. Then, in early German times, the Liebenzell mission entered the islands. They are a German evangelical group that was hoping to establish a mission in China. Everybody wanted to go to China around the late 1800s since it was the new promising territory that was just opening to the West at that time. But they couldn’t establish a mission there because of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Instead, they reoriented their mission towards other places including Micronesia. Since the eastern Carolines were taken care of, they came into the western Carolines. They started missions in Palau and in Yap shortly after the Catholics started their mission work in these two places, and they’ve continued up to the present day.

Woods: How did Christianity affect the indigenous peoples of Micronesia?

Hezel: You know the arguments. You know that many times people were saying “Oh, they lost their culture as a result of this.” You also know that in Hawaii people have contested that story. Remember the movie *Hawaii*? It presented the notion that when the missionaries came in, they were slowly, bit by bit obliterating the culture. The movie wasn’t particularly hostile to missions, but the whole mindset was that local island culture and Christianity were at odds from the start and only one would prevail. What the film didn’t point out was that there were social advantages that missionization offered local people.

The first advantage is education. That was brought out in the movie *Hawaii*, by the way. Any time there has been a Christian mission of any sort, soon afterward there has been an educational institution. There’s been immediately literacy, at least among some elements of the population. There have been broadsheets off the press, printing in the island languages—often the whole New Testament in translation, and a literacy among the educated mission students. Education was highly esteemed in practically all the missions, Catholic and Protestant, throughout Micronesia. The earliest printing press was set up on Pohnpei within a few years of the first arrival of the ABCFM missionaries in 1852.

There’s one other effect beside education that I wanted to mention because I think that this is often overlooked. The effect is the enormous expansion of relationships between one group of people and another. This was a gateway to peace. In all Pacific island societies, relationships were extended through their lineage or clan. If I belong to a clan, my clan members might include 1,000 or 2,000 people, and they might be spread all over the place. When I travel to another island, I might walk in and say, “I’m a member of Achau clan,” and somebody would say “Oh yeah, I am too. Come on over to our house, you can stay with us!” Because hospitality is one of the things we can expect from clan mates. Mutual help is another.

The same was true with Christianity. It was a bonding element. The stranger says, “I’m a Christian” And he is immediately offered hospitality and more. In the end, then, Christianity is not nearly so much a divisive element as a bonding element. I tried to make that point in one of the publications that I've made, because I think it’s often been overlooked. It is Christianity as a culturally destructive element that people like to point to, but in expanding relationships, Christianity can strengthen bonds and prepare islanders for the kind of expansive relationships that a modern society is going to demand.

This is not to say that there were no bad feelings between different religions. On Pohnpei, for instance, the Protestants had arrived long before Catholics, but there were ways for later religions to get a foothold on the island. Because Pohnpei has high chiefs, all you had to do, whether you were a Catholic or Protestant, was get the patronage of a high chief to support your church in his realm. The Protestants had the high chief from Madolenihmw, one of the sections in the south, as their champion. He was a huge force in helping them retain and expand their holdings in Pohnpei. At the same time, the Catholics got the sponsorship of the high chief in Kitti, the kingdom right next to the one in Madolenihmw. They won his favor partly because of the testy relationship between the two chiefs. You know, “the enemy of your enemy is my friend.” The Catholic missionaries also took on one of the islanders who was a successful businessman but was accused of making false claims to land throughout Kitti. When the missionaries confronted him, the paramount chief of Kitti must have felt “Oh! These Catholic missionaries can’t be all that bad if they hate this other person that we ourselves despise,”

The tense relationship between different religions persisted for a long time.Even when I first came to Micronesia in the early1960s, there were bad feelings among the older Catholic priests toward other religious groups. But by my return to the islands in the early 1970s, attitudes were already changing. By the 1980s the whole mindset had changed in Catholics and other denominations. All of the sudden I was invited to go to ceremonies, even ordination ceremonies, in the Protestant church and speak at them. And I soon had many friends who were ministers in Chuuk and in Pohnpei. We had no problem talking about church matters or anything else. Actually, the same thing was true with Latter-day Saints.

Woods: Of the challenges that the people of Micronesia faced, where are they succeeding?

Hezel: The challenges are not so much cultural. They have kept their language, their cultural practices, and much more. One of the points that I’ve made, though, is that there is a certain kind of social turmoil that people have been confronting for some decades now. But this is not a product of religious rivalry. It is the effect of the social change that has been caused, or at least amplified, by the unraveling of the social organization net. But that’s a whole different story of its own.

Jensen: What are the challenges in Micronesia?

