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The Normative Implications of the Doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Nikolai Berdyaev. Towards a renewed Christian Orthodox Understanding of Human Freedom for the Postmodern Twenty-first Century¹

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’ and the traditional Eastern Orthodox theological understanding of human freedom as submission to



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¹ This paper is a condensed version of my Master’s thesis that I successfully defended at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands on the 10th of July 2019, and I later presented in the International Conference: “Theology of Freedom” in Bose, Italy on the 24th of October, 2019.

the Church's teachings, regulations, and laws. Further, it explains that the established Christian Orthodox view of human freedom as submission to the Church is frequently at odds with the postmodern understanding of human freedom. Lastly, it focuses on Nikolai Berdyaev - a late 19th and early 20th century Russian religious thinker - and by analysing his philosophical interpretation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, it develops a more attuned to postmodernism Christian Orthodox theological understanding of freedom which views human freedom as an absolute and unlimited choice.

Keywords

Eastern Orthodox theology, Creation Out of Nothing, Human freedom, Postmodernism, Nikolai Berdayev

1 Introduction

Having left behind the classical, the pre-modern and the modern period, Stephen R. C. Hicks, a contemporary Canadian-American philosopher, claims that, "We are postmodern now"². Well, *Postmodernism*, be it what comes right after modernity as an attack on it or only as a "part"³ or a "continuation"⁴ of it, is

² Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, (Brisbane, Queensland: Connor Court Publishing, 2004), p. 1.

³ Nooshin Forghani, Narges Keshtiaray, and Alireza Yousefy, "A Critical Examination of Postmodernism Based on Religious and Moral Values Education," *International Education Studies* 8/9 (2015), p. 98.

⁴ Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition).

the intellectual movement that initially appeared during the 1960s and the 1970s and it nowadays constitutes “the broader historical, social and cultural environment” of the twenty-first century⁵.

The present-day intellectual dominance of postmodernism, however, does not necessarily mean that we are all ‘postmodern now’ as Hicks somewhat simplistically states. Moreover, for sure, the Eastern Orthodox Church, her theology and various people - either clerics or lay - associated with her might be many other things but certainly not postmodern. Indeed, for “primarily historical reasons,” the Orthodox Church did not “organically participate in the phenomenon of modernity,”⁶ and as a result, “a large spectrum of Orthodoxy today seems not to engage with modernity at all”, let alone postmodernity⁷. Thus it is no surprise that Orthodoxy, in a way “inconceivable to ‘the West’, consistently draws from premodern (patristic) sources for ethical and social wisdom”⁸. Nevertheless, this Orthodox theological reliance on pre-modern sources tends to create such a problematic gap between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the contemporary postmodern world, that Kalaitzidis, a noted Greek Orthodox theologian, observes that, “Today we live

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>
(Accessed September 11th, 2019).

⁵ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54/1 (2010), pp. 25.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁸ Gaelan Gilbert, “A New Middle Ages? A Reappraisal of Nicholas Berdyaev’s Prophetic Imagination,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 3/4 (2012), p. 142.

in a completely postmodern world, and yet Orthodox Christianity still has not come to terms with modernity”⁹.

It is clear therefore that the Eastern Orthodox Church, at least the more traditional and institutionalised side of it, shows signs of inability to relate and respond to the broader postmodern social, cultural and intellectual environment within which she is “called to live and carry out (her) mission”¹⁰. One such sign of inability, which is the central theme of my paper, is *human freedom*, a topic that is often understood so differently from the Christian Orthodox and the postmodern camp that it commonly divides the two sides and makes them talk at cross purposes.

On the one hand, the Orthodox, believing that human freedom is God’s gift to man, emphasise that to attain freedom fully, humans should come closer to God through His Church, and so the more one follows, submits and surrenders oneself to the teachings, laws and regulations of the Church, the closer to God’s freedom they eventually come. On the other hand, however, the postmodern audience of the twenty-first century, coming from an entirely different background which “considers humans as the centre of all realities, knowledge, and values, and rejects any belief in paranormal and metaphysical truth”,¹¹ measures human freedom, not by how much one submits oneself to Church laws and regulations, but rather “by the sheer number of behavioural options open to the chooser”¹².

