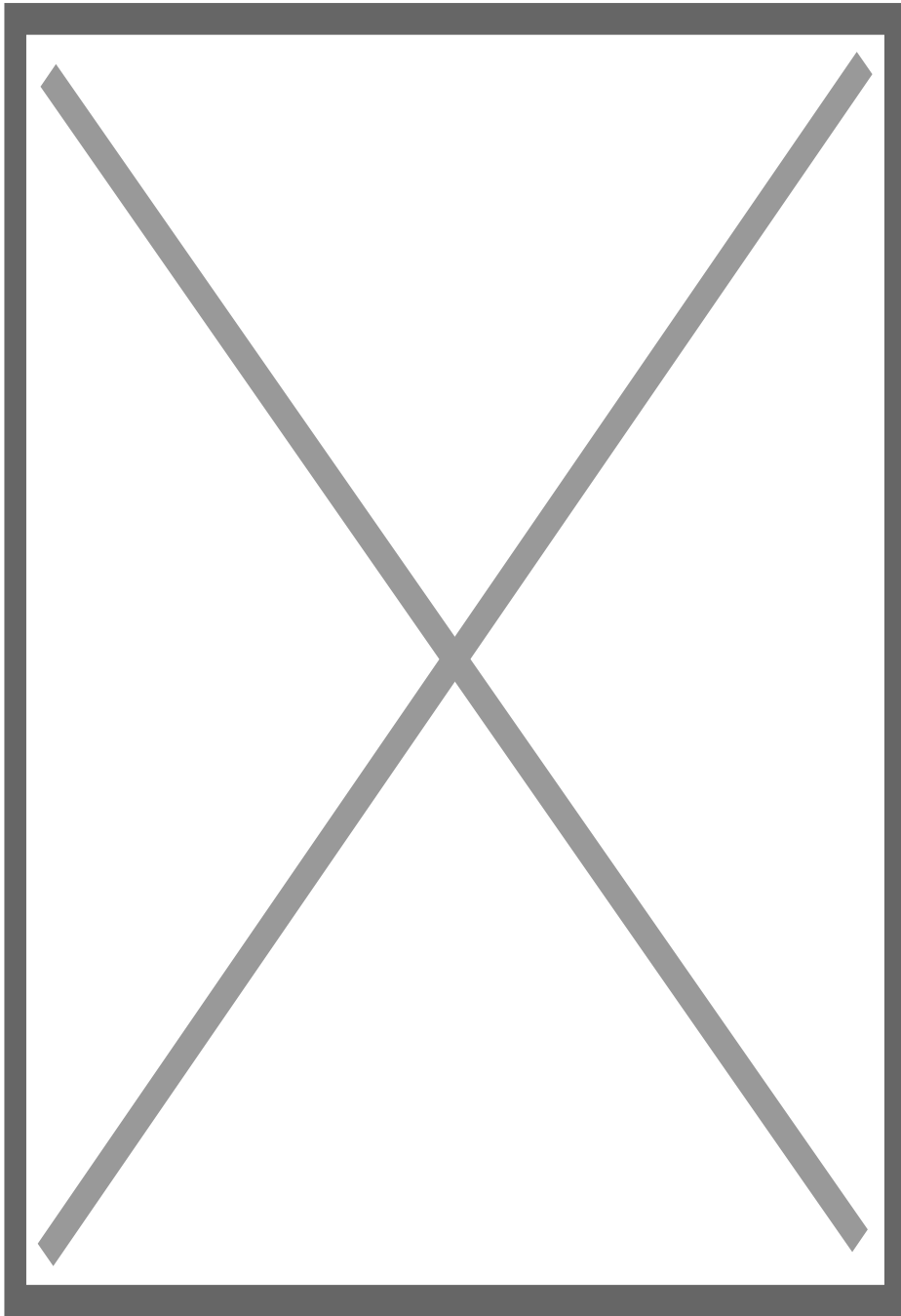


God's relentless gaze

Like the surveillance state, the Christ Pantocrator icon asserts an omnipresent authority. But it also asserts divine mercy and love.

by [Arthur Aghajanian](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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The sixth-century Christ Pantocrator icon at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt (Public domain / Creative Commons)

