

Hanna Reichel, Response to Nivedita Menon, Plenary Input, Oct 18, 2025

Prof. Menon, thank you so much for your incredibly rich and thought-provoking input. You have given us so many concretions of struggles for justice as well as epistemic principles of how to think about its pursuit.

I want to share a vignette from my own context on the notes of justice, order, and disorder that you've given us: The Seminary at which I teach runs a small-scale sustainable agriculture, called the "**Farminary**." The Farminary teaches students about food and soil, about community and ecology, about rest and about labor, and its harvest services our cafeteria as well as the local community. At this Farminary, I teach a course entitled, "**Theologies of Order and Chaos**." Most of our existential experiences – personal, communal, and political – can be narrated as experiences of order and chaos, and the wager of this course is that so can different doctrines – creation, providence, eschatology, are narrations and conceptual frameworks developed to process experiences of order and chaos in light of our faith in God.

At the **beginning of the course, students reflect** on their associations with the concepts of order and chaos. Some students report traumatic life events: the inbreaking of illnesses, sexual violence, the death of a child. They often find that accounts of creation as the setting up of a stable and reliable order express their hope and faith in God best. Other students have suffered under systemic oppression due to their sexuality, gender expression, race or ethnic background. Their hope and faith in God find themselves articulated more adequately in accounts of creation as an outburst and overflowing of energy that opens up new possibilities.

And then, one year, just before the first day of class, a hurricane devastated the Farminary. The class had been getting ready to bring in a rich summer's harvest, instead, we found ourselves doing the grief work of composting what was now contaminated due to flood water overflowing from nearby sewers. That year's class as a whole had quite a different take on order and chaos than the of other years, I can tell you, formed by this storm.

We need a **differential theology** to *do justice* to our different experiences of the world, of grace, and of our need for deliverance. We also need differential accounts

of justice. Neither **God nor justice** are merely “corrective projections” of our experience. But neither can be formulated without indexing them to our differential experience.

Injustice comes in many forms. Maybe that means that there also **cannot be a singular form of justice**. I take it that the reluctance to formulate positive visions of freedom and justice only partially has to do with the *difficulty* of doing such a thing, and at a deeper level that reluctance draws an ethical boundary, expressing the wisdom that any single conception of justice won't be able to “do justice” (pardon the pun) to the multifaceted and multilayered realities of injustice but just become another harmful and oppressive system.

This is why I so strongly resonate with your proposal that justice must be **postnational** - not in a glib cosmopolitan sense, but in the twofold “outsidism” of going both “over” and “under” that false universalism promised by the nation. Justice is, as you so wonderfully gesture toward in many concretions, neither an abstract global order, nor a “homelandist” claim to purity and authenticity. Justice is always local and therefore also differential. Sometimes it means allowing movement. Sometimes it means refusing to move. This doesn't mean that it's relative, or arbitrary. It means that it is concrete, and locally sourced, and boundary crossing, and material, and therefore differentiated, if it is to be at all, and that for its concrete outside to show itself, we do well to attune to both the layers “over” and “under” the base categories of our political economies, at the same time.

Justice is not an abstraction, it is only ever concrete. But it is an *aspirational* category. By that I don't mean that it is imaginary, but that we formulate our need and desire for justice correctively: in light of the concrete forms of injustice we know, we formulate hunches for what anything deserving of the name “justice” would have to look like. The cry for justice then functions less like a blueprint or roadmap to a new and right order, and more like the disruption of both the order and disorder that we know. It points to an outside even as it, as you so insightfully show, tends to also come to us from an outside: outside of what we are capable of telling ourselves, outside of what we can imagine, and, to some extent, outside of what we may bring about.

There is something **deeply theological and eschatological** in this vision that both invites perseverance and creativity even as it points us outside of ourselves. **“There is always an outside** that stops power formations from being consolidated” Nivedita Menon notes. Queer, feminist, and decolonial scholars turn this outside into a critical epistemology, insight from the margins. Christians also call on such outside for insight and judgment and redress.

Around 75 years ago, the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Amsterdam, under the motto: **“Man’s disorder and God’s design”**. Devastated by war and genocide, disillusioned by the complicity of nationhood, law, technology, and morality in the atrocities, they wrote the world up to a state of disorder in good Augustinian fashion: as disordered by universal sin that manifests socially and politically as well. And they sought to reorient themselves, trying to discern “The Universal Church in God’s design,” “The Church’s Witness to God’s Design,” “The Church and the Disorder of Society,” and “The Church and the International Disorder.” These are of course laudable attempts at theological and ethical reorientation, and they issued into important ecumenical and international institution-building and work towards peace and justice.

But if I honest, today, I find scarier than any attempt to design the right order only the invocation of God as the guarantor of that design. At best, this might be corrective projectionism, at worst yet another iteration of Christian supremacy. Maybe today we have a greater appreciation for the fact that “order” is not *outside* of universal sin any more than disorder, and that Christian theology itself is deeply entangled in sin, too. Neither a concept of “order” nor “Christianity” provide the needed “outside.” Both order and disorder stand under the judgment of the concrete and material suffering they engender, as does Christian theology and praxis. Persevering in our witness today in great part means the confession of Christianity’s complicity and sin.

Thankfully, God is not the guarantor of order. God does not offer the blueprints for the right design. God is the necessary breaking up of both our order and disorder to open up new possibilities, and God provides the critical epistemology to intervene in both.

Today, persevering in our witness might mean, then, to welcome the Spirit's ability to both disrupt our systems and reorient our desires. Persevering in our witness might mean to insist in God's judgement "over" both our order and our disorder. Persevering in our witness might mean to look for Christ's concrete, incarnational solidarity across boundaries as well as "under" the levels of the nation state, the family, and even the church. This perseverance opens up epistemic humility: the need to seek out those insights from outside: from the margins of church and society from queer, feminist and decolonial epistemologies, but also from outside of the church as they come to us from other faiths, indigenous traditions, ecological wisdom. Persevering in our witness might mean, then, to insist on the work of justice as neither purely negative nor positive, but as participation in contestation and discernment, deliberation and transformation.

For all the insights and inspiration you've given us, I thank you very much.