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## The contemporary faith of innovationism

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## **The contemporary faith of innovationism<sup>1</sup>**

by Katja Valaskivi

In Bell, E., Gog, S., Simionca, A. & Taylor, S. (eds.). *Spirituality, Organisation and Neoliberalism: Understanding Contemporary Subjectivities*. Edward Elgar, 2020.

This chapter argues that the all-encompassing concept of innovation, which has spread into all spheres of life, can be understood as a contemporary faith or belief system that I call ‘innovationism’. The values of innovationism – competitiveness, progress, growth and success – direct and guide human action and societies around the world. Innovationism is analysed here as an implicit (Bailey 1990), globally-circulating religion that permeates all levels of societies and ties organisations, nations, individuals, and ultimately humankind as a whole, into its value system. At its core is the utopian belief that (technological) innovations will ultimately solve fundamental challenges faced by humankind, including the threat of death and extinction. This enables societies to continue to believe in an economic system based on growth despite the obvious limits of the planet. This faith, in the unlimited ingenuity and innovativeness of humankind, assumes that innovation will save us at the last minute before extinction. At the same time, innovationism paradoxically proposes that unless there are innovations (and growth), the result is waning and extinction. Ultimately, innovationism sees innovation as a path to human immortality, for example through the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning.

In this chapter, I will illuminate features of innovationism as an implicit religion. First, taking inspiration from religious studies, I will consider the dimensions (cf. Smart 1996) or aspects of innovationism. Second, I will analyse how these aspects tie into the core values of implicit religion to manage hopes and mediate a sense of threat in society. Third, I will explain, through different cases and examples, how innovationism works in practice. Two bodies of empirical data are drawn on in the chapter: interviews collected for the Challenges of Global Innovation Journalism (GINJO) research project in 2008-2010, reported earlier in Valaskivi (2012), and media texts, interviews and ethnographic observations from the visit of Professor Steve Blank to Finland in 2008, reported earlier in Valaskivi and Sumiala (2013).

### **The idea of innovationism**

*Finalising this chapter during my stay at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication, I take the wrong transportation back home. The university provides a free bus service and, not having my bearings, I take the wrong one. The bus takes me to a shabby-looking industrial area with a new, fancy building in the middle. It starts to rain, and the irritated driver, at the end of his shift, tells me to*

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article have earlier been published as Valaskivi (2012) *Dimensions of Innovationism*. In Nynäs et al (eds.) *Post Secular Society*. London: Transaction.

wait for my Lyft ride inside the building. Stepping inside, I am greeted with a roll-up banner saying: 'Pennovation Center'. While waiting for my ride I learn on their website that:

*The Pennovation Center [is] a business incubator and laboratory that aligns and integrates researchers, innovators, and entrepreneurs for the commercialisation of research discoveries. Intended to marry entrepreneurs with an expert workforce and scientifically advanced facilities, key features of the Pennovation Center are the common creative spaces, including coworking areas, a cafe, and a venue for events and programs... By creating an atmosphere for collaboration, creativity, and productivity for innovators from all disciplines, the Pennovation Center [...] retain (sic) an industrial character to develop social space with a 'cool factor' [...]*<sup>2</sup>

*By sheer chance, I had arrived at the innovation incubator of my host organisation, the University of Pennsylvania.*

This is an example of how innovationism appears in practice. Innovation is the purpose for action, as well as the desired end result: growth is the aim, innovations are perceived to lead to growth, thus innovations are the solution. Innovation is a contemporary buzzword, used in a great number of situations:

A simple Google search<sup>3</sup> provides several illustrative examples: 'Innovation is vital for small businesses', 'The interplay between innovation, creativity and consciousness', 'How to build an innovation hub that's actually innovative', 'Japan Sets Aside 100 Billion Yen for Robotics and Innovation Research Programs', 'UW [University of Wisconsin] launching new innovation and entrepreneurship intern program', 'Innovation and the future of healthcare', 'UNESCO report: UK heritage sector 'world-leading' on innovation and international development'.

As we can see, the concept of innovation circulates from economics to the media and is used in contexts ranging from national competitiveness strategies to university policies and even to the health and cultural sectors. It appears in business prospectuses and academic textbooks, strategy documents and funding applications, and local industry policy statements and guidelines for cultural enhancement. In each context, the concept gains new meanings, gradually becoming almost a blanket term, all-encompassing and inevitable in discussions about the future, organisational renewal, business models, science, society, education, development, the economy, and so on. Innovation is seen predominantly as a good thing, something to be desired and enhanced. This pro-innovation bias (Rogers 1962, Kimberly 1981) has been recognised by innovation and organisational studies. The recently developed critical innovation studies

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pennovation.upenn.edu/pennovation-center> (accessed June 15, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> Aug 6, 2019 in Tampere, signed in to Google account with Chrome browser. As Google searches are sensitive to the user's browsing history, it is likely that searches by other users might provide different results.

makes the point that the pro-innovation bias leads to a collective blindness, innocence and lack of thought in studies of innovation (Godin and Vinck 2017a) as does, I suggest, wider usage of the term. However, this chapter goes further in arguing that innovationism can be understood as a faith that is not questioned; its doctrines are followed without question, relying on the presumed beneficial nature of the object of faith. Hence, I will look at innovationism as a worldview, faith or belief system that conforms to implicit religion. Implicit religion has been analysed and defined as something that does not explicitly belong to the category of religion, but which still provides existential meaning and purpose for human beings (Nesti 1990, Bailey 1990).