⁹ P. Kalaitzidis, “Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 61/1 (2009), p. 160.

¹⁰ P. Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” p. 25.

¹¹ N. Forghani et al., “A Critical Examination of Postmodernism Based on Religious and Moral Values Education,” p. 100.

¹² Donald P. Warwick, “Human Freedom and the Church of the Future,” in *The Case for Freedom: Human Rights in the Church*, pp. 107-128, ed. James A. Coriden (Washington, D.C: Corpus Books, 1969), p. 114.

The problem then that lies before us is that a significant part of the official Eastern Orthodox Church and theology traditionally perceives human freedom in a way diametrically opposed to that of the postmodern societies of our time. Furthermore, this is good news for nobody. Neither for the Orthodox Church that is often criticised for being old-fashioned and out of touch with the modern age. Nor for the present-day postmodern audience that feels disrespected and excluded whenever they hear Orthodox priests and theologians defining human freedom as submission to the Church, limiting in this way the number of choices available to humans. To solve this problem, I shall focus my paper on the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the religious philosophy of Nikolai Berdyaev. Specifically, I will present Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, and based on it, I shall develop an attuned to postmodernism Christian Orthodox understanding of freedom which will view human freedom as unlimited choice without perceiving it as a deterministic illusion.

To do so, I will argue that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is the cornerstone of the traditional Eastern Orthodox understanding of human freedom as submission to the Church's laws and regulations because it gives absolute freedom of choice to God, while at the same time it takes this freedom away from humans. Overall, I shall attempt to answer the following research question: *Is it possible to give a different interpretation of creatio ex nihilo so that to allow Orthodox Christians to perceive human freedom in terms of absolute freedom of choice rather than submission to Church laws and regulations?*

To answer this question, I will divide my paper into three sections. In the first section, I shall provide basic information regarding the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Further, I will indicate the strong influence that this doctrine exerts on the traditional and anti-postmodern Christian Orthodox under-

standing of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws. In the second section, I will briefly survey recent scholarly findings to show that there are no real theological and historical reasons obliging us to regard *creatio ex nihilo* as unchangeable Christian teaching. Subsequently, I shall turn my attention to Nikolai Berdyaev, and after presenting his philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, I will use it to offer a Christian yet more attuned to the postmodern outlook understanding of human freedom. In the third section, I shall consider three theological criticisms that Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* might receive and I will then attempt to refute them.

Finally, on a more methodological note, it is worth explaining that in what follows, I mainly examine secondary literature dealing with both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of it. In my examination of Berdyaev's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* and its connection with human freedom, I will undoubtedly use some of Berdyaev's key works. In general, however, I shall confine my presentation to secondary literature because Berdyaev's view on freedom and his interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* are scattered around his vast work and, for want of space, I cannot here survey his entire corpus. Overall, the method that I shall employ is none other than literature study, and my principal aim is first to analyse the scholarly material critically and then provide a substantiated insight into the subject matter.

2 Basic information about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and its influence on the traditional Christian Orthodox understanding of human freedom

To start with, in the first section of my paper, I shall argue that there is a correlation between the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the traditional Christian Orthodox understanding of human freedom as submission to the Church. However, first of all, what is *creatio ex nihilo*?

The so-called doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is “a foundational teaching in Judaism, Christianity and Islam,” and as its Latin name suggests, it states that, “God created the world out of nothing - from no pre-existent matter, no space or time”¹³. This simple, yet fundamental claim provided and still provides the basis for the “Christian understating of creation”¹⁴ and almost from the beginning the ecclesiastical tradition seems to have wholeheartedly embraced it considering that “from the time of the Cappadocians onwards *creatio ex nihilo* has been, East and West (...) a foundational teaching of Christian thought”¹⁵.

