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# The Category of ‘Ethical Apophaticism’ in Modern Orthodox Theology

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**Abstract:** This article begins by summarizing the concept of ethical apophaticism in the theology of John Zizioulas and Christos Yannaras. The impetus for this concept, namely a desire to maintain the irreducibility of the human person to extrinsic ethical categories, is noted and celebrated. However, it is proposed that to do fuller justice to the understanding of the ethical and moral life in the Orthodox tradition, a certain ‘ethical cataphaticism’ needs to be brought into the discussion. Some potential lineaments of what this might entail for these authors are highlighted (repentance and love) before seeking to supplement them with a discussion of the commandments of Christ through the lens of the theology of Sophrony Sakharov. It is argued that Christ’s commandments provide the sure path to developing an ethical cataphaticism that can work in tandem with the insights of the category of ethical apophaticism offered by Zizioulas and Yannaras.

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## Introduction

There exists a strong trend in modern Orthodox theology to treat ethics with a measure of surprising diffidence. Repeatedly, we have been told that Orthodoxy is not about moral codes or legalistic prescriptions; that Orthodoxy proposes and offers ‘life in abundance’ (Jn 10:10) rather than a list of ethical rules. Indeed, to reduce Orthodoxy to a program of ethical behaviour would be calamitous, as such figures as Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas have not tired of warning. To do so would be to collapse the message of the Gospel into a pietistic

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pharisaism and, worse, to make the coming of Christ, the Incarnation of God, an event of merely moral rather than ontological significance to humanity and creation as a whole. Reacting to this legitimate and real danger has helped lead to the blossoming of several key themes in modern Orthodox theology, in particular the concepts of divine and human personhood (with the attendant themes of relation and communion); an ecclesiology firmly focused on the ontological significance of the sacraments as rescuing us not only from sin, but also from death; and the role of apophaticism in theological discourse. This article is not intended as a challenge to, or rebuttal of, any of these core ideas prevalent in modern Orthodox thought. Instead, the intention is to analyse one of the emerging tendencies they have engendered, encapsulated by the term ‘ethical apophaticism’ coined by Zizioulas in his recent work *Communion and Otherness*. After summarizing this category and its range of meanings in the work of both Zizioulas and Yannaras, the question is raised of the possibility, even necessity, of supplementing it with an ‘ethical cataphaticism’ that accounts more fully for the rich, pervasive and even inescapable tradition of reflection on ethics and virtue throughout the patristic and Byzantine sources constitutive of Orthodox theological identity. Without such a supplement, which I suggest should take the form of a robust theology of the commandments of Christ, the Orthodox approach to ethics risks becoming thinned or weakened to the point of being unrecognizable before the witness of Scripture and the saints.

### **Judge not, that ye be not judged**

First, let us examine the concept of ethical apophaticism itself. In Zizioulas’ work, it emerges at the end of his chapter ‘On Being a Person’ in *Communion and Otherness*. He writes:

It is perhaps appropriate to introduce into our terminology the category of *ethical apophaticism*, so badly needed in our culture, with which to indicate that, exactly as the Greek fathers spoke of the divine persons, we cannot give a *positive qualitative content* to a hypostasis or person, for this would result in the loss of his or her absolute uniqueness and turn a person into a classifiable entity.<sup>1</sup>

Zizioulas’ message in using this terminology is relatively clear: he is emphasizing the irreducibility of human personhood to any classifiable attribute of a given human being (ethical or otherwise), applying trinitarian theology (whereby Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinguished solely on the basis of relationship rather than any particular divine attribute they hold in common) directly to anthropology. The practical purpose of this emphasis is also clear: it serves

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1 J.D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 112.

to pre-empt judgement of the other, since a human person *qua* person is not ultimately classifiable in terms of any particular quality, even an ethical one. To be ethically apophatic in this context, then, is to protect the integrity of a human person whatever their apparent ethical deficiencies or deviancy, recognizing that God alone is the judge of the human heart, and that human personhood in any case cannot be measured by abstract ethical standards, but only by relational ones (personhood being a constitutively relational category). The question naturally arises, however, whether the category of relation does not also include or imply an ethical or moral standard: if human personhood is fundamentally constituted through relationship with God and neighbour, then surely it is possible to speak of a relationship that is better or worse, healthy or broken.