Christ's face emerges from a shimmering gold background, his brow slightly furrowed, lips pressed in a quiet, knowing tension, one hand raised in blessing while the other clutches a bejeweled gospel book. His gaze holds us captive. One eye is stern, shadowed, and piercing; the other is softer, luminous—almost sorrowful. The sixth-century icon from St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt does not fully resolve into a single expression. Instead, it fractures into two: judgment and mercy, severity and compassion, divinity and humanity. Half his face regards the viewer with the unflinching gaze of a judge who sees all; the other side looks upon us with a quiet, aching tenderness, the face of one who knows our suffering. This dual gaze is unsettling. It asks, *Who do you say that I am?*

The icon at St. Catherine's is one of the oldest surviving depictions of Christ Pantocrator, the traditional Eastern Orthodox image of Christ as the almighty ruler and judge of humanity. Visually it is also one of the boldest—it represents a singular vision. Various theories exist to explain the mysterious, asymmetrical face. I see it as an invitation to explore the meaning of divine judgment—and to examine our culture's discomfort with the idea of God who judges.

Christ Pantocrator emerged in the Byzantine world during a period of theological and political consolidation. The icon was meant to assert Christ's dual nature as both merciful savior and ultimate authority. Often displayed prominently in the iconostases and apses of churches and monasteries, icons of this type became truly awe-inspiring when they took the form of monumental frescoes or mosaics at the apex of the inner dome, where they presided over worshipers from the highest point of the building.

In the Byzantine Empire, religious and imperial authority were tightly interwoven. The Pantocrator was central to both the liturgical life of the church and the broader worldview of Byzantine society. For medieval Christians, it became a potent symbol of divine governance that bridged the earthly and heavenly realms in a single, commanding gaze. This image of God would ultimately guide worship, frame theological debates, and affirm Christ's place at the center of history and salvation.

But it also represented God's mercy and guidance. As a focal point of prayer, a Pantocrator icon reminded worshipers that Christ was both their sovereign and their advocate. The raised hand in blessing reinforced the idea that divine judgment was deeply intertwined with love, correction, and salvation. The Pantocrator has remained the central icon of the Eastern Orthodox Church, offering the devout reassurance that its members are seen, known, and ultimately cared for.

Today, we often liken the pervasive oversight of our surveillance state to the all-seeing eye of God. But our responses to these two limitless gazes are vastly different. We tend to navigate the omnipresence of surveillance with resignation because we accept it as the cost of the comforts and convenience of modern technology. Meanwhile, we push back against the notion of an always present, judging God, whose gaze can rupture our complacency.

Judgment carries a negative connotation. We dislike being scrutinized and evaluated, especially by figures of authority who, we assume, will inevitably deem us inadequate. Our anxiety about being watched has only intensified with the rise of ever more sophisticated and invasive systems of surveillance. In contrast to the relationality of the Pantocrator, the omnipresent eye of the surveillance state serves to constantly monitor and control. This watchful gaze is a tool for maintaining order and reinforcing the power of those who wield its apparatus.

We tolerate surveillance when it's impersonal and algorithmic—a far cry from the intimate, redemptive scrutiny of divine judgment, which can lay us bare. There's a paradox here: We are anxious about the reach of the

impersonal eye, and we adjust our behavior accordingly. Yet we're also resigned to continual surveillance, having normalized it as a routine backdrop to modern life. At some point, we traded freedom for convenience—convenience offered by the same technocratic system that reduces us to patterns of quantifiable behavior.

To be seen is to be measured, and to be measured is to be judged. Judgment follows the gaze like a shadow. Though we may not think about it, modern surveillance leads to a new form of judgment through classifying, predicting, and determining outcomes. Such goals are accomplished without mercy or appeal. This impersonal system of control influences behavior through fear and self-regulation. Perhaps we've made our peace with being watched, so long as those watching ask nothing of us but our data.

The gaze of God is different—it doesn't collect, it calls. It doesn't simply see, it draws forth. It asks for our hearts, not our habits or opinions—and this we resist. The surveillance state supports our desire to live in illusion, whereas God calls us to account. While the corporate machine conditions us to construct and curate our identities, God asks that we surrender our egos, so that in meeting his gaze, the self we fashion for the world can fall away.

But we cling to our human-made identity, and social media—an arm of the surveillance state—encourages the worship of self by compelling us to fashion our image for public validation. In this way, the mechanisms of surveillance support the maintenance of a false self through the commodification of identity. Conversely, the gaze of God—penetrating, loving, and relentless—calls us to relinquish the false self and embrace who we are in the light of his vision.

