

Innovation

The term “innovation” derives from the Latin word *innovatus*, which is the noun form of *innovare*, “to renew or change,” stemming from *in*—“into” + *novus*—“new.” Although the term is broadly used, innovation generally refers to the creation of better or more effective products, processes, technologies, or ideas that are accepted by markets, governments, and society. Innovation differs from invention or renovation in that innovation generally signifies a substantial positive change compared to incremental changes. (“Innovation,” *Wikipedia*)

Quoting *Wikipedia* at the start of a scholarly text might seem out of place, but it does provide a much-needed starting point. For the concept is ignored in the study of religion. There is no entry on the topic in most reference works in religion. Hence the reliance on one from *Wikipedia*. But the definition offered there is not unproblematic.

The definition from *Wikipedia* takes innovation to mean a “change for the better.” But most present-day scholars of religion would be reluctant to make value judgments about religious groups, doctrines, or practices. Perhaps “better” could, from a historical perspective, be taken to mean simply more “successful” changes, ones which have had an impact. Or “better” could be seen from simply the point of view of whoever makes the claims.

The term innovation is notoriously fluid and means different things in different contexts (see Valaskivi 2012: 129). The relation of innovation to kindred terms like change, transformation, renewal, and invention is also unclear. If change is intrinsic to innovation, when is change substantial enough to be deemed innovation?

Innovation seems to be intentional. But when innovation stems from the influence of foreign or external factors, it might be

attributed less to active agency than to a necessary reaction to ensure survival. Innovation need not even have been intended as innovation. Protestantism for Martin Luther was not about modernizing the Christian Church but simply about returning it to its original state.

How Has Innovation Been Seen in the Study of Religion?

One of the most common ways of approaching religious innovation is to regard it as a result of either a foreign or an external influence. A religion might be transformed by the intrusion of foreign religious, social, or economic factors. Take Melanesian cargo cults. As described by Ton Otto (2009: 82–83), “the cargo cult concept highlights a range of millenarian ideas, cults and movements that originated in the wake of Western colonization and, more often than not, involved a strong concern with the acquisition of Western goods—the cargo.” Here a non-Western traditional religion was transformed by its contact with Western materialism.

A religion might also be transformed by factors that are native to a culture but still external to the religion. Take the case of new religions. George Lundskow sees new religions in the modern West as “a direct reaction to the collapse of meaning within established religious or cultural systems,” with the new groups being “purposefully innovative in order to address, whether through reform or revolution, the crisis of meaning in a rapidly changing world” (2005: 2). Wouter Hanegraaff sees occultism as a post-Enlightenment development of traditional esotericism, involving “all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanting world” (1996: 422). Innovation may be tied to the breakdown of either a religion or a culture. For example, Western material success and the ensuing societal transformation may be seen as a “triumph [which] also entails the destruction of

tradition, of local culture, of familiar reference groups and values” (Lundskow 2005: 1).

Nevertheless, new religiosity is most often attributed to entrepreneurship and purposeful innovation. New religiosity has even been described as “[t]he closest thing to comparative studies on religious innovation” (Williams et al. 1992: 2). Examples can be traced back to Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch’s distinguishing churches, sects, and cults, and can be traced forward to the study of new religious movements in the 1970s and 1980s and then to the study of neopaganism today.

Yet since the early 1990s “new religious movements” have increasingly been seen as simply another category of religiosity alongside Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, thereby losing sight of their innovativeness. And when innovation is studied, sociologists tend to overemphasize novelty. In the mid-1990s the rise of “spirituality” was attributed to something new in the West when in fact many of the “novel” and “innovative” elements could in fact be traced back to at least Renaissance esotericism. Still, old ideas and practices may be perceived as new by those who adopt them.

Tradition and Innovation

As Michael Williams et al. note, religion is commonly assumed to be inclined toward conservatism and traditionalism, “with the religious mindset that is bent on preserving rather than creating” (1992: 10). Therefore innovation is often considered radical and drastic. Williams et al. suggest that it may be “helpful to think of religious innovation as something ‘natural’ to religious traditions” and argue that there is more evidence of religion as constantly changing than as staying the same (1992: 10). Furthermore, following Eric Hobsbawm (1983), it has been increasingly accepted that tradition is created rather than maintained, and so religion should be seen the same way. Yet scholars of religion have been slow to adopt this perspective (see Hammer

and Lewis 2007 for a rare exception). If religion is constant and natural, what are the implications for innovation? One could claim that many changes are managed through ritualized and standardized performances, in which case innovation might be a form of tradition. Certainly the relationship between tradition and innovation needs to be studied.

Consider the creation of the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad from the previous Magh Mela-festival. The roots of this purportedly ancient Indian religious festival actually lie no further back in history than 1870. Religious experts adopted their practices “to suit the changing political and economic climate which otherwise may well have left them behind” (Maclean 2003: 898). Yet this particular Kumbh Mela appeared traditional enough not even to be recognized as an innovation.

While many religions prefer continuity, some do see innovation positively. For example, chaos magicians, who represent a fairly recent development within Western esoteric magic even promote innovation as a central aspect of their “tradition.” The standard trope of “adherence to a perennial tradition” is maintained, but together with the acknowledgment that even a perennial tradition evolves. Chaos magicians can thus appeal to both tradition and innovation in criticizing opponents and rivals alike (see Duggan 2012).

