

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER.

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APHRODITE.

Reproduced from *Mythology of All the Races*, Vol. I, Greek and Roman.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## ON THE RIGHT OF REBELLION.<sup>1</sup>

BY MARTIN LUTHER.

Early in 1525 the peasants of South Germany rose against their rulers appealing to Luther as a defender of their rights, and protesting against being called rebels. They formed leagues and issued a Bill of Rights in Twelve Articles. The first of these demanded the right to choose their own preachers; the second that the preacher should be supported by the tithes of grain, which alone they held to be scriptural; the third to the eleventh inclusive demanded relief from sundry oppressive taxes and from serfdom, and concession of the right to fish, hunt and gather fuel for personal use on public domains; the twelfth offered to submit to correction supported by Gospel, but reserved the right to add further demands on the same ground. On account of the appeal to his authority Luther issued his "Admonition to Peace, in Reply to the 12 Articles of the Peasant League of Suabia." In May of the same year, after much rioting by the peasants, Luther issued a second pamphlet in the case, "Against the Plundering and Murderous Peasants," in which he justified harsh measures against them. We quote chiefly from the first pamphlet.

THE peasants who have formed the league in Suabia have set up twelve articles of their intolerable burdens under the government and published them with an attempt to found them on certain passages of Scripture. Among them all this pleased me best that in the twelfth they offered willingly and gladly to accept better reason if this were lacking and needed, and to be guided if this were done with clear, open and undeniable passages of Scripture, as it is

<sup>1</sup> Translated and edited by W. H. Carruth.

just and proper that no one's conscience should be instructed or directed otherwise and further than according to Holy Scripture.

Now because this affair is great and perilous, involving both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world,—for if this insurrection should spread and prevail both kingdoms would perish, so that neither civil government nor the word of God would remain but an eternal distraction of the entire German land,—therefore it is necessary to speak freely about it and to advise without respect of persons; and on the other hand that we listen fairly and hear both sides, lest, our hearts being hardened and our ears stopped, God's wrath should have full sweep and swing.

#### TO THE PRINCES AND LORDS.

In the first place, we have no one to thank for such disorder and rebellion but you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops, and crazy monks and priests, who, stubborn unto this day, have not ceased to rave and rage against the blessed Gospel, even though you know that it is right and that you cannot refute it. Moreover in your worldly offices you do nothing but skin and tax in order to keep up your pride and splendor, till the common man neither can nor will endure it longer. The sword is at your throats, yet you think you are so firm in the saddle that you cannot be unhorsed. . . .

This you should know, my dear masters, that God is so guiding things that people cannot, will not, should not bear your tyranny longer. You must reform and give way to God's word. If you will not do it in friendly wise, you will have to do it in violent and destructive unwise. If the peasants do not accomplish it, others will have to. And even if you beat them all, they would not be beaten, but God would raise up others. It is not peasants, dear masters, who are opposing you; it is God himself who is against you to punish your tyranny. There are those among you who have said they would stake land and people to root out the Lutheran teaching. How would it seem if you should prove your own prophets and land and people were already lost? Jest not with God, my masters. . . .

Therefore, my dear lords, despise not my faithful warning, although I am a poor man. And do not despise this uprising, I pray you. Not that I think or fear that they prove too much for you, nor do I wish that you should be afraid of them. But fear God and consider his wrath: if he wishes to punish you, as you deserve, I fear, he will do so, even if the peasants were a hundred-fold fewer. For he can make peasants of stones and vice versa,

and by the hands of one peasant he can slay a hundred of your retainers, so that all your armor and strength would be naught.

If you will still take counsel, my dear masters, for God's sake give way a little to wrath. A load of hay should make way for a drunken man; how much more should you cease your rage and your stubborn tyranny, and deal with the peasants in reason, than with drunken men or madmen! Do not begin quarrels with them; for you do not know what the end will be. Try first to settle it in kindness, for you do not know what God may intend, lest a spark may be kindled that shall set all Germany on fire so that no one can put it out. . . . You can lose nothing by kindness, and even if you lost something, you can receive it tenfold hereafter in peace, whereas with war you may lose life and goods. Why will you take a risk when in good fashion you can do more good?

They have set up twelve articles, some of which are so right and fair that they take away your good name before God and the world and make true the 107th Psalm, bringing contempt upon princes. Yet they are nearly all aimed at their own profit and use and given the best color for themselves. I could set up very different articles against you, involving all Germany and its government, as I have done in the book to the Christian Nobility, matters of much more concern. But since you threw those to the wind, you must now hear and tolerate such selfish articles; and it serves you right, that you can take no advice.

