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The normative implications of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Nikolai Berdyaev: Towards a renewed Christian understanding of human freedom for the twenty-first century

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STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENT WORK

Hereby I, Christos Veskoukis, declare and assure that I have composed the present thesis with the title "The normative implications of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Nikolai Berdyaev: Towards a renewed Christian understanding of human freedom for the twenty-first century", independently, that I did not use any other sources or tools other than indicated and that I marked those parts of the text derived from the literal content or meaning of other Works — digital media included — by making them known as such by indicating their source(s).

Nijmegen, 13 May 2019

Man's relations to truth and beauty unquestionably have a moral character. We have a moral duty towards truth and beauty…

— Nikolai Berdyaev

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Foreword

Far from being a mere official requirement for the completion of my master's degree, the current thesis and its topic is a matter of the heart. Coming from a non-religious family and passing through a certainly not religious childhood and adolescence, I found myself, at the age of eighteen, thrown into the academic study of theology. With it, the world of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the church of my homeland, stood before me in both splendour and fear. And, the more I entered, the more I got confused. The words, *sin*, *obedience* and *submission*, words previously unknown to me, began now to gradually occupy my mind. And the questions came: What am I supposed to do? If God exists, as my Orthodox textbooks say and as my university professors boldly claim, then what is it that I have to do for Him? Am I really free? But, what is freedom if God is all-free and freedom is God? I once asked a priest, 'Father, what is your view on premarital sex? What do you think of masturbation?' His answer was bold, 'It is the Satan whispering these sins to your ears'. I felt restricted. New questions came: Where do I stand? For whom do I act? For me, or God? And, if I act just to please God, then what is left of me?

Yet suddenly I found Nikolai Berdyaev. For the first time, a thinker, coming from my Eastern Orthodox tradition, set me free instead of restricting me, and so, this is not only a dissertation. It is rather a confession, an academic one, for sure, but still a confession. Thus here, you will not find just general things about *creatio ex nihilo* and the writings of an Eastern Orthodox thinker regarding it. Of course, for some, what follows might sound philosophical, perhaps too philosophical or even irrelevant. But, for me, what follows is the problem of human freedom that has deeply concerned me, and here I am to confess what I came to consider a solution to it.

To make, however, a confession possible and to write things down on paper is not an easy task. For this reason, and before moving on, I would like here to thank three particular persons who, among others, yet more than others, made my confession possible and stood by me during the writing process of this dissertation. First of all, I owe an immense thanks to my mother Παυλίνα who always believes in me, and although she does not always understand, she stays here at all times, like a rock that never leaves the sea. Second, all my love, respect and, of course, my most tender hug goes to my girl-

Introduction

When a Christian theologian speaks about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in the twenty-first century, he or she immediately assumes the risk to appear either boring or old-fashioned by uttering a Latin phrase in a world where the Latin language is almost extinct, if not dead. But is nowadays Christianity and its theological message considered equally boring and dead?

A quick answer to this question is a simple 'no'. If it is "for freedom (that) Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1 New Revised Standard Version), as St. Paul affirms, then it becomes apparent that the essential purpose and message of Christianity is human freedom.[1] And, of course, the subject of freedom, especially in our postmodern era,[2] is highly valued and respected rather than being regarded as dull and dead.[3] Indeed, even when freedom is understood critically in overly deterministic terms, as is often the case with some postmodern thinkers, the question of human freedom is undoubtedly at the top of the postmodern agenda.

The problem, therefore, that Christian theology faces in the contemporary postmodern world is not whether it is boring or dead, but instead, if it remains faithful to its fundamental call to freedom or not. To put it differently, Christian theology is both topical and interesting as long as it strives to promote human freedom, remaining loyal to its central message, but it can also be fatally boring and irrelevant to modern ears, if, or when, it ceases to do so. Yet considering that the present-day Western secular paradigm seems to measure *freedom* "by the sheer number of behavioural options open to the chooser" (Warwick, 1969, p. 114), then the following question inevitably arises: Is the traditional Christian message *free* enough so that to be attractive to the postmodern

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[1] Here, my understanding of St. Paul's phrase seems to be in complete accord with Charles Meyer who states that, "The all-pervading and most basic message of the Bible centres around God's call to freedom" (Meyer, 1969, p. 81).

[2] For those, who are, perhaps, not acquainted with the term *postmodern* or *postmodernity*, I would like to explain that this "may be defined as a broad category designating the culture that historically extends from the late 1960s to the early twenty-first century, and that is economically determined by postindustrial capitalism" (Geyh, 2005, para. 1).

[3] In the year 1969, Meyer observed that, "At no time in the world's history has the question of human freedom been as burning an issue as it is today" (Meyer, 1969, p. 78). And, as I see it, this phrase can easily describe our postmodern period which places fervent emphasis on individual freedom.

audience in the twenty-first-century societies? The answer to this question is rather negative and as Meyer notes:

> The Christian today simply will not believe that his faith and its celebration is all about freedom. In the mind of most people religion is a thraldom; it enslaves mind and soul, it subjects to pronunciamento and edict. While extolling human dignity, it stupefies man and entangles him in a network of legalism. The words of St. Paul, "Brothers, you have been called to freedom…" and "Where the Lord's Spirit is, there is freedom," as well as Jesus' own words: "The truth shall make you free," simply cannot be reconciled with the practice of the Church in multiplying laws. All one hears from the pulpit is that the one who loves God must *surrender* himself entirely to the regulations of his Church. It would seem that actually the religious person is the most unfree of all men (Meyer, 1969, p. 82).

Unfortunately, this description of Christian freedom appears to be — to a greater or lesser extent— the everyday reality of various Christian communities and churches around the globe, depending on how conservative these communities are.[4] Given that, it can easily be imagined that the *mainline* Christian understanding of human freedom[5] is greatly at odds with the contemporary postmodern and secular understanding of the same concept. Indeed, as shown above, while Christians tend to perceive their freedom as total submission and surrender to the laws and the regulations of their Church, the major part of secular people, living in our postmodern Western societies, regard freedom as their ability to independently choose whatever they want from a plethora of

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[4] I would like to clarify that my full endorsement of Meyer's description of Christian freedom is purely based on my experience as a member of the Greek Orthodox Church and as a trained Eastern Orthodox theologian. In many Eastern Orthodox congregations both in Greece and in the Greek diaspora of Western Europe, I have personally encountered various clergymen defining Christian freedom in Meyer's terms. Furthermore, throughout my theological studies, both in Greece and abroad, I have met and discussed the subject of Christian freedom with fellow theologians — either Protestants or Catholics — from Africa, Asia and Europe, and many of them have agreed that, in their respective backgrounds, Christian freedom is often understood as enslavement, submission and surrender to the edicts of the Church.

[5] Here I use the word '*mainline*' to refer to all 'traditional' Christian churches and denominations which, like my denomination, namely Eastern Orthodoxy, tend to understand human freedom in Meyer's terms.

available choices. But, is this difference between the Christian and the postmodern understanding of human freedom a problem or something that should concern us?

When looked at from the postmodern point of view which acknowledges "an uncontainable and irreducibly de-centred *multiplicity* of coexisting cognitive and cultural paradigms, without any one of them being uniquely dominant or central" (Geyh, 2005, para. 3), then the differences in understanding human freedom can be just another sign of the much-celebrated postmodern multiplicity rather than a problem. For me, however, the fact that mainline Christian theology tends to perceive *freedom* in a way diametrically opposed to that of the postmodern societies of our era is a grave problem which might eventually lead Christianity to marginalisation, if not extinction. Indeed, as experience teaches us, the more Christians insist on defining, discussing and understanding human freedom as *submission* to the Church, limiting in this way the number of choices available to humans, the more the postmodern audience of our time will find the Christian rhetoric of freedom restrictive and thus unattractive, old-fashioned and boring. And, perhaps, this can partly explain why Christianity, at least in the West, is in decline and Christian churches are steadily losing members.

Moreover, understanding human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws is not only a problem for the postmodern and secular people. Such a view on human freedom can also harm the Christian community because viewing freedom as unreserved submission to the Church in a postmodern society which understands freedom in a completely different way might put the Christian community under heavy tension with broader society. Indeed, by maintaining their traditional understanding of human freedom, Christians are somewhat doomed to be secluded and far away, if not cut-off, from the contemporary secular society and its discourse on human freedom. As can easily be imagined, however, this feeling of seclusion is often accompanied by a high emotional cost which can potentially create the following two, not very attractive types of Christians. Either zealot Christians believing that they, unlike the secular masses, hold the correct understanding of freedom, or struggling Christians, who go through a painful existential struggle in their attempt to find the balance between the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church laws, and the postmodern understanding of freedom as free choice.

It becomes clear, therefore, that as far as human freedom is concerned, it is imperative for Christianity to find a new way to communicate with the present-day postmodern

society without being marginalised for being either restrictive or unattractive. And, this is what I aim to accomplish in the current assignment. More specifically, I will mainly concentrate on the seemingly boring doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and by using Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of it, I shall develop and present an attractive to postmodern people Christian understanding of human freedom which would view freedom as an absolute and unlimited choice without perceiving it as a deterministic illusion.

For those who are unfamiliar with Nikolai Berdyaev and his philosophy, I have to explain that Berdyaev was a late 19th and early 20th-century Russian religious "freelance" existentialist philosopher who embraced the Eastern Orthodox Church and devoted much of his life to investigating the concept of freedom (Zernov, 1963, 151, 155). Given Berdyaev's profound commitment to freedom, therefore, and due to my personal affinity with his philosophical understanding of it, I choose here to focus my attention on Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* and based on it, I shall develop an alternative Christian understanding of human freedom which aspires to be more attractive than the traditional one.[6]

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

To answer this question, I will divide my dissertation into three sections. In the first section, I shall provide information regarding the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.* In particular, I will indicate the strong influence that this doctrine exerts on — the unattractive to postmodern people — Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws. In this section, I shall specifically address the following two questions: What is the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine? And, how does it form the basis for the development of the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom?

