

PHISHING, SUPERSTITION OR HEALING PRAYER?

CHAIN LETTERS ON THE INTERNET¹

Abstract: In this study I analyse chain letters with a religious content spreading on the internet, by e-mail and on social media. On the basis of content, they can be sorted in separate groups: they transmit prayers, beautiful and instructive stories, wisdoms, and sometimes messages from heaven. In their promises too, they focus mainly on the accumulation of spiritual benefits (they will pray for those who forward the message, they will think of them, they will send them positive energy). In my analysis I examine the genre forerunners of the source group (letters from heaven, sacred letters), and their latest variants that are transmitted in the form of presentation letters. The main question I raise is whether the chain letters are really only well written, persuasive texts that are easy to forward thanks to the technical possibilities of the internet. Or is the forwarding motivated by a belief that the associated positive promises or threats will come true? Or could it be a desire to influence the future, and the rites associated with this? My initial hypothesis is that this is a writing practice with centuries of tradition and the associated beliefs are also ancient. Even if the knowledge they contain sometimes becomes a means for phishing.

Keywords: religious chain letter, letters from heaven, digital folklore, prayer, superstition

The internet is now the principal means of communication.² It has become an integral part of everyday life and has changed the forms and habits of maintaining contact both in the world of work and in private life.³ For this reason it cannot escape the attention of folkloristics either.⁴ In this study I examine a group of folklore texts, religious chain letters, that have found new possibilities and forms in internet communication.

One of the main ways in which the internet is used is to write e-mail messages.⁵ The religious chain letters to be analysed here most often reach the reader through this channel. However, we also often hear in connection with them the warning:

1 MTA-SZTE Research Group for the Study of Religious Culture

2 DOMOKOS 2013, 292.

3 KIBBY 2005, 770.

4 There have been many studies on the subject in the literature in recent years; I refer here to only a few basic works. BLANK 2007, 15-26.; BLANK 2009; BLANK 2012; KRAWCZYK-WASILEWSKA 2016; DOMOKOS 2013, 292-313; VARGHA 2016, 624-634; LAJOS 2016, 292-320.

5 KIBBY 2005, 770.

“Do not forward!” or “Delete immediately!” Behind these warnings is the opinion that the chain letters are launched with the purpose of collecting data, they unnecessarily burden the mail systems, and they spread fake news. To achieve these aims the authors of these letters follow well-structured patterns of persuasion, encouraging even doubters to forward the messages.⁶ As a result we all regularly find such letters in our mailbox, proving that people forward them in spite of the warnings. Most of the chain letters⁷ with religious subjects (28 in all) examined in the present analysis arrived in my own main system between 2012 and 2016. For the most part they came from my wider circle of friends with a wide range of attitudes, from deeply religious people (among them, from a Catholic priest) to openness to alternative religious phenomena. Often, of course, the letters were addressed to me as an ethnologist with an interest in vernacular culture, but mainly they were sent with the purpose of involving me in the chain of correspondents. All this raises the question of whether these are in fact only well written, persuasive texts that – thanks to the technical possibilities of the internet – are easy to forward. Or does the belief that the positive promises or threats associated with forwarding with come true motivate the sending? Could it be the desire to influence the future and the rites associated with this? My own initial assumption is that this is a writing practice with centuries of tradition and the also related ancient beliefs, even if in cases the knowledge in them becomes a means for phishing. I wish to support this conclusion with an analysis of the chain letters presented.

In this study I shall analyse here only the letters with a religious content from the source group of chain letters covering a wider thematic area⁸. It is these letters that show most continuity with the centuries-old custom of writing chain letters.

Basically, this is a corpus of texts that belong together at a pragmatic level but are heterogeneous. They include prayers, messages from heaven received in visions, pious stories and pearls of wisdom. Nevertheless we can treat them as a unit because of the similarities of meaning, the identical function and their occurrence in the concrete communication situation (correspondence via the internet).⁹ I ana-

6 MARINOV – DEZSÓ – PÁL 2006; SCHIRM 2008, 72.

7 Chain letters are letters in which the sender asks the recipient to forward the message to a specified number of persons, thereby involving an ever-wider circle of readers and senders. Generally, some kind of positive promise is linked to the forwarding, backed by a story giving credibility to the promise. Failure to forward the message (breaking the chain) is associated with some kind of misfortune. Often the letter also contains a story supporting this. DÉGH 2001, 189; DUNDES 1966, 14–19; DUNDES – PAGTER 1992, 3–5; HOPPÁL 1998, 75; SCHIRM 2008, 72.

