

Stephen Fry’s “Alternative Christmas Message” of peace, goodwill and a blind eye to Israeli genocide

Paul Bond
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Channel 4’s 2023 “Alternative Christmas Message” was a low point for the liberal pretensions of the station and of the popular actor, author and presenter, Stephen Fry. The six-minute address centred on rising antisemitism in Britain was an apologia for the Israeli government delivered during its genocide of Palestinians.

Fry managed only token and perfunctory mentions of Islamophobia. His passing reference to Israeli actions was an afterthought, framed entirely within the Israeli state’s official narrative that October 7 marked the beginning of hostilities. He had nothing to say about the genocidal character of the Israeli state’s onslaught which has followed.

On October 7, around 1,140 people were killed, including 373 members of the security forces, and around 250 hostages were taken. There is growing evidence that, despite ample military intelligence, the Israeli government allowed the attack to take place and that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) killed many civilians, both in crossfire or deliberately during missile attacks on buildings and cars. The incursion was meant to serve as a pretext for a long-planned assault on Gaza.

Since then, around 30,000 Palestinians have been recorded as killed, with thousands more still unaccounted for, and 56,697 injured by Israeli forces. Infrastructure, hospitals and refugee camps have been bombed and journalists targeted. There is clear evidence of war crimes and targeting of civilians. The IDF are pursuing the ethnic cleansing of Gaza Strip in line with the explicit policies of Benjamin Netanyahu’s fascist cabinet.

Pointing to a rise in antisemitic attacks since October 7 without addressing the genocide in Gaza peddles the Israeli state’s justifications for its own barbarity. The greatest crime in the world today is being perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians, and Fry barely mentions it.

He cites Metropolitan Police figures showing a 1,350 percent increase in antisemitic incidents in London. Between October 1 and 18, 218 incidents were recorded, up from 15 for the same period the year before.

There were 101 Islamophobic incidents over the same period, up from 42 a year earlier—despite what the Muslim Council of Britain recognises as “the extremely low reporting rate from Muslim communities.”

Fry does not define what his figures for antisemitic attacks include. There have been racist incidents, including the daubing of swastikas. But there have also been concerted efforts to portray any criticism of the Israeli government and its criminal war as antisemitic.

Pro-Israel groups have worked to pin the rise in reported incidents on Hamas, repeating the propaganda of the Netanyahu government. The pro-Israel Community Security Trust, which played a pernicious role in the slander of Jeremy Corbyn’s supporters as antisemites, said, “This wave of antisemitism was triggered by the mass murder, rape and kidnapping of Jews in Israel, and is fuelled and sustained by extremist hatred online and on our streets.”

In fact, the danger of a rise in antisemitism comes not from the October 7 Palestinian incursion but Israel’s brutal military assault on Gaza that followed, and the identification of Jewish people with Israel and its crimes which is the central message of Zionism.

Fry delivered his message in the most benignly parodic form of an establishment English figure—tacky Christmas jumper, china teapot and all—trading on his media-bestowed “national treasure” status. For all that, he explained, he is of Jewish heritage. A genetics test had revealed he had 52 percent Ashkenazy Jewish DNA.

He needed no such genetic tests. His mother’s parents, Martin and Rosa Neumann, were Hungarian Jews who

emigrated to Britain in 1927. Rosa's parents were sent to a concentration camp in Riga, and Fry's mother's aunt and cousins perished in Auschwitz and Stutthof.

Does any of this matter, he asked, as "I don't really 'identify as Jewish' any more than I 'identify as English' or 'British'." Clearly it does, because Fry, and his political backers, are raising the unimaginable crimes of the Nazis against Jews to paint opposition to Israel's Gaza genocide as a new form of "left" antisemitism.

Fry's Jewish heritage, to the extent it was known about, has until now been a matter of supreme indifference to majority of the British public. Fry himself acknowledges that only small far-right groups have ever attacked him for it. He draws attention to his Jewish background now to declare, outrageously, that he was glad his grandparents were not still alive "to read newspaper stories that would have reminded them of the 1930s Europe they left."

To suggest a comparison between Britain in the 2020s and the fascist regimes of the 1930s is a revolting insult to the memory of those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis and their allies. The event in the world most redolent of the crimes of 20th century fascism is Israel's war on Gaza.

"Can you imagine," Fry continued, "Jews afraid to be themselves in the open for fear of reprisal?" and spoke of the "old evil" of antisemitism.

This too follows the Zionist line that antisemitism is some ahistorical universal. As it cannot be defeated, Zionism argues, Jews can only survive in Israel, and only by waging perpetual and ever-more genocidal war on Arab neighbours and fellow-residents.

Fry's endorsement of Israel's war has history. Shortly after October 7, he fell into line with the Israeli regime by signing an open letter from the "Creative Community for Peace" (CCFP). The CCFP letter was a right-wing provocation that spoke of Israel taking "the necessary steps to defend its citizens in the coming days and weeks."

The CCFP, founded in 2011 to oppose the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, is linked with the far-right StandWithUs in the Israeli government-funded Israel Emergency Alliance. Fry signed another CCFP letter in 2019, supporting holding the Eurovision Song Contest in Israel.

These are not the only Zionist apologists and advocates Fry has lined up with. The Alternative Christmas Message broadcast's production company, Fulwell73, was founded by four former members of Zionist youth group B'nei Akiva.

B'nei Akiva channels Israeli youth into the military through its Limmud programme, which it says helps "tens of thousands of young Israelis join Mechinot [educational institutions]... to prepare for the challenges of transitioning from school into the IDF."

Fulwell73's founders have also all spoken at events for the Jewish Leadership Council, a pro-Israel lobby group.

Channel 4's programme prompted an angry backlash, both for its omission of Israel's genocidal actions and for its producers' pro-Israel lobbying record. Fry's defenders responded furiously with the inevitable accusation that any criticism of the broadcast was itself antisemitic. They had considered Fry's message something of a coup, winning a significantly more high-profile entertainer to the Zionist cause than they have been able to muster thus far—with events defending the Israeli state hitherto reliant on TV presenter Rachel Riley and actors Tracy-Ann Oberman and Eddie Marsan for a recognisable face.

Fry's performance has served only to stain himself and the nominally more "alternative" and "critical" Channel 4 with the blood of tens of thousands of Palestinians. It should be recalled that in 2008, on the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the state of Israel, Fry signed a rather different open letter, which declared:

"We cannot celebrate the birthday of a state founded on terrorism, massacres and the dispossession of another people from their land. We cannot celebrate the birthday of a state that even now engages in ethnic cleansing, that violates international law, that is inflicting a monstrous collective punishment on the civilian population of Gaza and that continues to deny to Palestinians their human rights and national aspirations."

Fry has now clearly made his peace with the State of Israel and its crimes. It is an act from which he, who trades on his reputation as an urbane, intelligent, cultured and humane individual, along with many others, will never truly recover.



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