



Barbara Hallensleben,
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Pantelis Kalaitzidis (eds.)

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations

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Verlag

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Abstract

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) is one of the preeminent theologians of the 20th century whose work is still being discovered and explored in and for the 21st century. The famous rival of Lenin in the field of economics, was, according to Wassily Kandinsky, “one of the deepest experts on religious life” in early twentieth-century Russian art and culture. As economist, publicist, politician, and later Orthodox theologian and priest, he became a significant “global player” in both the Orthodox diaspora and the Ecumenical movement in the interwar period.

This anthology gathers the papers delivered at the international conference on the occasion of Bulgakov’s 150th birthday at the University of Fribourg in September 2021. The chapters, written by established Bulgakov specialists, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), as well as young researchers from different theological disciplines and ecclesial traditions, explore Bulgakov’s way of meeting the challenges in the modern world and of building bridges between East and West. The authors bring forth a wide range of new creative ways to constructively engage with Bulgakov’s theological worldview and cover topics such as personhood, ecology, political theology and Trinitarian ontology.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Building the House of Wisdom. Editors' Introduction	11
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12520-5	

PERSONHOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond	25
Rowan Williams	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12172-6	

Masks, Chimaeras, and Portmanteaux: Sergii Bulgakov and the Metaphysics of the Person	43
David Bentley Hart	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12173-3	

Bulgakov and Lot-Borodine as Shapers of Deification in the West	63
Mark McInroy	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12174-0	

" <i>Transcende te ipsum</i> ": Faith, Prayer and Name-Worship in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i>	77
Ivan Ilin	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12175-7	

The Kenotic Iconicity of Sergii Bulgakov's Divine-Humanity: Doctrinal, Anthropological, and Feminist Considerations	91
Sarah Elizabeth Livick-Moses	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12176-4	

Sergii Bulgakov's Fragile Absolute: Kenosis, Difference, and Positive Disassociation	107
Jack Louis Pappas	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12177-1	

The Authenticity of Creativity: The Philosophical and Theological Anthropologies of Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov	123
Deborah Casewell	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12178-8	
Bulgakov on Mangodhood—or, Satan after Schelling	137
Justin Shaun Coyle	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12179-5	

POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND ECOLOGY

Seven Days of <i>Narod</i> : Sergei Bulgakov’s Christian Socialist Newspaper	153
Catherine Evtuhov and Regula M. Zwahlen	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12180-1	
Is It All the Greeks’ Fault? Reconsidering the Byzantine Legacy in Sergius Bulgakov’s <i>By the Walls of Cherson</i>	177
Nikos Kouremenos	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12181-8	
“The Sophia Dispute” in the Context of Political Ontology	193
Alexei P. Kozyrev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12182-5	
Sophiology and Personalism, Foundations of the New Political Science in the Twenty-First Century	209
Antoine Arjakovsky	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12183-2	
Sergii Bulgakov’s Chalcedonian Politics of Personhood	221
Nathaniel Wood	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12184-9	
The World as the Household of Wisdom: Political Theology and Philosophy of Economy	235
Dionysios Skliris	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12185-6	

Rethinking the Language of Economics as a Systematic Christian Response to Economic and Ecological Crises in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov	247
Tikhon Vasilyev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12186-3	
Bulgakov's Ecology	259
Austin Foley Holmes	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12187-0	

SOPHIOLOGY

The Reception of Palamite Theology in the Sophiology of Sergii Bulgakov	275
Liubov A. Petrova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12188-7	
An Unfinished Dispute. How is it Possible to Criticize Bulgakov's Sophiology at the Present Time?	289
Natalia Vaganova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12189-4	
Sophiology, Ascesis and Prophecy	301
Joshua Heath	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12190-0	
Mariology as Personalized Sophiology. Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Theology	317
Dario Colombo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12191-7	
The Training for Dying and Death: A New Reading of Bulgakov's Sophiology	331
Paul L. Gavrilyuk	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12192-4	

 CREATION AND ONTOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Early Marxism: A Narrative of Development	351
Caleb Henry	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12193-1	
<i>Creatio ex sapientia</i> in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i> : The Influence of F. W. J. Schelling	365
Taylor Ross	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12194-8	
Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom	381
Brandon Gallaher	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12195-5	
Sergii Bulgakov: Between Kenotic Theology of the Event and Trinitarian Ontology	409
Antonio Bergamo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12196-2	
From Social Trinity to "Linguistic Trinity": Sergii Bulgakov's Contribution to Analytic Theology	419
Nikolaos Asproulis	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12197-9	
Sergii Bulgakov: From Grammar to Wisdom	435
John Milbank	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12198-6	

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Father Sergii Bulgakov’s “Karamazov’s excursus” 463
Pavel Khondzinsky
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12199-3

Ships in the Theological Night? Sergius Bulgakov and
Liberation Theology 475
Graham McGeoch
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12200-6