8 The thematically broadest overview of chain letters can be found on Daniel W. Van Arsdale’s website and in the chain letter database to which it provides a link (online access: http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html#s1-2motivational_categories, accessed on: 14. 02. 2017). He classifies the letters in the following categories: 1. Protection 2. Charity 3. Religion 4. Luck 5. Advocacy 6. Money 7. Parody 8. Exchange 9. World Record 10. Chain Email. Marjorie D. Kibby distinguishes letters with similar themes: holding out the prospect of money; letters of friendship (that make the reader feel good); warning of business scams; warning of a terrible effect; petitions; unusual stories. KIBBY 2005, 779–780.

9 Incantations or spells constitute another heterogeneous but pragmatically cohesive corpus of texts. In the case of this genre too, we can observe that “the same function in a given concrete speech situation merges and intertwines the different formal solutions of incantations and prayer.” PÓCS 2014, 17.

lysed a total of 25 letters that I classified into four main types: 1. Messages promising divine blessing, 2. Threats, messages of warning from God, 3. "Effective" prayer texts and images, 4. Texts containing wisdoms.

My aim was not to discredit, to enlighten, or a confrontation with the accepted Catholic position.¹⁰ Rather, I wanted to understand what kind of beliefs appear in these texts. Can they be identified? To what extent are the contents of these beliefs traditional or innovative? Can these letters be interpreted as a kind of divination technique, that is, as a means of influencing the future? How is religious, spiritual contemplation connected in them with future well-being and spiritual equilibrium? In examining the letters, I also seek to identify the ideas on which the texts are built. Are they based on religious experience or do they use fake news regarded as superstition to induce the reader to forward them? Another question to be answered is the role played by the media in transmitting these superstitions and how the functions of the mass communications means influence the content and form of the chain letter genre. In the following I answer these questions.

I. Continuity and innovation

1. Religious texts of a chain letter nature in the past

Texts with religious content written as chain letters are not unknown as correspondence and everyday writing practice. In the literature they are known as *Letters from Heaven* (*Himmelsbriefe*). They contain a revelation in writing, a message or prayer text from a divine being, and are presented in the form of a letter.¹¹ The roots of the genre must be sought in the period in which the Bible originated, as confirmed by the motif of a letter of divine origin that occurs numerous times in the Bible.¹² Over subsequent centuries there is continuous data from all parts of the world on the practice of copying and forwarding letters, messages, written texts and prayers of this type.¹³ There was thus a series of cultural elements

10 In formulating my goals I drew much inspiration from the introductory lines to the book by Vilmos Keszeg *Hiedelmek, narratívumok, stratégiák* [*Beliefs, Narratives, Strategies*]. KESZEG 2013, 14.

11 SZOJKA 1990, 184.

12 The Ten Commandments, and the scroll in the Book of Revelation sent to the earth by the angel then eaten by the prophet (Rev. 10, 810) can be considered as such writings of divine origin. For more details, see: Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens (HdA) IV. (1931/1932) *Himmelsbrief* entry, 21–27.

13 In the chapter on *Letters from Heaven* in his database, Daniel W. Van Arsdale mentions Greek, Arab, Armenian, Syrian, Ethiopian, Jewish, even Islamic letters from heaven from different historical periods (online access: <http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>, accessed on: 14. 02. 2017). Another good overview can be found in: HEIM 1961, 13–20. There is detailed information on the types of heavenly letters that arose in different historical periods in the relevant entries in HdA: HdA IV. 1931/32, *Himmelsbrief* 21–27, HdA VIII. 1936–37, *Sonntagsbrief* 99–104, III. 1930/31, *Grafenamulett* (Count Philip's blessing text, weapon blessing) 1111–1112, VII. 1935/36, *Schutzbrief* 1384–1385, VI. 1931–32, *Ölbergspruch* (weapon blessing) 1246–1247. My attention was drawn to the entries by Emese Szojka's study.

present within the European system of beliefs that conveyed essentially the same message as the chain letter that is still known today.¹⁴

According to written records, already in the Middle Ages there were prayer texts “that could be carried at all times”, that were probably copied, and their copied variants were used as amulets. The earliest collected text variants came into circulation in the late 19th and early 20th century, for the most part as cheap popular prints or hand-written copies; they included the blessing of Tobias, the Seven sacred seals, Saint Michael’s letter, Miraculous image, Sacred letter, the 15 secret sufferings of our Lord Jesus.¹⁵ These were probably used for reading aloud at gatherings, to spread religious knowledge and rules,¹⁶ as prayers said for nine days in states of emergency, or said above the dying for the end of their sufferings and an easier departure into the otherworld.¹⁷ Copying and reading them could also endow these letters with magic power, giving protection from bullets,¹⁸ sickness or harm,¹⁹ or helping to settle disputed cases.²⁰ There are also sacred or apocryphal letters written by peasant prophets or holy women.²¹ In content these are texts of religious exhortation, interpretations of the Bible for believers and non-believers. The heavenly messages, preaching and prayers that they transmit were often copied and passed from hand to hand as vehicles of divine grace, texts bringing spiritual and physical healing.²²

