



Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism

William Junker

To cite this article: William Junker (2017) Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism, *Political Theology*, 18:6, 530-531, DOI: [10.1080/1462317X.2017.1317445](https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2017.1317445)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2017.1317445>



Published online: 20 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Bennett is clearly well versed in the theological, philosophical, and scientific disciplines, and it is a pleasure to read his analysis of human dignity. The book is a good first step to continue dialogue and debate about the role of science when it comes to human life. He closes the book stating: “The notion of human dignity is a social fact of our recent history, and the politics of intrinsic worth have shaped the current topology of life, ethics, and power” (285). Bennett’s study reveals that the almost universal appeal of human dignity has historical roots, illuminating that the public spheres of church, state, and the scientific community have a different understanding and use of the idea. This book is helpful in historicizing the concept, forcing us to critically reevaluate the way we speak about human dignity.

Michael Jimenez
Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA, USA
mjimenez@apu.edu
DOI 10.1080/1462317X.2017.1317444
© 2017 Michael Jimenez



Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism. By MATTHEW B. ARBO. Lanham: Fortress Press. 2014. Pp. 149. \$35.00 (PB). ISBN: 978-1 45148-275-1.

The Introduction to this short book claims that the eighteenth-century Scottish thinker Adam Ferguson can help us to better understand important aspects of our contemporary global political economy. Yet the first four chapters of the book make little to no reference to the present. They offer instead a serviceable introduction to Ferguson’s thought against the backdrop of (what the book’s subtitle calls) “early capitalism” (2). These chapters take up in turn Ferguson’s “Political Theology” (Chapter 1), his view of “The Meaning of History” (Chapter 2), his theory of “Action and Human Nature” (Chapter 3), and his critique of “Commercial Society” (Chapter 4).

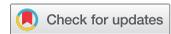
The first chapter presents Ferguson’s theology of nature and human freedom as responding to the challenges of Newtonian determinism; the second contrasts Ferguson’s views on Providence, history, and social or civilizational progress to those of his contemporaries – especially David Hume and Adam Smith; the third chapter interprets Ferguson’s practical philosophy as a combination of “classical insight and Christian metaphysical reflection” (81); and the fourth chapter expounds Ferguson’s thesis that the commercial society leads inevitably to a condition of political servitude or slavery. Of these four chapters, the second chapter on “The Meaning of History” is the best; it does a fine job of demonstrating just how far Ferguson departed from the Whiggish historiography that dominated his own milieu, and it offers a useful summary of Ferguson’s important *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*.

Only in the book’s fifth and final – and shortest – chapter, “Trappings of Liberal Democratic Capitalism,” are Ferguson’s ideas brought explicitly to bear on “today’s

economic situation” (139). The argument of this final chapter is intriguing, but also somewhat underdeveloped. Ferguson’s insight that a truly “commercial society” leads not to the refinement of our political institutions and virtues but to their ultimate decay seems on the one hand obviously relevant to today’s situation, and on the other hand too general and vague to be of much use (113).

In sum, Matthew Arbo’s *Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism* provides us with a succinct and at times provocative introduction to the thought of Adam Ferguson. Arbo is right to argue for Ferguson’s contemporary relevance, but this argument needs to be pursued at greater length and with more attention to detail to be found finally convincing.

William Junker
University of St. Thomas, St Paul, MN, USA
wjunker@stthomas.edu
DOI 10.1080/1462317X.2017.1317445
© 2017 William Junker



Faith and Joy: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Priest. By FERNANDO CARDENAL, S.J. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 2015. Pp. 254. \$29.00 (PB). ISBN: 978-1-62698-142-3.

Fernando Cardenal is a well-known Jesuit priest who occupied prominent positions in the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua. This book, published in English translation shortly before his death in February of 2016, consists of Cardenal’s reflections on his life, faith, and Nicaraguan realities. Cardenal stresses that the main purpose in sharing these reflections is not so much to draw attention to himself but rather to inspire others, especially the young, to “do something important with their lives” by getting involved in service of the poor and work for justice (xxv).

The opening chapter of the book is titled “The Key to Everything That Follows.” In this chapter Cardenal shares his experience of conversion to the God of the poor during his tertianship (a final stage of becoming a Jesuit priest) spent living in an impoverished barrio in Colombia. Here for the first time he was engaged with the daily lives of the poor, something uncommon for Jesuits in that time period. “I was seeing the suffering of people whom I loved,” he says, “and my heart ached” (3). He came to understand that the God of Jesus is “a God who is not neutral in the face of destitution and injustice” (6). Upon leaving Colombia to return to Nicaragua, Cardenal made a faith commitment to solidarity with the poor that would shape the remainder of his life.

Subsequent chapters of the book, told in the form of powerful personal vignettes, share where this faith commitment led him. Assigned to work as vice-president of student affairs at the Central American University in Managua, for example, Cardenal quickly finds himself supporting a student takeover of the university on behalf of educational reform. When student leaders of the university are arrested and tortured