Elsewhere, Zizioulas does in fact speak in these terms. Ethical apophaticism is not necessarily understood by him to be an abdication of morality, but an attempt to help place it on a different, specifically personalist, footing. In the same chapter, he articulates a profound vision of a 'eucharistic ethos' that puts the question of the 'ethos' of life in terms of gratitude versus ingratitude, self-giving relationship and loving communion versus egotistical individualism and depersonalization.<sup>2</sup> All of this presupposes an ethic, even if its contours are left largely undeveloped. We hear echoes of this ethic scattered throughout the oeuvres of Zizioulas, Yannaras and their heirs. Thus in *Being as Communion* we are told that 'the person cannot exist without communion; but every form of communion which denies or suppresses the person, is inadmissible'.<sup>3</sup> This is an incontrovertibly ethical claim, but one characteristically left dangling for the readers to draw their own conclusions. Similarly, we hear from Yannaras that the true morality or ethos of the human being is 'the way he relates to the existential adventure of his freedom', and that 'the Church's ethics are "beyond good and evil"; they relate to ontological realities and not to evaluative categories'.<sup>4</sup> For Yannaras, this position forms a clarion call against all forms of moralism and pietism in favour, like Zizioulas, of a liturgical or eucharistic ethos, where 'truth' rather than 'virtue' is the conditioning factor for Christian ethics and morality.<sup>5</sup>

It would be worth pausing for a moment over Yannaras' allusion to the need for an ethics that is 'beyond good and evil'. A little earlier in *The Freedom of Morality*, Yannaras identifies the temptation to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and its promise of divinization as 'an existential lie'.<sup>6</sup> There is

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2 See Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 91–8. The comparable theme of a 'liturgical ethos' is likewise developed in Christos Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), esp. pp. 77–107.

3 J.D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 18.

4 Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, pp. 29, 37; see also Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), p. 293.

5 See Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, p. 77.

6 Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, p. 30.

a striking echo here, as Neil Messer has pointed out, between Yannaras' position and that of Karl Barth, according to whom 'what the serpent has in mind is the establishment of ethics'.<sup>7</sup> What Messer deftly shows is that despite the distinctively Orthodox hue of Yannaras' position, his strident critique of ethics is not without impressive analogues in the theological discourse of the modern West. Similarly, while acknowledging the force and expediency of this kind of critique of 'legalistic and rationalist ethics', Messer wonders whether Yannaras might be going too far in appearing to dismiss 'not only laws and rules, but also virtues'.<sup>8</sup> For Messer, 'this dissociation of virtue from Christian transformation looks odd to a Westerner whose thinking has been formed in part by the writings of Hauerwas'.<sup>9</sup> This is an interesting point, but here Yannaras risks being misunderstood. For Yannaras, the category of virtue can just as easily be co-opted by the Pharisee as can the category of morality and ethics. As he writes:

Taking social utility as their frame of reference, they define sin merely as an objective transgression and virtue merely as a necessary and useful individual quality, thus definitively closing the way to repentance. Here we see why the harshest language in the Gospels is reserved for religious people and their rigid forms.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of virtue is condemned by Yannaras insofar as it is used as a substitute for *repentance* (μετάνοια). This is a crucial insight that holds considerable potential for attempting to tease out a positive ethic from the ethical apophaticism of both Zizioulas and Yannaras. For repentance, especially in Orthodox ascetic theology, serves as the basis and framework of a truly Christian ethics. This is repentance understood not simply as a turn from sin, but as a turn *towards Christ*, the lifelong struggle to conform to his holy image. Like Yannaras, Zizioulas can also quietly invoke repentance as a fundamental ethical category for Orthodox theology. Having declared that the legitimate human yearning for simultaneous communion and otherness cannot be solved 'through ethics', but requires the new birth of baptism into the Body of Christ, Zizioulas goes on to argue that in this light 'the essence of Christian existence in the Church is *metanoia* (repentance)'.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, p. 448, cited in Neil Messer, 'Christos Yannaras's *The Freedom of Morality* and Western Christian ethics', in Andreas Andreopoulos and Demetrios Harper, eds., *Christos Yannaras: Philosophy, Theology, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 85.

8 Messer, 'Christos Yannaras's *The Freedom of Morality*', p. 84.

9 Messer, 'Christos Yannaras's *The Freedom of Morality*', p. 84. He identifies the work of Vigen Guroian as an alternative voice who actively integrates virtue ethics into Orthodox moral discourse: see V. Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

10 Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, pp. 63–4.

11 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 3–4.