“Your Labor Is Not in Vain.” Sergii Bulgakov’s Sophiology as
a Key to a (Protestant) Theology of the Kingdom of God 489
Oliver Dürr
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12201-3

Sergius Bulgakov and Modern Theology 501
Paul Ladouceur
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12202-0

The Vision of Unity. The Ecumenical Thought of
Fr. Sergii Bulgakov 521
Adalberto Mainardi
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12203-7

List of Contributors 535

Creatio ex sapientia in Bulgakov's *Unfading Light*: The Influence of F. W. J. Schelling

Taylor Ross

Throughout his career, Sergei Bulgakov plays heir to the apophatic tradition in Christian theology, even as he strikes his own path. For instance, he shares with his forbears the conviction that God cannot be counted among things that exist. Hence the opening gambit of *Unfading Light* (1917), for which Bulgakov marshals plenty of patristic and medieval evidence: “we have to admit that it is impossible to affirm even being about the transcendent.”¹ But he proves more assiduous than, say, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, or John Scotus Eriugena in distinguishing this “Divine Nothing” from the source of *creatio ex nihilo*.² Whence, of course, the well-known taxonomy of “nothing” Bulgakov gleans from three Greek particles: the alpha privative, οὐκ, and μή.³ If those concepts are familiar to Bulgakov’s readers, their source is somewhat less so. The present chapter argues that his initial account of *creatio ex nihilo* cannot be understood apart from F. W. J. Schelling’s own attempts to chart a middle course between emanation and creation by means of the very same meontological distinctions.

Three Varieties of „Nothing“ in *Svet Nevechernii* (1917)

Less a concept than an apophatic placeholder, the alpha privative stands in for the “absolute NOT” of negative theology: “a gesture, a surge, a motion,

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- 1 Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Alan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 108.
 - 2 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 23; Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus* 4.7; John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* 3.5–6.
 - 3 Hereafter transliterated (i. e., alpha privative, *ouk*, *mē*) to match the English translation of Bulgakov’s text.

not a thought, not a word.”⁴ It is a verbal icon of the fundamental antinomy of religious consciousness, if you like: a literal window onto that which language itself cannot express. Such a transcendent sort of negation cannot be correlated to “being,” to be sure, but neither can it correspond to “non-being.” Otherwise, the absolute negation of negative theology becomes the contingent negation of a dialectical process. The sort of unsaying proper to the alpha-privative must be distinguished from *ou* and *mē*, in other words, “[f]or both *mē* and *ou* are for the *alpha privative* of negative theology already some sort of positive expressions about being, and thereby they relate to the immanent, diurnal, cosmic consciousness that distinguishes the light of being and the shadow of nonbeing, the manifestation of forms and the twilight of potentiality.”⁵ If the alpha-privative implies an absolute form of negation, once more, *ou* and *mē* are relative terms.

Which is another way of saying that both *ou* and *mē* represent “creaturely” forms of nothing in contradistinction to the “Divine Nothing” towards which the alpha-privative gestures.⁶ But these terms themselves can be distinguished further still: “the first [*ou*] corresponds to full negation of being—*nothing*, while the second [*mē*] corresponds only to its nonmanifestation and nondefinition—*something*.”⁷ Whereupon the question immediately follows: when Christians confess the world was created “out of nothing,” as indeed they must, what exactly do they mean? Bulgakov assures his readers that the only “admissible” possibility is creation out of *ouk on*—out of the “full negation of being,” that is, in contradistinction to the *mē on* from which monists of various stripes attempt to derive the world’s existence. For if the world simply gives form to some hidden potential within the depths of the Absolute, it thereby spells the logical elision of the alpha privative and *mē on*, the confusion of divine nothing and creaturely nothing. Bulgakov knows the provisos of his patristic forebears well enough to hold the line when it comes to the qualitative distinction between creation and emanation: “If we allow that the world arose out of divine *mē on*, this will mean that it is not created at all, but is *engendered* or *emanated*, generally speaking that it was realized in God in one way or another.” At which point, he warns, “[t]he border between the world and God is erased.”⁸ Once again, the dogmatic formula of *creatio ex nihilo* must mean creation from *ouk*

4 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 109.

5 *Ibid.*, 108–09.

6 *Ibid.*, 186.

7 *Ibid.*, 188–89.

8 *Ibid.*, 189.

on, lest the antinomic disjunctions on which Christian dogma itself depends give way to a dialectical identity between God and world.