Despite the wide usage of the word 'innovation' and the hopes attached to it, most innovationism is quite practical and mundane – perhaps even banal (cf. Billig 1995, Beck 2004, Hjarvard 2008). Emphasis on innovation affects business organisations as well as public institutions, such as universities, as the example that opens this chapter illustrates. Most of the time innovationism – like another contemporary implicit religion, nationalism – is like the air we breathe (Anderson 1991). It thus becomes the invisible and self-evident condition of our lived experience.

### **Ubiquity of innovation**

In what follows, I will provide some examples of the ubiquity of the concept of innovation and its development. First, a search using Google Ngram illustrates how innovation has become a buzzword. Figure 1 below demonstrates the prevalence of key words related to innovationism in science and technology policy, as well as in management and popular business literature.<sup>4</sup> The everyday experience of those who follow the media and/or social media, and take part in policy making and business culture suggests that the occurrence of 'innovation' is still growing, together with 'entrepreneurship' and 'start-up'. In contrast, 'technology transfer' and 'R & D' (research and development) continue to decline. Similar observations have been made by Alasuutari (2015) who has studied the circulation of policy trends and related concepts (including 'innovation') in several countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the search can go only up to 2008, so we cannot see how usage has developed since.



*Figure 1: Google Books Ngram viewer graph on 'start-up', 'technology transfer', 'entrepreneurship', 'R&D' and 'innovation' (based on a search of Google Books for work published between 1800 and 2008) [Searched May 30, 2019]*

The second example is the phenomenon called 'innovation journalism', a vague and nebulous term applied to journalism engaging with innovation that was developed in Sweden. The Swedish national agency for technology and innovation funding, Vinnova, launched a project on innovation journalism in 2003. This led into Vinnova initiating and partly funding a research centre at Stanford (The Stanford Research Centre of Innovation Journalism), which aimed at joining the entrepreneurial spirit of the Silicon Valley to the field of journalism. The word circulated into other Nordic countries and was also used in Finland, mainly to direct some of the plentiful innovation-related research funding into the field of journalism research. There was a national association for innovation journalism founded by enthusiasts, and various research projects were initiated and funded. The concept of innovation journalism was always vague and referred to at least three things: 1) journalism on innovations and new technology, 2) innovations in journalistic practices and organisations and 3) the usage of technological innovations in developing journalism and new business models for journalism.

The spread of innovation journalism inspired colleagues from the then Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Turku Future Research Centre and University of Jyväskylä Media centre in Finland to apply for funding from the National Agency for Technology and Innovation for the GINJO project on global innovation journalism. This research set out to study how different actors in Finland, the US and Japan perceived innovation and role of journalism in relation to it. All together around 40 interviews were conducted in Finland, the US and in Japan. The interviewees were 'innovation system specialists', journalists and policy makers. The project ran from 2008 to 2010.

The GINJO project interviewed journalists and experts who at the time were called 'specialists of the innovation environment' in Finland, the US and Japan. In the research team I was assigned to study Japan,

but I also had access to all the interviews produced in the other studied countries. The interviews consisted of discussions on innovation and journalism in relation to an ageing society and climate change. Some of the interviews for the GINJO project have been made use of in this article.

The fourth and final example demonstrates some of the intertwined practices through which innovationism has been advocated, circulated and promoted in public and political discourses, and how innovationism has changed the university sector in Finland. Around the time of the GINJO project, entrepreneurship associations were founded at universities by students, the leader in Finland being the Aalto Entrepreneurship Society (AaltoES) which began a systematic lobbying and media campaign to boost the start-up scene in Finland and find more investors for them (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2013). Innovationism-based politics in Finland over ten years (2009–2019) led to a complete restructuring of the whole university system, prioritising technology-related areas likely to produce innovations, patents and start-ups. The initiators of the Aalto-university merging – the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki University of Art and Design and the Helsinki School of Economy and Management – in 2011 first called their initiative the ‘Top University’ and then the ‘Innovation University’ (Ridell 2008). In the same year, Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen noted for the national broadcaster’s radio news that there is nothing ideological about investing in start-ups and innovation. At the same time, all other fields of research, society and culture, had to reformulate their discourses from the points of view of competitiveness and innovationism. The idea of ‘social innovations’ began to gain ground, and the social and health sectors were pushed towards privatisation in the name of competitiveness. The cultural sector began to emphasise its usefulness in increasing the health and welfare of citizens.

As the Ngram graph in Figure 1 demonstrates, there was a swift and loud policy discourse change from R&D policies to innovation policies at the end of the new millennium’s first decade. Innovation began to be tied to entrepreneurialism, and the ‘innovation environment’ and its enhancement was on the lips of many governments and governmental bodies. The GINJO interviews, together with the public circulation of the concept of innovation, led me to think about how to understand these ubiquitous discourses on innovation as a belief system that provides the kind of answers that we consider part of the realm of religion, rather than that of science and technological development. It seemed apparent that the way innovation was used, both as an aim and a means, and as a way to manage hope and threat in society, that the concept was more than a hegemonic ideology: it seemed like a faith, or implicit religion, that provided solutions to the problems of competitive society at all levels – individual, organisational, corporate, and even humankind. Innovation appeared to be the answer to the existential questions human beings continue to have even if many have given up institutional religion and faith in a personal god. This thought experiment was published in an anthology of religious studies on post-secular society (Nynäs et al. 2012).