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[6] For more general information about the life and thought of Nikolai Berdyaev, see: Matthew Spinka's *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of freedom.*

In the second section, I will examine the biblical origins and the early historical development of the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine, showing that there are no real theological and historical reasons obliging us to regard it as an incontestable and thus unchangeable Christian teaching. In this section, I shall specifically address the following two questions: Does the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* have a biblical basis? And, how did this doctrine develop and eventually manage to occupy a pivotal role in the Christian tradition?

In the third section, I shall present Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*; and based on it, I will offer a Christian, yet more attuned to the postmodern outlook, understanding of human freedom. In this section, I shall specifically address the following three questions: What is Berdyaev's interpretation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*? How can this interpretation help us develop a Christian understanding of human freedom more attuned to postmodernism and thus more attractive to both the contemporary Christians and the secular audience of the twenty-first century? Which are the major theological criticisms that Berdyaev's view on human freedom receives and how can these be tackled?

Finally, it is worth noting that in my dissertation, I will mainly examine secondary literature dealing with both the traditional 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.

1. *Creatio ex nihilo* & the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom

As already mentioned in the preceding pages, the current section will deal with the correlation between the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws. To be more specific, I shall devote this section to arguing that *creatio ex nihilo* plays a central role in shaping the traditional Christian view of human freedom as submission; and to advance my argument, I will divide this section into two parts. First, I will present what the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* holds, and second, I shall indicate how this doctrine influences the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom.

1.1 *Creatio ex nihilo*: Basic information

If somebody goes around talking about *'creatio ex nihilo'* in our contemporary Western secular societies, it is highly probable that they will either receive several odd looks or be simply thought of as crazy. To avoid this danger, therefore, it is deemed necessary here to clarify the following question: What is, after all, this peculiar Latin phrase that is commonly used in theological parlance, but it sounds rather strange to modern ears?

To answer this question, it has to be said that the so-called doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is "a foundational teaching in Judaism, Christianity and Islam", and, as its name suggests, it states that "God created the world out of nothing — from no pre-existent matter, no space or time" (Cogliati, 2010, p. 1).[7] This simple, yet fundamental claim provided and still provides the basis for the "Christian understating of creation" (Japhets, 2016, p. 2), and, almost from the beginning, the ecclesiastical tradition seems to have wholeheartedly embraced it considering that "from the time of the Cappadocians on-

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[7] It is perhaps helpful, if not necessary, to bear in mind that the term *nothing* [*nihilo*] is theologically understood as "the complete absence of being" (Siniscalchi, 2013, p. 679).

wards *creatio ex nihilo* has been, East and West…a foundational teaching of Christian thought" (Soskice, 2017, p. 38).[8]

A careful examination of this teaching makes clear that at the heart of it lies "the dependence of 'all that is'…on God or, more specifically, on God's free choice to create" (Soskice, 2010, p. 24). Indeed, 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[9] since nothing else apart from Him existed.[10] With this doctrine, therefore, we are somehow introduced to an ontological *duality* (i.e., 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 regard, Ford underscores that *creatio ex nihilo* "teaches an important truth. This is the fragility, the contingency of all beings. 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" (Ford, 1983, p. 207). Thus, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emphasises the *created* and so *finite* and *transient* nature of the world and the "transcendental otherness of God" (Japhets, 2016, p. 3). Given that, Cogliati observes:

> *C*reatio ex nihilo is a metaphysical concept, not a physical event…
> (which) establishes a true link between the finitude and the contin-

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gency of the *creatum* and the infinity and the necessity of the *Creator*, between the temporality of the world and the eternality of God (Cogliati, 2010, p. 8).

It becomes clear, therefore, that *creatio ex nihilo* distinguishes between the independent realm of the uncreated/eternal God and the dependent realm of the created and transient world, and, in doing so, it eventually manages to safeguard "the omnipotence and freedom of God" (May, 2004, p. 180). Indeed, by affirming that an infinite God created everything finite out of nothing, as *creatio ex nihilo* does, an omnipotent image of God immediately emerges. According to this image, God is not *powerful* in the way that humans understand *power*, but He is rather super, or Omni-powerful because His power belongs to the eternal realm of the miraculous absolute where everything can happen: even the creation of something out of nothing. In God's realm, therefore, the humanly impossible can become possible (omnipotence) and also, since *infinity* and *no-materiality* 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 the above, it is not a coincidence that Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, one of the most significant Eastern Orthodox theologians of our century, opines that with *creatio ex nihilo*, "Christianity…introduced into human history the very idea of…absolute ontological freedom of God" (Groppe, 2005, p. 478, 471). And, in his view, this divine 'absolute ontological freedom' is *really* absolute in the sense that it is "not a mere freedom of choice limited by two options (to create or not to create), but freedom as *ecstasis*, freedom as the transcendence of all boundaries" (Groppe, 2005, p. 472).

1.2 *Creatio ex nihilo* & the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws: How does the former influence the latter?

Having provided basic information about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and its central role in establishing absolute and unrestricted freedom of God, I will now turn my atten-

tion to human freedom and I shall point out how this doctrine influences the traditional Christian understanding of it. More specifically, I will address here the following question: Since *creatio ex nihilo* grants absolute ontological freedom to God, then what is the case with humans and their freedom?

To begin with, it has to be stressed that when it comes to human freedom our doctrine appears to be deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, it lays the foundation for the absolute and boundless freedom of God. But, on the other hand, it seems to take this total freedom away from humans by locating them in a created, finite and transient world which, unlike the unlimitedly free realm of God, is subjected to restrictions of all kinds (e.g., matter, space, time). It is apparent, therefore, that in the worldview stemming from *creatio ex nihilo*, absolute and unrestricted freedom belongs only to God and His realm, while humans, in their realm, namely the universe, can experience a "relative autonomy" (Japhets, 2016, p.15), at best, but not absolute freedom. So, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) observes that:

> Authentic freedom is impossible to experience in the created order and can be found only in the *ecclesial realm* through baptism into Christ who engrafts us into a true ontology (Groppe, 2005, p. 477).

However, an attentive look at this rather transcendent and church-centred understanding of absolute freedom — which, as shown above, ultimately results from *creatio ex nihilo* — reveals that with it, an either/or binary logic is inserted into the Christian understanding of human freedom. Indeed, through the prism of *creatio ex nihilo*, traditional Christianity[11] seems to embrace a syllogism which eventually leads to a somewhat *dualistically* narrow[12] and potentially restrictive and unattractive understanding of human freedom. This syllogism goes as follows:

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[11] By '*traditional Christianity*' I refer to all 'traditional' Christian churches and denominations which, like my denomination, namely Eastern Orthodoxy, accept and embrace the following syllogism.

[12] Here, the word *dualistically* doesn't have any connection with the philosophical *Dualism*. It rather refers to the binary either/or understanding of human freedom that the following syllogism introduces.

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

II. <u>Premise 2</u>: 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. <u>Premise 3</u>: The Christian Church is the body of Christ[13] who is believed to be the second person of the Triune God and God Himself.

IV. <u>Premise 4</u>: 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 laws.[14]

V. <u>Conclusion</u>: 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.

As is evident from this traditionally Christian syllogism, the Church or, the "ecclesial realm", as Metropolitan John put it, occupies a pivotal role in the human acquisition of absolute freedom. In this light, *human freedom* is not anymore measured by people's ability to independently choose from a variety of available choices, as is often the case in our postmodern and secular societies. Instead, people's freedom is now measured by the extent to which someone embraces the Church and submits to whatever this holds

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[13] Many Christian denominations view the *Church* as the body of Christ because there are various Biblical passages supporting this view. One of them is Colossians 1:18 where we read that Christ is "the head of the body, the church".

[14] Of course, it has to be underlined that this view is certainly not embraced and supported by all Christian denominations, churches and communities. However, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is the main focus of this study and forms my own confessional background, seems to endorse this view. Indeed, as the well-known Orthodox dogmatician, John Romanides informs us, "For the Orthodox…to participate in the Body of Christ without being a member of the…Church…is impossible", and the only possible way for someone to be a member of the Church is to "submissively follow (her) teaching" and show "unconditional obedience to the will of God" (Romanides, 2004, 79, 95, 102). Furthermore, for the Orthodox consciousness, 'obedience to the will of God' is often understood as obedience to the Canon law of the Church, and so, Doe notes that, "For Orthodox jurists: 'the original source of canon law is found in the will of God' and its authority stems from the will of God" (Doe, 2015, p. 33). In a similar vein, Kyrillos, Bishop of Abydos, explains that within the Orthodox theological folds, the laws of the Church are often regarded as "ius divinum", and, as such, they command "absolute authority" (Katerelos, 2017, p. 2). That being the case, Doe observes that, "Some Orthodox churches demand preservation of the norms of Christian morals, require clergy to act 'conscientiously', or provide that a person ceases to be a parishioner in good standing if that person disregards or transgresses 'the moral law of the Church'" (Doe, 2015, p. 33).

and teaches. Indeed, since absolute freedom is to be found only in the boundless realm of God, as *creatio ex nihilo* affirms, then participation in this realm is deemed necessary for the human attainment of absolute freedom; and, according to the traditional Christian logic, the Church is the safest path leading to God's realm where this total freedom resides. But, with this view, the either/or character of the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom becomes particularly apparent. According to this, humans will either submit themselves entirely to Church regulations and laws (i.e., what the church holds and teaches) in the hope of eventually participating in God's absolute freedom in the afterlife or will they remain indifferent to Church regulations and laws, and they will be doomed never to experience total freedom.