Stepping beyond the fragile scaffolding of the ego demands faith. But we must also reckon with the incomplete and misleading ideas we've inherited about a God who is far off and remote. Such separation warps our understanding of divine judgment so that it seems like an imposed sentence rather than a loving call to our highest good.

To sever God's justice from his mercy—to assume they exist independently of one another—is poor theology. This tendency, common among Christianity's adherents and its external critics alike, seems linked to the common misconception that the Bible depicts two Gods. The God of the Hebrew Bible is believed to be wrathful and punitive, while the God of the New Testament is loving and forgiving. But that's a fallacy stemming from, among other things, selective readings of scripture, cultural influences, anti-Judaism, and reactions against perceived legalism.

God's love, mercy, and justice are present throughout scripture. The God who delivered Israel from slavery and established covenants of love and faithfulness is the same God who fulfilled these promises through Christ's death and resurrection. God's justice is evident in both the flood and the cross, God's mercy in both the prophets' calls to repentance and Jesus' forgiveness of sinners—revealing a continuous, unchanging divine purpose. The Bible is replete with examples of how God's justice and love are inseparable, aimed at repentance, restoration, and ultimately, salvation.

Influenced by this false duality, many reject the notion of a judging God because they equate divine judgment with harsh, punitive condemnation. This view is at odds with biblical portrayals that emphasize the redemptive nature of God's judgment, which seeks to restore rather than simply reproach. To believe that a God who judges is a relic of an outdated, oppressive, and legalistic system fails to account for how divine judgment nurtures human flourishing by holding us accountable to the gospel of Christ, which calls us to live in love, humility, and service to others.

In the Orthodox Church, participation in worship—through both the liturgy and the sacred space of the church itself—mitigates the tendency to see God’s judgment this way. Through prayers, hymns, and the iconographic scheme of the building, worshipers encounter divine judgment in its true context: as a call to repentance within the loving presence of Christ. The Pantocrator serves as a visual and theological anchor that can help people overcome their simplified, fear-based views of God’s omniscience.

Medieval Christians understood divine judgment through a legal framework, guided by the Bible itself, which continuously depicts God as both judge and legislator (see Ps. 75:7, Isa. 33:22, Matt. 7:1–5, Rom. 2:16, Rev. 20:11–12). The Bible shaped Europe’s codes of law, and its courts perceived their rulings as extensions of divine justice. Even kings believed themselves to be accountable before Christ’s tribunal. Contrary to the outdated notion of the Middle Ages as a period of ignorance and fear-driven piety, modern scholarship has revealed its intellectual rigor, theological complexity, and spiritual vitality. Medieval conceptions of God were nuanced. Rather than simply a means of enforcing moral behavior, divine judgment came to influence both spiritual life and the structure of society.

The medieval worldview assumed that God sees into the heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and that divine judgment is revelatory because it exposes the truth of human hearts (Heb. 4:12–13). One’s inner life was always open before God—hence the intense focus on self-examination, confession, and penitence. Eastern Christianity views divine judgment as restorative rather than legalistic. Christ’s light reveals one’s true state, much like fire purifies gold. Being judged, then, is not about blame but about healing and conversion, leading the soul toward deification (*theosis*). The liturgy itself enacts this understanding: The entire service is structured around drawing closer to God, culminating in the Eucharist, which is not a fearful moment of exposure but a transformative participation in divine life. In addition, many of the church’s prayers and hymns reinforce the image of Christ as both righteous judge and merciful Savior.

St. Isaac the Syrian, a seventh-century bishop of the Eastern Church, spoke of the difference between God’s justice and human justice, pointing out that instead of rewarding the righteous and punishing sinners in a transactional way, divine justice seeks to return us to wholeness. It is meant to reorient us to truth and restore the image of God within us. Throughout scripture, judgment is linked to mercy: “Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). The Pantocrator icon exemplifies this teaching.

Byzantine churches were immersive sanctuaries where art, architecture, and theology converged to transport worshipers to a heavenly realm. Lavish interiors with dazzling mosaics and frescoes and expansive domes engineered via pendentives and squinches created a breathtaking visual feast. Every surface of the church’s interior celebrated God’s active presence and the restorative power of his judgment.