Nonetheless, Bulgakov also insists that the “investment” of *ouk on* with *mē on* “was the first, fundamental, and essential act of creation.” Indeed, he says the “conversion of *ouk on* into *mē on* is the fashioning of the common matter of creatureliness, of the Great Mother of the whole natural world.”⁹ Or again, if “*mē on* is pregnancy” and “*ouk on* is sterility,” then the latter must “overcome its emptiness and be freed from its sterility.” Simply put, “*ouk on* must become *mē on*.” It can only do so, however, when the Absolute “self-bifurcates” and becomes “absolute-relative,” thereby “placing in itself another center.”¹⁰ Apart from this act in and through which the Absolute becomes “the Father of all,” the “nothing, the nonexistent basis of creation” cannot become “the Mother, the *mē on* containing everything.”¹¹

But once it does, Bulgakov can even praise the monists he otherwise maligns—Baruch Spinoza, Jakob Böhme, G. W. F. Hegel—for stressing the inseparability of being and nonbeing, yes and no, determination and negation. For all of their dialectical insights readily apply to creation once *ouk on* becomes *mē on*, once “nothing” becomes “nonbeing.” Indeed, the *Science of Logic*’s “brilliant formula”—that “there is nothing that is not a middle state between being and nothing”—becomes the basis for Bulgakov’s own definition: “Creatureliness is above all and in its essence *mē on*, *being-nonbeing* . . .”¹² So long as *mē on* doesn’t imply some unactualized potency within the Absolute itself, the term is practically synonymous with creation. Hence, “[t]he concept of creation [...] is broader than the concept of emanation,” Bulgakov says, for “it includes the latter in itself, since creation is emanation *plus* something that is created by the creative *let there be!*”¹³ That initial “something” is non-being—meonal “potency,” as he likes to put it—but it’s crucial to Bulgakov’s thought in *Unfading Light*, at least, that God creates even such “non-being” out of “nothing.”

All of which implies that the “nothing” (*ouk on*) in the dogmatic formula of *creatio ex nihilo* functions as something like an apophatic safeguard against confusing creaturely being-nonbeing and divine nothing—a mediator between *mē on* and the alpha-privative. But what *is* it? Does it even make sense to ask whether nothing “is,” much less “what” it might be? Even if “*ouk on* cannot be

9 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

10 Ibid., 184–85.

11 Ibid., 195.

12 Ibid., 191.

13 Ibid., 183.

conceived directly but only indirectly, by a certain ‘illegitimate judgment’—*hapton logismōi tini nothōi*, according to Plato’s famous expression about matter,¹⁴ does the misbegotten attempt to think it nonetheless yield a bastard thought?

Creatio ex nihilo in the late Schelling

Though he buries the confession in a footnote, Bulgakov actually credits Schelling with the very distinction on which his doctrine of creation rests. “In modern philosophy,” he says, “the development between *mē* and *ou* is most distinctly of all expressed by Schelling in his *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* [1836]” when he observes that “*mē on* is the not-existing which only *is* the not-existing, with respect to which only actual existence is rejected, but not the possibility of existing,” while “*ouk on* is fully and in every sense that which does not exist ...”¹⁵ What’s more, Bulgakov actually praises the aforementioned text for claiming “the world is created by God out of nothing in the sense of *ouk on*, and not *mē on*,” even though he also chides the late Schelling for “not entirely remain[ing] faithful to it in *Philosophy of Revelation* [1841–43] where he develops the idea of the creation of the world out of itself by God, although in a covert and complicated way ...”¹⁶ Setting aside the question of the philosopher’s alleged development on the issue for now—but nonetheless noting our theologian’s obvious disapproval of it—a brief glance at the text Bulgakov elsewhere calls “one of [Schelling’s] latest and most profound works” confirms their agreement on the question of creation from *ouk on*.¹⁷

For we find in the *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* a similar effort to safeguard the Absolute from any causal relationship to the world—even one couched in terms of an as yet unactualized “potency” within the divine life—which thereby issues in a philosophical reinterpretation of the dogmatic formula of *creatio ex nihilo*.¹⁸ “The highest concept of God, and thus the highest concept as such, is not the concept of cause,” Schelling observes, but rather one

14 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 190.

15 *Ibid.*, 469n9.

16 *Ibid.*, 470n9.

17 Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. and ed. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 299, n. 23.

18 For discussion of these passages, see Emilio Brito, “La creación ‘Ex Nihilo’ selon Schelling,” *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 60, no. 4 (1984): 298–324; Walter Kasper, *Das Absolute in der Geschichte: Philosophie und Theologie der Geschichte in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 2010), 343–49.

“in and through which he is determined to be absolutely independent (*absolut Selbständiges*), i. e., the concept of substance.”¹⁹ It follows that such “freedom (*Freiheit*) will be absolute and unconditional only if God is not already the creator directly (*unmittelbar*) by virtue of his concept, only if there is a concept of God in which there might be no reference whatsoever to even a possible (*mögliche*) creation.”²⁰ Hence, “[h]e is only absolutely free when he not only posits the principles, i. e., potencies (*Potenzen*), insofar as they are already in act (*in Wirkung*), but also insofar as he posits the potencies *as* potencies, so that they would not even be potencies (i. e., possibilities of a future being) without his will.”²¹ Just so, the late Schelling's voluntarism replaces not only a “correlation theory” (*Korrelattheorie*) that would make God and world mutually constitutive terms but also a “doctrine of potencies” (*Potenzenlehre*) according to which creation is supposed to lie dormant in the divine ideas.