As can easily be imagined, however, this Christian understanding of human freedom 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 its laws and regulations. Second, it is *narrow* precisely because it is reluctant to acknowledge that true freedom can also be possible outside the 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 Church laws and regulations.

1.3 Conclusion

All things considered, it becomes clear that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* provides the theoretical basis for the development of an either/or binary Christian understanding of human freedom which stands over against the postmodern tendency to perceive human freedom as unlimited power of choice rather than submission to Church laws and regulations.

2. *Creatio ex nihilo* and its theologico-historical development: Was this traditional doctrine always part of the Christian tradition?

Having illustrated both what *creatio ex nihilo* holds and how this ends up laying the foundations for a restrictive Christian understanding of human freedom, I shall now turn my attention to the theological and historical development of this doctrine. More specifically, I will devote this section to investigating the biblical grounding as well as the historical origins of *creatio ex nihilo*, and I shall particularly argue that there are no unquestionably valid theological and historical reasons, obliging us to view this doctrine as an incontestable and so unchangeable Christian teaching. To advance my argument, I will divide this section into two parts. First, I will examine whether *creatio ex nihilo* is genuinely a biblically based doctrine, and second, I shall shed some light on the early historical development of it.

2.1 *Creatio ex nihilo* and its biblical basis

It is common knowledge that the Christian doctrines are official teachings which are often, if not always, derived from the Holy Scriptures and base their authoritative character on the divinely inspired nature of them.[15] But, what is the case with *creatio ex nihilo*? This doctrine, as already shown above, holds a central role in the Christian tradition and has long been regarded as a foundational teaching of Christianity yet what about its biblical basis? Is it a doctrine purely derived from the Bible so that to have all rights to command absolute authority and be viewed as incontestable or not?

To answer these questions, it should be noted that many Christian theologians and scholars, especially those coming from more traditional and perhaps conservative backgrounds, maintain that the biblical traditions are "fully continuous" and openly support the teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* (Robinette, 2011, p. 528). These scholars put a strong emphasis on the Bible and firmly believe that a close examination of "relevant biblical passages…will adequately show that the traditional teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* has strong biblical grounds" (Copan, 1996, p. 88). To substantiate their claim, these theolo-

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[15] This divine and thus authoritative nature of the Holy Scriptures stems from the fact that, "Christians view Scripture as the definitive witness to God's identity" (McFarland, 2014, p. 21).

gians commonly refer to five biblical passages,[16] and, based on them, they attempt to prove that God created the world and everything that exists out of *literally* nothing. These five commonly cited biblical passages are the following:

1. Genesis 1:1-2

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the
> earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
> while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

In this text, the phrase "the heavens and the earth" which appears to be the "object of God's creative activity" is often understood as a "merism which indicates totality, not simply two antonymic elements" (Copan, 1996, p. 88). That being so, some biblical exegetes argue that, "The heavens and the earth" of Gen 1:1 does not merely "refer to the beginning of something, but simply The Beginning. *Everything* began with God" (Copan, 1996, p. 88), and, in this light, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* seems to find biblical support.

2. Proverbs 8:22-24

> The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts
> of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of
> the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there
> were no springs abounding with water.

This passage refers to the creation of Wisdom, and some scholars tend to read this as biblical evidence for the validity of *creatio ex nihilo*. For them, the fact that, "Wisdom…was birthed by God before even the foundational infrastructure of the world came into being" (Fretheim, 2005, p. 206) is an indication that in the beginning there

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[16] Here, it has to be said that throughout the relevant exegetical literature one can find scholars using more than the following five biblical texts to provide support for the *biblicity* of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Despite that, however, I confine my study to the presentation of only five biblical passages because these are the ones that the majority of exegetes seem to use more often.

was absolutely nothing (i.e., *nihil*) out of which God at some point created everything that now exists (Oneill, 2002, p. 454).

3. 2 Maccabees 7:28

> I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see every-
> thing that is in them, and recognise that God did not make them out of
> things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into
> being.

In this deutero-canonical text, "appearing in some versions of the Christian Bible"[17] and especially in its phrase: "God did not make them out of things that existed" a number of exegetes see a clear reference to the "orthodox notion of creation out of nothing" (Fergusson, 2014, p. 16).

4. Hebrews 11:3

> By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of
> God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

In this passage, some scholars link the phrase "from things that are not visible" to God's creation of the world, and, based on that, they go on to assert that God created out of no pre-existing material (i.e., things that are not visible) and so the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine appears to be biblically grounded (Oneill, 2002, p. 462).

5. Romans 4:17

> As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations, in the
> presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead
> and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

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[17] It should be noted that 2 Maccabees is considered an apocryphal text by Protestants, but it is part of the "Septuagint and, as such, would have been treated as canonical Scripture by most Christians in the first centuries", as it still is "in the Catholic and Orthodox churches" (McFarland, 2014, p. 4).

Finally, this New Testament passage leads some exegetes to believe that it contains a subtle reference to creation. It is commonly argued that since in this text we read that God "calls into existence the things that do not exist", then this is a clear indication that *creatio ex nihilo* is a biblically based doctrine and not "a mere theological invention" (Copan, 1996, p. 87).

<center>***</center>

Nevertheless, as far as the biblical basis of *creatio ex nihilo* is concerned, things are not as simple and straightforward as they might seem at first sight. Indeed, although the aforementioned biblical passages make some writers argue that our doctrine has a biblical warrant, there is also a plethora of contemporary scholarly voices that claim the opposite.[18] Among these voices, Catherine Keller, a leading American process theologian, concisely, yet boldly states that, "Scripture itself does not declare any *creatio ex nihilo*" (Keller, 2003, p. xix). And Keller's statement seems to be embraced and endorsed by the majority of biblical scholars considering that "recent decades have witnessed a near-consensus of critical opinion that the idea of God's creation of matter 'out of nothing' is not affirmed in scripture" (Bockmuehl, 2012, p. 253). The five abovementioned biblical passages, therefore, are not necessarily to be read and interpreted as indisputable evidence for the *biblicity* of *creatio ex nihilo*.

To start with Genesis 1:1-2, it has to be said that a closer look at it suffices to show that regarding this text as irrefutable proof of creation 'out of nothing' is merely a mistake. Even if the phrase of its first verse, namely "the heavens and the earth" is a merism indicating totality, as mentioned earlier, this is not enough to support the biblical basis of *creatio ex nihilo*. The reason for this is that according to modern research the God of Genesis does not seem to be the creator of "the heavens and the earth" as is conventionally believed. As Ellen van Wolde explains in her recent work, a linguistic and textual examination of the Hebrew verb ברא in the context of Genesis 1.1-2.4a leads us to the conclusion that this verb "does not mean 'to create' but 'to separate'" (Wolde,

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[18] In this regard, Janet Soskice notes that, "In recent years *creatio ex nihilo* has come under fire as antiquated and destructive, especially from thinkers influenced by process philosophy and the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne" (Soskice, 2017, p. 38).

2009, p. 19).[19] So, in this light, it would be wrong to contend, as often happens, that Genesis 1:1-2 describes "an absolute beginning in time" through "God's creation of 'everything'" out of nothing (Wolde, 2017, p. 631). Instead, since the verb ברא appears to denote '*separation*' rather than '*creation*' Genesis 1:1-2 should be read and understood as a passage describing "the initial action of God in which he separates the heaven and the earth: He sets them apart by constantly moving his wind or breath over the primeval waters" (Wolde, 2017, p. 632). Thus it becomes clear that in Genesis 1, we see that before creation there was not an absolute *nothing*, as *creatio ex nihilo* affirms, but a primal *watery* situation "of before everything" (Wolde, 1997 p. 22). In other words, Genesis 1 offers us a "picture of the initial pre-existent situation in which the deity and water exist side by side" (Wolde, 2017, p. 644). And perhaps, this explains why nowhere in the text is said that, "God makes the water", but is rather implied that, "the abyss or the deep, the boundless surface of water…existed before the creation of the heaven" (Wolde, 1997 p. 16, 20). In view of these findings, therefore, it is not a coincidence that the "consensus among scholars is that the first three verses (of Genesis) depict God forming the world out of preexistent matter" (Anderson, 2017, p. 16) and thus the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* appears to be biblically unsupported.

Equally, with regard to Proverbs 8:22-24, contemporary scholars contend that this text fails to provide adequate biblical support for *creatio ex nihilo*. The reason for this is that although Wisdom appears to have been created by God, our passage "does not at all say that the abyss (water) was created by God" (Niehoff, 2006, p. 46-47). Instead, in Proverbs verses 8:26-27 we read that, "When (God) had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there (the Wisdom), he drew a circle on the face of the deep". So, what our text states, is not that God created everything from no pre-existing matter (i.e., *nihil*), but rather "that before God created the earth and thus before there was water anywhere on earth, God 'prepared the heavens' and he organised…*the already existent waters* (emphasis mine)…through the process of measuring them and plumbing their depths" (Ostler, 2005, p. 259). Further, as Yee observes, these 'already existent waters' to which our passage refers are not arbitrarily mentioned, but they reflect "the beliefs found in ancient Semitic myths that the

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[19] This rather novel claim is further supported by the fact that, "A number of etymological studies of ברא show that it is very well possible that ברא is etymologically related to Akkadian words that express the idea of "division" and "separation" (Wolde, 2017, p. 625).

primeval oceans continually menace the created world from above and from below" (Yee, 1992, p. 92-93). Thus, it is clear that in Proverbs 8:22-24, like in Genesis 1, the waters of the abyss seem to have preceded God's creation and so the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* cannot gain solid biblical support from this passage.

