

Innovation Theology

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Abstract

This article documents what the concept of innovation owes to religion or theology. Going back to the English Reformation, a key moment when the concept entered our everyday vocabulary – with a negative meaning – I unearth the concepts that defined innovation at that time, then examine the residues of the then-conception that survive in our modern and hyperbolic concept of innovation.

In 1967, Robert Charpie, who was President at Union Carbide Electronics and Chairman of the influential US Department of Commerce' report *Technological Innovation: Its Environment and Management* of the same year, claimed that “technological innovation is the driving force behind economic growth....Technological innovation is truly the cutting edge of the economic growth process and the economic vitality of the Nation is intimately enmeshed with those companies that are successful in the technological innovation process” (Charpie, 1967: 357-58). By innovation, Charpie meant “that process by which a new idea is successfully translated into economic impact within our society by providing better products and simultaneously creating new jobs in the manufacturing and application of those products”; by technological innovation he referred to “innovations which flow directly from new technical ideas, inventions, or discoveries and which result in new products or services with essential technical content” (p. 357). Every practitioners of the time (engineers, managers, policy-makers and their advisers and consultants) shared this representation of innovation. Such a view was an article of faith in the second half of the twentieth century. “Do we need to innovate?” asked the OECD a few years later. “Yes because it is one way, perhaps one of the best ways, to react in a rapidly changing society” (OECD, 1969: 15). As Jack Morton, engineer at Bell Laboratories, put it in 1971: “Innovation is certainly a ‘buzz-word’ today. Everyone likes the idea; everyone is trying to ‘innovate’; and everyone wants to do better at it tomorrow” (Morton, 1971: 73).

The historiography of innovation, although no writing really deserves that name, attributes the scholarly origin and study of the concept of innovation to the economist Joseph Schumpeter in the 1930s-40s. This is a legendary tale (Godin, 2019; 2020). Schumpeter simply used a concept that was becoming popular, as many others did in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, there is no theory of innovation in Schumpeter's works – Schumpeter does not concern himself with explaining the generation of innovation and its diffusion in space and time. Schumpeter's concern is economic development, of which innovation is a mean.

Where does the concept come from then, and what does it mean? This article looks back in time and suggests that religion is a key source of our modern concept of innovation, a not dissimilar thesis to that of Max Weber on Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism (Weber, 1930). Innovation is a loaded term that helped enforce the Reformation. To contemporaries, the concept was an inclusive term that covers both religion and politics, giving rise to a secular term for heresy. In the nineteenth century, innovation was re-conceptualized to serve modern society. This was a task to which social reformers including Christians devoted some energies, and they did so in the light of, or in reaction to, the religious discourse.

Religion is not the whole story of course. Technology is a major source of the concepts that define the semantic field of innovation and the discourses it provoked in the twentieth century, through economics and the market ideology. At the same time, the discourse on technological innovation espouses a semantic that has deep roots in history. The aim of this article is to document these roots. Fundamental residues or survivals from the Reformation and Counter-Reformation's connotation of the concept remain in our modern language. They just

changed meaning, from the negative to the positive. Innovation theology is the study of such a genealogy.

Innovation and the Reformation

The concept of innovation is of Greek origin (Godin, 2015). To the ancient Greeks, innovation (*kainotomia*) meant change to the established order. Innovation was political. The concept entered the Latin vocabulary (*innovo*) with a totally different meaning. Innovation is renewing, in line with many terms beginning with “re” (e.g.: reformation). The seventeenth century changed this meaning again. Innovation came to be discussed as a deviance or heresy and associated with anything not conforming to orthodoxy. Still again, in the nineteenth century, innovation acquired a new meaning as something totally new and instrumental to political, social and economic reform. Clearly, changes in language and vocabularies indicate changes in values.

The English Reformation is a key moment in this genealogy. It was at that time that innovation entered our everyday vocabulary (English and French). The concept served to support the Reformation. Kings and churches forbade innovation; bishops supported these instructions with sermons, and followers (e.g.: controversialists, pamphleteers) developed arguments to this end – normative, legal and cultural.