The important thing with this teaching is that at the heart of it lies “the dependence of ‘all that is’ (...) on God (and His) free

¹³ Carlo Cogliati, “Introduction,” in: David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice, William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Creation and the God of Abraham*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

¹⁴ Samuel Japhets, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Omnipotent God Still Creates Out of Nothing,” *ResearchGate* (April 2016), p. 2, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306253832_Creatio_Ex_Nihilo_The_Omnipotent_God_Still_Creates_Out_of_Nothing, (Accessed September 12th 2019).

¹⁵ Janet M. Soskice, “Why Creatio Ex Nihilo for Theology Today?,” in: Gary A. Anderson, Markus Bockmuehl (eds.), *Creation Ex Nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), p. 38.

choice to create”¹⁶. What *creatio ex nihilo* affirms is that in the beginning, before the creation of the universe, there was nothing but God and so whatever it was later created was necessarily caused by Him. This doctrine, therefore, introduces us to an ontological *duality*, that is, God and the universe, where the one sphere of existence, namely humans/cosmos is entirely dependent and inferior to the other one, namely God. In this way, *creatio ex nihilo* teaches the fragility and contingency of all beings since their “existence as beings is not self-sufficient. There is another dimension (God) beyond or behind the particular beings of this world, in terms of which their being can be explained”¹⁷.

It is clear then that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emphasises the *created* and thus *finite* and *transient* nature of the world and the “transcendental otherness of God”¹⁸. By doing this it establishes “a true link between the finitude and the contingency of the *creatum* and the infinity and the necessity of the *Creator*”,¹⁹ while at the same time it distinguishes between the independent realm of the uncreated/eternal God and the dependent realm of the created and transient world. Given that, *creatio ex nihilo* eventually manages to safeguard “the omnipotence and freedom of God”²⁰. By affirming that an infinite God created

¹⁶ J. M. Soskice, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: Its Jewish and Christian foundations,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, pp. 24-39, in: David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice, William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Creation and the God of Abraham*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Lewis S. Ford, “An Alternative to Creatio Ex Nihilo,” *Religious Studies* 19/2 (1983), pp. 207.

¹⁸ S. Japhets, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Omnipotent God Still Creates Out of Nothing,” p. 3.

¹⁹ C. Cogliati, “Introduction,” p. 8.

²⁰ Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation Out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), p. 180.

everything finite out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo* paints a picture of an omnipotent God. God's power is so great that He can do anything: even to create something out of nothing. In God's realm, therefore, the humanly impossible can become possible (omnipotence), and since *infinity* and *no-materiality* also reign in His realm, God is rendered *absolutely* free because in His sphere of existence there is no restrictive condition (e.g., matter, space, time) that could either enslave, determine or limit Him. Given that, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon rightly opines that with *creatio ex nihilo*, "Christianity (...) introduced into human history the very idea of (...) absolute ontological freedom of God", that is, "freedom as the transcendence of all boundaries"²¹. Nevertheless, since *creatio ex nihilo* grants absolute ontological freedom to God, then what is the case with humans and their freedom?

When it comes to human freedom, our doctrine is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, it lays the foundation for the absolute freedom of God while at the same time, it takes this very freedom away from humans by locating them in a created and finite world that suffers restrictions of all kinds. For *creatio ex nihilo*, therefore, absolute and unrestricted freedom belongs only to God and His realm, while humans, in their realm, namely the universe, can only experience "relative autonomy"²², but never absolute freedom. Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) underlines that "authentic freedom is impossible to experience in the created order and can be found only in the *ecclesial realm*

²¹ Elizabeth T. Groppe, "Creation Ex Nihilo and Ex Amore: Ontological Freedom in the Theologies of John Zizioulas and Catherine Mowry LaCugna," *Modern Theology* 21/3 (2005), pp. 478, 471-472.