Furthermore, 2 Maccabees 7:28 is not necessarily an allusion to *creatio ex nihilo*, as some scholars tend to postulate, but its phrase, "God did not make them out of things that existed" might simply be "a poetic depiction of divine power" (Fergusson, 2014, p. 16). And this opinion, despite its apparent simplicity, is in complete agreement with May's classic work where we read that in 2 Maccabees 7:28:

> There is…no theoretical disquisition on the nature of the creation process, but a parenthetic reference to God's creative power: the mother of the seven martyrs calls her younger son to steadfastness by holding before his eyes that God, who has shown his might by creating the world and mankind 'out of non-being', will, 'in the time of mercy' awaken the righteous from death. (So), a position on the problem of matter is clearly not to be expected in this context. The text implies no more than the conception that the world came into existence through the sovereign creative act of God, and that it previously was not there (May, 2004, p. 6-7).

Finally, the two above-discussed New Testament passages, namely Hebrews 11:3 and Romans 4:17, should equally not be considered unassailable evidence for the biblical validity of *creatio ex nihilo*. With regard to Hebrews 11:3, it must be noted that, although its phrase, "What is seen was made from things that are not visible" is sometimes perceived as an implicit reference to the doctrine of creation 'out of nothing', this cannot be the case for a twofold reason. First, a careful reading of this passage will immediately show that in it creation 'out of nothing' is nowhere mentioned. Instead, what the text actually states is that, "God created visible things 'from' invisible things" and these "invisible things", as their name suggests, are not at all 'nothing' but "they already exist" although we cannot see them with our human eyes (Ostler, 2005, p. 260).[20]

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[20] In the same vein, Ostler remarks that, "In the ancient world 'invisible things' are still things that are simply not seen" (Ostler, 2005, p. 272).

Second, in the original Greek text of Hebrews 11:3, the verb that is used to describe the 'creation' of "What is seen" is καταρτίζω (katartizo) which does not mean 'to create', but it refers to "organising, framing, or putting together what is not yet organised or to mend, repair, or put in order something that has become disorganised" (Ostler, 2005, p. 260). Thus, we are led to conclude that Hebrews 11:3 "implicitly assumes creation of the earth out of a pre-existing substrate not visible to us" (Ostler, 2005, p. 263). And, in this light, the phrase "from things that are not visible" is certainly not related to any notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, but is rather a metaphorical expression describing "the power and wisdom of the Creator" (Fergusson, 2014, p. 16) to organise and impose order on the pre-existing and invisible substrate.

With regard to Romans 4:17, it is true that scholars often read its phrase "the things that do not exist" "as referring to creation, perhaps even *creatio ex nihilo*", but this is a somewhat incorrect reading of this text because in it, "Paul is not referring to creation — at all" (Worthington, 2015, p. 49, 56). Indeed, if we read this passage contextually, we will immediately realise that St. Paul's phrase "relates to God's word not at creation but to Abraham". So "the things that do not exist" do not have anything to do with any "primordial nothingness" (i.e., *nihil*), but instead they refer to the Gentiles, namely, "the many nations…that God called 'existing'…at a moment when they were 'not existing'" (Worthington, 2015, p. 58-59). But even if we assume, for the sake of the argument that Romans 4:17 does refer to God's creation of the world/things, our text does not provide any evidence that this creation was 'out of nothing'. As Ostler writes:

> Romans 4:17 doesn't expressly address whether things are created out
> of nothing or from some material substrate. It simply says that God
> "calls" things into existence that are not. Moreover, such a statement
> in no way entails or requires creation out of nothing implicitly. If I
> create a table then I create a table that did not exist before I created it,
> but it doesn't mean that I create it out of nothing. In this text, the word
> *create* is not even used. Rather, what God does is to "call forth" the
> non-existent. The verb καλέω means to call out loud to something, or
> to invite. It presupposes something there to be called to or invited…
> Thus, the most natural reading of this text is that the "non-existent" or
> μή όντα refers to a preexisting reality that does not yet exist as God

calls it to be. Such a reading has nothing to do with creation out of absolute nothing (Ostler, 2005, p. 266-267).

Overall it might be said that, although there are some biblical passages which, at first sight, seem to lend biblical support to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, a further examination of these passages proves that this is not the case. Hence, as far as the Bible is concerned, the doctrine of creation 'out of nothing' seems not to have unquestionable and robust support.

2.2 *Creatio ex nihilo:* A brief look at the early historical development of this doctrine

Having shown that *creatio ex nihilo* divides biblical scholars, with the majority of them tending to regard it as a doctrine without a real biblical warrant, I shall now address the following question that can easily arise in the reader's mind: How did a dogma with little or no biblical basis develop and eventually manage to occupy a pivotal role in the Christian tradition?

To adequately answer this question, an examination of the early historical development of *creatio ex nihilo* is deemed necessary and here is the place to provide such an examination. To begin with, it has to be stressed that *creatio ex nihilo* traces its origins back to the "Christian theologians of the second century" and the intellectual environment in which they found themselves (May, 2004, p. 22).[21] In particular, these theologians lived and acted within the borders of the Roman empire where the intellectual mi-

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[21] The view that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was firstly formulated by Christian theologians around the second half of the second century AD is to be found in Gerhard May's classic work cited below. In the scholarly literature, however, there are also other scholars who hold different views. For instance, in one of Oneill's publications we read that, "There is evidence that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was already formulated as a credal statement by the time of the New Testament" (Oneill, 2002, p. 462). Furthermore, in a somewhat recent article Bockmuehl argues that *creatio ex nihilo* "has no explicit terminological basis in scripture. Contrary to twentieth-century claims like those of Gerhard May and others, however, it is at the same time, not a second-century afterthought….The meaning and substance of the doctrine, though not the terminology, is firmly rooted in scripture and pre-Christian Jewish literature" (Bockmuehl, 2012, p. 269-270). Nevertheless, these and other scholarly views constitute a minority because still today, as Ostler remarked in 2005, the relevant bibliography reveals that, "The vast majority of scholars agree that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was first formulated around AD 200" (Ostler, 2005, p. 254). For this reason, therefore, my dissertation embraces May's influential view and follows him in stating that *creatio ex nihilo* was a Christian theological development of the second century AD.

lieu was dominated by the "heritage of the Greek philosophical thinkers in the form of the middle Platonic school of philosophy (combining Stoic, Platonic and Aristotelian elements)" (Reventlow, 2002, p. 153). So, this philosophical environment, and especially the philosophical system of Platonism[22] provided the background against which these early Christian thinkers had to clarify their doctrine of creation (Soskice, 2010, p. 33).[23]

The philosophical system of Platonism, following the Greek philosophical "consensus that from nothing, nothing comes — *ex nihilo nihil fit*" held that, "matter exists eternally and is not the result of a creation" (Soskice, 2010, p. 30-31, 33). Given that, the Platonic philosophers, as well as the majority of the ancient Greek philosophers taught that, "The cosmos had always existed (and) there has always been matter out of which the world has come into its present form" (Japhets, 2016, p. 3). So, for the Platonists, *matter* is always to be found next to God or better the *Demiurge*,[24] and according to their world-view, the Demiurge's role is not to create the matter which anyway exists eternally, but rather to shape and impose order on it. However, in his attempt to shape and form the world out of the eternally existing matter, the Platonic Demiurge seems to have faced some difficulties because this matter was "in some fashion resistant" to formation and order (McMullin, 2010, p. 17). For this reason, the end product of Demiurge's world-formation, namely the universe, had some imperfections and defects for which it is not the Demiurge to blame, but "the recalcitrance of the material with which the Demiurge had perforce to work" (McMullin, 2010, p. 17). In this way, therefore, by introducing an ontological dualism between the Demiurge and the world, Platonism tactfully managed to explain "the presence of evil in the everyday

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[22] It is worth clarifying that by *'Platonism'* I do not strictly refer to the philosophy that Plato himself developed. Rather, being more in line with the historical period that primarily concerns us here, namely the second century AD onwards, the term 'Platonism' refers to Middle Platonism. The period of Middle Platonism "runs from the second half of the first century BC until the first half of the third century AD, (and) had realised its tendency towards theology which gave it an affinity with Christian thinking" (May, 2004, p. 3).

[23] Here, it should be explained that the fact that the early Christian theologians and their views on creation were influenced by their middle Platonic philosophical environment does not mean that they were entirely dependent on middle Platonism. As we shall see later, the Christian writers were initially influenced by middle Platonism, but they gradually came to reject its philosophical views.

[24] The word *Demiurge* is a technical term which is found in Plato's dialogue titled "*Timaeus*" and is frequently used to refer to the divine "Maker of heaven and earth" (Arendzen, 1908, para. 1).

world" (McMullin, 2010, p. 20) without blaming God for the world's imperfections and deficiencies.

