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Religion to Go!

Religion in Mobile Internet Environments, Mobile Apps, Augmented Realities and the In-Betweens

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Table of Contents

01 **Religion to Go – Introduction**
Simone Heidbrink & Tobias Knoll

05 **'Judaism to go'** – Hastening the redemption through Web 2.0
Christiane Altmann

18 **Pokemon Go** – How Religious Can an Augmented Reality Hunt Be?
Sonja Gabriel

32 **Learning with tablets in a church** – Experiences of augmented reality in religious education
Mari Huotari & Essi Ikonen

42 **Mobile Liturgy** – Reflections on the Church of England's Daily Prayer App
Joshua L. Mann

60 **RELab digital** – Ein Projekt über religiöse Bildung in einer mediatisierten Welt (Deutsch)
Ilona Nord & Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl

93 **RELab digital** – A Project on Religious Education in a Mediatized World (English)
Ilona Nord & Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl

125 **Pope Francis in Cairo** – Authority and branding on Instagram
Theo Zijderveld

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Religion to Go

Introduction

Tobias Knoll and Simone Heidbrink

Oh those young people with their smartphones! Always on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Taking selfies and pictures of their food and hunting virtual animals in the park. All the while forgetting how to talk to each other and not knowing how to hold a real conversation!

Sounds familiar? In addition to the above-mentioned comments, which we all know from various contexts, the enormous spread of mobile devices in our society has also triggered a media debate on the consequences of this development. For example, San Diego Psychologist Jean Twenge, in an article of the US magazine *The Atlantic* with the – quite bold – title "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" wrote in August 2017:

> What's at stake isn't just how kids experience adolescence. The constant presence of smartphones is likely to affect them well into adulthood. Among people who suffer an episode of depression, at least half become depressed again later in life. Adolescence is a key time for developing social skills; as teens spend less time with their friends face-to-face, they have fewer opportunities to practice them. In the next decade, we may see more adults who know just the right emoji for a situation, but not the right facial expression.[1]

She does not stand alone in this assessment, at least if one takes a look at further headlines from the same time: *Fortune* on August 6th 2017 posted an article titled "Less Work, Less Sex, Less Happiness: We're Losing Generation Z to the Smartphone"[2] and the *NPR* (National Public Radio[3]) on August 7th, titled their Interview with Twenge "How Smartphones Are Making Kids Unhappy"[4]. This is not a brand new development, as is demonstrated by an article by the *New Republic*, discussing the "new kind of loneliness", supposedly created by the usage of smartphones and the "difference between welcome solitude and scrolling through your phone"[5].

1 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/
2 http://fortune.com/2017/08/06/generation-z-smartphone-depression/
3 https://www.npr.org/
4 https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/08/07/542016165/how-smartphones-are-making-kids-unhappy
5 https://newrepublic.com/article/123190/smartphones-have-created-new-kind-loneliness

Corresponding responses are never long in coming. For example, in an article in *Psychology Today,* Sarah Rose Cavenagh, herself a psychologist, comments on Twinge's questionable methodology. Among other things, she criticizes the "cherry picking" of data and the ignoring of social contexts in her analysis.[6] She closes with the statement: “But my suspicion is that the kids are gonna be ok.”

Of course, these are only small and superficial insights into a debate that has reached the public sphere long before Twinge's article. What seems evident, however, is that scientists and academic research are also part of this discussion and are consulted from all sides. It is therefore all the more important for all academic disciplines – including those concerned with the research of religion – to pay close attention to this topic, which goes far beyond the question of impact on young people.

The editors of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* hope that this issue of "Religion to Go" will contribute to the ongoing research of the interconnections between religious practice and mobile technology and provide useful insights into practical work with this exciting subject. To achieve this – in addition to more “conventional” academic papers – we have also included examples and reports dealing with the practical usage of mobile applications and augmented and virtual reality, especially in educational settings.

The first contribution *‘Judaism to go’ - Hastening the redemption through Web 2.0* was written by **Christiane Altmann** and describes both the usage of modern smartphone technology. apps and social media by Chabad emissaries and the connection of Jewish communities and sections through these means.

Following up is **Sonja Gabriel**’s *Pokémon Go – How Religious Can an Augmented Reality Hunt Be?,* where she explores the origins of the enormously popular augmented reality game, religious implications, as well as positive and negative reactions to it by religious institutions.

The first practical example is provided by **Mari Huotari** and **Essi Ikonen** in *Learning with tablets in a church – Experiences of augmented reality in religious education*. They describe an experiment with elementary school pupils surrounding the creation of an augmented reality learning environment inside a church. Their report contains insight into both advantages and challenges such approaches can provide.

Joshua L. Mann’s *Mobile Liturgy – Reflections on the Church of England’s Daily Prayer App* takes a closer look at the publication of liturgical resources in the form of mobile apps. Based on the assumption, that the (technological) platforms on which the texts are presented have a significant impact on their usage, reading experience and interpretation, Mann provides an analysis

6 https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/once-more-feeling/201708/no-smartphones-are-not-destroying-generation

of the differences between the print and digital publications of the Church of England's Daily Prayer.

The second praxis oriented article of this issue comes from **Ilona Nord** and **Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl**. It describes *RELab digital – a Project on Religious Education in a Mediatized World*, which aims at the "development, testing, and evaluation of learning scenarios in religious education classwork". Additionally to general didactic considerations, Nord and Palkowitsch-Kühl explore applications of virtual and augmented reality in creating learning experiences both in purely virtual as well as physically existing (but digitally augmented) settings. (*Please note that this article is also provided in German under the Title "RELab digital – Ein Projekt über religiöse Bildung in einer mediatisierten Welt".)*

The final paper was written by **Theo Zijderveld** and is titled *Pope Francis in Cairo: authority and branding on Instagram* and provides some important insights on the relationship between religious leaders, (social) media and authority. He provides a detailed analysis of the usage of Instagram during Pope Francis' visit to Cairo in April 2017.

We, the editors of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* hope that you will enjoy the special issue *Religion to Go*. If you would like to submit a paper for a future issue of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, feel free to send an abstract or full article to online.religion@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de.

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