As an innovation, but not called such at the time, the Reformation’s reformers had to develop means to secure the Reformation: political, administrative and legal. To this list one must add language. In proclamations, declarations and statutes, monarchs used the concept of innovation to control the conduct of their subjects. The use of the concept began as an instruction not to innovate. Henry VIII’s private correspondence of the 1530s is full of letters to councilors and ambassadors as messengers, instructing them that His Majesty will not “endure” or “tolerate” innovation. In a second step, innovation became a public injunction. In 1548, Edward VI issued *A Proclamation Against Those that Do Innouate*, the first-ever royal injunction denouncing innovation.¹ The proclamation placed innovation in context, constituted an admonition not to innovate (not to change but to respect the new doctrine and discipline of the Church) and imposed punishments on offenders (England and Wales. Sovereign. Edward VI, 1548):

Considering nothing so muche, to tende to the disquieting of his realme, as diversitie of opinions, and varietie of Rites and Ceremonies, concerning Religion and worshipping of almightie God ...; [considering] certain private Curates, Preachers, and other laye men, contrary to their bounden duties of obedience, both rashely attempte of their owne and singulet witte and mynde, in some Parishe Churches not onely to persuade the people, from

¹ Edward’s reign was ruled by a Regency Council (under his uncle Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, then John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland) because Edward never reached his majority.

the olde and customed Rites and Ceremonies, but also bryngeth in newe and strange orders...according to their fantasies...is an evident token of pride and arrogance, so it tendeth bothe to confusion and disorder...: Wherefore his Majestie straightly chargeth and commandeth, that no maner persone, of what estate, order, or degree soever he be, of his private mynde, will or phantasie, do omitte, leave doune, change, alter or innovate any order, Rite or Ceremonie, commonly used and frequented in the Church of Englande ... Whosoever shall offende, contrary to this Proclamation, shall incur his highness indignation, and suffer imprisonment, and other grievous punishementes.

From that time onward, the concept of innovation served every cause, political and ecclesiastical, and soon became an accusation. Throughout his reign (1625-1649), King Charles I suffered the accusation of innovating. The Presbyterian Scots and the English Parliament were particularly violent in their words against Charles, who was accused of “popish innovation”. It is during this period that the concept became polemical. Everyone (archbishops, bishops, parliamentarians) accused the others (Puritans, Catholics, separatists) of innovation in religion and government.

During the Reformation and afterward, the concept of innovation was used predominantly in the pejorative sense. The very few positive uses that exist are legal and spiritual. For example, Thomas More uses it for renewal of the soul: a return to original or pure soul (before sin). Overall, however, the negative meaning of the concept of innovation, the dominant connotation, continued until late in the nineteenth century.

A Concept that Travels

The religious representation of innovation was highly influential. First, consider science. According to modern standards, the experimental method was certainly a great innovation. However, at the time of the Reformation and after, no one thought of calling this method an innovation. To take just one example, Francis Bacon never used the concept of innovation in the positive sense to name his experimental project. Except for a short essay *On Innovation*, where he discussed the nature of innovation from both the positive and negative sides, Bacon used the concept in the negative sense, mainly in his political and moral writings, and regularly reminded his readers of His/Her Majesties’ (Elizabeth, James) injunctions not to innovate in matters of religion (Godin, 2016a).

This is also the case with inventors. “Projectors”, as inventors were called at the time, never used innovation to name their inventions. The practice continued until the nineteenth century. Inventors had to defend themselves against charges of innovating (upon the tradition or in the name of progress), using the word as such (Godin, 2016b).

Political thought shared the same meaning of innovation as did science and the arts. In the seventeenth century, political thinkers never talked of the new idea of republicanism in terms

of innovation. The word is too negatively charged for such a purpose. Royalists, however, regularly used the concept to denigrate the republicans. That all innovation in government are “dangerous” was a watchword of the time. Innovation is a “plague” (Godin, 2012).