### **The pro-innovation bias**

Innovationism has grown in influence around the world in last decades, despite the fact that the so called pro-innovation bias was recognized in the 1960s (Rogers 1962) and studied extensively in the 1970s (e.g. Downs and Mohr 1976). Early literature on the pro-innovation bias considered innovation predominantly as a good thing, no matter the context. Because of this, it is usual to think that more innovation is better than less. Rogers (2003) considers this bias a particular problem in innovation dissemination research, which tends to focus only on rapidly spreading, successful innovations and ignore failures. Innovation research is also often funded by agencies and other actors particularly interested in enhancing innovations, which further strengthens the pro-innovation bias (Rogers 2003).

In the US, the idea of using innovations to boost growth and competitiveness had been spreading since the 1970s (Brint 2018), and matured into full-fledged entrepreneurialism and start-up frenzy by the time the concept started to direct policies in the Nordic countries and Japan.

Innovation, together with entrepreneurship, continues to be at the centre of the contemporary understanding of progress as growth and an increase in competitiveness, while lack of innovation is connected with failure and extinction. Brint (2018) explains how 'academic innovationism' replaced 'academic professionalism' in the US university sector from the 1970s onwards. At the time of economic decline, solutions for growth and competitiveness were sought through stronger ties with entrepreneurialism, business and higher education institutions. These policy developments led to the marketisation of the university, but also to greater trends of inclusion and heterogeneity in universities. For Brint, then, innovationism is a systemic concept, an attempt to name the overarching change of the university sector in the US. At the same time, he comes to explain how the belief system of innovationism came about initially through practical, institutional and systemic changes. These were then copied, adopted and circulated into a whole belief system, which became both the aim and the means for development and policy decisions.

Through the discourse analysis of the organisation and management research literature, Segergrantz et al. (2017) conclude that innovation is usually spoken of as a good thing. They analyse the usage of 'innovation' from three perspectives: drivers, effects and practices. There are interesting parallels in Segergrantz et al.'s (2017) analysis with earlier work on innovationism (Valaskivi 2012). The latter identifies the core values of innovationism as success, progress, growth and competitiveness. Segergrantz et al. correspondingly observe that the drivers of innovation include the hope for the profit, growth or survival of the organisation that is applying innovation. They find that the effects of innovation are similar to the drivers: organisational competitiveness or survival, economic benefits and faster change and novelty. Although they do not call the phenomenon 'innovationism', Segergrantz et al. recognize that much of the discourse on innovations is

based on faith. They conclude with three aspects of the discourse on the faith in innovation evident in management literature: 1) as a driver, the faith in the goodness of innovation drives innovation; 2) at the level of practices of innovation, the faith in the goodness of innovation creates a desire to invest in more efficient innovation practices; and, 3) at the level of effects of innovation, faith in innovation leads to complete trust in the goodness of innovation – in other words, innovation is always seen as having desirable effects. These faiths form a circular system which sustains pro-innovation bias.

In what follows, I first briefly discuss the concept of implicit religion in relation to innovationism. I then move on to discussing the dimensions (Smart 1996) or aspects of innovationism observed in the GINJO project and reported in my earlier work (Valaskivi 2012). This section ends with a table reflecting the aspects of innovationism as a way of engaging with hope for and threat to human action and existence.

### **Implicit religion and innovationism**

Religious studies has, for decades, relied on the idea that with the secularisation of modern societies and its emphasis on the modernisation, industrialisation and rising levels of education in (Western) societies, the importance of religion as a public, societal phenomenon diminishes. Religion thus becomes primarily the concern of the individual and a private matter rather than a public, shared institution (Parsons 1960; Berger 1967; Luckman 1967; Bellah 1970). Casanova (1994) identifies three aspects of secularisation:

- 1) The differentiation of spheres of the social system, such as culture, politics, religion and economy.
- 2) The decline of religious belief and practice.
- 3) The marginalisation of religion into the private sphere.

Beyer (1994) uses the concept of subsystems to understand modern society and the role of religion within it. This functional perception of religion sees the differentiation and professionalisation of subsystems as a core feature of modern societies. In this kind of society, religion is no longer an all-encompassing authority, and subsystems operate relatively independently of religious norms, values and justifications.

However, the functionalist idea of subsystems often stands in the way of seeing aspects, dimensions, or patterns of action that operate in religious ways in ‘non-religious’ subsystems. One of the concepts that attempts to grasp this phenomenon of religiousness beyond religion is ‘implicit religion’ (Bailey 1990, Nesti 1990). As Bailey (1990, 485) points out, ‘Even in a differentiated society, the specialized functions (religion, politics, art, education, health etc.) are not exclusive to the role-bearing institutions’.

My aim here is to demonstrate that the collective reliance on innovations at all levels of human action can be seen as implicit religion with a global, circulating value system that has actual consequences on the ways in which public and private resources are allocated, nature is utilised, and science is conducted in the



world. In other words, given the pervasiveness of innovationism, it is imperative to understand the ways in which it communicates a belief system that manages power, funding flows and social relationships.

Innovationism works in the ways of religion, mostly outside of the realm of what we usually see as religion. This is how I construct innovationism as implicit religion. In religious studies, implicit religion has been conceptualized through individual experience, as the core beliefs of individuals beyond institutional religion. Bailey (1990) finds through an interview study that what people find most important, in the core of their existence, is an 'intensive concern with extensive effects', 'creating our own identities'. This drive for creating one's own identity:

...was what people stood for, it gave coherence to much of their observable behavior; it made them comprehensible, in terms of meaning for themselves; it saw the ambiguity of their description as 'determined'; it enabled them to be driven by a chosen Cause or Causes, as well as causes, future hope as well as past inheritance; it recognized intentionality (p. 495).