Inside the dome, Christ Pantocrator reigned as the unifying center of creation, his gaze encompassing the entire space, inviting all those present into a direct encounter while also reinforcing a divinely ordained order. The image is a direct affirmation of his sovereignty over heaven and earth. Step under the dome of an Orthodox church today, and you’ll notice how the scale and placement of the Pantocrator creates a sense of all things originating from and returning to Christ—the Alpha and the Omega. The image’s relationship to the interior configuration of the church signifies the theological reality that Christ is both transcendent and intimately involved in human history. In the context of the liturgy, his gaze is understood as an invitation rather than a threat.

A magnificent Orthodox church isn’t merely a building but a living cosmos—a carefully designed tapestry of light, space, and sacred imagery that shapes the worshiper’s experience. Its cross-in-square design establishes a divine hierarchy: the central dome crowns the space with Christ, framed by a golden expanse that whispers of

eternity, while angels and prophets encircle him as eternal witnesses. In the main apse, the Theotokos (mother of God) stands as the radiant bridge between heaven and earth, emphasizing her role in the incarnation. Below her, the Communion of the Apostles testifies to the mystery of the Eucharist. The walls, adorned with vivid scenes from Christ's life and the liturgical calendar, recount salvation history and transform the space into a visual echo of the Holy Land. At the threshold of the sanctuary, the iconostasis, richly adorned with icons, serves as the symbolic threshold between the earthly and heavenly realms. Today, this sacred arrangement remains the paradigm for Orthodox churches, inviting the faithful to experience divine presence in a setting where theology, beauty, and communal life merge.

The church is consecrated to reflect God's indwelling among the people, with its beauty offering an expression of praise and divine presence as opposed to mere embellishment. Beauty is an essential ingredient for conveying the reality of a God whose judgment is based not in wrath but in love. The visual harmony of sacred space calls humanity to communion. As a divine gift, beauty testifies that God's justice is ultimately for our transfiguration, not our destruction.

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The visual theology of both the exterior and interior of the church has the power, if we are open to it, to overwhelm and disarm us, drawing us into a fuller reality. The harmonious interplay of iconography, architecture, chant, incense, and liturgy immerses us in an encounter beyond intellect. We are led away from the cultural biases that frame judgment as oppressive or arbitrary, from assumptions that stem from authoritarian distortions or individualistic resistance to accountability. We adopt a vision of divine justice that is inseparable from mercy, care, and the ordering of the world toward truth.

The Pantocrator's gaze is no distant stare, no cold and vacant eye in the sky. It's the luminous center, the heart of the whole. It calls the scattered to communion and weaves the many into one.

Meanwhile, in the world outside, the lens of surveillance divides and distorts, severing soul from soul and sight from truth. It builds a house of mirrored walls where each is watched, yet none are known.

In a society where communal bonds have weakened, the thought of an omniscient gaze that penetrates our personal defenses may invite dread, reminding us of our vulnerability and the division that permeates modern existence. The impersonal, bureaucratic gaze of the surveillance state also breeds defensive attitudes about privacy. No wonder the medieval embrace of divine omniscience seems so alien to us. But for early Christians, the ever-watchful gaze of God was not an intrusion; it was a guiding presence that gave life meaning and direction.

Over a thousand years ago, surveillance was, like today, thoroughly embedded in social life. Yet this ever-watchful presence—this all-seeing God—inspired reverence, provided moral guidance, upheld righteousness, and made each individual accountable to society. God's watchfulness ensured justice for believers and served as a model for right relationships. The expectation of being seen and judged this way influenced one's actions toward others.

Today, we live under thousands of unblinking eyes, their gaze ubiquitous: cameras at intersections, algorithms tracing our desires, invisible watchers feeding on our data. And yet we don't tremble or cry out against the faceless judgment of the digital age, because it asks for nothing.

Unlike the cold calculus of surveillance, divine judgment is not mere observation. The Pantocrator's gaze unsettles not because it's oppressive but because it's intimate. We might attempt to keep God at a distance, safely divided, but the truth is neither so simple nor so comfortable. The One who walked among us, who

overturned tables and wept at tombs, is the same who called forth light and set the cosmos in motion.

To behold Christ Pantocrator is to become aware that love judges—not to condemn but to make whole. The question is no longer whether we are being watched. Every day, we submit to invisible gazes. The question is whether we will recognize the one gaze that truly sees us.