This brief overview shows that a variety of text groups can be linked to the tradition of writing letters with religious content: prayers, heavenly messages and pious stories about the power of belief to bring good luck and healing. What they have in common is their content encouraging readers to strengthen their individual faith or to perform certain religious actions. They associate this with positive promises related to everyday life or the future (protection in cases of emergency, recovery) or more rarely with threats. Their fulfilment requires the texts to be forwarded, copied or possessed. The good luck chain letter variants that were spread as mail grew out of these texts with religious content.²³

14 HOPPÁL 1998, 84.

15 BÁLINT 1943, 117–118; BÁLINT 1998, III/375–376; ÚJVÁRY 1980, 477–493; HOPPÁL 1998, 75–86; LENGYEL 2003, 243–256; SZOJKA 1990, 178–191; FÜLÖP 2013, 56–60.

16 They most frequently contain reminders of the Ten Commandments, moral requirements and bans based on the Commandments, and the command to honour the Sabbath. For more details, see: MOLNÁR 1986, 441.

17 SILLING 1992, 373–393.

18 JUNG 1994, 7–17; 18–34.

19 BÁLINT 1943, 117; JUNG 1994, 35–67; SZOJKA 1990, 178–191.

20 LOVÁSZ 2002, 75; SZOJKA 1990, 178–191.

21 The holy letters of a Protestant peasant woman, Mariska Borku living in the Hungarian-inhabited region of today’s Ukraine (Subcarpathia) are well known in Hungarian folklore material, as is the “Eternal Gospel” summing up the visions of another woman from the same region, Borbála Szanyi Mikó. KÜLLŐS-SÁNDOR 2009, Similar apocryphal letters written by a peasant woman have also been collected from the south of the Great Hungarian Plain (Akasztó). RÉTHEY-PRIKKEL (ed.) 2007.

22 KÜLLŐS-SÁNDOR 2009, 32–37.

23 HOPPÁL 1998, 82–84, SZOJKA 1990, 189, ARSHDALE, online access: <http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>, accessed on: 14. 02. 2017.

2. Internet variants

When the internet came into general use for correspondence, the genre gained new impetus as it made copying and forwarding much easier.²⁴ According to Marjorie Kibby forwarding by e-mail created a greater possibility for the e-mail sender to maintain a distance from the content of the letter. "Forwarding creates an exact duplicate of a message that remains in the mailbox, so the message is in effect not 'passed on'. The information is simply transferred unaltered by any human intervention."²⁵ In this way the forwarder is in practice not the author of the text. Since detachment reduces responsibility, at the same time this also results in authenticity. This strengthens the printed form (recorded in writing) and this also makes the content more credible for many people.²⁶ Alan Dundes, the American folklorist who researched the genre, in addition points out that the viability of the chain letter is due not only to the possibility of easy technical reproduction. He gives as an example the story about the origin of chess. We can read in it the ancient desire for a sudden increase in quantity. The Indian wise man who invented chess asked as a reward for as many grains of wheat to be placed on the chessboard according to the following rule: one on the first, two on the second, four on the third, eight on the fourth and so on. It was soon found that this would be more wheat than is grown on Earth, even more than had been produced in the entire history of mankind. Interest in the unexpected magical turn undoubtedly arises from the fact that an insignificant initial number, namely one, in a relatively short time becomes an astronomical figure. In his opinion this desire for sudden growth can be observed in the promises of the chain letters.²⁷

The letters with a religious theme also obviously build on this desire, but to assist forwarding they also refer to ancient beliefs and religious experiences. These knowledge contents are effective even in the age of digital media. They make the behaviour of the reader and the forwarder viable and regulate it because they give the letters credibility. In the following I examine these "points of reference", indicating the changes in content, form and style that appear in the digital letter variants.

II. Points of reference: religious experiences and beliefs

1. The heavenly origin

In the case of the classical sacred letters we could see that they acquired magical function from the fact that they placed their origin in God, the "heavenly ones". They deduced their power of influencing events, averting harm or healing from this heavenly origin. The texts circulating on the internet rarely refer to heavenly

24 DÉGH 2001, 189–192.

25 KIBBY 2005, 772.

26 KIBBY 2005, 772.

27 DUNDES 1966, 14.

origin (for example: descended from the heavens or sent by Lord Jesus through Saint Michael). At the same time, the messages almost everywhere refer to the origin of the messages from God or Mary:

- “Please read this before you go home, or if you are at home already, read it through now. My name is God”
- “A very urgent request from the Virgin Mary has reached me [...]”
- “God has asked me to tell you [...]”

