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E-HATE: HOW RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IS

ADAPTING TO THE ONLINE WORLD

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The media are a reflection on society. And in our technology-obsessed culture, reflections abound. The Internet age has made everyone's opinions and theories, no matter how far-fetched, available to the world's 1 billion Web surfers, of whom roughly 208 million live in the United States.[1] Although some forms of Internet communication—such as blogs and chat rooms and instant messaging—were new creations, many—such as e-mail, online newspapers and Internet phones—were simply digital face-lifts to pre-existing systems.

It is undeniable that the Internet has made many tasks simpler and faster. Instant, worldwide communication occurs at the push of a button. This has positive applications: We receive news seconds after events occur. We can be forewarned of natural disasters. We can keep in contact with loved ones around the world. But there are negative implications to the Internet's speed. Anyone can create a credible-looking Web site and disseminate to the world statements of questionable truth. E-mail allows users to send information—truthful or not—instantly to thousands of people.

Chain e-mail is the perfect example of untrue or partially true information that becomes viral. It's the digital version of the chain letter, one of the earliest of which was sent in 1795 by none other than Jesus Christ himself. The letter says it contains

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[1] *The CIA World Factbook*, (2008), http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook (accessed 23 May, 2008).

the true words of Jesus, which generally amount to a truncated, and rather doom-and-gloom, version of the Gospel message. It claims to have been found at the foot of Christ's cross 53 years after the crucifixion, and it's signed by the angel Gabriel.[2]

The content of today's digital versions has changed very little. Religion—especially Islam, Christianity and Judaism—is often the subject on these inbox plagues. There are a few common themes in religious chain e-mails: The United States is portrayed as a morally upright, often Christian, nation that is being victimized by some force that doesn't belong; Muslims, Jews, other religious minorities and liberal politicians are not to be trusted; the media (the news media, we can assume) are involved in a malicious cover-up of the actual truth; and there is something of which the general public is unaware that is being revealed by the e-mail, mainly because all mainstream channels are unwilling.[3]

Why examine chain e-mails? They are rarely factual, but they do contain some truth: Chain e-mails hold up a mirror to society, and they expose the general American opinion about current events. Their anonymity lets the authors make offensive and unfounded statements without the danger of negative consequences. And when it comes to chain e-mails that have been circulating since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, such e-mails show how religious violence has impacted American attitudes toward religious and cultural minorities and how the memetic cycle continues.

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[2] "Letter from Heaven. Jesus' sabbath letter. '… from Iconium.' England, 1795. Link to scan," (Paper Chain Letter Archive), http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/archive/he1795u_jesus_sab.htm (accessed 28 May, 2008).

[3] I make these statements based on my experience and based on databases from Snopes.com, TruthOrFiction.com and other Web sites that archive and research chain e-mails.

Before I begin my analysis, I must set up some ground rules. First, I have confined my study to chain e-mails, which I define as e-mails of dubious origin that have enjoyed wide distribution radii. It is impossible to determine exact scope of an e-mail's distribution, so I define a wide radius as the e-mail's being so ubiquitous that it brings the attention of a third party, such as an independent debunking organization or, in some cases, the news media, the government or someone targeted by the e-mail itself. Second, I have specifically targeted e-mails that deal with religious subjects. There are plenty of online rumors that deal with political voting records, illegal immigration and other hot-button issues, but they are not pertinent to my investigation.

I have taken great care to preserve the original language of each e-mail. I have adjusted for spacing, but not for grammar, spelling or punctuation mistakes. In addition, I have tried to suspend my political and religious beliefs in the middle part of my discussion.