²² S. Japhets, "Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Omnipotent God Still Creates Out of Nothing," p. 15.

through baptism into Christ who engrafts us into a true ontology”²³.

However, with this church-centered understanding of freedom that ultimately stems from *creatio ex nihilo*, an either/or binary logic is inserted into the Christian and especially the Orthodox understanding of human freedom. In particular, through the prism of *creatio ex nihilo*, the Eastern Orthodox Church often centers its theological understanding of human freedom around the following exclusivistic syllogism:

I. Premise 1: Absolute freedom is to be found only in the infinite and unrestricted realm of God.

II. Premise 2: Humans, being finite and living in a created, transient, and thus restrictive world, are bound to be devoid of authentic and absolute freedom unless they somehow participate in the infinite realm of God where true freedom exists.

III. Premise 3: The Orthodox Church is the body of Christ²⁴ who is believed to be the second person of the Triune God and God Himself.

IV. Premise 4: To truly belong to the Church, that is the body of God (Christ), people should faithfully follow her teachings and obediently submit themselves to her regulations and laws²⁵.

²³ E. T. Groppé, “Creation Ex Nihilo and Ex Amore: Ontological Freedom in the Theologies of John Zizioulas and Catherine Mowry LaCugna”, p. 477.

²⁴ The Eastern Orthodox Church, like many other Christian denominations, views the Church as the body of Christ because various Biblical passages are supporting this view. One of them is Colossians 1:18, where we read that Christ is “the head of the body, the church”.

²⁵ For want of space, I take here for granted that this step of the syllogism is supported by the mainline theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For a more detailed explanation of why this happens, see John Romanides, *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics* (Rollinsford, N. H: Orthodox Research Institute).

V. Conclusion: Therefore, Church membership and total submission to Church laws and regulations are necessary conditions for people who truly wish to eventually reach God and experience the absolute freedom of His realm.

For this mainline Christian Orthodox syllogism, the Church plays a pivotal role in the human acquisition of absolute freedom. *Human freedom* is not anymore measured by people's ability to independently choose from a variety of choices, as often happens in postmodern societies. Instead, people's freedom is now measured by the extent to which one embraces the Church and submits to whatever this holds and teaches. With this view, however, the either/or character of the Orthodox understanding of human freedom becomes particularly apparent because humans will either submit themselves entirely to what the Church holds and teaches (i.e., the Church's regulations and laws) in the hope of eventually participating in God's absolute freedom in the afterlife. Alternatively, they will remain indifferent to the Church, and so they will be doomed never to experience total freedom.

This understanding of human freedom, however, has three main unattractive characteristics. First, it is *exclusive* because it envisages authentic and absolute freedom only for people that belong to the Church and abide by her laws and regulations. Second, it is *narrow* precisely because it is reluctant to acknowledge that true freedom can also be possible outside the Orthodox (or other Christian) church(es). Third, it is latently *judgmental* because it may lead religious people (inside the church) to criticise the choices of secular people (outside the church) as wrong or even unfree if these happen to be in disharmony with what the Church teaches.

3 *Creatio ex nihilo* and Nikolai Berdyaev: Towards a renewed Christian Orthodox understanding of human freedom for the Twenty-First Century

Turning to the second section of my paper, I shall begin with a question: If *creatio ex nihilo* lies behind the somewhat unattractive Christian Orthodox understating of human freedom, then why don't we interpret this doctrine differently so that to get another and perhaps more fitting for today theological understanding of human freedom?

For years the appeal to tradition prevented Orthodox theologians from re-examining the doctrine of 'creation out of nothing'. Nowadays, however, when the majority of Biblical scholars and historians agree that, "Scripture itself does not declare any *creatio ex nihilo*"²⁶ and that the idea of God's creation 'out of nothing' was developed no earlier than the second century AD,²⁷ there is no compelling reason not to re-examine or even re-interpret the Orthodox teaching on creation. The primary focus of this section, therefore, is the reinterpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* and the religious philosophy of the freelance Russian existentialist thinker Nikolai Berdyaev.