While in the case of the traditional paper-based chain letters the divine origin means a real (physical) “descending”, the text of internet variants is often said to have originated from oral messages from God or Jesus, or to be the text of visions of apparitions of Mary (Fatima, Medjugorje). The origin is much less tangible as it is based “only” on the oral experience of a vision or private revelation. But it is precisely this that gives the texts their authority. This is why the principle of a link to the Transcendent remains a key component of these modern variants.²⁸ This is not merely a point of reference; it is also the guarantee of effectiveness.

It is not surprising that chain letters are generated from visions and private revelations. There has been a proliferation on the internet and in the votive objects offered for sale of blogs, websites and publications²⁹ where the daily updated messages of Jesus and Mary can be read.³⁰ Messages of this nature come into circulation again and again on the mail systems especially in times of crisis, such as wars. This is not a new element in the genre of chain letters either. Numerous ethnological studies have shown that during wars, for example the First World War and the Serb wars, holy letters encouraging protective religious piety have always become very popular.³¹ Armed conflicts in the 21st century have led to the reappearance

28 SZOJKA 1990, 187.

29 A few letters of this type available on Hungarian websites: http://web-hang.hu/maria_uzenetei.html, <http://www.medjugorje.hr/hu/medjugorjei-jelenesek/a-szuzanya-uzenetei/>, <http://www.masodikeljovetel.hu/>, accessed on: 22. 06. 2018.

30 One of the most thorough analyses of websites of this nature has been made by the Italian cultural anthropologist Paulo Apolito in his book *The Internet and the Madonna* published in 2005. Through an analysis of the heavenly messages and visions received by the seer Laura Zink living in Bennington, Vermont (USA) he shows how the internet influences representation of the vision phenomenon. He points out that in America in the 1960s efforts to give new impetus to declining religious life led to a sharp rise in the number of visions. This process also had unexpected effects, contrary to the intentions of the Second Vatican Council. A pre-Council atmosphere appeared in certain areas of religious life resulting in a return to certain pre-modern religious practices. The mingling of these practices with the possibilities of modern technologies resulted in a very eclectic group of phenomena in which miracles and the miracles of neo-Baroque religiosity are mixed with the objects and tools of modern telecommunications. The best example of these phenomena is Medjugorje, where the means of mass media played an important role in making it a shrine. Apolito also notes that in his experience technology does not deprive the holy, the Transcendent of all its aspects. Seers find a unique resource in technology and use it to recreate the world, making it possible for certain places, means, objects and persons to become holy again, including some that do not become holy within the frames of institutionalised religion. For more detail, see: APOLITO 2005.

31 This is not a new element in the chain letter genre either. Many ethnological studies have shown that holy letters with religious content have always become more popular during wars, for example the First World War, the Serb wars. See: JUNG 1994, 7–17; SZOJKA 1990, 178–191.

of narratives of this type. One example is a letter dated 5 January 2016 in which the Virgin Mother of Medjugorje warns of an approaching war in the Middle East:

“Prevent the war! The Virgin Mother’s request to the seer Iván
War is very close! For everyone! The war will begin in the Middle East because of the serious situation and will spread throughout the world. You must prevent it. The whole world must pray every minute! Let the priests open the doors of the churches and invite the people in to pray the rosary and let them pray very hard. Pray, pray, pray. Send this message throughout the world, and above all make it a practice. [...] You must take this message seriously, so that it reaches everyone, and the praying can start.”

As the above example shows, letters of this type generally call for prayer at a specified time, for religious conversion. In exchange they promise that wars will be prevented, evil defeated and the world saved. On the one hand they help the reader to understand the “signs of the times” and on the other they provide a concrete guide to the correct everyday behaviour they consider able to influence phenomena of the world.

2. Strong prayers

Many letters are based on the text of familiar or less known prayers, or on the religious experience that the person praying believes that the Transcendent is able to intervene in human life and the natural world around them. This is one of the reasons why they seek possibilities for an encounter with it.³² One of the most ancient manifestations of this contact or encounter present in all religions is prayer. Through prayer it becomes possible – even if only temporarily – to bridge the gap between the everyday material world and the divine, spiritual world. Besides the religious function, magical, protective functions bringing good luck (such as spells) often become associated with the church’s sacred texts, prayers and experiences of the sacred.³³ Prayers regarded as effective (more effective), that are associated with some kind of additional magic power – protection from bullets, from the plague, that influence birth, a court procedure, the course of a journey – have been present for centuries in our culture. The appearance in chain letters of such prayers with a religious-magical function is not new, the continuity is quite clear. True, the prayers forwarded on the internet are not linked to crisis situations, instead they tend to be linked to a much more general and spiritual type of promises (blessing, grace, peace, happiness) that can give the reader positive reinforcement in the future.³⁴

32 Lovász 2002, 11.

33 Pócs 2014, 15–18.

34 In a survey among a few of my acquaintances, several reported that it is precisely because of these thoughts of a general nature and with a reinforcing content that they forward letters they receive. They say that they send them “if they have a message that could be useful for someone” or “if I have an acquaintance who is sick, and it could help them to believe a little again”.

