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Eighteenth-Century Dissent and Cambridge Platonism (Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion)

Louise Hickman

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Eighteenth-Century Dissent and Cambridge Platonism traces the influence of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists on eighteenth-century radicalism, specifically on the ethics and philosophy of Richard Price and Mary Wollstonecraft. The eighteenth century has been portrayed as an age of reason, defined as a project of rationalisation, liberalism and increasing secularisation, leading inevitably to nihilism and the collapse of modernity. The result is that any coherent concept of an 'Enlightenment Project' has to be rejected. Richard Price has been accused of being the culmination of eighteenth-century rationalism, with an intuitionist ethic that is thought to epitomise a modernistic world view. This book challenges this interpretation by arguing for the influence of Cambridge Platonism on Price and, through Price's influence, on Mary Wollstonecraft. Such a reading highlights the importance of teleology, deiformity and the divinity of reason for both Price and Wollstonecraft, and it demonstrates that their philosophy and ethics are profoundly theological. Price's philosophy of political liberty, and Wollstonecraft's feminism, both grounded in a Platonic conception of freedom, are perfectionist and radical rather than liberal. This has important implications for understanding the political nature of eighteenth-century theology: they represent not so much a shaking off of religion by secular rationality but a challenge to religious hegemony. By distinguishing Price and Wollstonecraft from other forms of rationalism including deism and Socinianism, this book takes issue with the popular division of eighteenth-century philosophy into rationalistic and empirical strands and, through considering the influence of the Cambridge Platonists, draws attention to an alternative philosophy of religion that lies between both empiricism and discursive inference.

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