I argue here that implicit religion can also take the form of a societal belief system beyond individual perception of existence. It is, however, easy to see how innovationism ties in with the ideas of individualism, individual existence and individual core identity, and can act as a shared cause in societies. Implicit religion, thus, can also be something that is not considered to belong to the realm or subsystem of religion, but nevertheless provides core values and other aspects of usually derived from religion, such as myths, rituals and social structures.

Innovationism is tied to the Western Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and individual development contributing to the centrality of science as an orientation towards the world (cf. Turner 2011). Science and religion are often seen in binary opposition, with science as rational, public and secular and religion as emotional or mystic and private.

Recent texts on secularisation have begun to acknowledge that even in secularised societies there remains the human need to seek a deeper meaning and purpose in life. Charles Taylor (2007) acknowledges that even in societies that have rid themselves of God there is nevertheless an aspiration for something better, and Habermas (2007) describes modern societies as having 'an awareness of what is missing'. Taylor borrows Luc Ferry's concept of the 'meaning of meaning' (*'sens du sens'*) in explicating the notion that 'somewhere there is a fullness or richness which transcends the ordinary' (Taylor 2007, 676). In this sense, the issue is about the meaning of life. The question of (collective) meaning is intertwined with feelings of insecurity and a desire for security in (globalised) times. Secularisation does not remove the need for faith(s) that bring hope and help in managing the sense of threat caused by what Paul Tillich (1950) calls 'the ultimate frustrations'.

Tillich, the renowned 'theologian of hope', defines religion as being about the ultimate concerns of humankind. Thus, religion provides in the first place a meaningful set of ultimate values on which the morality of a society can be based. When these values are institutionalized, they can be spoken of as central values of a society. Second, religion provides an adequate explanation for the 'ultimate frustrations' which are inherent to the human condition, and are not manageable. Death is the typical case of (individual) ultimate frustration, while environmental concerns and climate change are current issues that threaten the whole of humankind (see also Bellah 1985). Ultimate values should be greater than ultimate concerns or frustrations; there should be hope beyond the ultimate concerns, in this (immanent) life or the next (transcendent) life. In this view, religion can provide an explanation for ultimate frustrations, so that an individual or a group can accept them without having their core values rendered meaningless (Bellah 1985). Tillich (1990, 182-193) emphasises the necessity of hope for human beings and for the collective: hope should exist as the driving force for a human being 'as long as he lives'.

Tillich's view on ultimate concerns has for some time been considered 'rather empty and too wide-ranging' (Smart 1996, 9) to facilitate an understanding of religion. Smart (1996) advocates for a comparative perspective, with the study of 'dimensions of worldviews'. According to Smart, there are seven dimensions that must be taken into account: (1) the mythic or narrative, (2) ethical, (3) material, (4) philosophical, (5) experiential or emotional, (6) organisational or social and (7) ritual or practical. In this chapter, the seven dimensions of religion will be used to analyse the *aspects of innovationism*.

Like religious belief systems in general, innovationism is based on certain shared values. As noted above, these values are competitiveness, success, progress and growth. The circulation of these values not only contributes to the construction of an imagined (global) community (Anderson 1991) but is also the basis from which more practical dimensions are constructed. Thus, innovationism provides for contemporary developed societies both a set of ultimate values and a way of controlling ultimate frustrations – hope and transcendence beyond the existential threat of climate change and mass extinction.

In what follows, I will discuss the seven aspects of innovationism in relation to its core values and ability to manage hope and threat in society, using interview data from the GINJO project to illustrate.

### **Aspects and values of innovationism**

First, *the mythic or narrative aspect of innovationism* refers to authoritative stories belonging to certain groups or traditions (Smart 1996). Myths are recited in the community, and are foundational to the worldview of the group in question. Myths are passed on through circulating narratives; through narration, myths enable the communication of the shared values of a community (Smart 1996).

By analysing the mythic dimension, it is possible to describe how the values of innovationism appear in the GINJO interviews. Here, values are understood as aims and aspirations toward which the actors strive. In

the narratives which circulate in the GINJO project interviews, core values cut across individual, corporate, national and global levels.

The values of innovationism (success, growth, competitiveness and progress) appear in stories that recur within the interviews. The values appear on four levels within the narratives: the individual, the organisational, the national and the global (humankind). At the *individual level*, innovation becomes a means for *success* for the interviewees, in the United States in particular. The myth of the American dream, the individual entrepreneur, is frequently repeated in the US interviews. In the technology sector, the story of Steve Jobs developing his breakthrough innovations in his mother's garage has gained mythical dimensions, and the lone introvert in his mother's garage is often mentioned in the interviews as a necessary beginning for innovations, but also as somebody who needs support in order to become a commercial success (see xx). The success of individual entrepreneurs can involve new start-up companies, which can generate *growth*. At the individual level, the narrative dimension has a connection with the second aspect, the *ethical* one (Smart 1996). The innovation system specialists emphasised how the behaviour of individuals should become suitable for creating innovations: mobility, flexibility, creativity, language proficiency, and openness, plus a risk-taking mentality, are qualities required of the citizens of an innovative nation. In the discourses of the AaltoES, there is also an emphasis on embracing failure: the myth of the successful and innovative serial entrepreneur claims that one is supposed to fail nine times out of ten and be rewarded with 'outrageous wins' on the tenth try.

At the *corporate level*, innovation first and foremost provides a means for productivity and the possibility for *growth*. Innovations can also mark the beginnings of new corporations, which is one of the aspirations of competing nations: to produce more start-up companies. It is at the corporate level that the third aspect of innovationism, the *material*, is most visible: enterprises create new technology, new services, and new markets through innovations. Innovation offers a way for corporations – and nations – to survive and flourish in the global market. This aligns with Segergranz et al.'s (2018) observation of the self-preservation discourse in the innovation literature, wherein innovations are a means of survival for organisations. This is one way of sustaining organisational hope for the future.