The letters, especially those that encourage the saying of Our Father and Hail Mary prayers, build on these magical-religious functions: "Say a Hail Mary and turn to the Virgin Mother with a request! [...] When you're down at the lowest point, unable to do anything, God above is planning something for you." It can also be seen that in many cases the prayers are supplemented with promises that make them more effective, like spells:

- "This is a very strong prayer!"
- "Father, take care of and bless those who read this letter."
- "Lord, walk through my house and take away all my anxiety and sickness. I beg you to care for and heal my family. I beg you in your name."
- "Concentrate on the following sentence: The will of God never leads to a place where divine grace does not look after you!"

However, while saying spells is always linked to specified circumstances (human or animal illness, natural catastrophe, against pests, love, etc.), to specified ritual actions (making the sign of the cross, drawing a cross, pouring water, hiding or throwing away objects, etc.), to a consciously determined magical procedure, the appearance of chain letters is always spontaneous. It cannot be said that they involve the conscious and planned influencing of everyday life events. The letters appearing at random in the mail system merely provide the possibility to express our desire or belief that the promise they contain will be fulfilled by forwarding them.

3. Encouraging deeper individual spirituality

It can be observed in practically all of the chain letters examined that they encourage their readers to deepen their spirituality in a way that can be achieved individually or to perform a religious action for this purpose.

- "I want you to spend 30 minutes with me today"
- "In the next 60 seconds stop everything you're doing and take advantage of this opportunity!"
- "Let's bring people together for the rosary prayer on the same day, the same hour, the same minute. All you have to do is say a Pater Noster for the person who sent you this message [...] Secondly, send this message to all your acquaintances! Soon more and more people will pray for you, and you will win over more and more people to pray for each other!"
- "Be still, think and feel the power of God in your life!"
- "Say a Hail Mary and turn to the Virgin Mother with a request!"
- "My children, I am calling you to join together in a great chain in prayer and humility!"

- "Prayer is one of the loveliest acceptable gifts. Trust in the Universe enough to know that you are precisely where you should be. Don't forget the infinite possibilities that arise from faith. Make use of the endowments you were given, and pass on the love that you have received."

Appeals to pray, to say the basic prayers, to repeat them nine times are not new elements in the chain letters either. However, the internet variants do not use the imperative mood. Nor do we find concrete punishments and threats held out as a prospect for failure to perform the religious practice.³⁵ This too helps to bring the reader to forward the letter.³⁶ The earlier, traditional, paper-based letters also called for the observance of other church rules (attending church on Sunday, confession, the Ten Commandments). Warnings about these have also entirely disappeared from the texts. The authors of the messages call on the reader to perform actions of much more general validity, less bound by the church: pray, be still, meditate, look into yourself, accept different pieces of lifestyle advice. These questions can be clearly understood by persons who do not practice their religion, as well as by those who live outside the scope of the organised church but who nevertheless have a kind of openness to deepening individual spirituality. The infinite diversity of possibilities for spiritual experiences found today indicates that many people are open to and feel a need for such experiences. Paul Zulehner, sociologist of religion, even speaks of a megatrend. Elsewhere we can read of a proliferation of forms offering various spiritual experiences as an alternative to religion.³⁷

4. Promises and expectations

It is above all the reference to religious-magical experiences, the various promises and expectations raised beside the calls for deeper individual spirituality that give a magical character to the chain letters with a religious content. The expectation that they will be forwarded as a guarantee that they will come true, and the related series of positive and negative promises must be mentioned here. The letters examined hold out the promise of good luck, success, happiness, blessing, peace, the attainment of goals, prosperity, a surprise, and joy for readers who forward them.

³⁵ Letters originating in the early and mid-19th century included very detailed descriptions of terrible punishments and threats (plague, war). For more details, see: LENGYEL 2003, 251-252.

³⁶ My survey among a few acquaintances found that this did in fact motivate a number of them to forward a letter. However, others reported that "They now contain fewer evil spells and curses. When they still had them, I still forwarded them: you never know, perhaps it was some kind of subconscious fear that made me forward them."

³⁷ Knoblauch cites Paul Zulehner in a study in which he draws attention to a distinctive form of the individualisation of religion that is now taking shape, an individual, private belief not linked to a church that he describes by using the concept of spirituality. According to his definition this is a kind of personal reference to God or a Transcendent being. It is focused on individual experience, so that there is no need to believe in a dogma or follow its representatives, but instead to follow one's own experience. At the same time this experience-orientation leads to the generalisation of charisma, offering a possibility not only to those belonging to the organised churches but potentially to everybody. KNOBLAUCH 2010, 19-34.