The larger meaning of this positive ethic of repentance is not explored in detail by either Yannaras or Zizioulas, but its presence could be read as another subtle yet significant gesture towards an ethical vision that is not purely apophatic. Indeed, if we look at the manner in which the concept of repentance was understood and deployed particularly in Greek patristic and Byzantine ascetic literature, we find an unmistakably cataphatic and comprehensive moral vision, grounded on the idea of the human being's assimilation to Christ.<sup>12</sup> One representative example will suffice to give the reader a sense of this. It comes from the opening lines of the fifth-century Mark the Ascetic's treatise *On Repentance*, which reads:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the power and wisdom of God, foreseeing for the salvation of all what he knew was worthy of God, decreed the law of liberty by means of various teachings, and to all set a single goal [ἓνα σκοπὸν], saying: 'Repent' (Matthew 4:17), so that we might understand by this that all the diversity of the commandments is summed up by one word: repentance.<sup>13</sup>

Repentance is understood in this passage as encapsulating the whole of Christian moral life, conditioning its beginning, middle and end. Repentance constitutes the 'one goal' or 'scope' of Christian morality precisely because it places Christian ethical theory on the foundation of conforming to the living person of Christ. Conforming to Christ is predicated on the fact that there exists a dissonance or break between us and Christ, between his life and ours, and thus the only admissible ethic becomes an ethic of repentance.<sup>14</sup>

To make this claim, as the reader may have noticed, requires taking something rather embryonic in the thought of Yannaras and Zizioulas and developing it on the basis of other sources. Without actively retrieving such sources, the fleeting mention of repentance by both Yannaras and Zizioulas and its possible significance for Orthodox ethics could easily be missed.

Of course, the positive ethic to which Zizioulas and Yannaras do frequently return in far more detail is the ethic of love (often described as 'ecstatic eros'), a love reflective of, or rather itself identifiable with, the divine life. As Yannaras puts it: 'the mode by which the Godhead *is*, reveals the morality of the divine life, the love and the Being of God'.<sup>15</sup> This love is the goal of Christian striving:

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12 I have examined the theme of repentance in such sources in Alexis Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life, ca. 400–650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For the general theme of assimilation to Christ as the goal of human life in the Orthodox tradition, see also Alexis Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

13 Mark the Ascetic [or Mark the Monk], *On Repentance* 1.1–7 (SC 445:214).

14 This line of thought cannot be developed in detail here, but I attempt to elaborate this point throughout Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity*.

15 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 276.

as Zizioulas writes, ‘ascetic life aims not at the “spiritual development” of the subject but at the giving up of the Self to the Other, at the erotic ecstasis of the I, that is, at *love*’.<sup>16</sup> It is a love, moreover, that far from being indifferent to evil, acts in the manner of Christ by taking the evil of the other onto itself: evil ‘is passed from the Other to the Self’.<sup>17</sup> This is indeed an ethic, but Zizioulas is interestingly quick to distance it from any attempt at formulating a morality that is tenable in society at large. It is an ethic not of this world. As he argues:

the ethos she [the Church] preaches cannot take the form of a rationally or practically sustainable ethic. The optimism of a ‘social gospel’ which might transform history into the Kingdom of God simply cannot be sustained theologically. Society will never become the Church, and history will have to wait for the *eschaton* to redeem it from its antinomies.<sup>18</sup>

We thus find ourselves back at ethical apophaticism via a concept of history that some might construe as quasi-escapist. Notwithstanding a nod towards an ethic of repentance and love that freely gives the self up for the other, there exists an abiding resistance, even opposition, in both Zizioulas and Yananras, to elaborate this ethic in much more detail. An exception in the case of Zizioulas is his concern for ‘cosmological sin’: that is, the need for an environmental ethics whereby human beings recover their mediating role as priests of creation, but this too is formulated in somewhat general terms.<sup>19</sup> What remains is an approach to ethics which, while rooted in important elements of Scripture and patristic tradition, is sufficiently underdeveloped as to warrant closer scrutiny.

Once again, the category of ethical apophaticism has several advantages that this article does not intend to diminish. First and foremost, it attempts to safeguard the evangelical directive to ‘judge not, that ye be not judged’ (Mt.7:1). Realizing the permanent and immeasurably precious uniqueness of each human person or hypostasis regardless of their apparent faults is a lesson we must all continually learn. Ethical apophaticism seeks to cut out, root and branch, our destructive tendency to sit in judgement on our neighbour, commending every soul to the loving embrace of Christ, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. Similarly, it is a category that opens the way for a repentant and thus healing self-reproach, providing a context in which to understand the summons to ‘bear one another’s burdens’: instead of reproaching our neighbour for their apparent faults, we reproach and blame ourselves before Christ for these same faults, thereby ‘standing surety’ for our neighbour in a relationship of love. Finally, it equips the theologian with a means of resisting the temptation to

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16 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 84.

17 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 82.

18 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 87.