Hezel: First of all, the challenge of dealing with economic change and its consequences. The US subsidy to Micronesia exploded from 6 and a half million dollars in 1961 to sixty million dollars in 1970. So it increased tenfold—without taking account of inflation, that is. But still, the increase was huge, the number of new Micronesians who began working was great, and their salary increases were also large. What that brought about was an enormous impact on the shape and functioning of the family. The larger family that used to go out and gather breadfruit and fish, bring everything into a cookhouse for preparation, and divide the food among about the three or four nuclear families living on the estate didn’t quite operate that way anymore. As more of the men in the family became wage earners, the head of the larger family group began to say, “Well okay, I don’t have any authority over people if I don’t have the resources to support them, to nourish them.” And so he backed off, and what that meant was the father was left in charge of the smaller family. What that meant, in turn, was that the head of the extended family no longer exercised the controls he once had.

The old family society in Micronesia is like an outrigger canoe. The mother and the mother’s family was the hull of the canoe, which bore the weight of those in the canoe. The father, on the other hand, was the outrigger. This is typical of matrilineal societies. Much of the responsibility for caring for the nuclear families lay with the matrilineage. With the support of the matrilineage, the maternal uncle (or mother’s oldest brother) made decisions on behalf of the mother’s family. This meant that if the young man got in trouble with his father, he could always go to his maternal uncle, the head of the extended family, to appeal for help in resolving the conflict. Then, suddenly, that mechanism was lost. It was as if the canoe had lost its outrigger and retained only its hull—but now the father of the family was the hull of the canoe, not the outrigger. So, the young man who had problems with his father didn’t have any support, there was no back up, there was no opposite member to go to. If the father his son something, and the young man thought, “Oh, they don’t love me anymore,” there was no one to say “Oh kid, we’ll take care you, don’t worry.” The mother would not do that on her own. The result of this family change was more suicides. Not because young people weren’t economically taken care of, but because the structure of the family was changed, so they didn’t have someone who could say, “Oh don’t worry about this, this is just a small thing. I’ll be talking to your father tomorrow.”

That was just one the consequences of the change in family organization and dynamics. There are many other examples I could give: violence within the family, especially following domestic quarrels. These things were taken care of easily once upon a time. But they’re not now. On Pohnpei, over a period of fourteen years, there were five women who were killed by their husbands and boyfriends. Including, by the way, one man from Salvation Army, an American, who was responsible for the death of his much shorter Filipino wife. That was just one of five cases that took place in these fourteen years. As I watched the violence increase over time, I said “Look, I’m a believer. This spouse abuse thing is real.” But it’s something that’s grown up over time, especially as the social controls that are supposed to prevent this aren’t in place any longer. These, then, are current serious social problems that, I believe, result from cultural change.

The second challenge is economic. The islands don’t have much of a chance for economic self-reliance. When you look at their economy, even Palau, which has a great tourist industry, can’t support itself on this industry alone. In view of the limitations of their economy, the island nations (Palau along with FSM and the Marshalls) need support in some form or other from the US under the Compact of Free Association. In FSM and the Marshalls the yearly tourist number hasn’t changed in over forty years. It’s still forty thousand a year in the FSM, and about nine or ten thousand a year in the Marshalls. So you’ve got this stagnant economy in all the new nations. What can you do to improve it? You can’t make products and export them to be sold in other places because of the distance to other markets and because of the lack of resources. You can’t sell minerals, because there are no minerals to sell. You know, you can’t do the agricultural thing because there aren’t the high price agricultural products that would make a significant difference. The Marshalls was selling goldfish once, tropical fish to aquaria in the States, but that stopped pretty quickly. So what do you do? The answer, not just in Micronesia but throughout the rest of the Pacific is to take your case to these bigger countries and ask them for financial aid. The banks may reply, “Oh no. We want you to develop the genuine capacity to support your own nation.” But isn’t that expecting a miracle? How exactly does this happen, unless you do things like sell services. Unless you do things like send half your population to the US to get jobs, while you depend on the remittances of money they send back. Or unless you charge the US for the strategic zone that it gains due to the terms of the Compact, which provide a US monopoly of the area.

We’re seeing the outmigration of Micronesians today because they can’t find jobs in the islands. The outmigration started from the very first implementation of the Compact in 1986 when the document was signed. Just two years later there was already a measurable outflow of people to the States. But it became much stronger during the late ’90s, because there was an Asian Development Bank team that was called in to cut down the size of the government and to reduce government jobs. So they lopped off about a third of the jobs. What that meant was there were even fewer opportunities for young Micronesians to return to their islands and find jobs waiting for them. So the response was “Off we go to college, but thank you very much, we’re staying in the US after graduation because there are no opportunities for us back in the islands. And that’s pretty much been the pattern since.

But I must say that I’ve been interested in remittances, the money emigrants send back home. I used to believe that remittances would play a big role in developing the island economy, as was the case in Samoa and Tonga. Samoa was getting 25 percent of its gross national product from remittances, the money people were sending back. Tonga was once getting 40 percent from remittances, although now the figure has dropped to about 30 percent—still a good share of the national income. In Micronesia, when we did our first video on people who settled abroad in 2006, we found that remittances in FSM were about 16 to 18 million dollars a year. And then, three years later, they dropped to about 8 million; and after that, they seemed to have dropped to about 4 million. So FSM is going the wrong direction on remittances. As time goes on, it appears that less money is coming in by the year rather than more. I don’t know why. But I’ve encouraged leaders in Micronesia to do everything that they can to encourage people to come back for visits, to give them continuing land rights, and to offer them to opportunity to vote absentee ballots. There might be homecoming days every once in a while, occasions that would draw them back to the islands, remind them where they’re from, and reinforce their sense of cultural identity.

