

Assuming We are Dealing with Men: Taking Nietzsche Out of Context

by Mark Gullick (October 2014)

The French philosopher René Descartes was a worried man. His concern was that his memory resembled a sheet of paper which was constantly being written over with his experiences, with facts and events. Realising that it is in the nature of paper eventually to become filled with writing, he avoided wherever possible being told extraneous facts for fear that insufficient room would remain in his mind for things of importance to this polymath. Thus, he hoped to avoid the fate of Homer. Homer Simpson, that is. The yellow father of three noted the same phenomenon, cheerfully asking of wife Marge whether she remembered 'that time I learnt how to make tequila and forgot how to drive'.

With Cartesian concern on my mind (as it were), I now refuse to use Google to retrieve a half-remembered fact. I am too likely to be distracted and, in addition, I wish to keep my memory as supple as is possible for a middle-aged man, and not reliant on modern prosthetics. So it is that I can remember only the sketchiest detail of a Radio 4 *Today* programme interview which took place some years ago.

One of *Today's* presenters was talking to a religious spokesman who had been caught saying something culturally – or rather multiculturally – contentious in a conversation he erroneously believed had gone unrecorded. His repeated defence was the (post-) modern default excuse; his words had been taken out of context. As the interview progressed, it became clear that the unfortunate man believed that 'taken out of context' was equivalent to 'repeated without my permission'. His confusion was increasingly apparent to the listener and to the interviewer, who declined to point out the error, fearing perhaps for community relations. The loose-tongued interviewee – a religious man, as noted – and his fear of decontextualisation, bring us to another philosopher, himself the son of a religious man.

In 1888, shortly before his complete mental collapse, Lutheran pastor's son Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a book criticising Christianity, and by extension all religion. The short work was not published until 1895, by which time Nietzsche had been insane for six years, but it would go on to become something akin to the 'dynamite' Nietzsche believed and wished his work

to be. Nietzsche, for demonstrable reasons, is a writer often quoted out of context, but this book is more cohesive than his others, with their intentional lack of systematising, and has much to say to the West of today, embroiled as it is in a problem which could be described as religious. The book was *Der Antikrist*.

Like much of Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (or *The Antichristian*; the German signifies both) is worth reading through quickly and returning to at leisure. Familiar Nietzschean themes are present and correct: The Christian as *homme de ressentiment*