- "I didn't get anything I wanted and yet I got everything I needed."
- "Only love me and the blessing is on its way!"
- "You will be successful in all fields and attain your goals!"
- "Our Father walked through my house and took away all my troubles!"

The amulet-like use of the text, the magical elements arising from always keeping them on the person (protection against bullets, help in childbirth, in court cases, in concrete illnesses) have practically disappeared from these electronic text variants. I have in my possession only one letter that makes various promises in connection with an image with miraculous power:

"This image is sacred and works miracles ...

The president of Argentina received this image and thought it was foolishness; 8 days later his daughter died. A man also received this image and immediately forwarded copies of it. The prize was that he won the lotto prize. Alberto Martinez also received this image and gave it to his secretary to make copies of it, but he forgot to distribute them, the woman lost her job and the man his family. This image is sacred and works miracles, don't forget to forward it within 13 days to at least 20 people."

Today's internet messages with a religious content rarely promise greater material prosperity or that money will arrive. The more recent promises mainly keep pace on the intellectual-spiritual level with the countless material goods constantly offered in our daily life.³⁸ The general values and advice these letters offer mainly reflect the collective fears of our time and the collective desires linked to them.

"Our telephones – are wireless, our stoves – have no flames, our image of the future – is without hope, our life philosophy – is without faith, our babies – have no fathers or mothers, our feelings – are heartless, our education – is without values, our children – have no manners, our churches – have no believers, our peoples – are Godless."

Negative promises also appear in the instructions to forward, as the opposite pair of the associated positive promises, although not so frequently (in three letters):

- "You must forward this within 6 minutes, or you will have an unpleasant surprise. This is true even if you are not superstitious, or in general you have little or no faith."
- "... after he received the letter he forgot about it and a few days later he lost his job"
- "... they forgot to distribute the copies, the woman lost her job, and the man lost his family"

38 LENGYEL 2003, 252.

Two things can be observed in connection with the promises. One is that the punishments and benefits can be classified in opposite pairs along the lines of success/failure, happiness/unhappiness.³⁹ It can be seen (although less often nowadays) that fulfilment of the promises made in the letters, that is, the guarantee of their success, is that the letters must be copied in a specified number (10,12, 20), within a specified time (13 days, 1 day, 1 minute, 30 seconds). Such instructions – to repeat the prayers once, three times, nine times – also appear in spells, making forwarding the letters in the required way similar to the saying of spells.⁴⁰ The other thing that can be observed however, is that the majority of today's letter variants are based principally on positive reinforcements of general human values, most often the deepening of religious devotion. These letters dilute the basic formula, depriving them to a certain extent of their magical contents.

5. Verificative stories

Most letters contain one or two stories verifying the positive or negative promises associated with their forwarding, reinforcing in the reader that the letter must be forwarded. Stories of this kind have not disappeared from the internet letters either. These can be classified in opposite pairs in the same way as the promises associated with forwarding. The stories giving verification of a positive nature tell how the reader: won the lottery, found a job, experienced something joyful; the stories of negative verification are about death, loss of a job, loss of a family. However, in the majority of the letters the verificative stories contrast the values of the material world with the values of the Transcendent. The former are associated with evil, bad things, death, and the latter with good, life, spiritual peace.

“A young man was preparing for his diploma. For months he had been admiring a beautiful sports car in a showroom, and knowing that his father could afford it, he said that is all he wanted. As the final exam approached the young man waited for his father to buy the car. Finally, on the morning of the exam his father called him into his study and told him how proud he was that he had such a fine son and how much he loved him. He gave him a beautifully wrapped box. Curious, but a little disappointed, the young man unwrapped the box and found in it a leather-bound Bible with his name embossed in gold. Angrily he raised his voice and said to his father: “You have lots of money and you give me a Bible?” he rushed out and left the Bible there. Many years passed, and the young man was very successful in business. He had a lovely home and a wonderful family, but he realised that his father was now very old. He thought that perhaps he should go and visit him. He had not seen him since he graduated. But before he could do anything he received a telegram: his father had died and left all his wealth to him. He needed to come home immediately because he had to make

39 HOPPÁL 1998, 78–80.

40 HOPPÁL 1998, 79.

arrangements. When he reached his father's home his heart was filled with sorrow and remorse. He began to look through his father's papers and saw that the Bible was just as new as when he had left it there years ago. With tears in his eyes he opened the Bible and began to leaf through it. His father had underlined the following verse: Matthew 7:11. "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" As he read these words a card fell out of the Bible, the label on it bore the name and address of the dealer where he saw the sports car. There was a date on the label, the day of his exam, and one word ... PAID."

In this binary view of the world the striving for material goods stands opposed to the teachings of the gospels, or simply to the most fundamental human values (love, respect, health).