With these two models of cosmogenesis off the table, the traditional Christian doctrine recommends itself quite readily, for the plain reading of “[c]reation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) can mean nothing other than *creatio absque omni praeexistente potentia*—creation without any already existing potency that has not been posited at first by the will of the creator himself.”²² Despite the various objections²³ one might pose to the religious “picture-thought” (*Vorstellung*) preserved by the dogmatic formula, he says, it nonetheless points the way to a “third possibility,” whereby God would be “absolutely free, to create or not to create . . .”²⁴ One such objection to the doctrine might worry at the “ambiguity” (*Zweideutigkeit*) of the operative term, Schelling notes.²⁵ Whereupon he introduces the aforementioned distinction between “non-being” (*nicht Seiende*) and “non-being” (*nicht Seiende*), between μη ὄν and οὐκ ὄν. It's clear, as Bulgakov himself claims, that Schelling means to say that *creatio ex nihilo* must signify creation out of οὐκ ὄν, i. e., “that from which not merely the actuality of being, but also being in general, even its possibility, has been denied.”²⁶ For this alone secures a concept of God from which even the “potency”

19 F. W. J. Schelling, *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus*, in *Schellings Münchener Vorlesungen*, ed. Arthur Drews (Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1902), 254–55 [Sämtliche Werke X, 279]. Hereafter *Darstellung*. All translations of this text are mine.

20 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 257 [SW X, 281–82].

21 *Ibid.*, 258 [SW X, 282].

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, 259 [SW X, 282].

24 *Ibid.*, 257 [SW X, 282].

25 *Ibid.*, 258 [SW X, 283].

26 *Ibid.*, 259 [SW X, 283].

of creation has been stricken, a concept of God according to which he would be free to bring about such “potency” if he so pleased. Even so, what Bulgakov does not quite say is that Schelling also concedes an interpretation of creation out of “nothing” that includes its emergence from μη ὄν, i. e., “non-being, that which only is not, from which only actually existing being has been negated.”²⁷ Said otherwise, Schelling believes *creatio ex nihilo* means both “that God made the world out of nothing” and “that he pulled it from nonbeing.”²⁸

Consider the following statement: “The true doctrine of creation out of nothing also knows this *Néant* [i. e., μη ὄν],²⁹ this nothing, but it takes it to be something that itself originated from nothing (*de rien*); this [μη ὄν] is the immediate possibility of actual being (*unmittelbare Möglichkeit des wirklichen Seins*), but [the true doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*] does not claim that this potency (*Potenz*) was in any way already existing.”³⁰ Just like that, Schelling recuperates his “doctrine of potencies,” without thereby implicating the Absolute in a dialectical process. Such was the stated aim of his late distinction between “negative” and “positive” philosophy, between a logical derivation of the world from the concept of God and a voluntary recognition of reason’s limits before the sheer fact of existence. Hence the “metaphysical empiricism” to which the work’s title alludes.³¹ Setting aside a longer summary of his “philosophy of revelation,” though, it suffices here to note that Schelling introduces the distinction between μη ὄν and οὐκ ὄν in order to maintain his own commitment to creation’s emergence from a prior state he variously calls “non-being” (*nicht Seiendes*), “unbeing” (*Unseiendes*), “shapeless matter” (*materia informis*), “unmediated stuff” (*unmittelbarer Stoff*), “not yet something” (*noch nicht Etwas*), “blind and unbounded being” (*blindes und grenzenloses Sein*), and even “that which should not be” (*nicht sein Sollendes*).³² All of these can be synonymous with the “immediate possibility of actual being” only to the extent that such a “potency” emerges from “nothing,” not “the concept of God.”³³ So long as μη ὄν itself originates from οὐκ ὄν, that is, being as such can be defined by the “con-

27 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 259 [SW X, 283].

28 *Ibid.*, 260 [SW X, 285].

29 Cf. *ibid.*, 260 [SW X, 284–85].

30 *Ibid.*, 261 [SW X, 285].

31 Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 179. Hereafter *Grounding*.

32 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 260–61 [SW X, 285].