The first article, demanding the right to hear the Gospel and to choose their preachers, you cannot refuse with any face, although there is a selfish element connected with it, in their claim that the preacher is maintained by the tithe, which is not theirs. But this is the sum of it, that the Gospel be preached to them. Against this no government can or should object. Indeed government should not interfere with what any one will teach or believe, be it Gospel or lies. It is enough that it forbid the teaching of discord and rebellion.

The other articles touching physical complaints, such as matters of serfdom, levies and the like, are also just and right. For government is not established to seek its profit and pleasure from its subjects, but to give them profit and whatever is best for them. Now it is not to be borne forever to skin and extort thus. What good does it do him if a peasant's field bear as many florins as blades and kernels, if the government takes only that much more, increasing its own splendor therewith, lavishing the income on clothes, food and drink, buildings and the like, as if it were chaff? You

ought to limit your extravagance and stop the expenditures, so that a poor man might save something. You have gathered further information from their pamphlets in which they support their demands adequately.

#### TO THE PEASANTS.

Up to this point, dear friends, you have heard only that I admit it is all too true and certain that the princes and lords who forbid the preaching of the Gospel and oppress the people so unbearably well deserve that God cast them down from their seats, as having sinned heavily against God and men. They have no excuse. Nevertheless you should be cautious that you undertake your affair aright and with good conscience. For if you have a good conscience you have the comforting advantage that God will support you and help you through. And even if you should for a time be beaten or even suffer death in the cause, yet you would win in the end and your soul be saved with all the saints. But if you are not right and have no good conscience, you must succumb, and, even if you should win temporarily and slay all the princes, you must in the end be lost body and soul.

In the first place, dear brethren, you cite the name of God and call yourselves a Christian band or league, and allege that you propose to act and proceed according to divine law. Well now, you know that God's name, word and title are not to be cited to no purpose and in vain, as he says in the second commandment. Here stands the text simple and clear, which applies to you as well as all men, regardless of your great numbers, your right, or your frightfulness, threatening you with his wrath as much as us others . . . .

Secondly, that you are taking God's name in vain and violating it is easily proven, and that finally on this account all misfortune will come upon you is beyond doubt, unless God's word is not true. For here stands his word, saying through the mouth of Christ, "Whosoever taketh the sword shall perish by the sword." This means nothing else than that no one on his own presumption is to assume authority, but, as Paul says, every soul should be in subjection to the higher powers.

Thirdly, Yea, say ye, our government is too wicked and intolerable; for they will not leave us the Gospel, and oppress us all too harshly in the matter of temporal goods, destroying us body and soul. Yet I reply, That the government is bad and unjust does not justify mobs and insurrections. For it does not belong to every



individual to punish wickedness, but only to the civil authority which wields the sword. . . . So natural law and the laws of all the world agree that no one shall or may be his own judge or avenge himself. . . . Now you cannot deny that your uprising is of such a nature that you are making yourselves your own judges and avenging yourselves and not suffering wrong. This is not only contrary to Christian law and the Gospel, but also contrary to natural law and all justice.

Now if you are to justify yourselves in your undertaking, when both divine and Christian laws in the Old and the New Testaments as well as natural law, are against you, you must be able to cite a new and especial command of God, confirmed by signs and wonders, which is giving you the right to do this and commanding you to do so; otherwise God will not allow his word and order to be broken by you on your own license, but, because you appeal to divine law and yet are violating it, he will give you a terrible fall and punishment for taking his name in vain, and will damn you eternally besides, as above said. . . .

I ask you in this to judge for yourselves, and appeal to your decision, which is the worse robber, the one who takes from another a large piece of property but yet leaves him something, or the one who takes from him all that he has and his life beside? The government is taking your property from you unjustly; that is one thing. In return you are taking from it its authority, in which is involved all its property, and life as well. Therefore, you are much worse robbers than they and plan worse things than they have done. Yea, say you, we will leave them life and property enough. Believe this who will; I will not. He who ventures such a wrong as to take his authority from any one by force, which is the chief and essential matter, will not stop there: he will also take from him the rest and least, which depends upon it. If the wolf eats a whole sheep, he will surely eat an ear. And even though you were so well disposed that you would leave them life and property enough, yet there is still too much robbery and wrong in taking from them the best, namely authority, and setting yourselves up as lords over them. God will surely judge you to be the greatest robbers.

Can you not think and reckon out, dear friends, if your purpose were right, that every one would be the other's judge and no authority nor government, order or law be left in the world, but only murder and bloodshed.

