CHAPTER 4

Anti-Atheist Plato

For a group of very influential seventeenth-century Cambridge-trained clergy-men, Plato the theist provided the ancient foil to Epicurus the atheist. The Cambridge Platonists\(^1\) tended to view the apostle Paul himself as a kind of Platonist. They also viewed the Platonists and Neoplatonists of antiquity as pagan philosophers who in many important ways anticipated and echoed Paul. Nor were these Cambridge divines alone in their combination of Platonic and Christian wisdom. Sir James Thornhill’s original drawings of Paul on Areopagus (figure 11), created in the competition over the commission for the cupola of St Paul’s Cathedral, drew upon Raphael’s depiction of Plato in his *School of Athens*, imaging Paul as a second Plato.\(^2\)

Three of the most influential Cambridge Platonists, Henry More (1614–1687), John Smith (1618–1652), and Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) drew heavily on classical Platonic and Neoplatonic arguments and their vision of Christian antiquity in order to articulate a powerful and widely influential set of confutations of atheism between 1650 and 1680. Although the Cambridge Platonists have been studied frequently, their central opposition to atheism has been neglected.\(^3\) In the broadest terms they each constructed a Platonist defence of God and the

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1 The terminology is still imprecise regarding this loosely affiliated group, which often includes: Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Benjamin Whichcote, Peter Sterry, John Smith, Nathaniel Culverwell, John Worthington, all fellows of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, at some point. While the designation of “Platonist” is apt in that they all held Plato and Plotinus in high regard, it should be noted that their thought drew heavily upon many aspects of ancient philosophy, including Aristotelianism and Stoicism.


Figure 11  J. Thornhill, St Paul Preaching at Athens, 1720.
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