33 Cf. Kasper, *Das Absolute in der Geschichte*, 344.

stant overcoming" (*beständige Überwindung*) of nonbeing.³⁴ Indeed, *creatio ex nihilo* can mean both creation out of $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$ and creation out of $\delta\upsilon\kappa\ \delta\upsilon\nu$, given the right interpretation of each term.³⁵

With this qualified affirmation of creation out of $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$ in view, return to Bulgakov's summary of the *Darstellung*: "According to Schelling's own thought, which is defended in the treatise cited, the world is created by God out of nothing in the sense of *ouk on*, and not *mē on*."³⁶ He's only half-right, of course. But what makes this misrepresentation of Schelling more than a curious oversight is Bulgakov's proximity to the position he suppresses. For he too recuperates the *mē on* as creation's source on the very same condition that "non-being" itself be created from "nothing." According to Bulgakov, recall, "the world is created out of nothing in the sense of *ouk on*," but he immediately adds that "its [i. e., *ouk on*'s] investment with *mē on* was the first, fundamental, and essential act of creation," the ineffable decision whereby the Absolute first brings "the common matter of creatureliness" into "being-nonbeing."³⁷ Much like Schelling, moreover, Bulgakov also maintains that the Absolute "becomes its own potency (or 'meon') by giving in itself and through itself a place to be relative, but without at the same time forfeiting its absoluteness."³⁸ To do so, Bulgakov must presuppose a recalcitrant "nothing" in the divine life from which "meonal being" itself springs, just as Schelling must entertain a certain "non-potency" in God himself: *creatio ex nihilo* "stipulates only that the potencies are not in him as *potencies*," the latter claims, "but it does not say that they are not in him as *non-potencies* (*Nichtpotenzen*), sheer *differences* (*Unterschiede*) as such, which he freely treats and regards as potencies (as possibilities of another being) only because it pleases him."³⁹ Contextualizing this concept of "non-potency" in Schelling's corpus reveals just how close he actually comes to Bulgakov's own position, regardless of whether the latter was willing to admit it.

Despite his development, the idea of "non-potency" is a vestige of Schelling's middle period (ca.1805–ca.1815). Students of Schelling know this "non-potency" (*Nichtpotenz*) as the more familiar but no less impenetrable notion of the "non-ground" (*Ungrund*). Both terms imply a state of exception from the principle of sufficient reason, even as they point up the paradoxical relation

34 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 261 [SW X, 285].

35 Cf. Brito, "La Creation 'Ex Nihilo' Selon Schelling," 315.

36 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 470, n. 9.

37 Ibid., 189.

38 Ibid., 185.

39 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 261 [SW X, 286].

such an “excluded term” still bears to the dialectic of cause and effect. Consider, for instance, Schelling’s introduction of the term in the *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809: “there must be a being *before* all ground and before all that exists, thus generally before any duality—how can we call it anything other than the original ground [*Urgrund*] or the non-ground [*Ungrund*]?” For if this “being” is neither “ground” nor “existence,” and this because it precedes them both in equal measure, “it can only be described as the absolute *indifference* [*Indifferenz*] of both.” Which is to say “nothing else than their very non-existence [*Nichtsein*].”⁴⁰ The negative prefixes attached to these terms—*Un-grund*, *In-differenz*, *Nicht-sein*—signal an exemption from the “duality” in which they would otherwise traffic: the “original ground” (*Urgrund*) must be “ungrounded” (*Ungrund*) because it “grounds” (*begründen*) the very opposition to “existence” (*Existenz*) that defines “ground” (*Grund*) itself, must be “indifferent” (*Indifferenz*) because it “differs” (*differieren*) from the dialectic of “identity” (*Identität*) and “difference” (*Differenz*) on which the latter trades, must be “non-existence” (*Nichtsein*) since it “pre-exists” (*schon vor sein*) both “being” (*Seiendes*) and “non-being” (*Nichtseiendes*) alike.

Precisely because this point of “indifference” is itself “ungrounded,” moreover, there can be no logical progression from non-existence to non-being, much less being itself: “the Other [i. e., the world] cannot be posited by that eternally commencing nature in a continuous series [...] as a potency that belongs to it,” since “it is outside and above all potency, a lack of potency in itself (*das an sich Potenzlose*).”⁴¹ Rather, existence itself must be the result of a groundless “de-cision” (*Ent-scheidung*) from this “abyss” (*Abgrund*) of possibility. Schematized in terms of the “doctrine of potencies” (*Potenzlehre*) from the slightly later *Weltalter* of 1815, “nothing” (non-potency) must first posit itself as “that which does not have being” (first potency) before its subsequent idealization as “something” (second potency) can become “that which should actually be, that which truthfully and in itself has being” (third potency).⁴² For the middle Schelling, moreover, this “unprethinkable decision” (*unvordenkliche Entscheidung*) on the part of “nothing” is coterminous with the “personal-

40 F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 68. Translation altered. Hereafter *Freedom*.

41 F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 23. Hereafter *Ages*.

42 *Ibid.*, 13.