"[...] You can buy a watch
But not time;
You can buy a book
But not knowledge;
You can buy a position
But not respect [...]"

The stories serving as verification offer the reader answers to or strategies for the solution of the desires of our time, the crisis of values and the uncertainties arising from it. In most cases we find that these recommendations are focused on the need to strengthen individual faith and acquire spiritual experiences. In many cases – as part of the persuasion – citing the words of Jesus, simply forwarding the letter appears as a test of the confession of faith.

- "If you believe in God, forward this message!"
- "Please don't be ashamed to follow these instructions! Jesus says: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."
- "This is a simple test. If you love God and bear witness to the great deeds he performed in his life, send this message to everyone you know and to the person you received it from!"
- "This is a test, do not break it."

Besides encouragement to bear witness, instructions and advice on how to dispel doubt are also an important element of the texts:

- "This message must be taken seriously, please do not throw it out, and I will help you in something you need, the chain of this letter has never been broken, this is not a joke."

- "This is true even if you are not superstitious, if you are not ashamed, send this message [...] you might be angry now, but I thank you all the same, someone thought it foolish, but it turned out not to be, if you can please don't break the chain."
- "He died for you! It's easy to send jokes, images and other foolish things, even pornography in e-mail. BUT you are ashamed to forward anything about God because you are worried about what they will think of your moral views?"

Linda Dégh points out in her analysis that sentences of this type "draw attention to the seriousness of the letter, and by dispelling doubt induce the sender to cooperate".⁴¹ The same purpose is served by the remarks to the reader that it is sufficient to spend a minute in God's presence, to say a prayer, etc., as this reassures the suspicious that they do not have to send money or perform hocus-pocus actions. In the opinion of Mihály Hoppál "this sentence is a classic example of the Freudian slip of the tongue: it says precisely what it wants to leave unspoken. The reference to faith and trust gives a logical frame to all the other claims: it places the constructed world of the examples in the possible world of faith."⁴²

The doubt attached to the letters and their content can often be read from the remarks added by the person forwarding them. What we most often find here is an indication that the reader does not believe in such letters, but the instructive and thought-provoking content of the forwarded letter has overridden and induced the reader to forward them.

- "I received this, it has instructive and thought-provoking contents, the rest is not interesting [...] I don't believe in it, but the advice it gives is worth taking!"
- "There is some really beautiful teaching in these words, even if you are not superstitious; perhaps it is not by chance that I received it now, I sent it because [...] just because."
- "I'm not in the habit of sending things like this, but this felt good."

It is precisely these remarks that arouse the greatest suspicion in people who have doubts about the chain letters. What they see is manipulative linguistic elements in the contents cited here and decide against forwarding them on the grounds of their negative belief in phishing.⁴³

41 DÉGH 2001, 191.

42 HOPPÁL 1998, 78.

43 I often find that instead of forwarding the letters, people are forwarding messages with warnings of phishing or virus threats.

III. Present-day variants – a new genre: presentations with music and images

When the good luck chain letters that had previously circulated on paper appeared on the internet and took advantage of its technical possibilities (easy forwarding, the possibility of wide dissemination, the inclusion of further reinforcing elements: image, sound, music) new variations of the genre arose. It can be seen that they are generating with increasing frequency messages that can be forwarded from visions, the messages of seers, prayer texts, beautiful thoughts, pearls of wisdom, and literary works with religious content. In addition, the texts have assumed a new form: they now appear as presentations with images, sound and music, or they become video clips, giving the message transmitted reinforcement through multiple communication channels. A number of elements of the classical chain letter are missing from these,⁴⁴ for example reference to divine origin, stories verifying the commands, threats and prescriptions, the appeal to forward them within a specified time. Only the “Forward” request can be read in the main text. In recent years these letters with music and images have conquered new forums, such as YouTube, Facebook and other similar websites.⁴⁵ Here the “Forward” inscription is not essential as these internet forums offer the possibility of sharing. Parallel with this there are fewer and fewer ppt presentations of this type in the mail systems. We are witnessing a full transformation that is resulting in the birth of an entirely new genre. It is also new in its function: the aim is no longer realisation of the positive message dependent on forwarding, or influencing an event, but merely to share spiritual lessons and experiences.

On leaving the mail system further functions became associated with the new type of messages. Anyone can add comments, remarks or feedback. These also indicate that the aim of sharing and forwarding is to assist individual prayer and deeper spirituality.

“Our Father, For You, for us, for everyone! Watch, read, listen with love and send this to everyone in need of prayer and the Lord’s help! I made this video for the victims of the 2010 flood, as an e-mail to be forwarded. But everyone needs or could need Prayer [...] So no matter when the video was made, it will never be out of date!”