19 See, for instance, J.D. Zizioulas, ‘The Book of Revelation and the Natural Environment’, in Sarah Hobson and Jane Lubchenco, eds., *Revelation and the Environment, AD 95–1995* (London: World Scientific), pp. 17–21.

adopt shifting human and created criteria (e.g. dominant social mores) to describe 'the living human being', the glory of God<sup>20</sup>: the church's ethic is indeed 'not of this world', and any attempt to reduce it or combine it with this or that ethical trend or theory is fraught with difficulties.

All that said, can ethical apophaticism really bear so much of the weight of Orthodox tradition on the issues of morality, ethics and virtue? Just as in the case of theology proper, problems emerge when apophaticism as the *via negativa* runs wild without the corrective presence of the cataphatic, so too here, it seems evident that without a more sustained study and articulation of the positive and cataphatic elements of Orthodox ethics, we risk a similar danger. What follows is a look at the issue in admittedly broad terms, but not, it is hoped, without an indication of its potential practical relevance.

### Teach me thy statutes

As mentioned earlier, the category of ethical apophaticism develops in part out of the frequent juxtaposition in Orthodox theology of ontology on the one hand and ethics on the other. This juxtaposition, while not without some merit, poses a larger problem when understood as a straightforward opposition, because it gives way to a tendency that altogether ruptures ontology from the question of human morality, as if the coming of Christ being relevant to ontology means that his coming is somehow *not* relevant to ethics. Even if unintentionally, this juxtaposition risks opposing, in other words, that which to the mind of the church goes firmly together, namely Christ and his commandments. The commandments have always been seen in Orthodoxy as the only path of Christian life, not because they are an external legal code that betrays a simplistic and arbitrary 'divine command' understanding of ethics, but because they are inextricably linked to who and *how* Christ himself is, and as such, they reveal nothing less than the divine life. In the succinct words of Mark the Ascetic (who was also cited earlier): 'the Lord is hidden in his own commandments, and he is to be found there in the measure that he is sought'.<sup>21</sup> Thus the gift of divine life that Christ offers us, which is identical to communion with divine love, cannot be dissociated from the observance of that love's duties. The duties attendant on divine love are, put simply, the commandments of Christ: 'if ye love me, keep my commandments' (Jn 14:15). These commandments constitute the cataphatic space of Orthodox Christian ethics. Christ's commandments are encapsulated, as was argued above, by the commandment of repentance (*μετάνοια*), and this is so insofar as all the variety of Christ's commandments are integrated into the concept of loving conformity to Christ (the meaning of *μετάνοια* in the Orthodox tradition). Without a robust and constructive understanding of these

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20 See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.34.7.

21 Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, 190.

commandments, the legitimate critiques of legalistic ethics offered by Zizioulas and Yannaras can too easily give way to a strong form of ethical relativism.

Most attention has been paid in Orthodox thought, not least in Yannaras and Zizioulas, to the fact that the diverse commandments are all fulfilled in the commandment of love (cf. Gal 5:14). One could already nuance this picture by introducing (as Yannaras and Zizioulas themselves do) the concept of repentance as an important qualifier here. But even with the combination of an ethic of love and an ethic of repentance (understood as conformity to Christ), we are left with a rather broad and under-defined ethic. What perhaps needs further emphasis and exploration is the fact that in order to understand what the supreme commandments of love and repentance mean and entail, we must revisit the other commandments of which love and repentance are the summation, and by which both are comprehended. Which, then, of the commandments should concern us? A complete theology of the commandments cannot be worked out in this short article, but it stands to reason that there needs to be an engagement with, and integration of, a wide range of the ordinances of the New Testament into such a theology, especially those often glossed over or ignored. I will briefly consider three such commandments: to watch (cf. Mk 13:37), to 'pluck out' our offending eye (cf. Mt 5:29–30 and 18:8–9), and to hate our own life (cf. Lk 14:26).

The interrelated commandments from the Synoptic Gospels to 'watch' (*γρηγορεῖτε*), 'take heed to yourselves' (*προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς*), and 'be vigilant' (*ἀγρυπνεῖτε*) might not be the first set of commandments that comes to mind when considering the field of Christian ethics, and yet Christ repeats them again and again. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark, this commandment is considered of such importance that Christ explicitly addresses it not simply to his close circle of disciples, but to everyone: 'what I say unto you, I say unto all: *watch*' (Mk 13:37). It is almost as if the temptation to limit the scope and relevance of this commandment to Christ's immediate disciples is suffering a pre-emptive strike here. The exhortation to watch is a universal commandment. But how can we integrate this commandment with the commandments of love and repentance? In what way does watchfulness or vigilance express God's own way of life revealed in the person of Christ? For a clue, we can look first at the contexts in which the commandment occurs. In Mark 13, to 'watch' implies a strenuous attentiveness and heedfulness to the coming of the Lord, an attitude not far removed from the definition of repentance mentioned above, a straining to conform to the Coming One. The commandment is also connected in each of the Synoptics to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane, and the need for the disciples to 'watch and pray', that is, to imitate Christ's own Gethsemane prayer of self-giving love for the world.

