

DOCTORAL RESEARCH UPDATE

The Moral and Political Theology of Adam Ferguson

The aim of this thesis is to explore Adam Ferguson's response to the economic question by outlining the theological shape of his moral and political philosophy. Ferguson stands at the front of the 'Commercial Age' with ethical indignation, expressing intense disagreement with his Scottish peers concerning the establishment of a distinctly moral economic order. A much neglected voice within the eighteenth-century civic discourse, Ferguson has often been the victim of an historical generalization, where he is grouped with other 'noble humanists' of the Scottish enlightenment and made to take their rational view points. My contention is that Ferguson cannot be so conveniently categorized; his thought displays an historic sensitivity to questions of morality and politics that isolates and resolutely challenges the compromises of modernity, rather than accommodate them. The son of a minister and himself a military chaplain prior to taking the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, Ferguson's commitments to Christian faith and obedience simply cannot be overlooked if one wishes to do him hermeneutic justice.

As Ferguson is himself a remarkably wide-ranging theorist, giving shape to his moral vision of economic life will require a somewhat wide-ranging conceptual outline involving a variety of practical questions. The primary task will be to bring an ordered unity to Ferguson's moral and political thought by focusing upon four dominant themes: Mind, Action, Natural Law and Political Jurisdiction, and the Meaning of History; the point being to elucidate how these themes relate to the nature of the economic question. As this intellectual history gains clarity and definition it will be seen that it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that confers meaning to history, the Spirit of God that empowers moral imagination through Divine Illumination, the authority of Christ that ultimately consecrates political power, and the grace of God that gives appropriate context for authentic human exertion "by, in and for God." Thus, as each theme relates to the economic question, a theologically attentive and morally ordered economic sphere leads to the disruption of modernity's unacknowledged project—the economization of politics. If such arguments can be established this will have the effect both of incorporating yet one more distinctly Christian voice within the history of moral and political reflection, as well as broadening our understanding of how the economic and political orders are to be ethically configured.

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