44 Alan Dundes divided the chain letters into four main structural elements: 1. Opening formula that contains a statement indicating that this is a chain letter; 2. Order to forward the letter with precise instructions or an indication of how many times the letter has been around the world; 3. List of verificative cases; 4. List of cases warning of the undesirable consequences that will follow if the letter is not sent. For more detail, see: DUNDES 1966, 14–15. Linda Dégh divided the letter into five basic elements: 1. Appeal, request; 2. The question of origin; 3. Good luck stories about those who sent the letter back; 4. Description of a case of misfortune due to failure to send the letter; 5. Instruction and promise. For more detail, see: DÉGH 2001, 189–190.

45 A few examples from youtube.com: I asked God; I requested God; Mother Teresa’s prayer; Indian wisdom; Saint Teresa’s prayer; A minute in the presence of God, Wise advice, thoughts. Accessed on: 21.06.2018.

Sometimes the authors of comments report that the shared music and image presentation becomes a means and aid for prayer, at times inspiring collective prayer:

- "I said the prayer together with you"
- "I prayed with you all [...] it is more effective together"
- "I prayed TO MY GOD!! THANK YOU FOR THE BEAUTIFUL VIDEO"

Many people also reported that the messages gave them spiritual consolation or advice for their life, for example:

- "It's good even if it helps only one person!"
- "I'm sending this to those who do not yet know!"
- "As though it was about me"
- "I listen to it several times a day. If I'm in a good mood, for that reason, of if I'm in a bad mood, then for that reason."
- "Thank you for the video, it helped me to understand things in life that I had never understood before; I thank you with all my heart."
- Thank you for [...] the experience [...] I'm glad that I stumbled on this [...] it has filled me with love:)"

The text videos with music and images created the possibility to meet like-minded readers – although only virtually. Connections were formed, communities came into being where people could experience the practice of prayer or even offer spiritual help to others. The essential thing was not belief in the dogmas of different denominations, but rather prayer addressed to some Transcendent being, belief in its power and in the basic human values.

Conclusion

Summing up, it can be said that chain letters with religious subjects have not disappeared from today's new kind of folklore. Technology has not entirely removed the related superstitions from this group of texts. Indeed, the technical background provided by the internet assists the survival of chain letters and the emergence of new variants. In this way chain letters that have centuries of tradition have adapted to the technical possibilities of the internet and in many cases assumed a new form, at times losing their earlier, well-organised structure. Their language is renewed, they are thematically more colourful and more varied in form. However, the desire for a miraculous or magical change expressed in them can still be found: in the global village⁴⁶ that is taking shape with the development of electronic communications technologies the longing for magic or miracles is still

⁴⁶ The term 'global village' was coined by Marshall McLuhan, one of the greatest theoreticians of the theory of communication. It refers to the notion that with the spread of electronic communications media mankind is now in a restricted space and lives its life there, similarly to the former closed world of villages and primitive tribes. For more detail, see: McLuhan 2001, 45.

part of everyday life. This demand is kept in motion by the current collective desires (preservation of health, work, family) and collective fears (death, war, existential insecurity, globalisation), “always seeking a form in the culture that enables them to appear and to be passed on.”⁴⁷ In this way the desires and fears transmitted in chain letters with religious content can be seen as narratives of societal and social discontent.⁴⁸ The reference they contain to religious experience (divine inspiration, the power of prayer and religious devotion, conversion, penance) and the positive promises associated with forwarding prove that our superstitions are among the less changing elements of our culture.⁴⁹ Their appearance can often be linked to borderline or crisis situations (rescuing the Earth, preventing war, dangers of the materialistic, globalised world), where rational behaviour or thinking is not satisfactory or does not give a sufficient explanation. It is here that the utopian fantasy of the human being⁵⁰ plays a role which in our case is manifested in belief in positive influences affecting the future connected to forwarding the letters.

The transformation undergone by the genre of chain letters with religious content and the closely related appearance of the presentation genre shows that in today’s internet variants the magical ideas regarding the future associated with forwarding the letters are gradually disappearing and negative, threatening command elements are much less frequently found. The focus is on prayers and spiritual contents reinforcing the spiritual values of the individual. The personal comments made on the texts indicate that the sharing of the new variants is motivated by belief in prayer and the supportive nature of positive pearls of wisdom and experience of this. In this case the aim of forwarding/sharing is not to influence future events but to consciously share this experience and the positive lessons arising from it.

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47 HOPPÁL 1998, 86.

48 KIBBY 2005, 771.

49 HOPPÁL 1998, 82–86.

50 Ernst Bloch regards the utopian fantasy of the human being as the key leading to the optimistic world-view, manifested in our beliefs and the symbolic actions and narratives connected to them. Its appearance can always be expected where rational behaviour/thinking is not satisfactory or does not give a sufficient explanation. On Bloch’s theory, see: Fosztó 1999, 54.

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