ization” of God himself.⁴³ Notice the parallels between the following passage and his description of the “non-ground” quoted above: “What then could be thought above all Being, or what is it that neither has being nor does not have being?” Schelling’s answer: “It certainly is nothing, but in the sense that the pure Godhead is nothing ... in the way that pure freedom is nothing ...”⁴⁴ Or again, this “nothing” is “not so much God itself, but the Godhead, which is hence, above God ...”⁴⁵ From which it follows that the “groundless” decision by which the Godhead contracts itself into the “non-being” at the “ground” of existence is not only the materialization of creation out of “nothing” but also the emergence of the “living God”⁴⁶ from the “eternal freedom to be” (*die ewige Freiheit zu sein*).⁴⁷

Simply put, the middle Schelling betrays no interest in distinguishing a category like οὐκ ὄν from the divine nature itself.⁴⁸ The latter serves as the “dark ground” (*dunkler Grund*) of both God and world, the “indivisible remainder” (*der nie aufgehende Rest*)⁴⁹ at the basis of both creation as well as its Creator: “The attracting force, the mother and receptacle [!] of all visible things [...] eternal force and might itself, which, when set forth, is seen in the works of creation.”⁵⁰ Indeed, the *Weltalter* (1815) even glosses *creatio ex nihilo*⁵¹ as the world’s emergence from “first potency,” thereby implying that the “nothing” in the dogmatic formula is something more like the exteriorization of the “non-ground” than the sheer absence of being as such.⁵² Which is to say, μὴ ὄν: a self-revelation of the same “infinite lack of being” (*der unendliche Mangel an Sein*) in the heart of God itself.⁵³ For the middle Schelling, the “doctrine of potencies” (*Potenzlehre*) is just as much a theogony as it is a cosmogony, and this because not only “non-being” but the “non-existent” itself comes “to be”

43 Schelling, *Ages*, 12.

44 *Ibid.*, 24.

45 *Ibid.*, 25.

46 Cf. *ibid.*, 17, 26–27, 47.

47 *Ibid.*, 23.

48 Cf. Jason Wirth, *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 63.

49 Schelling, *Freedom*, 29–30.

50 Schelling, *Ages*, 31.

51 *Ibid.*, 14.

52 Cf. Sean McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2011), 14.

53 Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke* vol. II/2, 49.

in the process: “God leads human nature down no other path than that down which God himself must pass.”⁵⁴

The late Schelling has given up such “historical immanentism”⁵⁵ for a notion of “pure act” completely exempt from temporal development—compare, for instance, his comment that the concept of God must be “absolutely free from the world, completely detached from the world”⁵⁶ in the *Darstellung* (1836) with his recurring claim in the *Weltalter* (1815) that God only becomes fully conscious of himself⁵⁷ when creation has come to fruition in third potency—but he nonetheless retains the notion of the “non-ground,” now under the heading of “non-potency.” Indeed, the contemporaneous *Grundlegung der positiven Philosophie* (1842) equates the latter term with the *actus purus* itself: “the potency, which is not a potency, but is rather itself the *actus*, does not exist via the transition *a potentia ad actum*.”⁵⁸ Even if his final attempts at a philosophical system insist more strenuously than the works of his middle period that such a “transition” can only occur by an unprethinkable “act” of the divine will, the late Schelling is no less committed to the idea that “non-being” (first potency) exteriorizes a “dark ground” (non-potency) in God himself: “while the later Schelling abandons theogony, he still maintains the claim of the Freedom essay that the ground of God is in God but not identical to God, that is, that there is a distinction in God, something in the divine, which the divine depends upon for being, which is not God.”⁵⁹ No matter his subsequent breakthroughs regarding the priority of actuality to potency, Schelling never abandons the hard-won insight that “all personality rests on a dark ground.”⁶⁰

Such is the background against which one must read Schelling’s otherwise puzzling remark in the *Darstellung* that *creatio ex nihilo* “stipulates only that the potencies are not in [God] as *potencies*,” but does not thereby say “that they are not in him as *non-potencies* (*Nichtpotenzen*), sheer *differences* (*Unterschiede*) as such, which he freely treats and regards as potencies (as possibilities of another being) only because it pleases him.”⁶¹ Again, the comment means to prescind from any possible relationship to creation, to secure a concept of divinity “com-

54 Schelling, *Ages*, 101.

55 Cf. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, 6–11.

56 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 257 [SW X, 282].

57 Cf. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 88.

58 Schelling, *Grounding*, 199.

59 Cf. Sean. J. McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling: The Turn to the Positive* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 92.