For as soon as he saw that any one was wronging him he would proceed to judge him and punish him himself. Now if this is im-

proper and intolerable from a single person, it is not to be tolerated from a band or mob. But if it is to be tolerated from a band or mob, then we cannot properly forbid it to an individual. For in both cases there is the same cause, to wit, the wrong done.

And how do you propose to act? If in your league such anarchy were begun that each individual set himself against the other to avenge himself upon him, would you tolerate it? Would you not say that he should let others, who were appointed by you, judge and avenge? How then do you expect to stand before God and the world if you judge and avenge yourselves in opposition to the government instituted by God?

But all this is based on universal divine and natural law, which heathen, Turks and Jews must observe if peace and order are to be maintained in the world. And even if you observed such laws strictly you would be doing no better than heathen and Turks do. For not judging and avenging oneself and leaving this to the government does not constitute a Christian. We have to do it in the end, willy nilly. But since you are acting contrary to such laws, you see clearly that you are worse than heathen and Turks, not to speak of any claim to be called Christians. . . .

Therefore I say again, let your cause be as good and right as it may, yet, because you propose to defend it yourselves and not to endure violence and wrong, you may do or not do whatever God does not forbid. But I say, let alone the Christian name, and do not make it a shield for your impatient unpeaceful, un-Christian purpose; This I will neither concede to you nor allow you to use it, but snatch it from you to the best of my ability both by writing and by speech, so long as a vein is running in my body. For you will not succeed, or will succeed to the ruin of your body and your soul.

Not that I would justify or defend the government in its unbearable wrong, which you are suffering, (I confess that they are shockingly wrong and are doing shocking wrong), but this will I: If on both sides alike you refuse to be guided and (which God forbid!) you challenge and fight each other, that neither side shall speak of being Christians, but admit that, as when otherwise in the way of the world one people is fighting with another, as the saying is, God is chastising one knave by the means of the other. I wish you to be named of such sort and style in case it come to combat (which God graciously forbid!), so that the government may know that it is not fighting against Christians but heathen, and that you may know that you are fighting against the government not as

Christians but as heathen. For those are Christians who fight not for themselves with swords and guns, but with the cross and the passion, just as their duke Christ wields not the sword but hangs on the cross. Therefore their victory lies not in conquering and ruling and in power, but in yielding and in weakness, as St. Paul says, 2 Cor. x. "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God"; and again, "Strength is perfected in weakness."

Thus all your articles are answered. For although they are right and just by the law of nature, yet you have forgotten the law of Christ in not achieving and carrying them out in patience and prayer to God, as becomes Christians, but instead you have determined in your own impatience and lawlessness to force them from the government and compel them by violence, which is contrary to local law and natural justice. . . .

It is true that you are right in demanding the Gospel, if indeed you are in earnest. Indeed, I will make this article keener than you yourselves do and say: It is intolerable that men should shut the doors of Heaven against any one and force him into hell. This no one should endure and rather lose a thousand lives for it. But he who withholds from me the Gospel is shutting Heaven against me and driving me by force into hell; since there is no other means nor way to salvation but the Gospel, I may not permit this deprivation on peril of my soul.

Lo, is not your right here strongly enough proven? Yet it does not follow that I may set my fist against the government that does me this wrong. And sayest thou, Yea, how then am I to endure it and at the same time not endure it? And the answer is easy: It is impossible to keep the Gospel from any one. There is no power in Heaven or on earth that can do this. For it is an open teaching which goes freely under the open sky and is bound to no place, like the star which passing through the air announced the birth of Christ to the wise men from the East.

This, indeed, is true, that the lords can control the place and space where the Gospel or the preacher are. But thou canst leave that city or village and follow the Gospel to some other place, and it is not necessary to capture or keep that city or village on account of the Gospel: but leave the ruler with his city, and follow thou the Gospel. Thus thou wilt suffer that they wrong thee and drive thee away, yet sufferest not that they deprive thee of the Gospel. See, thus do the two agree,—suffering and not suffering. Otherwise, if thou propose to retain the city along with the Gospel, thou robbest

the lord of the city of what is his, and pretendest that thou doest it for the sake of the Gospel. My dear man, the Gospel teaches thee not to rob nor take, even though the owner of the property misuses it wrongfully, to thy harm, and against the law of God. The Gospel needs no physical space nor place where it may abide; it will and must dwell in thy heart.

In specific treatment of the Twelve Articles Luther says: Number one is right; you have the right to choose your own preacher; choose him and ask the authorities to confirm him; if they will not, let him flee and follow him. Number Two, claiming the tithes for the poor and other public needs, means mere highway robbery, for the tithes are not yours, but the government's. To Number Three, demanding the abolition of serfdom, this is all from the wrong standpoint, making Christian freedom a fleshly matter; a serf can be a Christian; Christ has nothing to do with physical freedom. As to the other articles, demanding more share in the public goods, these are matters belonging to lawyers; they too are physical interests and do not concern Christians as such.