²⁶ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xix.

²⁷ For want of space, I shall not here discuss in detail the historical development of the doctrine of 'creation out of nothing'. For more information, see Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation Out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004). In May's classic work one finds the view that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was initially developed by Christian theologians around the second half of the second century AD. And although there are some scholars disagreeing with May's view, the majority of them agree with him, and so his view remains influential until today.

aev²⁸ will provide me with the philosophical tools required for such an endeavour. Yet before I scrutinise Berdyaev's philosophical view of *creatio ex nihilo*, an examination of his understanding of freedom is necessary because his interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* is connected with his understanding of freedom.

To start with, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, Berdyaev who generally "considered himself to be a loyal son of the Russian Orthodox Church",²⁹ developed an original understanding of freedom different from the one that his Church offered.³⁰ For him, "Freedom is not created by God: it is rooted in the Nothing",³¹ and so it is "ontologically independent of God"³². As such, freedom is not "a gift given by God" and also "God cannot direct or revoke human freedom"³³. The reason why Berdyaev perceives freedom as an uncreated and independent category is that, for him, freedom is a "lawless" condition of non-external determination³⁴ and "to the extent that freedom

²⁸ For want of space, I cannot here give more information about Nikolai Berdyaev. For a detailed account of Berdyaev's life and thought, see Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950).

²⁹ Richard A. Hughes, "Nikolai Berdyaev's Personalism", *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6/3 (2015), pp. 64.

³⁰ For more information about why Berdyaev came to develop his unique understanding of freedom, see Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity: A Critical Study* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1967), esp. pp. 36.

³¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), p. 25.

³² Thomas A. Idinopulos, "Nicolas Berdyaev's Ontology of Spirit," *The Journal of Religion* 49/1 (1969), p. 89.

³³ James McLachlan, "Mythology and Freedom: Nicholas Berdyaev's Uses of Jacob Boehme's Ungrund Myth," *Philosophy Today* 40/4 (1996), p. 480.

³⁴ Mary-Barbara Zeldin, "Nicholas Berdyaev: Creative Freedom," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 7/3 (1969): p. 207.

is dependent on something (...) there cannot be true freedom".³⁵ Nevertheless, if *freedom* is absolute non-determination, as Berdyaev contends, then it should also be an "indeterminate Nothing"³⁶ because *everything* is to a greater or lesser extent determined by the very conditions of its existence. For Berdyaev, though, the *nothingness* of freedom is not to be understood as absolute or literal nothing, but rather as nothing which "contains in itself bottomless potentiality"³⁷ and as such it "is the *no-thing* that is also everything, potentiality without form"³⁸.

In Berdyaev's world, therefore, there is a *creatio ex nihilo*, as traditional Christianity teaches, with the only difference being that, for Berdyaev, the *nihil* of creation is not a literal but a potential nothing which is basically "potential being"³⁹. So, for Berdyaev, "There existed (...) prior to creation, a potentiality which God did not control"⁴⁰, and it was through this poten-

³⁵ Tim Noble, "Theosis and Pleroma in East and West: Integral Freedom," in; John Arblaster, Rob Faesen (eds.), *Deification: Christian Doctrines of Divinization East and West*, (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2018), p. 132.

³⁶ Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity: A Critical Study* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1967), p. 155.

³⁷ Romilo Knežević, *Homo Theurgos: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2016), pp. 12-17, 167, 176-177. I would like here to sincerely thank Dr. Knežević for providing me with a reworked and edited version of his unpublished PhD thesis.

³⁸ J. McLachlan, *The Desire to Be God: Freedom and the Other in Sartre and Berdyaev: Studies in Phenomenological Theology* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 1992), p. 126.

³⁹ Georg Nicolaus, *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person: A Critical Comparison* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), pp. 122-123.

