

Religion Today
January 10-15, 2001
The End of Christianity in Bethlehem?
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Christmas did not come to Bethlehem this year. No pilgrims worshiped. No choirs sang. No lights decorated Manger Square. No crowds filled the restaurant tables or purchased souvenirs in the shops. The throngs of people from around the world stayed home; the town of Jesus' birth was no place for celebration.

This year, Bethlehem was supposed to be the center of Christian celebration of the new millennium—the place where the third Christian millennium dawned. Years ago, plans were made for a huge influx of worshipers to Bethlehem, who would celebrate Christ's birth and welcome the future. Millions of dollars were invested, partly by Yassar Arafat's Palestinian Authority Government, but mostly by private individuals and entrepreneurs. New hotels were built, restaurants and other facilities were constructed to accommodate the visitors, and Manger Square itself received a multi-million dollar facelift.

But then came the failure of the Middle East Peace Talks and the start of the new Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation. At first it was merely unsafe—Bethlehem and its neighboring villages became a center for anti-Israeli agitation on the West Bank. But then the Israeli Army moved in, surrounded Bethlehem, and set up a blockade, placing heavy restrictions on movement in and out of the new restricted zone. The violence stopped, but so did the plans for Bethlehem's celebration of Jesus' birth and the arrival of the new Christian millennium.

There are many somber observations that we could draw: loss of jobs and economic hardship, the missed opportunity for Christian celebration, the injury and death in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian friction. But I want to focus on just one, namely, that this disaster may signal the

beginning of the end for native Christianity in the Holy Land. At a time when Palestinian Christianity is already marginalized and its membership has been declining, this may be the final blow.

The money invested to prepare for the celebration that never came was largely from native Palestinian Christians. It was the native Palestinian Christians who failed to get jobs or to earn wages to support their families. And in the end, it will be the native Palestinian Christians who will lose their houses and their possessions, and who will be forced to emigrate from the country to find new jobs. The start of the new Christian millennium may see the final loss of an indigenous Christianity in the land of its birth.

To be sure, Christianity will still be represented in the Holy Land, but it will be the Christianity of the rest of the world. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Christian shrines throughout the Holy Land will remain. But they are maintained by the international Christian community, by monks, priests and believers who come from other countries to be in the land of Christ's birth. It is the native Christians, those who have lived in this country for centuries, who have for generations been born here, married, raised their families and died here, who will disappear. What does that say about the message of peace that Jesus brought to the Earth 2000 years ago?