Luther closes in an appeal to both sides:

Now, my dear sirs, since there is nothing Christian on either side, and no Christian issue between you, but both lords and peasants are concerned with heathen or worldly rights and wrongs and temporal goods, and moreover, since both sides are acting contrary to the will of God and are under his wrath, for God's sake let me tell and advise you,—Go at the matter as such matters are customarily dealt with, that is, under law and not by force and with strife, that you may not cause endless loss of blood in German lands. For since you are wrong on both sides and propose to avenge and protect yourselves, you will destroy one another and God will chastise one knave by means of the other.

You, my lords, have against you the Holy Scripture and history, showing how tyrants are punished, so that even heathen poets write of how seldom tyrants die a dry death, but are commonly assassinated and perish in their blood. Now it is certain that you are ruling outrageously and tyrannically, forbidding the Gospel and so slaying and oppressing the poor man that you have no assurance nor hope but to perish as your like have perished in the past. . . .

You peasants have also the Gospel and all experience against you showing that no insurrection ever ended well; and God has everywhere strictly upheld this saying, He who taketh the sword

shall perish by the sword. Now because you are doing wrong in judging and deciding your own case and besides abusing the Christian name, you are certainly under the wrath of God. And even if you win and destroy the government, you could but tear one another to pieces in the end, like frenzied beasts. For since not the spirit, but flesh and blood are ruling you, God will soon send an evil spirit among you, as he did among the men of Shechem and Abimelech.

But to me the most pitiable and lamentable thing of all, one that I would gladly avert by my life and death, is that on both sides two inevitable evils will follow. Since both parties are fighting without a good conscience and to maintain the wrong, it must follow that those who are slain will perish body and soul, as dying in their sins, without repentance and grace, in the wrath of God; and this cannot be helped or avoided. For the lords would be fighting to confirm and maintain their tyranny and persecution of the Gospel and their unrighteous oppression of the poor, or at least help uphold those who are doing thus; this is a shocking wrong and contrary to the will of God, and whoever is found in this course will be eternally lost. On the other hand the peasants would be fighting to defend their leagues and their misuse of the Christian name, both of which are supremely against the will of God; and whoever is found in this course and dies in it will also be lost eternally, beyond all recourse.

The other evil result is, that Germany will be desolated, and if such bloodshed once begins it will scarcely cease until everything is destroyed. For strife is soon begun, but it is not in our power to stop when we want to. What harm have you received from so many innocent children, women and old people, whom you like madmen will draw into danger of filling the land with blood and robbery and making widows and orphans?

Therefore my faithful counsel is to choose a number of counts and barons from the nobility and a number of councilors from the cities and deal with the matter and settle it in a friendly manner; that you lords bend your stiff necks, as at last you must, willingly or not, and cease somewhat from your tyranny and oppression, so that the poor man might have room and air to breathe; and on the other side, that the peasants listen to advice and give up certain articles which demand too much and aim too high, so that the matter, even if it cannot be dealt with Christian wise, may be settled in accordance with human laws and compromises.

Luther's position is clear: Christian conduct is not conditioned on outward circumstances; rebellion against constituted authorities can not be justified on grounds of Christian teaching. As a Christian teacher he refuses to be drawn into the controversy so long as it is concerned alone with physical well-being or physical wrongs. He is not blind as a man to the wrongs done the peasants and admonishes the rulers to mitigate these.

But when the peasants resorted to actual violence, Luther issued a proclamation "Against the Plundering and Murderous Peasants," in which he justifies the authorities in the harshest measures of suppression. If they are Christians, he says, they should first offer to treat with the peasants, but if they still persist in their demands and in the resort to force in attaining them, then the authorities are performing a true Christian service in slaughtering them, while those who may fall on the side of the government are sure of eternal salvation. "Rebellion brings in its train a land full of murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and ruins everything like the greatest calamity. Therefore whoever may should strike in the case, slay and stab as he can and remember that there can be nothing more noxious, harmful and infernal than a rebellious man, just as one must kill a mad dog; if thou strike not, he will slay thee, and a whole land with thee."

Luther's intensity and bitterness in the matter is explained in part by the fact that the peasants were appealing to him and the evangelical teaching in support of their uprising, thus involving the cause of the Reformation with mob rule. He felt that his cause had enough to do in making its own way, and was wise enough to avoid entangling it with other causes however just.