60 Schelling, *Freedom*, 75.

61 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 261 [SW X, 286].

pletely detached from the world” as we know it.⁶² It should be clear by now, however, that Schelling can only do so at the cost of retrojecting a recalcitrant “nothing” into the divine life itself. For these “non-potencies” occupy the same (il)logical space as the οὐκ ὄν out of which God freely elects to bring μὴ ὄν. But precisely because the late Schelling insists upon God’s absolute independence from the world while nonetheless maintaining that “God is only God as the Lord, and he is not the Lord without something over which he is Lord,” his final system must presuppose something “in” God other than the “potencies” themselves, over which he might exercise such lordship.⁶³ As he puts the point in the last cycle of his *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (1854) lectures, “there must be something in the middle,” between God and the potencies, as it were, since “without such a mediator the world can only be thought of as an immediate and therefore necessary emanation of the divine essence.”⁶⁴ According to the *Darstellung*, that liminal being can be called “non-potency,” or indeed “nothing.” Whence, of course, the text’s recuperation of *creatio ex nihilo*: the dogmatic formula itself becomes a testament to this “mediator” (*Mittelglied*) the late Schelling’s concept of God requires.

But the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* proposes other names: “original potency” (*Urpotenz*), “original possibility” (*Urmöglichkeit*), “original contingency” (*das Urzufällige*), “wet nurse of the world” (*Weltamme*), “mother of the world” (*Weltmutter*), “matter of the world to come” (*die Materie der künftigen Welt*), even “wisdom” (*Weisheit*).⁶⁵ Indeed, the figure of *Chokhmah* (חכמה) becomes the operative term in this text, not least because of several important scriptural references. Schelling is especially drawn to Wisdom’s own speech in Proverbs 8:22, which he renders thus: “The Lord had me at the beginning of his ways, before his works, *from then on*. From eternity I was appointed, from the beginning, *before the earth . . .*”⁶⁶ His italics betray the connection Schelling describes between this biblical sketch of Wisdom and the “mediator” he seeks. For she is clearly “distinguished” (*unterschieden*) from the Lord in this passage, but still present to him from eternity: “although she is not herself God, she is nevertheless not a creature either, not something brought forth, and so she thereby represents the middle ground (*das Mittel*) between God and creation—just the mere possibility (*die bloße Möglichkeit*), the first distant material (*der erst*

62 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 257 [SW X, 282].

63 F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke* vol. II/3., 291. All translations of this text are mine.

64 *Ibid.*, 292.

65 *Ibid.*, 294–95.

66 *Ibid.*, 295.

entfernte Stoff) of future products.”⁶⁷ This is not to say Wisdom competes for logical priority, since she is something God has always “overcome” (*überkam*) to establish his lordship. “He does not presuppose her; she presupposes him,” to be sure. “But just as he is,” Schelling continues, “she is there and presents herself to him as something he can either will or not will (*das er wollen oder nicht wollen kann*), something he can either take up with his will (*in seinem Willen aufnehmen*) or not,”⁶⁸ for she offers God a “mirror” (*Spiegel*) in which to see “that which could actually be in the future, if he wills it.”⁶⁹ It’s precisely because God perceives in her the highest possibility of creation that Schelling is willing to call “Wisdom” that which he otherwise labels “nothing.” Even if the term properly belongs to “the consciousness that knows all things in their coherence, grasping together beginning, middle, and end,” he concedes, “there is nothing wrong with assuming that [...] this principle should be named after that which it will be.”⁷⁰ So it is, at any rate, that Schelling attempts to find a place for the “non-potencies” in God that compromises neither his freedom nor his personality. Proleptically speaking, he suggests, *creatio ex nihilo* is *creatio ex sapientia*, but not exactly *creatio ex deo*.

Conclusion

By means of an all too brief commentary on Schelling’s late interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, we’ve nearly backed our way into Sophiology. Which makes it all the more strange, once again, that our Russian theologian both misrepresents the *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* despite praising its distinctions and distances himself from the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* for supposedly defaulting on those same insights. For not only is there substantial agreement between these two works, but each sheds light on Bulgakov’s own concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. They do so in at least three ways.

First, it bears repeating that Bulgakov not only borrows Schelling’s distinction between οὐκ ὄν and μὴ ὄν but also endorses the latter’s idea that μὴ ὄν represents the “the immediate possibility of actual being,” so long as “non-being” itself “originated from nothing.”⁷¹ Despite failing to disclose his proximity to Schelling on this point, in other words, Bulgakov also insists that “*ouk on*

67 Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, 301.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 302.

70 Ibid., 295.

71 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 261 [SW X, 285].

must become *mē on*,” that “it must overcome its emptiness and be freed from its sterility.”⁷² Otherwise, it remains a vacant womb, much like “prime matter” in Plato’s myths: “naked potentiality,” but not yet a “potency” in its own right.⁷³ Hence the late Schelling’s use of “non-potency” to describe that which Bulgakov calls “pure possibility.”⁷⁴ In either case, οὐκ ὄν represents the sufficient condition on which the world rests, without it thereby implying that creation is the necessary product of a transition from potency to act in God’s own life.

