CHAPTER 2

The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted

Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? And some others said, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

*THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, 17:18*

When St Paul's Cathedral was rebuilt after its destruction in the Great Fire of 1666, the apostle Paul preaching at Athens was an apt scene to display inside the newly constructed church. In a deliberate imitation of Raphael's magnificent tapestry of the same vista, a cartoon copy of which hung for many years in the halls of English royalty, Sir James Thornhill's painting, which won him the commission for the Cathedral's cupola, showed Paul reasoning with Stoics and Epicureans in an attempt to convert them to belief in the one true God and in the resurrection.¹ It was an incredibly powerful image. When the Huguenot Simon Gribelin published a set of commercially popular engravings in England in 1720 based on the Raphael cartoons (Figure 3), not long after Thornhill submitted his painting (Figure 4), the image became even more widely known and eventually relatively cheap to own.² As a material symbol of Anglican Christianity triumphant, complete with a phoenix rising from the flames on the south-end transept, the new St Paul's Cathedral was an English Areopagus, a new platform from which the truth of the Christian religion could be once again proclaimed to contemporary “unbelievers.”³ Where the apostle Paul had proclaimed the truth of the Christian religion by arguing against pagan philosophers, early modern English apologists did likewise by attacking any and all forms of atheism, including those they associated with pagan philosophy. This attack was called the confutation of atheism.

As a genre of early modern Christian apologetics, the confutation of atheism employed a classical rhetorical form and utilized every type of early modern textual format. It thereby reached a very wide audience, from philosophers to politicians to ordinary parishioners. The confutation of atheism was delivered in sermons by Protestant clergymen in their local parish, distributed as popular broadsides, published as part of pamphlet disputes, and constructed as an elaborate argument by the learned in weighty philosophical treatises and theological tomes. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the matter, form, and patterned delivery of this important and hitherto unexplored religious discourse.

Materially speaking, the confutation of atheism was often a part of a textual work with broad aims, such as the puritan preacher Henry Smith’s frequently reprinted 1593 work, *Gods Arrow Against Atheists*, and it often took up the whole of a given text, such as John Dove’s *A Confutation of Atheisme*, published in 1605 and again in 1640. As the table of contents makes clear, in Smith’s popular text the confutation of atheism takes up Chapter 1 and was the first and