⁴⁰ Matthew Spinka, "Berdyaev and Origen: A Comparison," *Church History* 16/1 (1947), p. 9.

tiality that God out of His “infinite love”⁴¹ “brought all ‘Being’ into existence”.⁴² Unlike, then, what traditional Christianity holds, Berdyaev argues that before all creation, God did not exist alone, but a mysterious, uncreated, indeterminate and uncontrolled potentiality always existed as “a powerful reality alongside God”⁴³. Furthermore, when the time of creation came, God “used the pre-existent (...) stuff, which potentially contained uncreated freedom. Uncreated freedom, which carried the seeds of man’s freedom of self-determination, therefore, went into the making of man”⁴⁴.

In this light, the foundation of man is not anymore the literal nothing out of which God created everything but rather the uncreated freedom/nothingness. And given that, we are now approaching the solution to the problem of human freedom that concerns this paper. Indeed, if absolute freedom is to be found in the here and now *inside* humans, being their very foundation, as Berdyaev’s understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* implies, then there is not anymore a real need for humans to participate in God’s far-off realm in order to experience absolute freedom in the afterlife. By extension, Church membership and total submission to Church regulations and laws are also not at all necessary conditions for the experience of complete freedom.

⁴¹ N. Berdyaev, “Salvation and Creativity: Two Understandings of Christianity,”

http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1926_308.html
(Accessed September 16, 2019).

⁴² Paul Scaringi, *Freedom and the Creative Act in the Writings of Nikolai Berdyaev: An Evaluation in Light of Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology of Freedom* (Doctoral dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2007), p. 37.

⁴³ T. A. Idinopulos, “Nicolas Berdyaev’s Ontology of Spirit”, pp. 90.

⁴⁴ F. Nucho, *Berdyaev’s Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity: A Critical Study*, p. 155.

For Berdyaev, therefore, *freedom* is not something that will (or will not) be given to humans in the afterlife, depending on how faithfully they lived their lives during their earthly existence. Rather, freedom is the mysterious and absolute potentiality that forms the basis of everything that exists, including humans, and so it is to be found in the innermost depths of man. A human, then, is already in this life an entirely free being in the way a poet is free when confronted with the infinite potentialities of his art. Just like the poet “confronted as he is with his sheet of white paper, he sees it as the place of infinite poetic possibilities”⁴⁵, humans confronted with the restrictive conditions of their existence, do not lose the infinite freedom of potentiality that resides in them. Thus as far as the external side of human life is concerned, humans are restricted by conditions of matter, space, time, etc., but deep down, in the inner side of their life humans can come into contact with an infinite potentiality which renders them free.

Humans, then, are called to be poets. Despite the restrictive conditions of their lives, they are called to see life as the ‘sheet of white paper’ that confronts the poet. They, like the poet, have to approach life not as the place of restriction and no-freedom, but as the place where the infinite potentialities of their inner freedom can be materialised. Moreover, of course, like when the poet is confronted with ‘his sheet of white paper’ nobody knows beforehand what he will eventually write on it, we also do not know how humans will respond to God’s call to love. There is not one single response; there are infinite ones, humans are endowed with an infinity of choices. Furthermore, this is the solution to our problem. If humans are by

⁴⁵ Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), p. 114.

construction endowed with absolute freedom of choice, as Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* suggests, then Christian and of course, Orthodox theology is now able to speak about human freedom in terms of absolute freedom of choice. In this way, Christian Orthodox theology can now be less at odds with postmodernity and its contemporary view of human freedom.

4 Criticisms of Berdyaev's understanding of human freedom: An attempt to refute them

Finally, in the third and last section of my paper, it is time for criticisms. Berdyaev's view of freedom might somehow bridge the gap between the Christian Orthodox and the postmodern understanding of human freedom, but does it stand the theological criticisms that it inevitably receives? Many theologians, both Orthodox and heterodoxy often criticise and eventually reject Berdyaev's philosophy because it appears to undermine three essential attributes of God, that is, His *oneness*, His *omnipotence* and His *freedom*.