As can easily be imagined, however, against this Platonic philosophical background the early Christian theologians of the second century AD were profoundly confronted with the following question: "Who is the God we worship?" (Soskice, 2017, p. 40). For them, to answer this question was particularly difficult because at their time the church had not yet developed a clear-cut "orthodox structure" on which they could lean and draw their answers from (Niehoff, 2006, p. 50). Given that, these early Christians thinkers were often attracted to the answers provided by their philosophical environment and so a large number of them "had been quite happy to endorse Plato's description of creation as God's ordering of unformed matter" (McFarland, 2014, p. 1-2).[25]

Most prominent among the second-century Christian theologians who supported a Platonic *creatio ex materia*[26] rather than *creatio ex nihilo* were: Clement bishop of Rome, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, Hermogenes, and Clement of Alexandria.[27] But the fact that these theologians "initially harmonised their theology with the (Platonic) cosmology" (Vail, 2012, p. 65), should not be viewed as an isolated instance unrelated to the views of the early Christian community. On the contrary, these writers endorsed the Platonic tenet that, "God had created from an eternally existing substrate" precisely because this "appears to have been a generally accepted belief in the early Christian church" (Ostler, 2005, p. 293-294). This view is supported by the fact that the extant writings of these early theologians reveal that all their references to *creatio ex materia* are somewhat devoid of substantial arguments in favour of this Platonic teaching. If their writings contained detailed arguments for *creatio ex materia*, then we could assume that this teaching was "either a contested doctrine or a new view". Since, however, *creatio ex materia* is acknowledged as obvious, and further elu-

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[25] In the same vein, May claims that, "Throughout the second century and the early part of the third the doctrine of the pre-existence of matter was firmly held by philosophically educated Christians" (May, 2004, p. 147). In addition, speaking about the early Christian theologians of the second century AD, Vail contends that, for them, "God's creative activity was viewed in line with Platonism: as world-formation" (Vail, 2012, p. 32).

[26] This Latin phrase is the exact opposite of *creatio ex nihilo* and describes creation out of some pre-existent, eternal matter.

[27] More information about these early Christians and their views on the creation of the world is to be found in the fourth chapter of May's book titled *"Christian and Platonic Cosmology"*, and in Ostler's article p. 293-302.

cidation of it is not provided in their works, we are led to conclude that second-century Christians considered this teaching a "received Christian doctrine" (Ostler, 2005, p. 293-294).

However, in the latter half of the second and the beginning of the third century AD things began to change when Christians gradually realised that the Platonic understanding of creation from a pre-existent material was incompatible with their deep conviction that God is omnipotent, all-free, and unique (Vail, 2012, p. 30-31, 65). Indeed, if *matter* existed eternally side by side with God, as the adherents of Middle Platonism believed, then an ontological dualism would immediately appear and it would set "limits on God's creative power" which, in their turn, would ultimately undermine three fundamental Christian attributes of God, namely His *omnipotence*, His *freedom*, and His *oneness* (McMullin, 2010, p. 20).

To be more precise, the Platonic *creatio ex materia* threatened to undermine these Christian attributes of God in the following threefold way. First, if God required pre-existing matter to create the universe, as *creatio ex materia* held, then He would cease to be Omni-powerful simply because the very pre-existence of matter would limit His ability to realise His will in creation "in the same way that the properties of wood constrain the creative possibilities open to the carpenter" (McFarland, 2014, p. 2). Second, the limitation that a pre-existence of an eternal matter would impose on God's creative power would also cripple His ability to be free because, as is known, the exact opposite of freedom is enslavement and limitation. Third, the claim of *creatio ex materia* that matter is coexistent and coeternal with God would compromise God's "status as the sole ground of being", and so, His oneness would be severely questioned (McFarland, 2014, p. 10).

To safeguard, therefore, God's *omnipotence*, *freedom* and *oneness* against the undesirable theological implications of the Platonic belief in *creatio ex materia*, the early Christian community eventually developed the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (Vail, 2012,

p. 65).[28] This was initially formulated by "Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch, and soon with Irenaeus"[29] it achieved "its permanent form" (May, 2004, p. 148).[30] With these theologians, "Platonic cosmology was rejected, and adherence to it among Christians was treated as a severe theological error" (Niehoff, 2006, p.50). Later on, and for the same anti-Platonic reasons, *creatio ex nihilo* was adopted by major Church Fathers, like "Athanasius, the Cappadocians, John Damascene, and Augustine" and once "established as a mainstream teaching (by the early fourth century at the latest) was rarely in itself a matter for debate" (Soskice, 2017, p. 49, 37-38).

2.3 Conclusion

By and large, it becomes clear that both the lack of a solid biblical foundation of *creatio ex nihilo* and the endorsement of *creatio ex materia* by the early Christian community of the first two centuries shows that reconsidering or perhaps re-interpreting more creatively the traditional doctrine of creation 'out of nothing' is possible. Indeed, since the Bible does not provide adequate support to *creatio ex nihilo* and since early Christianity exhibited a certain degree of flexibility when dealt with this doctrine — by initially disapproving it and later approving it. I cannot find a compelling reason not to display the same flexibility nowadays by attempting to interpret this doctrine in a way different from the traditional one.

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[28] On that note, it should be mentioned that in the scholarly literature there are some voices, like that of Hart and others claiming that, "the *ex nihilo* doctrine arose to exclude…gnosticism, the view that this universe is to be ascribed to an ultimate Evil principle that is in contention with an ultimate Good principle, a contention to be resolved only in an eschaton beyond this universe" (Hart, 2016, p. 117). Contrary to Hart's view, however, I here support Soskice's view that *creatio ex nihilo* essentially arose as "a critical response…to pagan philosophy" and especially to the cosmology of Middle Platonism (Soskice, 2010, p. 31, 33). And, the reason for this is that, as McFarland underlines, "The most serious objection to any attempt to trace the doctrine of creation from nothing directly to Christian opposition to Gnosticism is the fact that the first Christian we know of to defend this teaching explicitly, the Alexandrian theologian Basilides, was himself a gnostic" (McFarland, 2014, p. 6).

[29] Of course, even before Tatian, the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* was explicit in his "assertion of an *ex nihilo* origin" (McMullin, 2004, p. 4), but here, I preferred not to mention this early Christian work*,* because, as Quasten notes, "although numbered among the Apostolic Fathers, the *Shepherd* of Hermas belongs in reality to the apocryphal apocalypses" (Quasten, 1986, p. 92), and, I do not find the 'apocryphal apocalypses' absolutely reliable.

[30] More information on how these theologians developed the doctrine in question, see May's fifth chapter, titled, *"The Church Doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo"* p. 148-178.

3. Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*: Towards a renewed Christian understanding of human freedom for the Twenty-First Century

Having indicated that both the Bible and the paradigm of the early Christian community allow us to take a more flexible stance towards *creatio ex nihilo* and its traditional interpretation, I shall now turn to the late 19th and early 20th-century Russian religious existential philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev and his philosophical understanding of the traditional Christian teaching of creation 'out of nothing'. More specifically, I will devote this section to arguing that Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* can help Christianity develop a new understanding of human freedom, far removed from the traditional Christian view of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws and closer to the postmodern understanding of freedom as absolute and unrestricted freedom of choice. To advance my argument, I shall divide this section into two parts. First, I will scrutinise Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, and I shall show *how* this can give rise to a new Christian understanding of human freedom. Second, I will grapple with, and attempt to answer, some critical theological questions that this new understanding of freedom raises.

3.1 Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* & the birth of a new Christian view of human freedom

Berdyaev might not necessarily be "the most brilliant modern exponent of Greek Orthodox mysticism" (Niebuhr, 1964, p. 172), as Niebuhr boldly contends, but he is certainly "a pioneer in contemporary Orthodox theology" (Hughes, 2015, p. 65) and, more importantly, he has some claim to be "the most outspoken champion of freedom" among the religious existentialist philosophers (Nucho, 1967, p. 3). For this reason, this modern advocate of freedom is here chosen to give a solution to the theological problem of human freedom that, as shown above, the traditional Christian understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* creates. But, what is Berdyaev's alternative interpretation of the traditional doctrine of creation out of nothing? And how can this help us develop a Christian un-

derstanding of human freedom more attuned to postmodernism and thus more attractive to both the present-day Christians and the secular audience of the twenty-first century?

To answer these questions, a close examination of Berdyaev's understanding of freedom is deemed necessary because his interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* is connected with and ultimately stems from his philosophical understanding of freedom. To be more specific, although Berdyaev "considered himself to be a loyal son of the Russian Orthodox Church" (Hughes, 2015, p. 64), the answer that this Church gave and still gives to the problem of freedom, namely that "man received freedom from God when he was created" deeply dissatisfied him (Nucho, 1967, p. 36). Indeed, for Berdyaev, if human freedom is a pure gift from God, as traditional Christianity teaches, then man appears to be a creature that does not possess freedom of himself and, in this way, freedom "is wholly set within the grip of God" (Berdyaev, 1930, para. 4). If this is the case, however, Berdyaev continues, God appears to "be morally responsible for the presence of evil in the world" (Idinopulos, 1969, p. 89) since He gave freedom to humans, although, He, as omniscient, foreknew that the human misuse of this freedom would eventually result in evil. Thus, following the rationale of the traditional Christian view of freedom as God's gift, the problem of theodicy crops up, and, as Berdyaev acknowledges "the only serious argument in favour of atheism is the difficulty of reconciling an almighty and benevolent deity with the evil and suffering in the world and human existence" (Berdyaev, 1950, p. 178).

To dissociate God from evil, therefore, and ultimately 'save' Christianity from atheism, Berdyaev turned to Jakob Böhme, a Christian Lutheran mystic and theologian of the 17th-century,[31] and, influenced by his mystical writings, he went on to develop a new and original understanding of freedom different from the one that the official Eastern Orthodox Church offered (Nucho, 1967, p. 36). According to this understanding of freedom, "Freedom is not created by God: it is rooted in the Nothing…God the Creator cannot be held responsible for freedom which gave rise to evil" (Berdyaev, 1935, p. 25). But how are we to understand this seemingly unorthodox, if not heretical, statement of Berdyaev?

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[31] To some would perhaps seem somewhat strange that a thinker, coming from the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, turned to a Lutheran mystic like Böhme. But, when dealing with Berdyaev, we should bear in mind that his 'Christianity' "was derived from sources much wider than those recognised by the official church—the Scriptures and tradition" (Spinka, 1947, p. 7).