The competitiveness of the nation-state is the third value identified in the interviews. The idea of global economic competition between nations, where growth is measured through GDP and countries compete over growth and competitiveness (cf. Pilling 2018), is a myth that is rarely questioned. However, through innovativeness, the basic starting point of economic competition among nations is widened to include competition in general. National competitiveness is thus more than economic; it is about being useful for the global community, becoming visible and important – being meaningful – for others in the global setting, but also about being able to survive in the competition. This discourse is particularly prominent in relation to climate change: especially in Japan, interviewees talk about innovations as a way towards solving issues

of climate change, but also emphasise the possibility of Japan being an example for other countries in changing the economic system towards a controlled degrowth when the population ages. In this way, there is a utopian aspect to innovationism.

At the *national level*, innovationism is a part of the political discourse on national competitiveness that was introduced during the 1980s throughout the industrialised world. In the narrative of innovationism, the globalizing economy poses a threat to nation-states (Kantola and Seeck 2010). Thus, national actors express concerns about survival and success. At the same time, technology-driven ideas on innovation became influential in economics. It is important to note that although the discourse on competitiveness is global, the consequences and actions are taken at a national level. Thus, competitiveness measured by GDP becomes an aim primarily at the national level, although it has value also at the corporate level. On the corporate and organisational level, the emphasis is on the acceleration of the innovation cycle and the amount of innovations, which is believed to lead to self-preservation, or success (Segergranz et al. 2018).

Fourth and finally, at the *global level*, the narrative of innovationism appears through the emphasis on *progress*. This aspect could be considered *the philosophical aspect of innovationism*. Reliance on constant progress remains even when, occasionally, growth is questioned because of concerns of climate change or looming ageing society. Innovations then become a means for the further enhancement of humankind, providing hope during times of global environmental threat. The values of progress and competitiveness are constantly intertwined in the GINJO project interviews when the national and the global circulate:

[...] in Asia relations between Japan, China, and Korea are complicated and difficult. We have been competing for hundreds of years. During the last twenty years Japan has been the underdog and has suffered severe mental [spiritual] damage. Should we progress [purely] with style or charm? With the arts? [referring to the Cool Japan phenomenon and the global growth of sales in Japanese popular culture] Our citizens are wondering about this as well. That is why we compete in science and want to compete for who is best in developing solutions for the [environmental] threats facing humanity. Our current prime minister has set a target to cut down carbon dioxide emissions by 25 per cent. This is a truly idealistic goal, and a significant one. It is something China and Korea cannot do. We no longer compete in food, fashion, or cars, but we want to be a presence and to be important in the world in other ways. We are looking for these ways now. (JP9)

This excerpt from an interview with a Japanese journalist also exemplifies the fear of failure in reaching what is aimed at. A nation that fails in competition is believed to be damaged and would need to seek out

new areas in which to become competitive. The possibility of innovation brings determination and hope: 'We will be meaningful in the world of tomorrow'.

### **How innovationism manages hope and threat**

'The emphasis in religion is today on this world, not the world to come', writes Frisk in her discussion of Woodhead's concept of the 'turn to life'. This refers to a focus on gaining desirable results in this world, in other words within the immanent frame. According to Woodhead, themes of punishment, hell, damnation, and demonology have been losing their importance as societies have become more 'this-worldly' (Frisk 2009-2011; Woodhead 2001). Innovationism can be seen as following this trend through its focus on human capabilities and abilities.

At every level, the management of threat and hope in innovationism can be analysed through the fifth, *emotional aspect of innovationism*. Innovationism creates a sense of threat by narrating ultimate frustrations and attempting to simultaneously manage these threats through positing innovations as solutions to the threats it narrates – thus developing hope for the future. At the organisational level, innovationism is used to alleviate the threat to existence through a self-preservation discourse, but also through a discourse of faith (Segergranz et al. 2018). In the GINJO project interviews this appears as expressions of fear and uncertainty. The sense of threat is concentrated within issues of global warming and environmental change, phenomena that intensify an awareness of the limitedness of natural resources. To some extent, talk about the environment and demographics is invited by the framework of the interviews, in which innovations are discussed in the context of global warming and aging. Nevertheless, the interviewees frequently list threats and challenges which correspond to multiple features of the risk society (Giddens 1990; Caplan 2000). The world is dangerous at every level: global, national, the level of (the media) industry, and at the individual level. Exacerbated by global economic recession and the development of an aging society in Japan in particular, ultimate frustrations are concentrated into the issue of sustaining the nation. However, at the core of global threats lies the question of competitiveness.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008) points out that within neoliberalism, it is not the market mechanism that is new. What is new is the idea of constant competition and the aim of continuous growth. Taking up Foucault's identification of competition, I develop one of my central claims: through innovationism, competition is transformed into the source of the sense of threat. The operational environment of nation-states and corporations is one of constant competition for resources, for 'top' workers, and for foreign investment. Similarly, individuals compete against each other: for jobs, for visibility, for fame. The necessity to innovate appears in expressions such as 'innovate or die', or 'innovate or perish' (cf. Cole 2019).

The outcome of possible failure was hardly ever explicated in the interviews, but can be read between the lines. Ultimate frustrations derivable from the interviews involve death, waning, chaos and extinction. On corporate level, this means loss of competitiveness, and ultimately perhaps takeover or bankruptcy. These possibilities are rarely discussed in the GINJO interviews; there is rather just a present sense of indistinct threat.