Jensen: The next question is on the interactions between the Roman Catholic Church, the Congregational Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. What has been positive? Where can we all improve?

Hezel: Let me first say that we have come a long way. I think the climate is entirely different from what it was when I first came to the islands in the early 1960s, when other churches were usually regarded as the enemies. When I returned to the islands in 1969, things had taken a big turn. I could converse with German Lutherans on cultural matters, give talks to young people from the Congregational Church, chat with LDS missionaries about language, and play basketball on a truly ecumenical team. On Pohnpei, some years later, my gang would go to the Seventh-day Adventist school on Pohnpei and use their gym for our games. Of course, we did it on Sunday, and that day presented no big problem for them. But we could also do that because the principal of the SDA school was a brother-in-law of a Catholic deacon and the pastor of the church in one of the other parts in Pohnpei. So you always had those ties between people from one church and another. That’s the wonderful thing about these islands. As you start talking, you begin to make known who are you related to and who do you know. It doesn’t take long before the parties find links that connect them to one another in some way. You might have to go back a couple of generations, but that’s just fine. This is a strategy that people use for discovering links between themselves. There’s so many links, personal links between people in the Roman Catholic Church and these other churches, that you wouldn’t dare say anything harsh about the other religions.

The other day I was walking into the hospital here—GRMC, Guam Regional Medical City hospital—four Chuukese women were coming out, so I asked them, “Are you Catholics?” One of the women took it upon herself to explain, “She’s Catholic, she’s Protestant, she’s something else.” And so it went. I told her that I wasn’t going to burn a cross in front of their homes or curse them publicly. I only asked the question because I wanted to find out if there was someone I should be visiting in the hospital. They nodded and accepted my explanation. We have thankfully arrived at an age when we can happily accept one another’s presence in the islands and even see one another as allies rather than foes. The intolerance of a past age is gone, as far as I can see.

Woods: What has changed the attitude of rigidity or harshness of an earlier period with respect to religious differences? What do you attribute the attitude changes to a more ecumenical feeling in the islands?

Hezel: I think that one time there was this competitive drive that was supported by the theologies of our religions. We felt that we had to bring the local people into what we regarded as the true faith. And I think missionaries representing other religions were thinking the same thing. Now, however, there is a theological understanding that what we’re supposed to do is bring people closer together to God, the one God. We can call this God different names, and we can theologize differently about Him, but we’re not talking about a whole different series of gods. This is not Yahweh versus Thor or Jupiter or Osiris or Baal. Just calling him Yahweh or Jehovah, or whatever other name you want, is not going to make a huge difference. We are beginning to understand that now. We are beginning to see each other as allies in a common cause rather than as adversaries. This notion that we are all about the same basic task has taken root in a lot of people in the islands. I tell people all the time, for example, that I have never seen so many couples holding hands while walking as I did when I was in Salt Lake City. Wasn’t that a sign that the work of God was being accomplished there. Perhaps not as I might have done it, but still the work of God.

Woods: That’s wonderful. Let me just ask one follow-up question, because I do a lot of interfaith work, particularly with Catholics, and the first thing I thought of when you were mentioning the 1960s is, because of being familiar with Vatican 2 in about 1965, do you think that had an impact? I just wondered if you think that was a turning point?

Hezel: The Second Vatican Council was undoubtedly a formal recognition of the changing attitudes and theological positions. There was this old saying: “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.” In other words, “outside of the church there is no salvation.” Actually, we recognized that there is there is plenty of salvation outside of our limited church. And the best thing that we can do is think big rather than small. We are interested after all in pursuing the same goals: having people develop their own spiritual life and bring their attention to the Lord. We’re all doing this. But I must admit that conversations like the one I had last night during a Catholic clergy get-together make it clear to me there is a right wing turn in Catholic theology and perhaps in seminary training these days. I can’t explain this entirely, but it seems that more and more people are going back to doing the theology of Thomas Aquinas, one that had been supplanted by other theologies in the ’60s. They’re turning towards the fussiness of ecclesiastical dress. They’re turning towards the Latin Mass. They’re turning towards all of these old customs that seem to symbolize for them the original church “uncorrupted,” as they believe, by recent changes. In other words, they seem to be trying to recapture the day when everybody who was called a Catholic went to Sunday mass. If only we could get back to those days, they feel. But I think they’re on a fool’s errand. I don’t think we’re going to recapture those days. Certainly not in that way. I think we have to keep speaking to people about God in a language that they understand, and never stop trying to relate the divine somehow to others to the world in which we live and work.