In short, watchfulness is presented in the Gospels as a moral imperative for all of Christ's disciples, and its content is described in terms of an active, conscious expectation of Christ's coming and presence, as well as an imitation of his own perfect vigilance before the Father for the life of the world. To understand the ethics of the Orthodox tradition, one cannot lose sight of the significance of

this commandment, especially as it is captured in Orthodoxy's ascetic literature. A simple perusal of the *Philokalia*, a popular collection of Greek ascetic texts spanning over a millennium and first published at the end of the eighteenth century, reveals this significance without question. From Isaiah the Solitary's *On Guarding the Intellect* and Hesychios the Priest's *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, to Philotheos of Sinai's *Forty Texts on Watchfulness* and Nikephorus the Monk's *On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart*, there is an unmistakable trend in Orthodox thought to make Christ's commandment to watch a pivotal one for the Christian life. Two citations will suffice to give a sense of the centrality of watchfulness for Orthodox ethics, the first from Isaiah the Solitary (fifth century):

Our teacher Jesus Christ, out of pity for mankind and knowing the utter mercilessness of the demons, severely commands us: 'Be ready at every hour, for you do not know when the thief will come; do not let him come and find you asleep' (cf. Matt. 24:42–43). He also says: 'Take heed, lest your hearts be overwhelmed with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of this life, and the hour come upon you unawares' (cf. Luke 21:34). Stand guard, then, over your heart and keep a watch on your senses; and if the remembrance of God dwells peaceably within you, you will catch the thieves when they try to deprive you of it. When a man has an exact knowledge about the nature of thoughts, he recognizes those which are about to enter and defile him, troubling the intellect with distractions and making it lazy. Those who recognize these evil thoughts for what they are remain undisturbed and continue in prayer to God.<sup>22</sup>

Here we see Christ's commandment amplified in terms of the inner spiritual work incumbent on the Christian believer, and intimately connected with the life of prayer. In another text from the collection, Hesychios the Priest's *On Watchfulness and Holiness* (possibly seventh–ninth century), the comprehensiveness of the commandment to watch is put in no uncertain terms: 'Watchfulness is a way embracing every virtue, every commandment. It is the heart's stillness and, when free from mental images, it is the guarding of the intellect.'<sup>23</sup> This sense that watchfulness ought to be fundamental to Christian ethics permeates Orthodox sources. The category of watchfulness, moreover, of 'taking heed' to every impulse of the mind and heart, of actively bringing each thought into captivity 'to the obedience of Christ' (cf. 2 Cor 10:5), is hard to fit neatly into the 'apophatic turn' in Orthodox morality described earlier. Watchfulness in Orthodoxy presupposes not only an ethical apophaticism, but a

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22 Isaiah the Solitary, *On Guarding the intellect* 12, translated by G.E.H. Palmer *et al.*, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text. Volume 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 24.

23 Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness* 3, translated in *The Philokalia. Volume 1*, p. 163.

positive, cataphatic endeavour to guard the human heart cleansed and healed by sacramental divine grace. As we see from the text of Isaiah the Solitary cited above, such jealous guarding of the heart as the chosen dwelling place of God is bound up with the task of prayer, and for the Orthodox ascetic tradition it involves firmly, even aggressively, refusing entry to any and every unclean thing within the chambers of the heart: 'for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies' (Mt 15:19). Realizing the centrality and power of the human heart for the moral life provides, as it were, the baseline for Christian ethics, not least in the Orthodox tradition, and so the ethical principle of inner watchfulness cannot but have a central place in its articulation.

Much more could be said about the commandment to watch, such as its applications to the guarding of the faith, or the church's earnest expectation of Christ's coming, but my purpose is not to exhaust the meaning of each commandment, but simply to offer a sketch of how ethical 'cataphaticism' is a viable and even necessary supplement to the notion of ethical apophaticism. I will thus mention two other commandments of Christ, both rather more alarming at first blush than the commandment to watch. The first is the twice-repeated commandment in Matthew to 'pluck out' our offending eye and 'cut off' our offending hand (Mt 5:29–30 and 18:8–9). Eyes are good. Hands are good. But Christ orders his disciples to cut off what is good when it causes offence. The 'offence' Christ has in mind might be expressed (to put it in terms akin to the broadly personalist ethical approach found in Zizioulas and Yannaras), as all things – even good things – which disrupt, hamper or hinder the believer's relationship with Christ. This qualification, *even good things*, is crucial and, I submit, much needed in contemporary ethical discourse.