Before answering this question, it has to be borne in mind that Berdyaev, a highly intuitive and mystically oriented thinker, "is not an easy writer for those trained in the West, for those who are accustomed to exposition in the terms of Aristotelian logic" (Braybrooke, 1952, p. 54). So, to better grasp Berdayev's understanding of freedom, a certain striping off our Western rationalistic preconceptions is required, and, that being said, the road is now clear for a further examination of Berdyaev's view on freedom. To begin with, it has to be stressed that, for Berdyaev, *freedom* is uncreated and "ontologically independent of God" (Idinopulos, 1969, p. 89). As such, freedom is not "a gift given by God" and also "God cannot direct or revoke human freedom" (McLachlan, 1996, p. 480). More specifically, the very reason why Berdyaev perceives freedom as an uncreated and totally independent category is that, for him, freedom is a "lawless" condition of non-external determination (Zeldin, 1969, p. 207) because "to the extent that freedom is dependent on something else, more or less by definition there cannot be true freedom" (Noble, 2018, p. 132).[32] Hence, freedom, Berdyaev avers, "cannot be rooted in any sort of being, nor in any sort of nature, nor in any sort of substance" (Berdyaev, 1928, para. 9) and, if this is the case, then freedom should naturally be located "outside God" (Berdyaev, 1950, p. 99) in order not to be determined in any way by Him.[33] [34]

But if *freedom* is absolute non-determination, as Berdyaev contends, then we are led to conclude that freedom is, or must be No-thing because every *thing* is to a greater or lesser extent determined by the very conditions of its existence; and, indeed, Berdyaev asserts that freedom is an "indeterminate Nothing" (Nucho, 1967, p. 155). Yet following a somewhat Platonic line of reasoning, Berdyaev explains that the *nothingness* of free-

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[32] In a similar vein, Bourke remarks that, for Berdyaev, "Freedom is self-determination in the inmost depths of being and is opposed to every kind of external determination which constitutes a compulsion in itself" (Bourke, 1936, p. 419). In the same regard, Berdyaev himself goes on to define freedom as "indeterminism and as infinitude" (Berdyaev, 1928, para. 15).

[33] Here, it should be clarified that when Berdyaev locates freedom 'outside God', he also means that freedom is "outside the Godhead" (Nucho, 1967, p. 155). As Scaringi explains, Berdyaev, unlike Böhme, locates *freedom* entirely outside God, and by this, he means that freedom is not at all to be understood as "part of the Divine nature", or the Godhead (Scaringi, 2007, p. 40).

[34] I should explain that I am aware that Berdyaev's view that *freedom* is located outside *God* can be strongly criticised for rejecting God's oneness, omnipotence and omni-freedom. But, here is not the place to address these criticisms. For now, I shall only present Berdyaev's understanding of freedom and his philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, and in subsection 3.2, I will deal with the criticisms that Berdyaev's views might receive.

dom is not to be understood as absolute or literal nothing [i.e., οὐκ ὄν], but rather as nothing which "contains in itself bottomless potentiality" [i.e., μή ὄν][35] (Knežević, 2016, p. 12-17, 167, 176-177)[36] and, as such, it "is the *no-thing* that is also everything, potentiality without form" (McLachlan, 1992, 126). As bottomless potentiality, however, Berdyaev's *meonic*[37] freedom is "the potential for both good and evil" (Scaringi, 2007, p. 40) because a truly absolute and bottomless *potentiality* should necessarily include everything that is not yet realised and by *everything* we certainly mean all the unrealised possibilities for good as well as for evil.[38]

It is clear therefore that, in Berdyaev's world, there is a *creatio ex nihilo*, as traditional Christianity teaches, with the only difference being that, for Berdyaev, the *nihil* of creation is not to be understood literally as absolute nothing, but rather as a *meonic* nothing which is basically "potential being" (Nicolaus, 2011, p. 122-123). So, according to Berdyaev's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, "There existed…prior to creation, a potentiality which God did not control" (Spinka, 1947, p. 9) and, as Scaringi explains, it was through this uncontrolled potentiality that God "brought all 'Being' into

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[35] As we shall see below, despite Berdyaev's somewhat Platonic distinction between 'οὐκ ὄν' and 'μή ὄν', his philosophy has original qualities and is not essentially Platonic.

[36] Here, I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Knežević for providing me with a reworked and edited version of his unpublished PhD thesis.

[37] The word '*meonic*' comes from the Greek term 'μή ὄν' that I explained above.

[38] In this way, Berdyaev indicates that, "Freedom (as *nothingness*) is not merely the occasion or condition of evil, but the very source of evil, just as it is the source of good" (Idinopulos, 1969, p. 90). That being so, the problem of theodicy is resolved, because it is freedom/nothing, rather than God that should be held responsible for the existence of evil.

existence" (Scaringi, 2007, p. 37).[39] Thus, unlike what traditional Christianity holds, Berdyaev argues that before all creation God did not exist alone, but a mysterious, un-created, indeterminate and uncontrolled potentiality always existed as "a powerful real-ity alongside God" (Idinopulos, 1969, p. 90). That being the case, when the time of cre-ation came:

> When God created the world and man, He used the pre-existent *meon-ic* stuff which potentially contained uncreated freedom. Uncreated freedom, which carried the seeds of man's freedom of self-determina-tion, therefore, went into the making of man (Nucho, 1967, p. 155).[40]

In this light, however, the foundation of man is not anymore the literal nothing [i.e., οὐκ ὄν] out of which God created everything, as the traditional Christian interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* maintains. Instead, the foundation of man is now, according to Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, the bottomless, indetermin-ate, unrestricted and uncreated freedom/nothingness[41] that God creatively yet mysteri-

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[39] On this note, one would wonder: Isn't it a contradiction in terms to say that, on the one hand, God cannot control the *meonic* freedom, but, on the other hand, He created everything by using this very freedom? In answering this question, it should be noted that, for Berdyaev, "God determines nothing and is not to be thought of causally, God does not cause anything…God is not a cause of world at all…it is not possible to think that God causes something in the world like powers of nature, that he *controls* (emphasis mine) the world and rules in a similar way as kings and authorities in states, that he determines the life of the world and man" (Dancák, 2012, p. 22-24). That being so, we should not assume that, at the time of creation, God somehow con-trolled the *meonic* potentiality of the pre-existent nothing/freedom. On the contrary, considering that, for Berdyaev, God is pure and "infinite love" (Berdyaev, 1926, para. 8), it follows that He, being love, stands in opposition to any control and limitation. Consequently, in His relation to nothing/freedom, God can only 'inspire' the creation of something, but He can never control nor determine nor predict the outcome of the interaction between His *creative inspiration* and the *potentiality of nothing/freedom* (Hartshorne, 1957, p. 73-74). In this light, therefore, I propose, that, in Berdyaev's context, to say that: 'God created everything by using the uncreated *meonic* freedom', is not a contradiction in terms, because the verb *'to use'* does not here imply that God *controlled* the pre-existent nothing/freedom. It rather means that God *revealed* His inspiring, loving and creative spirit to nothingness/freedom, without knowing what the response of free-dom to His 'creative' revelation would be. So miraculously, the *meonic* freedom, out of its depths, and, for a reason unknown to us, received God's creative inspiration positively and thus the creation of the universe came to be. However, if the uncreated *meonic* freedom had received God's creative revelation negatively, then the universe might never have existed at all.

[40] In a similar vein, Spinka remarks that, "The temporal world and human freedom have a double origin: God's creative activity and the *Ungrund* (i.e., nothingness/freedom)" (Spinka, 1947, p. 9).

[41] For this reason, Knežević also remarks that, "The creation 'out of nothing',…is merely the other name for creation out of undetermined freedom" (Knežević, 2016, p. 133-134).

ously implanted *in* humans at the time of creation (Zeldin, 1969, p. 213-214).[42] That being so, it follows that we are now approaching the solution to the problem of human freedom that concerns us in this thesis. Indeed, if unlimited and 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, as the traditional interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* suggests, 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. For Berdyaev, therefore, *freedom* is not something that will (or, will not) be given to humans in a distant eschatological reality (i.e., afterlife) depending on how faithfully[43] they lived their lives during their earthly existence.[44] Rather, freedom is the somewhat mysterious *prima materia* of absolute potentiality that constitutes the basis of everything that exists, including humans, and, as such, it is to be found in the innermost depths of man. Given that, *man*, in Berdyaev's view, is already in the current life an entirely free being just like an artist or a poet is free when confronted with the absolute and infinite potentialities of his art. As Gilson observes:

> Let us consider the poet. Confronted as he is with his sheet of white paper, he sees it as the place of infinite poetic possibilities, any one of which can materialise precisely because none of them is already there (Gilson, 1957, p. 114).

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[42] Here again, my phrase: 'God mysteriously implanted (freedom/nothingness) *in* humans at the time of creation', should be understood in view of my previous footnote (no. 39) which explains that God did not control the pre-existent freedom/nothing.

[43] Here, I use the word *faithfully* in its religious sense, that is, 'following a religion and whatever this teaches'.

[44] That being so, Holsberg observes that, "By placing freedom 'outside' God, Berdyaev challenged… the theological definition of human freedom as simply a choice by the human will of whether or not to sin" (Holsberg, 2017, p. 51).

