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January 9, 2011: The Violence of the Secular

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Title: The Violence of the Secular

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1/9/2011—One of the most often repeated criticisms of religion by its detractors is its tendency to violence. From the Crusades to the Wars of Religion to the assassination of Salman Taseer, Governor of Pakistan's Punjab Province, who was killed on Tuesday, January 4, no one can deny this terrible tendency. But one of the messages of the neo-orthodox movement, particularly by the Christian theologian John Millbank, is that religion carries a promise of peace, while the secular, with its inevitable conflicts of self-interest, can only practice violence or repress it. There is no possibility of peace in a secular world. Millbank by no means tries to justify or deny religious violence. His point is that violence in that realm is the result of failure and can be rectified. Not so with the secular. I'm thinking of this, of course, in light of yesterday's horrific events in Arizona. Those events raise real questions about the violent rhetoric used in American political life particularly by anti-government voices. We all hope that these killings usher in a new tone in politics. But on a deeper level, killing people over healthcare differences or taxes or whatever motivated this killer, seems simply weird. At least the killings of abortion doctors, as horrible as they have been, seem comprehensible. The killers believe they are taking the law into their own hands to save human lives. How in the world have we come to the point where higher taxes or more government regulation of the economy or whatever can motivate killing people? Our differences today are not all that significant. Obamacare was patterned on earlier republican proposals. The tax rate controversy was over a 34% or 39% tax rate. None of this seems that crucial. Yet, our politics have clearly become red-hot. Millbank would say this is the result of a secular worldview in which fundamentally, as Hobbes said, we are all enemies to each other. Religion may sometimes lead to violence. But perhaps the absence of religion does so all the more.