Second, the Bulgakov of *Unfading Light* agrees that a transition from οὐκ ὄν to μὴ ὄν—from “non-potency” to “first potency,” as the late Schelling puts it—can only be the result of a supra-rational “decision” on the part of the Absolute. “[I]t is impossible to comprehend by what manner *mē on* arises in *ouk on*,”⁷⁵ says Bulgakov, and this because the “self-bifurcation of the Absolute as absolute-relative forms the ultimate antinomic limit for thought.”⁷⁶ We are thus given to know that the Absolute “becomes thereby its own potency (‘meon’) by giving in itself and through itself a place to the relative,” but not how this has come about.⁷⁷ Likewise, the late Schelling’s “positive” philosophy turns on his recognition of the “unprethinkable” act by which God not only creates the world but thereby becomes the Creator of Christian revelation—the “living God,” as he likes to put it.⁷⁸ For him, too, the dogmatic formula of *creatio ex nihilo* ultimately safeguards the freedom of God’s decision to create or not. It “stipulates only that the potencies are not in him as *potencies*,” recall, “but it does not say that they are not in him as *non-potencies* (*Nichtpotenzen*), sheer *differences* (*Unterschiede*) as such, which he freely treats and regards as potencies (as possibilities of another being) only because it pleases him.”⁷⁹ Such is the late Schelling’s solution to the relationship between that which Bulgakov dubs the alpha privative, οὐκ ὄν, and μὴ ὄν.

Finally, the fact that Schelling ultimately treats this “non-potency” under the heading of “Wisdom” offers the most salient point of contact with Bulgakov’s first account of *creatio ex nihilo*. For it not only provides a precedent for his attempt to find a “mediator” between God and world in the figure of Sophia,

72 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

73 Ibid., 191.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 189.

76 Ibid., 184.

77 Ibid., 185.

78 Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *Die Philosophie der Offenbarung 1831/32 (Paulus Nachschrift)*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 191.

79 Schelling, *Darstellung*, 261 [SW X, 286].

but also anticipates the Russian tradition's characteristic tendency to distinguish her from the second person of the Trinity. By contrast with Bulgakov's later efforts to suture his Sophiology to Christology—and this by interpreting “the two forms of the one Wisdom of God” as “the two natures in Christ,”⁸⁰ thereby indexing “the inclusion of creation in God's own life” to Sophia's “dual mode,”⁸¹ recall—his work prior to the Great Trilogy still treats her as a “fourth hypostasis,” straddling the line between time and eternity.⁸² Or again, “[o]ccupying the place *between* God and the world,” says Bulgakov, “Sophia abides between being and super-being; she is neither the one nor the other, or appears as both at once.”⁸³ But it's precisely Schelling's influence that explains why Bulgakov should assign such a mediating role to οὐκ ὄν as well: “Between God and creature, between the Absolute and the relative, there lay *nothing*.”⁸⁴ Bearing in mind the philosopher's claim that “non-potency” should be called “Wisdom” *per anticipationem*—from the perspective of the fully actualized creature it will become in “third potency,” that is—Bulgakov's elision becomes somewhat clearer. The provenance of “nothing” in the middle Schelling's notion of “non-ground” makes sense of why Bulgakov might claim that Sophia is “free of being submerged in the nothing which is proper to worldly being”⁸⁵ while nonetheless insisting that “a certain *intelligible matter* [...] forms the basis of corporeality in Sophia herself.”⁸⁶ It sheds light on why he might say “nothing, nonbeing, *apeiron*, emptiness”⁸⁷ finds no place in Sophia proper, while nevertheless protesting that “*apeiron* proves to be not weakness or defectiveness” but rather “that matter thanks to which Sophia becomes *ens realissimum*, *ontos on*, and not an idealist phantom.”⁸⁸ Simply put, it may be the case that Bulgakov is never more Schellingian than when he suggests that Sophia is a “person,” for he seems to be no less committed than his German predecessor to the idea that

80 Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, trans. Rev. Patrick Thompson, Rev. O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikovitc (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 95.

81 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 45.

82 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 217.

83 *Ibid.*, 219.

84 *Ibid.*, 186.

85 *Ibid.*, 219.

86 *Ibid.*, 258.

87 *Ibid.*, 219.

88 *Ibid.*, 258.

“personality rests on a dark ground,” even if the “nothing” in question has been always already overcome.⁸⁹

The full story of Schelling's influence on Bulgakov has yet to be written. He is certainly not the only philosophical source of Bulgakov's sophiological gloss on creation. A more exhaustive treatment of the topic would have to include Plato himself, Plotinus, and Jakob Böhme, especially. But then again, each of these figures already plays a significant role in Schelling's own philosophy of creation. Rather than treating each of the sources in his vast “storehouse of wisdom” on their own terms, it may behoove scholars of Bulgakov to reconsider the extent to which his reception of past figures was mediated by modern authors. Pride of place among such privileged guides should belong to Schelling.

89 Schelling, *Freedom*, 75.