The same holds true for social reform. Until late in the nineteenth century, socialism as “social innovation” was described as subversive to the social order, namely to private property (Sargant, 1858; Encyclopedia Britannica, 1888). Yet it is in the nineteenth century that the representation of innovation began to change. The rehabilitation of innovation went through several routes: cultural (making use of history), linguistic (etymology) and utilitarian or instrumental. Among the instrumental arguments is social reform, as supported by the French socialists (Claude-Henri Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier) and their followers, in France (Victor Considérant) and elsewhere (John Patterson). Religion is an integral part of the discourse of the socialists. As Gareth Stedman Jones has suggested, socialism was to many the “new spiritual power” in post-revolutionary France and elsewhere in the western world (Stedman Jones, 2010). The concept of innovation, or rather “social innovation”, served this “new Christianism”, as Saint-Simon called it (Saint-Simon, 1825). Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* praises Catholicism for the introduction of a system of general education for all, an “immense et heureuse innovation sociale” [great and happy social innovation] (Comte, 1841: 366). To Fourier, “Dieu a fait éclore dans nos sociétés des germes d’innovation, bienfaisantes et nuisibles” [God causes to be born in our societies kernels of beneficial or harmful innovation] Among the good seeds are “innovations domestiques et sociales” [domestic and social innovation] (Fourier, 1808: 90). Social innovation and the Church’s message go hand in hand, as another French socialist put it: “L’évangile, lors même qu’il ne serait pas le livre définitif de la parole divine, sera toujours le guide et le modèle du novateur social” [the gospel, although it is not the definitive book of the divine word, will always be the guide and the model of the social innovator] (Lechevalier, 1834: 538).

Innovation in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, innovation became a word of praise. Innovation came to be considered as the source of progress. To be sure, such a discourse began in the decades following the French Revolution. What was previously called “dangerous innovation”, like revolution, becomes “happy innovation”, a key phrase to Comte. Comte also introduced a contrast that became very popular later on. He contrasts “esprit de conservation” [the spirit of conservation] to “esprit d’innovation” [the spirit of innovation] as two fundamental instincts, and explains social progress as the result of the latter (Comte, 1839: 558-59).

Yet a complete rehabilitation of the concept of innovation had to wait until the twentieth century, thanks to or because of technology. The view of change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was eminently conservative. There was no question of progress. Then, after

a long period of contestation, a new conception emerged (Godin, 2019; 2020). The qualities that had been denounced as social vices emerged as moral virtues. In the name of economic growth, “technological innovation” became instrumental to economic policy, as Charpie claimed. Practitioners started making of innovation a technological affair – before scholars, who only articulated the practitioners’ view. “There is little doubt”, stated the OECD in one of the first titles on technological innovation ever produced in the Western world, “that if governments succeed in helping to increase the pace of technical innovation, it will facilitate structural changes in the economy, and increase the supply of new and improved products necessary for Member Governments to achieve rapid economic growth and full employment and without inflation” (OECD, 1966: 8). Religion, or rather a new kind of ‘religion’, remains in the background here. Innovation is the modern belief or new faith:

Most current social, economic and environmental challenges require creative solutions based on innovation and technological advance (OECD, 2010: 30).

Innovation is our best means of successfully tackling major societal challenges, such as climate change, energy and resources scarcity, health and ageing, which are becoming more urgent by the day (European Commission, 2010: 2).

Innovation is a key driver of productivity, growth and well-being, and plays an important role in helping address core public challenges like health, the environment, food security, education and public sector efficiency” (OECD 2015: 11).

In the late 1960s-early 1970s, technological innovation gave rise to a growing literature concerned with organizational strategies and public policies for industrial innovation: in management, economics and research policy. Then starting around 1990, new terms began to appear that argued for a different kind of innovation: social innovation (a term of the nineteenth century), responsible innovation, sustainable innovation, etc. An adjective rather than an object defines what innovation is. This has to do with the “quality” of innovation: we need a different type of innovation. Innovation must be societal (social), ethical (responsible) and environmental (sustainable).