The first critique regarding the oneness of God supports that since Berdyaev's freedom is uncreated and its "source is other than God," then it "implies an ontological dualism foreign to Christianity"⁴⁶. In my opinion, however, the criticism of 'ontological dualism' is not valid because *dualism*, as its name suggests, exists only when *two* things exist, and Berdyaev's uncreated freedom is not a thing. In Berdyaev's philosophy, there is only one thing that truly *is* and *exists*, namely, God, and next to Him, there is *nothing*. Of course, Berdyaev's *nothingness* is absolute

⁴⁶ F. Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity: A Critical Study*, p. 169.

potentiality, but still, *potentiality* is not necessarily *actuality* and so criticising Berdyaev for ontological dualism is almost absurd. The second criticism regarding God's *omnipotence* supports that since, for Berdyaev, God has "no power" over the uncreated freedom, then God's omnipotence is abolished⁴⁷. As I see it, however, this criticism is invalid because there is not only one way to understand God's omnipotence. Especially in the Christian context, which is inspired by God's love, omnipotence should not be understood exclusively as a synonym for oppressive or domineering power. Instead, the *omnipotence* of an infinitely loving and merciful God, like the Christian God, is to be understood as "the sacrificial power of infinite divine love which is utterly powerless"⁴⁸.

The third criticism regarding God's freedom supports that Berdyaev's philosophy must be rejected because by presenting God as unable to control 'uncreated freedom,' the classical theological understanding of God as all-free is opposed, and God's absolute freedom is crippled. This criticism is admittedly the most valid of all, but like the previous one, it equally fails to take God's love seriously. If God's loving condition of being is taken seriously, then, I believe, God's inability to control the 'uncreated freedom' might be a sign of God's very freedom rather than the opposite. Indeed, '*to be love*', as the Christian God appears to be in the Gospel according to John⁴⁹, basically means that God finds Himself in an active state of existing as love and not as something else. So we could speculate that prior to 'being love' God might have had the potential to *be* some-

⁴⁷ R. Knežević, *Homo Theurgos: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev*, p. 171.

⁴⁸ G. Nicolaus, *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person: A Critical Comparison*, p. 123.

⁴⁹ 1 Joh. 4.16.

thing other than love and yet for a mysterious reason, He actualised Himself as love. In this case, God is now unable to control the 'uncreated freedom' because out of His absolute freedom, He freely chose to actualise Himself as love and this free choice of His renders Him unable to exist as something different from love. In this way, God can be both absolutely free in His initial state of existing and unable to control 'uncreated freedom' in His current state of being. I should admit, however, that this explanation is not entirely sufficient because it leaves the following question open for further research: If the absolute freedom of potentiality is 'outside God', as Berdyaev's philosophy suggests, then how did God have in the first place the potential to actualise Himself?

5 Conclusion

In closing, it is clear that despite the criticisms that Berdyaev's philosophy raises, its interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* and the understanding of human freedom stemming from it is a valuable contribution to contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology. With Berdyaev's view of *creatio ex nihilo*, the Orthodox Church and her theology are now presented with a renewed Christian understanding of human freedom, which, if used appropriately, can help the Orthodox Church better communicate with the postmodern audience of the twenty-first century. Of course, Berdyaev's understanding of human freedom receives many theological questions and criticisms, some of which we cannot entirely refute. Nevertheless, to reject Berdyaev and his religious philosophy as heretical and perhaps non-Christian is not advisable. This would make us appear arrogant and forgetful of the fact that we are all "fellow-pilgrims to (...) [a God] that none

of us has yet grasped in its immensity"⁵⁰. So what I propose instead is to positively embrace Berdyaev's understanding of human freedom and let ourselves be enriched by its creative insights into the mystery of God and humanity.

⁵⁰ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 193.