In Berdyaev's eyes, therefore, humans, just like the poet in Gilson's example, are daily confronted with the restrictive conditions of their human existence,[45] but these conditions do not strip them off their infinite freedom of potentiality which resides deep inside them. Indeed, 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 a mysterious, all-inclusive and infinite potentiality which renders them free. So, humans are somehow called to be like artists, like 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 and other artists, have to approach life not as the place of restriction and no-freedom, but as the place where the innermost and infinite potentialities of their freedom can be materialised. And, to the question: What is the direction that the materialisation of humans' infinite potentialities will take? The answer is: this is unknown. When the poet is confronted with 'his sheet of white paper' nobody knows beforehand what he will eventually write on it, and the same happens with ordinary humans. Berdyaev writes:

> God longs for His "other", His friend [human]; He wants him to answer the call to enter the fullness of the divine life…God does not answer His own call: the answer is from freedom which is independent of him…He creates out of nothing the world and man and expects from them an answer to his call — an answer from the depths of freedom (Berdyaev, 1935, p. 25-26).

But what will this answer be? This is the great unknown. Since humans are, as shown above, mysteriously endowed with infinite potentiality, then there are countless different ways to follow God's call, and, of course, there are equally countless different ways not

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[45] In Gilson's example, the restrictive condition of the poet is the 'sheet of white paper', while the restrictive conditions for ordinary humans are, among other things: matter, space, time, etc.

to follow God's call: and this is the essence of the absolute freedom that humans have.[46] Despite their *creatureliness*, humans are endowed with an infinity of choices, and it is entirely in their hands to choose the path that suits them best.[47] And in this unfathomable infinity of possible choices that humans can make, the choice to heed God's call to love and to exist in a loving way is just one choice among innumerable others.

If humans, however, are by construction endowed with absolute freedom of choice, then, as I see it, the problem of our thesis has just found its solution. As explained in the introduction of my dissertation, traditional Christian theology faces a predicament because it tends to perceive human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws, while the postmodern societies of our era understand freedom in a radically different way as people's ability to independently choose whatever they want from a plethora of available choices. In view of Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, and the alternative Christian understanding of human freedom stemming from it, the problem of human freedom and the inability of traditional Christian theology to understand freedom in a way more attuned to postmodernism ceases to be. By accepting Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, therefore, traditional Christ-

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[46] A possible theological problem that emerges from Berdyaev's understanding of people's absolute freedom of infinite potentiality and choice is that of perdition. One would argue that Berdyaev's theology, unlike traditional theology, envisages an infinity of options on the part of humans which would perhaps lead some people to reject God's call during their earthly existence. If this happens, however, then these people in the afterlife will, as traditional Christian theology teaches, end up suffering eternal damnation. In this case, Berdyaev's theology of unlimited potentiality and choice would be solely responsible for their loss because it would be the one that inspired them to make a different choice from what the Church considered right and safe for their salvation. In Berdyaev's world, however, eternal damnation on the base of what choices people made during their earthly life should not even exist as a problem. Indeed, if God is absolute and infinite love, as Berdyaev understands Him, and as He revealed Himself in the person of His incarnate son Jesus Christ, then "it is very difficult to accept a metaphysical system which makes the eternal destiny of the soul dependent on this temporal life, which exists merely from the cradle to the grave. According to this point of view, our brief life on earth is a mere trap, and our fitness for eternity is determined by an experience whose duration is entirely insignificant" (Berdyaev, 2009, p. 323). Further, instead of affirming the traditional belief in eternal damnation, Berdyaev resorts to a somewhat apophatic language and writes that, "The question of knowing whether all men will be saved, and how the coming of the Kingdom of God will be brought about, is the final mystery which is insoluble by reason" (Berdyaev, 2009, p. 323-324). Of course, here Berdyaev gives a rather vague and a somewhat unsatisfying answer to a valid critique. Personally, I hold that, drawing from the Christian doctrine of universal salvation and in the spirit of a merciful and loving God, a better answer to this critique can be developed. However, I shall herein refrain from giving a longer answer to this critique because this is beyond the scope of the current thesis.

[47] In view of this, *ethics*, "Instead of demanding subjection to collective norms (e.g., what the Church holds and teaches), it is concerned with finding what it is that I and only I can give to the world" (Nicolaus, 2011, p. 153).

ian theology can, as I indicated above, articulate an understanding of human freedom which, far from being restrictive and unattractive, will be in line with the postmodern understanding of freedom and thus more attractive both to contemporary Christians and to the broader secular audience of the twenty-first century.

3.2 Criticisms of Berdyaev's new Christian understanding of human freedom: To embrace Berdyaev's view on freedom or not?

Having explained Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* and the renewed Christian understanding of human freedom stemming from it, I shall now attempt to deal with what I consider the most important theological questions that Berdyaev's view on freedom raises. Indeed, if, as suggested above, it is to embrace Berdyaev's understanding of human freedom as a solution to the predicament that traditional Christian theology faces, then it is deemed necessary to check whether Berdyaev's understanding of freedom can stand the theological criticisms that it inevitably receives. For this reason, I shall herein try to answer the following question: Which are the major theological criticisms that Berdyaev's view on human freedom receives and how can these criticisms be tackled? To answer this question, it should be said that Berdyaev's philosophical understanding of freedom appears to be both unacceptable and in opposition to traditional Christian theology because it seems to undermine, as Middle Platonism did in the past, three basic attributes of God, namely, His *oneness,* His *omnipotence* and His *freedom.*

With regard to the critique concerning the oneness of God, Berdyaev and especially "his concept of uncreated freedom" has been heavily criticised by many scholars (Nucho, 1967, p. 169). For them, to claim, as Berdyaev does, that before everything there was "an uncreated freedom, which goes into the making of man but whose source is other than God, implies an ontological dualism foreign to Christianity" (Nucho, 1967, p. 169). As Spinka observes, Berdyaev's assertion that, "God created the world out of "meonic" stuff" leads us to a "radical dualism" which cripples the oneness of God by introducing two entities, that is, God and the *meonic* freedom (Spinka, 1947, p. 8). In my opinion, however, the criticism of 'ontological dualism' is not valid, or better, it

could be valid in the Platonic cosmology where, as already shown in the second section of my thesis, there are two different entities, namely *matter* and the *Demiurge*, but Berdyaev's case is significantly different from that of Platonism.

It is true, Berdyaev, diverging from the tenets of Platonic philosophy, teaches that it was not *something* (e.g., *matter* or something else) that existed eternally next to God, but *nothing*. In this way, the criticism of ontological dualism fails because *dualism*, as its name suggests, exists only when *two* things exist. In Berdyaev's philosophy, however, 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, as explained above, absolute potentiality but still, *potentiality* is not necessarily *actuality* and so criticising Berdyaev for ontological dualism because, for him, God existed next to a not yet existing, albeit potentially existing *nothing* is at least absurd.[48] Moreover, remembering that the contemporary Biblical scholarship tends, as shown above, to support that before everything there were some bottomless and unfathomable waters out of which God called creation forth, it follows that Berdyaev's understanding of creation out of *infinite potentiality* might be more biblical and Orthodox than his critics think. Indeed, since the Bible seems to accept the pre-existence of a mysterious and primordial abyss, then I see no reason not to view this primeval deep in Berdyaev's light and interpret it as a somewhat inspiring metaphor for the bottomless and uncreated potentiality of *nothingness* that eternally existed together with God.

Nevertheless, apart from the critique regarding the ontological dualism and the oneness of God, the second main reason why Christian scholars and theologians show reluctance to embrace Berdyaev's view on freedom is the problem of God's *omnipotence* coming with it. As Knežević remarks:

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48 My refutation of the criticism that Berdyaev's understanding of freedom introduces an 'ontological dualism' seems to agree with Berdyaev himself who writes, "To avoid misunderstanding I was always anxious to emphasise that the idea of 'groundless freedom' does not imply a kind of ontological dualism, which affirms the existence of two spheres of being, viz. God and freedom. Such affirmations are precisely evidence of rationalisation, no less conspicuous than the affirmations of monism, which reduces everything to a single sphere of being, be it divine or human" (Berdyaev, 1950, p. 179).

Berdyaev's entire philosophical edifice is deliberately built on…the presupposition of uncreated freedom over which God has no power. In that case, does Berdyaev not abolish God's omnipotence? (Knežević, 2016, p. 171).

An easy answer to this question is, indeed, to say, 'yes' and finish once and for all with Berdyaev's seemingly quasi-heretical philosophical theology. For me, however, this 'yes' would mean to endorse a Christian understanding of omnipotence which is only nominally Christian. Indeed, by saying that Berdyaev's claim that, 'God has no power over uncreated freedom' abolishes the Christian understanding of God as omnipotent, we imply, as I see it, that *omnipotence* is synonymous with oppressive power because we expect God to be able to exert absolute control over freedom. In Christian terms, however, this cannot be the case because if "God is love" (1 John 4:16), as the only New Testament definition of God reveals, then His *omnipotence* should not be viewed as absolute or domineering power in the same way as *power* is "understood on a natural level" (Knežević, 2016, p. 171). Rather, 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" (Nicolaus, 2011, p. 123). In this vein, Berdyaev explains:

The social categories of dominance and power have been transferred to God and that was evil sociomorphism. But in truth God is not a master, nor is he a wielder of power. A wrong cosmomorphism transferred categories of power to God, but God is certainly not a power in the natural sense of the world (Berdyaev, 2008, p. 4).

It is clear, therefore, that when speaking of the absolute God who transcends everything, our natural and social categories are simply inadequate to describe Him. For this reason, as far as God's *omnipotence* is concerned, it is deemed more appropriate to per-

ceive it in the light of *love*, as His revealed Holy Scriptures teach us, rather than in our human understanding of power as dominance and control. If this is so, however, we are led to conclude that God can still be considered omnipotent even though, as Berdyaev asserts, He is unable to control freedom. In this case, "God's powerlessness over the… uncreated freedom is where God's uncompromising power lies in" (Knežević, 2016, p. 171).