Innovation Theology

In *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt claimed that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (Schmitt, 1922: 36).² Schmitt’s is a controversial thesis that did not remain uncontested. In *lieu et place* of secularization, some prefer to follow Hans Blumenberg and talk of “reoccupation”. Some issues – which may have been discussed in religion first – are subsequently dealt with anew (reinvested, reoccupied) in

² One may find the same idea expressed before Schmitt. “Politiks both civil and Ecclesiastical”, claimed George Lawson in his *Politia sacra et civilis* (1689), “belong unto theology, and are but a branch of the same” (cited in Tierney, 1982: 99). 350 years before Lawson, Marsilius of Padua argued, in *Defensor pacis* (1324), that the provision of natural law could be found in divine law (as well as human law) (Tierney, 2014: 124).

light of a different context (Quesne, 2007; Monod, 2012; Pankakoski, 2013). Above, I talked of “traveling”. The concept of innovation traveled from the religious sphere to other social fields that appropriated it for their own ends. At first the concept had essentially the same connotation as the religious one in these fields. In the following centuries, it acquired new meanings.

Innovation theology, I suggest, is the study of the theological genealogy of innovation. Many of our modern concepts owe their origins to religion, or at the least religion contributed significantly to the use and diffusion of such concepts. Such is the case of progress (eschatology) (Lowith, 1949), freedom (Troeltsch, 1912), liberty (tolerance) (Tierney, 1995), liberalism (Siedentop, 2014), revolution (resistance) (Kelley, 1988; 1995), capitalism (Weber, 1930), governmentality (*oeconomia*) (Agamben, 2007; Leshem, 2016), absolutism (Kantorowicz, 1955; 1957; Oakley, 1968), sovereignty and constitutionalism (Schmitt, 1922; Tierney, 1982). The secularization itself found its first expression in the government of the Church. Innovation is another such concept. Our modern representation of innovation carries survivals of a century-old conception, that of religion.

In order to unearth these survivals, we must study the vocabulary used to talk of innovation at the time of the Reformation. As an accusation above all, innovation was talked of in terms of a series of core or constitutive concepts. One is *change*. The Reformation was a period of considerable change. Changing Christianity to Protestantism has been a long process enmeshed in political struggles. This was a time when change, particularly change to religion, law and politics, was prohibited. The vocabulary used to make sense of (acceptable) change was a series of terms beginning with “re”: reformation, renovation, restoration, regeneration, renewing (Ladner, 1959). All of these terms mean the purification of “infirmities” or what has been “corrupted”, “deformed” and “abused”. It is a matter of improving what exists, not of changing it. In this context, innovation is the emblematic and contested concept of change. Innovation is changing to the worst: *altering* – a recurrent co-word with innovating –, “polluting”, “poisoning”, “perverting”, “prostituting” and “adulterating” things; changing or departing from what is exemplary – customs, laws and government and, particularly in religious matters, Antiquity (Primitive Church and Scripture) – or from the true Protestant religion, by “adding” to or “subtracting” from it, or wholly substituting something else, “breaking” or “overthrowing” it.

What about *novelty*, as the etymology of the word innovation suggests (*novus*). Novelty (something new) itself is a key word of the time, but it is not the issue. Novelty is mere “imagination”, in a pejorative sense: “fancy”, “fantasy”. Novelty is also “men’s invention”, “device” and “forgery”. Again, the etymology must be taken seriously (in+). Innovation is more than mere novelty. Innovation is an *activity* (what we call process today): “introducing” something new into the world, new ideas (doctrine) or activities (worship) into practice. In this sense, innovation is deliberate change. One concept that serves this discourse is *liberty*, not in the modern sense (autonomy) but in the sense of excessive and arbitrary liberty (as being opposed to the social order), namely licentiousness. “Private opinion” and “private men” were key terms

used at the time to discuss such a liberty. A related concept is *design* together with “scheme”, and later, “project”. The innovator has a purpose, a scheme or design: “overthrowing” the social order; reintroducing “popery” in Protestantism. He is never alone. He creates a whole “sect” that follows him.