There is a tendency in popular and even technical discussions of morality (especially, but not exclusively, of the virtue ethics variety) to put one's whole trust in the concepts of 'human flourishing' and 'the common good' as self-explanatory goals of ethical life. This Neo-Aristotelian shift in ethics, while intuitive and laudable in many respects, is not, of itself, an obviously Christian ethic, especially when it bumps up against the full range of Christ's commandments. We hear, for instance, in the commandment to cut off our offending hand and cast it away, that the things we might assume to be constitutive and integral to our human flourishing and the common good, say the development or cultivation of certain positive personal predispositions or even talents, could in some circumstances raise a stumbling-block to Christian life. In fact, there is a real danger that the terms 'human flourishing' and 'the common good' have begun to take on the status of a shibboleth in theological ethics that needs serious attention. This is not the place to address the issue at length, but it cannot be avoided when confronted with the ethical demands of the gospel. For Orthodoxy, ethical trust cannot be placed wholesale or even in the first instance in the concepts of human flourishing and the common good

(and on this point, Zizioulas' rejection of a 'social gospel' approach to ethics is noteworthy).

The foundation for Christian ethics is solely the person of Christ, through whom the true ethic or *ethos* of life is revealed, an *ethos* that embraces life and 'human flourishing' through the humiliation of the cross. Certainly, Orthodox theology can adopt a notion of 'human flourishing' into its ethic if what is meant by this is growth in likeness to the suffering and risen Christ, but it must be done with great caution. The transformative ethic of the New Testament must never be reconciled with human flourishing when this is understood as a simple ratification of social norms (whether these are branded 'progressive' or 'conservative'). The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre can lament the 'paradox' that Jesus and Paul's ethical pronouncements do not translate into a viable social code, and he can, with sleight of hand, use this lament to set these ethical pronouncements aside as unrealistic and inapplicable to social life: 'we cannot . . . expect to find in what they say a basis for life in a continuing society'. Jesus, we are told, was in any case not concerned 'to expound a self-sufficient code'.<sup>24</sup> This approach leads MacIntyre to conclude that Christianity requires a framework from without in order to make sense of its ethical muddle brought about by the delayed arrival of the kingdom of God, for which, of course, Aristotle proves the hero.<sup>25</sup> This is an alluring approach for many theologians (and it could in theory provide many resources for the kind of ethical cataphaticism under discussion), but its starting point is ultimately unacceptable from the perspective of Orthodoxy. It is a given for Orthodox theology that Jesus Christ both expounds and *is* the self-sufficient code of ethics for all of human life: the Lawgiver and the Law. To place the starting point or guiding principle elsewhere is to eliminate what is distinctively Christian about Christian ethics. Orthodox theology is not ashamed of Christ's commandments, even when they appear to conflict with the paradigm of human flourishing that seems to square so nicely with modern sensibilities. In fact, it is perhaps especially these commandments that need amplification and clarification in order to properly address the confusion around the unstable and fluctuating concept of human flourishing in Christian ethics. Orthodoxy has an abundance of resources to help in this matter, but it can only do so if its ethical approach is broadened to include its cataphatic tradition of ethical reflection alongside the apophatic one championed by Zizioulas and Yannaras.

One more hard saying of Christ is worth mentioning that both challenges any simplistic view of human flourishing and that articulates and hedges about the true meaning of the supreme commandment of love. This is a culminating commandment in Luke's Gospel, a commandment of self-denial, even

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24 A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 115.

25 See MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, pp. 110–20.

self-hatred: 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' (Lk 14:26). Zizioulas in fact briefly deals with this commandment in *Being as Communion*. For Zizioulas, the commandment that one must 'hate' one's relations in order to be Christ's disciple points to a certain opposition between the human being's 'biological hypostasis' and 'ecclesial hypostasis'. As he puts it, this commandment 'means that henceforth he can love not because the laws of biology oblige him to do so – something which inevitably colours the love of one's own relations – but *unconstrained* by the natural laws'.<sup>26</sup> The emphasis for Zizioulas is on loving non-relatives *more* than relatives as a sign of the transcendence of one's biological hypostasis. This interpretation certainly challenges a human flourishing approach to ethics, and it grapples head on with a difficult passage, but it likewise seems limited by Zizioulas' frame of reference that seemingly posits a necessary opposition between the biological and the ecclesial.