Contexts and Perspectives of Innovation

Context matters. What is conventional in one context may be innovative in another, and vice versa. In contrast to the standard narrative which states that when cultures meet, the dominant culture affects the less powerful while itself remaining unchanged, meetings are commonly two-way streets. Hugh Urban’s study of the “meeting of East and West” in Indian Tantra (see Urban 2003) demonstrates this point. So does the Theosophical Society, which introduced to the West many Indian religious concepts, such as Karma, Chakras,

and Reincarnation (see Godwin 1994: 307–331). In India the use of these terms was hardly innovative, but the positive appraisal of them by Westerners was. This appeal, together with the involvement of the Society in the Indian nationalist struggle, secured the position of the Society when it moved to India. In the West these terms were considered innovative, but they were also connected to ideas from “traditional” Western esotericism. Again, tradition and innovation can work together.

Perspective also counts. As Williams et al. (1992: 3) note, “Defining something as religious innovation is essentially to define it as ‘significant’ change—but significant to whom?” Members might perceive their religious group as innovative, but the rest of society may not. The rhetoric used by groups may also be decisive. A group that uses the rhetoric of conversion is more likely to emphasize change; a group that enlists the rhetoric of “coming home” is more likely to emphasize continuity.

The question a scholar is seeking to answer also counts. One may examine a contemporary religious group in relation to its historical predecessors. The “new religion” may, then, seem to be more traditional than innovative. Or one may examine the same group to see the *perceived* innovativeness of it. Problems arise when scholars assert innovativeness without historical evidence, as in the case of “spirituality.”

Modernity, Societal Change, and Innovation

The sociologist Edward Shils noted that in modernity, with rationality and scientific knowledge reigning supreme, tradition is often associated with ignorance (1981: 4–11). Something deemed innovative is therefore more valued than something deemed traditional. Innovation might even be taken as itself the religion of modernity. Furthermore, sociologists, who tend to focus on novelty

rather than on tradition, consequently tend to overestimate the profoundness of some changes.

Still, innovations, especially technological ones, do have much impact on religious life. Stig Hjarvard (2008: 13) looks at the impact of the use of media, studying “the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity... assume media form.” Mara Einstein’s *Brands of Faith* (2007) explores the use of marketing techniques by religious organizations. More skeptical critics have argued against the focus on any single, new “media logic” and have analyzed instead the effects of different forms of *mediation* (see Horsfield 2008). They argue that religion has always been “mediated.” Therefore the rise of new kinds of media may not mean changes more profound than, say, those brought on by the shift from oral to textual forms of “mediation” in early Christianity or by the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

Still, new means of communication do have implications for innovation: the borders of “a society” become more fluid and more broad. Several localities may be bound together in transnational networks. The particular beliefs and practices of a religious group, when seen from beyond the immediate context, may prove to be more conventional and tradition-bound from this larger framework.

Making Sense of Religious Innovation

Much that is deemed innovative by scholars may in fact consist of changes in scholarly trends themselves. The notion of postmodern religion was all the hype in the 1990s but has since lost most of its currency. Many scholars claimed great transformations in religion without adequate evidence. Indeed, a proper investigation of religious innovation may itself be innovative. For example, the standard approach has been to look at innovations in beliefs and practices, but it is innovative to

look as well at innovations in social location—the move from mainline organizations to everyday lives and popular culture—and in use—the move from religion as “ultimate concern” to religion as entertainment and pastime.

Bibliography

- Duggan, C., “Perennialism and Iconoclasm: Chaos Magick and the Legitimacy of Innovation,” in E. Asprem and K. Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, London, 2012.
- Einstein, M., *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Oxon, 2008.
- Godwin, J., *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, New York, 1994.
- Hammer, O., and J.R. Lewis (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, Cambridge, 2007.
- Hanegraaff, W.J., *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden, 1996.
- Hjarvard, S., “The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of Media as Agents of Religious Change,” *Northern Lights* 6: 9–26, 2008.
- Hobsbawm, E., “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger Jefferson, 2005.
- (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, 1–14, Cambridge, 1983.
- Horsfield, P., “Media,” in D. Morgan (ed.), *Keywords in Religion, Media and Culture*, 111–122, New York, 2008.
- Lundskow, G.N. (ed.), *Religious Innovation in a Global Age: Essays on the Construction of Spirituality*, Maclean, K., “Making the Colonial State Work for You: The Modern Beginnings of the Ancient Kumbh Mela in Allahabad,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 82(3): 873–905, 2003.
- Otto, T., “What Happened to Cargo Cults? Material Religions in Melanesia and the West,” *Social Analysis* 53(1): 82–102, 2009.
- Shils, E., *Tradition*, London, 1981.
- Urban, H.B., *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Berkeley, 2003.
- Valaskivi, K., “Dimensions of Innovatism,” in P. Nynäs, M. Lassander and T. Utriainen (eds.), *Post-Secular Society*, 129–155, New Brunswick, 2012.
- Williams, M.A., C. Cox, and M.S. Jaffe (eds.), *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change*, Berlin, 1992.

Kennet Granholm