What distinguishes innovation from *heresy* (meaning = choice), a key word of the time, is the scope of the liberty or deviance. To be sure, the same vocabulary used against heresy is used to discuss innovation.³ Innovation too is called heretical (“heretical innovation”). But with the decline of persecution, and of the Inquisition in the Christian world (for political rather than humanist purposes such as individual freedom), innovation came to include more than religious heresy. Innovation is religious *and* political deviance. This distinguishes the use and function of the concept of innovation from heresy in Protestant England. Heresy, as strictly religious, is a word of Papal power. By the time of Charles’ reign, the word heresy was used mainly as a polemical. Kings as Sovereign of the Church and controversialists used the concept to refute their opponent (the Catholic) using his own words: using a Popish word against the Papists themselves.

Innovation may be an activity or process and it is discussed as such, with emphasis on the “innovator”, but what is feared are the effects of innovation. Innovation is “sudden” and “violent” and, particularly after the French Revolution, is often discussed in terms of “revolt” and what we call *revolution* today (tumult, rebellion, subversion, sedition, division, faction, war, disorder, schism, disobedience), and contrasted to reformation, which is gradual. Innovation is destructive of the social order. This is why innovation is to be feared. The innovator foments a plan to “subvert” things for his own purposes. Innovation may be private as to origin, but it is public with regard to its consequences. Innovation may begin as a small or indifferent thing (adiaphora)⁴ but over time it leads to a chain reaction. It creeps imperceptibly, “little by little”, into the whole world.

The Reformation’s representation of innovation endured for more than three centuries. In turn, the modern representation began to take shape with political and social reformers in the nineteenth century, those who began to re-conceptualize innovation as an instrument for “progress”. Until then, the instruments of progress (civilization) were knowledge (including moral knowledge), education (including religious education), law and commerce. The social reformer added “innovation” to this list. However, this step was neither easy nor self-evident. To make his case, the social reformer had to develop arguments against the then-common discourse on innovation, the religious discourse.

³ For some official texts on heresy, see Peters, 1980; Hughes and Larkin, 1964: 57-60; 181-86.

⁴ In Reformation England, adiaphora was a major argument used by the conformists. Certain practices, ceremonies and rites, qualified as Romish by the reformers, were permitted because indifferent, like kneeling at communion, wearing ecclesiastical vestments (cap, surplice), ringing bells, lighting candles at Mass, observing saint’s days.

The same concepts that served to define innovation in the past define innovation today. But the concepts of the previous centuries have acquired new meanings. To the moderns, innovation is *novelty*, novelty of any kind: new ideas, things, behaviors and practices. In this sense, innovation is a synonym for novelty. But novelty is only one of the meanings of innovation. To practitioners and some scholars, innovation excludes some types of novelty: the mental or speculative. Innovation is contrasted to contemplation. Innovation is *action*, as was understood in the past centuries. A discovery or an invention becomes an innovation only when it is introduced, applied, adopted, commercialized, that is, only if it is used and useful: “Research...is an unrealized public investment until the resulting innovations are diffused to and adopted by the intended audience” (Rogers, 1962: 2). Among writers of the early twentieth century, innovation as action was often discussed in terms of “energy”. Later innovation was discussed in terms of “initiative”.

The next step in the re-conceptualization of innovation is originality. An innovator initiates something for the “first” time, as was understood at the time of the Reformation. This perspective gave rise to innovation as creativity, a concept that had nothing to do with innovation prior to the twentieth century. Again, it is a matter of re-describing precursor terms previously used in the negative sense: invention, imagination. The most important impact of the concept of creativity in recent decades is, perhaps, a definition of innovation as originality, in the sense of origin: the “first” adoption of a new behavior or practice or the “first” commercialization of a new idea or thing. “The first enterprise to make a given technical change is an innovator. Its action is innovation. Another enterprise making the same technical change later is presumably an *imitator*, and its action, *imitation*” (Schmookler, 1966: 2).

The most important dimension of innovation is *effects*, again as was understood during the Reformation. The difference between reformation and innovation, that is, between renovating and altering, gave rise to the contrast between “meliorating”/“improvement” and innovation. Early in the twentieth century, economists made a distinction between improvement and invention. An improvement improves on existing things, while an invention is something entirely new. The same distinction came to define innovation. The more an innovation differs from predecessor innovations, the more it has transformational effects (structural or generic), effects that are called “revolutionary”. The effect dimension of innovation explains why scholars study successful innovations and not failures. An invention without effects is not an innovation.