To go further, we can turn to another modern Orthodox theologian, Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), for whom this verse is fundamental for understanding Orthodox ethics.<sup>27</sup> He is fond of relating Christ's two seemingly conflicting commandments of love and of hate, capturing the paradox with the phrase 'love – to the point of self-hatred'.<sup>28</sup> He explains the connection in a characteristically ascetic mode when he writes:

In order to be re-born in God it is necessary for us to feel appalled at ourselves as we are – to loathe the odious, ungodly passion of pride in us that drove us in disgrace from the Kingdom of the Father of lights. Salvation lies in Christ's commandment to love God and hate one's own life.<sup>29</sup>

The challenge of understanding love through the lens of self-hatred is understandably not a palatable one to most, but it is undeniably a necessary challenge for the Christian, not least the Orthodox, ethicist. Archimandrite Sophrony expounds his thinking on this further elsewhere:

The normal consequence of keeping the Lord's commandments is an extreme reduction of our self – a self-emptying. Without sincere recognition

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26 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 57. His emphasis.

27 On the thought of Archimandrite Sophrony, see N.V. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am: The Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002). I have discussed this aspect of his thought in a little more detail in Alexis Torrance, 'Christ's Commandment of Hatred (Lk 14:26) in the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov)', *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 5 (2012), pp. 1–6.

28 This is the title of the eleventh chapter of Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Tolleshunt Knights: Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, 2002), pp. 141–9.

29 Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer* (Tolleshunt Knights: Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, 1998), p. 53.

that we are indeed devils incarnate in our fall, we shall never arrive at fullness of repentance. Through total repentance we break loose from the deadly embrace of selfish individualism and begin to contemplate the divine universality of Christ, Who 'loved us unto the end'. When we hate ourselves for the evil that lives in us, then it is that the boundless horizons of the love commanded of us are revealed.<sup>30</sup>

For Archimandrite Sophrony, the commandment of hate finds its meaning in the commandment of love, without which it would make no sense. This is not all that far removed from Zizioulas' approach mentioned above, but the difference lies in the absence of the frame of reference that in Zizioulas measures the keeping of this commandment on the basis of one's love for non-relatives vis-à-vis one's love for relatives. This does not interest Archimandrite Sophrony, since the chief point of reference in the commandment of hate is, as he reads it, 'self-hatred' ('his own life also') before the presence of Christ, which in turn makes hatred of father, mother and so on, not about despising individual relatives, but about making Christ and his demands the only law of existence, even at the expense of familial relationships. Once this is done through the path of 'total repentance', the infinite horizons of divine love are opened up to the Christian soul, wherein all relatives, friends and enemies are embraced with the same ardour and compassion.

## **Conclusion**

To watch, to cut off in some cases even what appears to be good, and to deny oneself to the point of self-hatred, are some of the building blocks taken from Christ's commandments to be used in the enterprise of elaborating an Orthodox cataphatic ethic that, I argue, is sorely needed. What is not needed is the awkward and even dangerous appropriation of ethical mores and 'commandments' from the world that have no discernible connection to, or basis in, the explicit commandments of Christ. Thus when society proposes an ethic of love that is grounded in ideals of impatience, self-justification, self-assertion and self-pity, we have to ask: where is the evangelical commandment to be impatient? Where are the commandments to assert ourselves, to justify ourselves, or to pity ourselves? Where in the Orthodox tradition are these manifested as ways of love? If we do not make such positive, cataphatic distinctions – thereby trying the spirits – Orthodox ethics will remain hopelessly confused.

Already from what we have observed in looking at a number of often overlooked commandments of Christ (and how they relate to the overarching commandments of love and repentance), we can begin to see the importance of paying closer attention to their breadth and depth. Doing so provides a critical vantage point vis-à-vis the ethics and virtues of this world, because it

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30 Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 145.

demonstrates that even when using the very same terminology, the conceptual underpinnings uniting the ethos of Christ and the ethos of the world are at best analogous to one another, and at worst inimical and contradictory. In the case of the concept of love, an obvious analogous relationship is that of marriage and family life, used constantly as an image or analogy for divine love throughout Scripture and tradition. But the realities of divine love and familial love are in fact not the same, even if the former is supposed to infuse the latter. It is possible for familial love to shut out divine love – ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come’ (Lk 14:20) – and for divine love to overpower familial love. Christians have a clear mandate as to which kind of love they should prioritize. As for an inimical or contradictory relationship, where ‘the friendship of the world is enmity with God’ (Jas 4:4), take the insidious example of so-called mercy killings, tied to the widespread legalization of euthanasia in Western society in the name of mercy, compassion and ‘love’. Such alleged love, as a manifestation of despair, has no place in an Orthodox Christian ethic.