Table 1 illustrates how innovationism manages hope and threat at different levels in relation to ultimate values and the most relevant corresponding aspects of innovationism for each level.

**Table 1**

**How innovationism is used to manage hope and threat at different levels**

Level	Value (aim)	Hope	Outcome of failure	Threat	Dimension
<i>Individual</i>	Success	Memory	Unemployment	Death	Ethical
<i>Corporate</i>	Growth	Expansion	Takeover, bankruptcy	Merger or bankruptcy	Material
<i>National</i>	Competitiveness	Sustaining the nation	Falling of GDP, falling credit rating	Waning, oblivion	Social and ritual
<i>Global</i>	Progress	Continuity	Climate change	Chaos, extinction	Philosophical

At the core of innovationism is a belief in human ingenuity. According to the innovationist faith, humankind will eventually be able to solve the issues threatening our existence, including the climate change and the mass extinction of species. Innovationism also carries the steadfast trust that humankind will be able to contain the development of artificial intelligence. Some even believe that technological innovation will eventually lead to individual transcendence, when human consciousness can be uploaded to a computer and live on beyond the death of the human body. In organisations – and nations – innovationism means prioritising values of competitiveness and competition, progress and continuous change. At a societal level, sectors and institutions can be seen as being a part of the innovation system, and both the ends and the means for the increase of innovations.

**Power and social aspects of innovationism**

Sustaining innovationism – like any belief system – is hard work. Any faith comes into existence through the relentless circulation of the values and perceptions of the belief system; this work is concrete and material, done by identifiable actors. I shall now move to the sixth aspect, the *organisational and social aspects of innovationism*, focusing on the actors and roles present in the production and circulation of innovationism. Next, I take a look at some of the actors involved in this circulation.

The most important actors in the circulation of innovationism are national elites. Among the GINJO project interviewees were innovation systems specialists and journalists, both of whom could be regarded as the elites of innovationism. Others took more neutral or skeptical roles. Interviewees talked about 'the ordinary people' for whom they found two possible role positions in innovationism: they were either the audience, to be educated or informed about the benefits and urgent priority of innovations, or those who had the potential for creating innovations that the system was yet to tap into.

The actors of innovationism are tied between two contradictory logics at different levels of action. On the one hand, there is the conforming, global logic of innovation which emphasises the global setting, including the global, imagined centre of Silicon Valley. On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on the nation-state, which plays the role of a mediator in the circulation of ideas. (Trans)national elites circulate innovationism to the national level; while doing this, they apply a national framework and make use of the imagined community within the nation. The nation and the national political system is the frame within which resources are distributed, and elites with symbolic power themselves possess an interest in this distribution. The power struggle is tied to questions of national survival and a sense of threat and hope.

Silicon Valley appeared in the GINJO interviews as the 'centre' and the 'peak' of innovativeness. Smart (1996) describes the various ways in which height has symbolic value in most cultures and notes how height, size and centrality are often connected. Interviewees, in Japan and Finland, and the East Coast United States, referred to Silicon Valley both as a source of innovative new solutions and as an ideal innovation environment: a place with a highly competitive atmosphere, plus a creative buzz, both desired characteristics. In Silicon Valley, one sees a reversal of the norm: interviewees emphasised that there is no need to travel to see the world, since 'everybody comes here'. (US1). This mentality can be understood through social practices belonging to the seventh and last aspect of innovationism: the *ritual* one. One ritual practice is *pilgrimage*. Groups and individuals traveling to Silicon Valley and Stanford University to learn innovativeness can be seen as pilgrims traveling to the centre of innovationism. In pilgrimage, travellers go to 'high sacral bumps in space, learn and gain from its merit, and convey it back to the periphery' (Smart 1996, 86-87). Within the experienced periphery, in Japan and in Finland to some degree even in the East Coast of the US, there is a desire to become like the centre (Silicon Valley), or at least to overcome the spatial and mental distance between them.

The strength of the myth of the centre of society (Shils 1975, Couldry 2003) is underlined in interviews with the Japanese and Finnish elite experts, who are almost in despair over a national lack of innovativeness, mobility and openness, and express the desire to reach the level of innovation achieved in Silicon Valley. The sense of inadequacy cannot be assuaged by international comparisons that emphasise the innovativeness of Japan or Finland (see, e.g., Florida and Gulden 2005). Nevertheless, journalists, who act as mediators between the elites and ordinary citizens, are not as certain of the circumstances: 'In Finland

politicians appear to have taken on this [idea of developing innovations]. [They are] creating—I'm not sure if it is an illusion—but at least I have a perception of Finland being innovative'. (FI17)

It is paramount that a country is perceived as innovative, because only in an innovative country will start-up companies be able to attract competitive funding from 'angel investors'. In order to develop the attractiveness of Finland in obtaining foreign investments, AaltoES began systematic development of events and support for start-ups in 2009, with the aim of 'becoming the Silicon Valley of Europe' (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2014, 85). The inspiration for this association came directly from the Silicon Valley, where founding members had visited. In 2011, the association invited Stanford University Professor and private consultant Steve Blank to convince Finnish decision makers, politicians and the general public of the aim of making Finland the Silicon Valley of Europe. The event was carefully planned and publicised, and resembled more a revivalist service than a business event. A series of videos of all these events was available on the Internet, and extensive attention was paid to stimulating media interest in Finland. Invited guests and speakers included ministers, high-level business leaders and rising start-up gurus (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2013). The audience was predominantly students from Aalto University. The three-day event organised around Steve Blank's visit was utilised as a kind of reformation of innovationism and a critique of earlier efforts to develop the Finnish innovation environment and organisations behind it.