In sum, one observes a shift in the vocabulary over time, from the negative to the positive. “A recurring pattern of Western thought is that ideas originally presented to justify an existing order of things often prove to have revolutionary implications, when they are taken over by critics of the existing order” (Tierney, 1982: 49). But at the same time, clear survivals of past connotations inhere in our current meaning. Alteration (in the pejorative sense) changed to “difference”, “creativity” and “originality”; liberty is discussed in terms of “entrepreneurship”; scheme and design became directed or “planned change”, “strategy” and “policy”, thus giving a programmatic character to innovation; revolution gave rise to “radical” and “major” innovation

as key concepts to the students of innovation.⁵ The New Christianism of the nineteenth-century, together with socialism, gave us “social innovation”. To many scholars, the term social innovation is situated within a left-wing ideology today, either explicitly or implicitly. Social innovations favor (or should favor, to be so named) the non-institutional, the ‘alternative’ and the ‘marginal’. Furthermore, the ‘community’ and non-profit organizations are favored sources of social innovation and the focus of many studies. Autonomy, liberty, democracy, solidarity and liberation are key words that came into use in theories on social innovation. Social innovation is “democratic, citizen- or community-oriented and user-friendly”; it assigns significance to what is “personalized, small, holistic and sustainable”; its methods are diverse, not restricted to standard science, and include “open innovation, user participation, cafés, ethnography, action research”, etc. (Mulgan, 2007)

Despite the lingering survivals of past meanings, two entirely new perspectives define innovation today. One is the future. *Philosophes* of the twentieth century added a future perspective to innovation.⁶ Innovation became a programmatic concept. Scholars and others sanctified innovation and made of it a way to modern salvation. Previous uses of the concept of innovation were made in the present form (accusing someone of innovating) or the past form (the “Happy Innovations” of previous ages, as examples or models). Furthermore, there was no theory of innovation, in contrast to the field of political thought, where theories have abounded for centuries. As Brian Tierney put it on popular sovereignty: “We are in a world of *mentalités*, of taken-for-granted presuppositions rooted in the corporate life of the Middle Ages, that the canonists never explained because it never occurred to them that they needed any explanation” (Tierney, 1982: 21). Using a future point of view, a modern philosophe imagines and prescribes a new political (economic) order. Innovation creates new means for a better future (the re-enchantment of the world).

As moderns, we are accustomed to talking of the Reformation as an innovation. The Reformation is one of those moments that, together with the Renaissance and the French Revolution, changed the world. Indeed, the word innovation began to be used at that time. But it was the critics that discussed the Reformation in terms of innovation. The reformers considered the Reformation as an improvement, a renewing, not an innovation. It was a matter of *redressing*, namely eliminating corruption, hence a vocabulary of “reforming”, “restoring”, “correcting” and “amending”.⁷ The Reformation was imitation not innovation. It is past-oriented. Innovation is

⁵ To be sure, the word revolution remains in the modern vocabulary – “revolutionary” innovation is contrasted to “minor”, “incremental” or “gradual” innovation – but as an attribute of innovation rather than as an effect, although the semantic reference is to effects (an innovation is revolutionary because of its important effects on society).

⁶ I include in this category all of the writers who produce thoughts on innovation: scholars, engineers, managers and policy-makers. At the time of the Enlightenment, the French called such men *philosophes* (as distinct from professional philosophers). The *philosophes* included men of letters, men of science, statesmen, government administrators, journalists and scholars.

⁷ With the Act of Supremacy of 1534, Henry VIII became the “only Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England” with “full power and authority to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts, and enormities” of the Papacy for the “conservation of the peace, unity

altering the past. In contrast, a central feature of the modern concept of innovation is a future orientation. Innovation is an activity or process conducted in the present, but whose purpose is imagining or constructing the future. This is a totally new meaning.