This is simply one illustrative example to indicate the importance of going beyond the theme of ethical apophaticism if we are to address the real possibility of widespread moral confusion that cannot discern the ethic of Christ from the ethic of the world, and that even begins, in the ominous warning of Isaiah, to call evil good and good evil, setting darkness for light, and light for darkness (cf. Isa 5:20). Having said this, are we not in danger of tumbling once again into a puritanical moralism, the kind that Yannaras, Zizioulas and many others have done so much to warn us against? Certainly, if we treated the commandments as an impersonal and abstract code of conduct, this danger would be virtually unavoidable. Yet when we recover – building on the personalist insights of Zizioulas and Yannaras – the nature and meaning of the commandments as utterly dependent upon, and manifestations of, *the person of Christ*, the danger of legalism starts to dissipate. For if we understand the commandments as the personal summons to Christ as well as the revelation of how Christ himself is, we know that they can only be pursued and kept by receiving the life of Christ through the action of grace. To keep the commandments is to have ‘not I, but Christ living in me’ (Gal 2:20). The keeping of the commandments is not a simple matter of the tenacity and grit of the human will against the odds: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who unites himself to the struggling sinner, rendering the latter’s meagre and corruptible ethical efforts fruitful, incorruptible and deiform.

One example will suffice for our purposes as we draw to a close, taken from John Chrysostom. He is a particularly good choice as many modern scholars tend to dismiss the great Chrysostom as precisely the kind of ‘moralist’ worth transcending on the issue of ethics.<sup>31</sup> Such a labelling of Chrysostom is, in the opinion of this author, nothing short of unsophisticated calumny, but it would

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31 So, for instance, I.R. Torrance, “‘God the Physician’: Ecclesiology, Sin, and Forgiveness in the Preaching of St. John Chrysostom”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999), pp. 163–76.

take a different article to make this case. The following passage, however, at least shows some of Chrysostom's true and shining colours. In his exegesis of the Beatitudes, when he comes to 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Mt 5:7), he deals with the apparent straightforwardly transactional nature of the commandment (you show some mercy, you get some mercy), and he says:

The reward seems to be an equal exchange, but it is in fact much greater than the good deed. For while we ourselves are showing mercy as human beings, we are receiving mercy from the God of all. Human mercy and God's mercy are not the same thing: as far distant as wickedness is from goodness, so far is the one removed from the other.<sup>32</sup>

We can extend Chrysostom's logic to all the virtues: human virtue and divine virtue are not the same thing.<sup>33</sup> The commandments of Christ are not about developing, improving or strengthening our natural moral standing, nor do they have anything to do with promoting an aesthetic of respectability. They are about inheriting divine virtue, which is none other than supernatural and uncreated life, something that can (and we are promised will) engender all manner of 'natural' moral problems, from family division to the hatred of all nations. This does not mean, however, that there can be no *relationship* between our striving for virtue, our struggle to keep the commandments, and the reality of divine and intrinsically unattainable virtue that these commandments point to. The age-old rhetorical question put by Paul, 'shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?' (Rom 6:1), should always be given the same response in Orthodoxy: 'God forbid!' For while it is true that the keeping of the commandments is ultimately a work of grace, it is also true that God is not mocked: he tries the hearts, seeking out the soul that seeks him, that cries out with Psalmist in however faltering yet sincere a manner: 'Blessed art thou O Lord, *teach me thy statutes!*' (Ps 118/119:12).<sup>34</sup>

To be taught God's statutes, his commandments, is to commune with him. There is no need, in other words, to pit the theology of personhood and communion against the domain of ethics and morality in Orthodoxy as is so often done. Ontology and ethics are meant for one another.<sup>35</sup> If we can reattach

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32 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 15.4 (PG 57:227).

33 This principle also, incidentally, lies at the heart of much of Gregory Palamas' polemic against Barlaam in the early stages of the fourteenth-century Hesychast Controversy, on which see Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology*, pp. 169–79.

34 On the issue of faith, works, and synergy, the comments of Vladimir Lossky are still helpful: V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), pp. 196–9.

35 For an impressive retrieval of Maximus the Confessor on this matter, in conversation with Kantian and post-Kantian ethical theory, see R.D. Harper, *The Analogy of Love: St Maximus the Confessor and the Foundations of Ethics* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019).

Orthodox ethics and morality to the commandments of Christ, thereby making them inextricably bound to his person, then Orthodox ethical theory can breathe freely. But if we satisfy ourselves with ethical apophaticism at the expense of the cataphatic, we will be laying down our defences against the moral confusion, even anarchy, that so captivates our age.