PART 12
Society and Politics in Early Modern Europe

12.1 The German Peasant’s Revolt: The Twelve Articles

Luther’s stand against pope and emperor coincided with the growing anger and resentment of peasants and urban workers against noble authority. The following year the leaders of the peasants in the southwest German area drew up a manifesto of their demands. Sympathetic to their grievances, yet opposed to social revolution and disruption of public order, Luther urged the peasants to refrain from violence and seek a peaceful resolution. When the nobility disdainfully rejected the Articles, however, a bloody and destructive peasant rebellion erupted that was brutally crushed. Luther sternly approved of the retaliation because of the death and destruction that the rebels’ violence had caused.


Peace to the Christian reader and the grace of God through Christ:

There are many evil writings put forth of late which take occasion, on account of the assembling of the peasants, to cast scorn upon the Gospel, saying: “Is this the fruit of the new teaching, that no one should obey but all should everywhere rise in revolt, and rush together to reform, or perhaps destroy entirely, the authorities, both ecclesiastical and lay?” The articles below shall answer these godless and criminal fault-finders, and serve, in the first place, to remove the reproach from the word of God and, in the second place, to give a Christian excuse for the disobedience or even the revolt of the entire Peasantry....

The Second Article According as the just tithe [a tax paid in grain] is established by the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New, we are ready and willing to pay the fair tithe of grain. The word of God plainly provides that in giving... to God and distributing to his people the services of a pastor are required. We will that for the future our church provost [manager of a feudal estate], whomsoever the community may appoint, shall gather and receive this tithe. From this he shall give to the pastor, elected by the whole community, a decent and sufficient maintenance for him and his, as shall seem right to the whole community.... The small tithes,* whether ecclesiastical or lay, we will not pay at all, for the Lord God created cattle for the free use of man. We will not, therefore, pay farther an unseemly tithe which is of man’s invention.

The Third Article It has been the custom hitherto for men to hold us as their own property, which is pitiable enough, considering that Christ has delivered and redeemed us all, without exception, by the shedding of his precious blood, the lowly as well as the great. Accordingly it is consistent with Scripture that we should be free and should wish to be so. Not that we would wish to be absolutely free and under no authority. God does not teach us that we should lead a disorderly life in the lusts of the flesh, but that we should love the Lord our God and our neighbor. We would gladly observe all this as God has commanded us in the celebration of the communion. He has not commanded us not to obey the authorities, but rather that we should be humble, not only towards those in authority, but towards everyone. We are thus ready to yield obedience according to God’s law to our elected and regular authorities in all proper things becoming to a Christian. We therefore take it for granted that you will release us from serfdom as true Christians, unless it should be shown us from the gospel that we are serfs....

The Tenth Article In the tenth place, we are aggrieved by the appropriation by individuals of meadows and fields which at one time belonged to a community. These we will take again into our own hands. It may, however, happen that the land was rightfully purchased, but when the land has unfortunately been purchased in this way, some brotherly arrangement should be made according to circumstances.

The Eleventh Article In the eleventh place, we will entirely abolish the due called [heriot, a death tax], and will no longer endure it nor allow widows and orphans to be thus shamefully robbed against God’s will....

Questions:
1. What influence did Luther’s reformation doctrine have on these Articles?
2. What were their social and political demands?

* This is, tithes of other products than the staple crops—for example, tithes of pigs or lambs.
11.3 The Act of Supremacy: The Church of England

Thwarted by the pope’s reluctance from getting an annulment of his marriage, Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) invoked the principle “the king in Parliament can do anything” to validate by legislation his new position as head of the Church of England. The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, granted the king his annulment and Henry married Anne Boleyn.


ALBEIT the king’s majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England, and so is recognized by the clergy of this realm in their Convocations, yet nevertheless for corroboration and confirmation thereof, and for increase of virtue in Christ’s religion within this realm of England, and to repress and extirp all errors, heresies, and other enormities and abuses heretofore used in the same: be it enacted by authority of this present Parliament, that the king our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicana Ecclesia; and shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the title and style thereof, as all honours, dignities, preeminenties, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities to the said dignity of supreme head of the same Church belonging and appertaining; and that our said sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts, and enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God, the increase of virtue in Christ’s religion, and for the conservation of the peace, unity, and tranquillity of this realm; any usage, custom, foreign law, foreign authority, prescription, or any other thing or things to the contrary hereof notwithstanding.

Questions:
1. On what grounds did Henry claim the right to exercise authority as “Supreme Head of the Church of England?”
2. How does this law change the relationship between church and state government? between England and other European states?