The second perspective is the market (Godin, 2019). Beginning after World War II, innovation acquired a meaning related to industry. Innovation is the commercialization of inventions or goods embodying knowledge (technology) and thus contributes to economic growth. In a matter of only a few decades, this representation became the spontaneous representation of innovation. Increasingly, this representation is contested. Today, people expect innovation to be societal, environmental and ethical, rather than strictly economic.

Conclusion

Innovation is a theology in the sense that it has become a modern belief and faith. But innovation theology is more than that, as this article documented. Innovation theology suggests that the modern representation of innovation developed out of the religious one, shifting this representation to an entirely opposite and positive representation, reinvesting or reoccupying it with new meanings. “Il est au fond logique”, claims Jean-Claude Monod, “qu’une ‘force’ dominante de la culture à une époque donnée ne disparaisse pas sans laisser quelques traces profondes dans les pensées ou dans les institutions ultérieures” (Monod, 2012: 12). We have simply turned a negative concept into a superlative one.

Innovation theology is not the end of the story. The modern concept of innovation may be a secularized concept, but the religious concept is the result of a ‘theologization’ of a political concept. I may have stressed the religious origin here, but the concept previously had a political (and negative) connotation, originating in classical Greece. It traveled from politics to religion, first as a positive concept, in the spiritual sense (innovo: renewing the soul), then back to the negative (during the Reformation).⁸

In addition to constituting a contribution to the debate on secularization (or rather desacralization), innovation theology is also a contribution to intellectual and conceptual history. Intellectual historians have largely ignored religious ideas (Kelley, 1988; Coffey, 2009). With a

and tranquility of this realm”. Elizabeth I’s Act of Supremacy of 1559 instituted visitations “for reformation, order and correction” of “all manner of errors, heresies, schisms, abuses, offences, contempts and enormities” in the Church.

⁸ Both Ernst Kantorowicz and Brian Tierney documented such a dialectical process, the first in the case of the concept of “king’s two bodies” and the second on constitutionalism: there has been “a transference of definition from one sphere to another, from theology to law, ... just as, vice versa, in the early centuries of the Christian era the imperial political terminology and the imperial ceremonial had been adapted to the needs of the Church” (Kantorowicz, 1957: 19); “the typical process that occurred was the assimilation of a text of Roman private law into Church law, its adaptation and transmutation there to a principle of constitutional law, and then its reabsorption into the sphere of secular government in this new form” (Tierney, 1982: 25).

focus on political ideas and their sources in political and legal thought, intellectual historians have sidestepped religious sources – they have also neglected innovation as a political concept. Innovation theology corrects this trend. Innovation theology studies one of the contributions of religion to political, social and economic ideas, in this case innovation. Innovation theology suggests a new area of research: unearthing the historical (religious) assumptions that define innovation today.

Finally, innovation theology is also a contribution to the critical study of innovation. Scholars who study innovation have espoused a pro-innovation bias, or at least sympathy, toward innovation, with few reflective thoughts on either their object of study or their conceptual constructs. The semantic morphology of the field bears witness to this situation. With a vocabulary focusing on the market and economic competitiveness, and increasingly on progress of any kind, innovation has become a panacea. Innovation theology opens the black box of the concept, studies its origin and development, and explains its moral valuation, thus allowing one to question the place of innovation among the many possible actions on society, e.g.: maintaining the status quo, imitation, resistance, withdrawal.

One question remains to be addressed. Is innovation a Protestant term? Put differently, why did the concept diffuse so widely in England at the time of the Reformation? Statistically speaking, over the last five centuries the concept was used first of all in religious matters. To the best of my knowledge, in this context no European country seems to have used the concept as much as England did (and neither did the US). The concept diffused in this country in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Protestants in England appropriated a concept with moral connotations to support their case against Rome. But the Reformation as a new orthodoxy is also an innovation or “heresy” according to Catholics. Protestants needed a new and different term (than heresy) – innovation – to attack those who, in turn, contest this new orthodoxy – or unorthodoxy – to denote differences from the Papal vocabulary. In doing so, Anglicans and Puritans were saying that they, as Protestants, were not heretics. Others innovate, not them. Yet, over time the concept was used by the Catholics against the Protestants.

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