AaltoES continues to support entrepreneurship and innovation-based start-ups including through an annual start-up investment event. In a few years, Slush has grown into a mega-event attracting thousands of participants from around the world. The development of the AaltoES and the investment event demonstrates the ways in which innovationism organises resources and action. The example also demonstrates the role of media outlets in the circulation of a belief system. AaltoES paid special attention in both own media production for different platforms and integrating journalist media outlets into their project. Without (mediated) circulation the belief system fails to spread and take on.

As explained above, the role of Silicon Valley is essential in innovationism – it is to innovationism what Rome is for the Catholic world. While GINJO interviewees emphasise national solutions for developing the innovation system, it is clear that innovationism is a global belief system. Although interviewees in other countries emphasise Silicon Valley as the model for national innovation systems, in Silicon Valley itself, interviewees emphasise the anarchic and unstructured nature of the innovation environment as being the source of its innovativeness (e.g. US1, US3). Nevertheless, in Finland and Japan, interviewees perceive the orientation first and foremost as a national one: innovations are a means to maintain (national) competitiveness and help in solving problems on a (national and) global scale. In the United States in general, but particularly in Silicon Valley, interviewees focus more on innovations as means of individual as well as corporate success.



What distinguishes and differentiates elite actors of innovationism is their access to transnational sources of information and opportunities to take part in the circulation of information—in other words, the level of symbolic power that they possess (Bourdieu 1991; Hall 2003). Elite actors can exercise ‘pastoral power’ through the effects of words. Foucault (1982, 783-785; 792) emphasises that power of the pastoral type has spread from religious institutions to enter the entire social body. Foucault (ibid.) refers to ‘the power exercised by private ventures, welfare societies, benefactors, and [...] philanthropists’. This type of power is exercised by figures who take various roles within innovationism. As manifested in the interviews, pastoral figures include academics, consultants, some work for think tanks, and others for multinational corporations. Politicians are rare, although some may have had a political career previously. At the present time they tend to be in a managerial position in relation to politics (Kantola and Seeck 2010; Valaskivi 2016). Their role can be understood as similar to a preacher or a theologian, who ‘formulates the doctrines or teachings of a tradition or sub-tradition’ (Smart 1996, 215-225).

In innovationism the role of the theologian is often played by consultants. Pastoral figures act as prophets who describe what a future with more and better innovations will be like. Alternatively, they issue predictions of a terrible future if national systems are not developed into a functioning innovation system, if new technology is not commercialised effectively, if social media is not made use of innovatively, and so on. They speak at seminars or workshops and are called ‘social media gurus’. Some carry the title of ‘evangelist’ and aim to achieve ‘innovation development’ or ‘transfer’; and funding for innovative start-ups is provided by ‘business angels’.

In the GINJO interviews, pastoral figures constituted the authorities of innovationism. They described the measures that need to be taken in order to enhance national innovativeness and develop the national innovation system. In the case of Finland, these figures included Pekka Himanen, who during the 1990s<sup>5</sup> was the youngest scholar ever to defend a dissertation in philosophy, and Jorma Ollila, the former CEO of Nokia. These younger generation preachers are self-made entrepreneurs with fortunes made in ICT-related innovations. Pastoral power continues to be exercised by directors and employees of national funding bodies. Consultants and researchers working in think tanks and universities also fall into this category. The most influential pastoral figures, however, are CEOs, executives and founders of the global technology giants, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple etc.

The visit of Steve Blank to Finland was a case of conscious utilisation of pastoral power in an attempt to shift political discussion, outflows of resources and emphasis of business funding towards innovation-based

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<sup>5</sup> Pekka Himanen has since then fallen out of grace spectacularly, when in 2012 he prepared a report for the Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen’s government about the future prospects of the society. Investigative journalism revealed that Himanen had been assigned without tender competition, which violated the Act on Public Procurement and Concession Contracts. After the public frenzy he has focused on his work abroad and remained silent in Finland. On Himanen’s career and publications see [pekkahimanen.net](http://pekkahimanen.net)

start-ups. The event was utilised by the organisers to critique the national institutions of innovation funding, as well as previous generation of business executives, although they were also committed to supporting the youth entrepreneurial movement. Innovationism, then, demonstrated itself in this event through the ‘cool’, rebellious young (men), those mythic innovators who will fail nine times, and hit it big the tenth. Steve Blank was an obvious pastoral figure, but he was also utilised by the Finnish hosts to creating a hype that would be noticed by the Finnish media.

The actors taking part in the circulation of innovationism are predominantly male. The overall picture is one of men dominating discussions concerning innovations, innovation policies, and the measures that need to be taken. In practice, the women who are actually visible in this field are exceptions.<sup>6</sup> The innovation discourse exists as part of a continuum of science and technology policy discourses, and women have been side-lined for decades in national discourses relating to technological development (Vehviläinen 2002a, 2002b). Similar restrictions apply in discourses related to a number of areas of technology – ICT in particular (Stahl 1999). After the #metoo campaign, women attending the start-up event discussed above also came forward in the social media and the press saying that they had been harassed, and that the scene was very male-dominated. After this public dispute the organisers promised to change this and pay attention to the behaviour of attendees in the future. Nevertheless, specialists of start-up entrepreneurship and ‘preachers’ of innovationism are still mostly male, and the sexist and misogynist practices in the technology world and on the internet have only strengthened in recent years. Examples of this trend include Gamergate, the so called ‘incel-culture’ and different forms of extreme right platforms.