Following the second theological criticism that Berdyaev's view on freedom receives, we can now examine the third and last critique that Berdyaev's philosophical understanding of freedom might attract. According to this, *freedom,* in the way Berdyaev perceives it, should be dismissed as inadequate because it severely undermines God's absolute freedom. Indeed, if God is to be viewed as all-free, as traditional Christian theology maintains, then the God-image stemming from Berdyaev's view on freedom is in direct opposition to the free God of classical theology. Since God, in Berdyaev's world, appears to have no control over uncreated freedom, then it is implied that God may have a restricted but not at all absolute freedom because His inability to control or to do whatever He wants with this 'uncreated freedom' shows the restriction that this very freedom imposes on Him.

This critique of Berdyaev's philosophy, however, might, at first sight, appear valid, but a closer look at it is enough to convince us that, although it is not entirely mistaken, it repeats the same mistake that the second critique of Berdyaev's freedom made, namely not to take God's love seriously. Indeed, if "God is love" (1 John 4:16), as the New Testament explains, then we are somehow called to see God's inability to control the 'uncreated freedom' as the indication of His very freedom rather than the opposite. This claim might sound strange, but, as I see it, a linguistic explanation of what it means for God, 'to be love' can shed some light on why God's inability to control the 'uncreated freedom' might reveal His own freedom. More specifically, 't*o be love'*, as the Christian God appears to be, means first of all that God is in a state of existing and not of non-existing. God's state of existing, however, is not passive because God does not merely exist, but He exists as something, that is, as love. So, to say that, 'God is love' basically means that God finds Himself in an active state of existing as love and not as something else. On a somewhat speculative note, however, this makes us think that God might

have had the potential to be something other than love yet for a mysterious reason, He actualised Himself as love. Consequently, due to His positive freedom,[49] God is now not free to control the 'uncreated freedom' because His free choice to actualise Himself as love renders Him unable to exist as something else, for example, as control.[50] In this way, God can still be both free and unable to control 'the uncreated freedom'. Unfortunately, however, this explanation leaves the following question open: if the absolute freedom of infinite potentiality lies, as Berdyaev claims, outside God, then how could God have had the potential to actualise Himself in a way different from that of love? But still, our inability to answer this question does not make Berdyaev's understanding of freedom less valuable than it is. Rather, it makes us realise once more that in this life we only "see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor 13:12) and thus our ability "to speak of the unspeakable and ineffable apophatic mystery of God's life" (Berdyaev, 1950, p. 99), is subject, like many other things, to the restrictive conditions of our human existence.

3.3 Conclusion

On the whole, it is evident that Berdyaev's understanding of freedom as an uncreated and infinite potentiality 'outside God' can at least to an extent be in line with the traditional Christian theology and its perception of the Deity. Of course, Berdyaev's view on freedom might, at first sight, seem somewhat shocking to classically trained theologians, but this does not necessarily make it non-Christian. In Christianity, like in life, there are more than one ways of looking at things and the fact that Berdyaev's view on freedom can, as noted above, successfully refute its two main theological criticisms re-

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[49] *Positive freedom* means, as Knežević explains that, "I am free only as long as I am able to create my own world" (Knežević, 2016, p. 68). Given that, God, in our case, appears to be 'positively free' because by choosing to exist as love He chose to exist in the way He wanted.

[50] This happens because, as Hartshorne explains, "Actualisation is, in principle, exclusion" (Hartshorne, 1957, p. 73). So, if God, for whatever reason, actualised Himself as love, then this implies that His very actualisation excludes Him from being something other than what He chose to be, that is, love. In other words, it is like saying that a person X decided to become a 'baker' and so X is now not a 'banker'. Before becoming a 'baker', however, X had all the potential to be something other than a 'baker', but since X chose to be a 'baker', then X cannot now be a 'banker' because being a 'baker' excludes X from being a 'banker'.

garding the *oneness* and the *omnipotence* of God proves precisely this. Equally, our inability to entirely reconcile Berdyaev's view on freedom with its third theological critique regarding the absolute *freedom* of God should, I think, not make us reject Berdyaev's philosophy as either heretical or non-Christian. This would make us appear arrogant and somewhat forgetful of the fact that we are all, "Fellow-pilgrims to…[a God] that none of us has yet grasped in its immensity" (Goddard, 2000, p. 193). Instead, we have to embrace Berdyaev's philosophy and its understanding of freedom positively and allow ourselves to be enriched by the valuable and creative insight that this new understanding of freedom gives into the baffling mystery of God and humanity.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, I attempted to show the restrictive and unattractive Christian understanding of human freedom stemming from the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and, by using Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of this doctrine, I proposed a renewed Christian understanding of human freedom which is more attuned to the present-day, postmodern and secular view on freedom.

To do so, I first presented what the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* teaches and how this lays the theoretical foundation for a somewhat restrictive Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws. Further, I explained that viewing human freedom in such a way puts traditional Christian theology in a predicament by making it stand over against the postmodern tendency to perceive human freedom as an unrestricted power of choice. Afterwards, I examined both the biblical origins and the early historical development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and I discovered that the Bible, as well as the early Christian community, do not lend unquestionable support to the doctrine in question. In view of this, I argued that a more flexible stance towards *creatio ex nihilo* and its traditional interpretation could be taken. Subsequently, I turned to the Russian religious existentialist philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, and after scrutinising his philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, I contended that this could allow Christians to develop a new understanding of human freedom. Specifically, I illustrated that according to the understanding of freedom resulting from Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, human freedom could be perceived as absolute freedom of choice, and, in this way, it would enable traditional Christian theology to escape the predicament in which it finds itself. Then, I analysed three essential theological criticisms regarding God's oneness, omnipotence and all-freedom that Berdyaev's view on freedom might receive. In attempting to refute these criticisms, I focused first on the fact that Berdyaev's freedom is understood as potentiality rather than an actuality, and second, on the fact that love is the supreme attribute of God. Finally, I maintained that Berdyaev's understanding of freedom could theologically enrich Christianity and so the Christian world should unhesitatingly embrace it.

Overall, I am of the opinion that the main conclusion that can be drawn from all the above is that the research question of my thesis can find its answer in Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Indeed, as explained in the introduction, the current dissertation set out to answer the following question: *Is it possible to give a different interpretation of creatio ex nihilo so that to allow Christians to perceive human freedom in terms of absolute freedom of choice rather than submission to Church regulations and laws?* And the answer to this is 'yes'. By placing the absolute freedom of bottomless potentiality 'outside God', Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* provides us with a new theological anthropology which views the freedom of 'infinite potentiality' as the foundation of man and thus it allows humans to be entirely free because by their very construction they are endowed with absolute freedom of choice. In this light, Christians can now speak of human freedom, not anymore as submission to Church laws and regulations, as traditionally happens, but rather as absolute freedom of infinite choice, and, in this way, Christian theology can cease finding itself at cross purposes with the postmodern view on freedom. Instead, it can now understand the postmodern language of freedom in a better way and so as far as human freedom is concerned a fruitful dialogue between Christian theology and postmodernism can be more easily established.

The answer, however, that Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* gives to the research question of my dissertation is far from perfect. Indeed, as is commonly the case with many answers, Berdyaev's answer to our research question does not settle the matter once and for all. Of course, it offers a valuable solution to the problem of the restrictive Christian understanding of human freedom that stems from the traditional interpretation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. But, as noted above, Berdyaev's claim that the uncreated freedom of infinite potentiality is located 'outside God' can generate critical theological questions. Some of them are the following: How can God be all-free, as classical theology maintains, if infinite potentiality is, according to Berdyaev, outside God? Why do we insist on imagining God as all-free? Do we have biblical evidence in favour of God's Omni-freedom? Or, a detailed examination of the belief in God's absolute freedom would prove — as it happened with our investigation of the biblical grounding of *creatio ex nihilo* — that there is no real biblical support for this belief? Finally, if it is to accept Berdyaev's view on human freedom, then what is the role of the

Church? And why should one follow or even care about the laws and the regulations of the Church?

Despite being fundamental, these questions lie beyond the scope of the current thesis, and so I shall not answer them here. It is a need for further research to be undertaken in order to deal with these questions and provide us with detailed answers. For the time being, however, I would like to end my dissertation with the hope that Christians, especially the ones who perceive human freedom in terms of submission to Church regulations and laws, will positively receive Berdyaev's philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* and the understanding of human freedom stemming from it. The solution that Berdyaev's understanding of human freedom can potentially give to the predicament that traditional Christian theology faces is, to my mind, of great value, and by embracing it, the Christian community has more to gain than to lose.

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Summary

In this dissertation, I attempt to answer the following research question: *Is it possible to give a different interpretation of creatio ex nihilo so that to allow Christians to perceive human freedom in terms of absolute freedom of choice rather than submission to Church regulations and laws?*

To do so, I first explain that the traditional Christian understanding of human freedom as submission to Church regulations and laws stands in opposition to the postmodern understanding of human freedom as an unrestricted power of choice. Second, I argue that behind this disagreement between the Christian and the postmodern understanding of human freedom lies the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Third, I indicate that both the Bible and the early Christian community do not lend support to the doctrine at issue, and, based on that, I maintain that a more flexible stance towards *creatio ex nihilo* and its traditional interpretation can be assumed. Fourth, I contend that the Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev can provide Christianity with a valuable philosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* which, in a somewhat postmodern spirit, would eventually allow Christians to perceive freedom as unlimited choice by viewing the *nihil* of creation as potential rather than an absolute nothing. Fifth, I try to refute three important theological criticisms regarding God's oneness, omnipotence and all-freedom that Berdyaev's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* might receive.