Below is a paper I presented for Middlebury's annual Spring Academic Symposium in 2015. It was presented as part of a student panel entitled "Modern Political Philosophy."

"Religion in 17th Century Political Philosophy: God is Dying"

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In the 19th-century, Friedrich Nietzsche famously quipped that "God is dead."[1] In the 20th-century, Martin Heidegger explained this declaration to mean, "The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics… is at an end."[2] Many readers have found Nietzsche's sentiment utterly provocative and inventive. Indeed, the assertion that absolutely nothing beyond the physical world exists *was* a provocative claim then and *remains* a provocative claim into the present day. But I'd like to address the second word I used to describe Nietzsche's central idea -- "inventive." That point, I think, is much more complicated. Especially in his later works, Nietzsche himself never hesitated to boast about his inventiveness and paradigm-shifting genius, but I think it's critical to understand Nietzsche's thought as a logical and reasonable next step in a progression that goes back to the very earliest years of the era we label "modernity." Nietzsche did not philosophize in a vacuum. To demonstrate this point, I will describe how three prominent political philosophers of the 17th century treated religion -- over a century before Nietzsche was ever born. Even a limited investigation into the thought of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke reveals that God was dying long before Nietzsche rang the death knell. All three philosophers relegate theological inquiry into the supersensory beneath scientific, sensory-driven methodology.

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[1] *Gay Science* Section 125 (All citations refer to editions on the syllabus, except for Hobbes)
[2] Heidegger's *The Word of Nietzsche* 61

In a notable sentence from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, he identifies the furthest end of knowledge as an understanding of the "glory of the creator and relief of man's estate."[3] By this he means something very close to what we today might describe as use of the scientific method towards a successful execution of both "theory and practice." Contemplating the Baconian creator is worthwhile not for its own sake, but instead so that we might relieve earthly pain and suffering. Bacon's preference for this kind of scientific inquiry over religious or theological inquiry becomes evident over the course of his book, as he spends two hundred pages discussing the former and a mere 10 pages ruminating on the latter. When Bacon finally comes around to discussing religion directly, he posits that religious doctrine is only attained through "inspiration and revelation."[4] How are we to reconcile this statement with his central thesis that all knowledge in the highest sense arrives via demonstration and aims at practicality? Bacon himself never gets at this question directly, and I believe that we are forced as readers to choose one of two interpretations. Either Bacon didn't present a very serious thesis, or there is something disingenuous about his appeal to divinity. When I consider the quality of life made possible by modern medicine and other rewards of Baconian thinking, the answer seems clear to me. I posit that the undeniable influence of Bacon's thesis in our contemporary world renders the former choice inarguable. Bacon implicitly suggests that one must accept science or religion, and he sides with the former.

Like Bacon, Hobbes also elevates empirically demonstrable sensory experience above religious inquiry. Unlike Bacon, Hobbes doesn't doddle for 200 pages before implicitly raising

[3] Bacon 34
[4] Bacon 194

questions of discord between his empirically-grounded epistemology and the revealed religion he claims to believe. The very first sentence of his *Leviathan* reads, "Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal."[5] Hobbes has already revealed three several components of his religious thought in this sentence. First, we can note that the emphasis in this sentence is on *nature*, not God; Hobbes goes out of his way to engage in grammatical twisting in order to make it the very first word of his magnum opus. Second, This sentence suggests that God's art is limited to nature, that which human beings are capable of understanding and investigating. Finally, the sentence asserts man's capacity to act as *creator* in his formation of the "artificial animal," the state. This seems rather problematic since *the* distinguishing characteristic of the Judeo-Christian God that Hobbes ostensibly believes in is his unreplicatable capacity for *creation*. The totality of the *Leviathan* strongly suggests that Hobbesian political philosophy rests upon a conception of a deistic (that is to say non-interventionist or "watch-maker") God, but we need not even go farther than his very first sentence to see strong signs of his religious position.

John Locke wrote his *Two Treatises of Government* several decades after Hobbes published his *Leviathan*. Locke's work serves only to further relegate religion beneath sensory experience. The entirety of the First Thesis is a discussion of why God did not give Adam political dominion over mankind, and why, even if he did, the heirs of Adam (i.e., the English Monarchs) did not retain such dominion.[6] Perhaps it is obvious that this thesis does not suggest that Locke had a strong affinity for traditional religious thinking. The Second Treatise also

[5] Hobbes 3 (In the Hackett edition edited by Edwin Curley)
[6] Locke 267

suggests strongly that Locke sides with Hobbes in asserting the apotheosis of nature. Like with Hobbes' work, one need not delve into the complex intricacies of the text to find strong evidence for Locke's deistic position. In this 243 section treatise on political power, Locke uses the word "religion" a mere *three* times. In contrast, he mentions "nature" 206 times.[7] In all fairness, Locke does refer to scripture occasionally throughout his work, but these occasions are far more often examples of twisting context to support his deistic thesis than they are authentic applications of Biblical ideals. To offer a prominent example, he reverses the moral in the Biblical story of Jephthah in order to illustrate that God is the appropriate judge of human affairs *only when* man exists outside civil society and has no other earthly judge but himself. A traditional reading would likely interpret the Jephthah story to suggest that God's justice is ultimately higher than man's, but Locke's central thesis advocates man's departure from the state of nature (where God judges) into civil society (where man judges).

I acknowledge that I have only barely scratched the surface on the universe of thought that Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke offer on religion, but I hope I have been able to demonstrate that -- to say the least -- these three 17th century thinkers didn't put much stock in a traditional interpretation of religious doctrine. While coming short of openly declaring atheism, they recognized that a cohesive philosophy must cannot find its roots in both modern science and religion. They resoundingly supported the former and, in doing so, they infected God with the terminal disease that Nietzsche would come to diagnose over a century later.

[7] I used word processing software to gather these numbers.