The symbolic, pastoral power that is represented and reproduced by elites through the circulation of innovationism is connected to economic and political power. Symbolic power in general differs from other forms of power in the sense that it affects ‘not just what we do, but our ability to describe the social itself; it affects the perception of the inequalities in the social world, including the unequal distribution of those very symbolic resources themselves’ (Couldry 2003, 39).

The elite interviewees saw society first and foremost as an environment for innovation—one whose purpose is to provide good circumstances for more innovative activities and competitiveness. The question is predominantly one of flows of public funding. Innovationism has meant that the flood of public money to the private sector has been plentiful and rapid. Among other things, it has meant that health care institutions, schools and universities are seen as deserving of investment, insofar as they are basic elements of the innovation environment. In recent years there has been a growing tendency of privatization of

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<sup>6</sup> It was difficult to find female interviewees in the GINJO project. Among the specialists, only one interviewees was female. The journalists specializing in science and innovations were predominantly male, while the journalists focusing on aging were almost exclusively female in all three countries.

central institutions based on the idea that private organisations would automatically be more flexible, effective and innovative than the public sector.

One of the contradictions of innovationism lies in the relationship between the transnational and the national. The processes to which innovationism is attached – namely, the free flow of capital, economic growth, and competition – are transnational, and could in fact lead to the dissolution and erosion of the nation-state. However, the particular actors and elites with symbolic power in the circulation of innovationism are always national, although they have access to the transnational mechanisms by which innovationism is circulated. Pastoral figures from other countries – mostly from Silicon Valley, as in the case of Steve Blank – are used in a consecrating role and as a means to persuade national actors of a particular ideological setting and policy decisions. Consequently, national elites, while preaching innovationism within the nation, in fact use their symbolic power in a contradictory manner, to advance the globalizing processes that are tightly bound up with their faith in innovation. The nation-state is a necessary vehicle for globalization. And at the same time, global trends constitute the vehicle through which the elites attempt to sustain their power. This happens through twin endeavours—the summoning up of threatening images of globalization and the preaching of innovationism.

### **Human potential unlimited**

This chapter has analysed the discourse on innovation as a religious belief system, or implicit religion which has four core values: competitiveness, success, progress and growth. These core values cut through four levels of action: individual, organisational, national and global (humankind). It has analysed these values in relation to the seven aspects of innovationism: mythic or narrative, ethical, material, philosophical, experiential or emotional, organisational or social, and ritual or practical. The chapter has argued that, as an implicit religion, innovationism acts in the ways of a religion although it does not belong to the realm or subsystem of religion. Innovationism, however, has its roots in the intertwined history of technology and Christianity, and can be seen as a form of religion of technology (Noble 1999). Our ability to recognize the existence of innovationism as a faith is hindered by the perception that innovation belongs to the realm of technology and science, and that this subsystem is completely separate from any kind of faith, belief or religion. However, this is a misunderstanding: Believing in science becomes an ideology and a faith when it is assumed that science and innovation will solve all of the problems faced by humankind.

Innovationism, not unlike other religions, is a belief system with both immanent and transcendental implications: it justifies our contemporary way of life, while pointing a hopeful way to transcendence. Transcendence in this context means first and foremost the survival of humankind, but also the (still utopian and extreme) possibility for individual immortality through technology. This is the existential aspect of innovationism: providing hope in the time of grave threats, and also providing the kind of hope that does not require humans to give up their core values and beliefs: competitiveness, growth, progress and success.

Innovationism aligns with capitalism and the oil economy, because it reassures us that we do not have to give up growth despite the global threat of climate change because innovations are seen as both the driver of growth and the remedy to destruction caused by it. Innovationism directs our attention astray: when it claims that without innovations individuals, companies, nations and human kind will wane and face extinction because innovations create growth, it actually contributes to the extinction. If innovationism instead generated innovations for degrowth, it could perhaps actually deliver what it promises.

Despite the transcendental and existential aspects of innovationism, its implications continue to be in this world – in other words, immanent. The last five years have shown how vulnerable society is in the midst of innovationism, which disrupts not only the climatic and natural environment of humans, but also the media environment in ways that challenge free, democratic societies. In Silicon Valley technology developers have for couple of years been publishing *mea culpa*, regretting their naïve pro-innovation bias and faith in automatic benefits of technology (see Valaskivi 2018). They are resigning their positions in big media technology companies and founding initiatives to remedy what has been broken<sup>7</sup> and limit drastically the usage of mobile technology and social media of their own children. Simultaneously, the global university sector continues to establish ‘cool’ innovation initiatives and restructure along the lines of innovationism. Some changes might already be taking place in Silicon Valley and the technology industry, i.e. the centre of innovationism, but the periphery remains in a state of deep faith. There the pro-innovation bias continues to direct policy making, leading into constant, market-oriented restructuring in the public sector, and e.g. growth of managerialism in universities, making universities first and foremost innovation factories. In Finland this has been particularly prevalent in recent years.

For myself, the latest practical implication of innovationism is my *alma mater*. In early 2019, what used to be the University of Tampere for over 50 years with a preceding history for over 90 years, was merged with the Tampere University of Technology forming Tampere University. The new joint university then acquired the Tampere Polytechnic. These three higher education institutions now form the ‘Tampere higher education community’. The operation is innovationism come to flesh, with a focus on university-business cooperation, entertaining only ‘top notch’ research, increasing the employability of the students through educating them in ‘know-how’, supposedly needed in work life, and questioning the importance of any disciplines without clear and direct potential of capitalization or immediate field of application. The new slogan of the university is ‘Human potential unlimited’. What is there to add?

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<sup>7</sup> see e.g. <https://humanetech.com/>

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