

Evangelizing technologies: from the Silicon Valley, back to the Church.



Following printing press, radio, television and smartphone apps, it is now time for the newest technologies to be seized by the ever-evolving churches. Last October, the *Believers' Evangelical Church* teamed up with the religious media *MyWay* to buy together the startup e-ar and exploit its core product, which is a smart earpiece wearable going by the name of the 'e-ar'. The two evangelist entities claim to have a big mission in mind: to better guide their flocks to the 'right path'.



By **Georges Smith and Elizabeth Simson**

January 2nd, 2019

e-ar, the promise of rectification for the sake of one's better self

Designed back in 2017 for high-level athletes, e-ar is a bone conduction earpiece imagined to provide advice and guidance to its users. The wearable is coupled with a dedicated algorithm working like a coach, by whispering to the ear of the sportswomen and sportsmen to help them boost or push out their physical and mental boundaries. e-ar builds on the sideline trend of rectified self, a radical version, or rather vision, of another trend coming straight from the Silicon Valley: the quantified self movement. The latter conveys a philosophy in which anyone should be able to monitor its daily life, across all fields, to better understand oneself and control one's habits.

e-ar pushes the concept to its limits: this is not only about measuring anymore, but rectifying. The original startup product works on a rewarding/punishing system. The user receives cheering when he or she outperforms the set goals, whilst aural punishments are released when surrendering to a bad lifestyle - according to the embedded system - such as high-fat diet or laziness. The wearable is also designed to 'rectify' the user if the daily or weekly goals haven't been reached.

The earpiece ability to "adapt itself according to each user in order to help him/her reach its optimum performance" justifies a continuous data collection. Further, the marketing brochure explains that the earpiece 'should be worn assiduously' and in the best case scenario 'never be taken out' to give the best of itself.

This technology looks alike any other sport gizmo, but actually proved itself already, according to its creators. In a study commissioned by the startup e-ar back in 2017, we found that 64% of the eponymous earpiece users had beaten their personal goals. Among them, British sprinter talent Sani Roberts managed to break world-famous Usain Bolt's record on 100-metres during the latest International Athletics contest. A prowess achieved after a rewarding training period for Roberts, supposedly coached by the e-ar product. A glorious storytelling, as the Silicon Valley likes them.

When the Church joins the mergers/acquisitions game

Despite this communication campaign, the e-ar technology did not become a commercial hit. Behind the scenes spread the rumor than only a few hundred were sold in two years. The company was highly unprofitable during the first semester of 2018, ergo losing the trust of its early investors. When suddenly the miracle happened. Thanks to a crowdfunding campaign and a partnership formed with the religious media *MyWay*, the *Believers' Evangelical Church* raised the hefty sum of 1M dollars. Last October, the religious corporation repurchased the startup on the verge of bankruptcy, strongly determined to resurrect it. When questioned about what is rather an incongruous operation for a religious entity, Pastor Gordon MacStewart from the *Believers' Evangelical Church* stated that it shows great potential to retain believers. Once reformatted to fit in a religious context, the e-ar technology and its algorithm represent a true "gift from God [...] to spread divine precepts daily", says Pastor MacStewart. "Most of my parishioners have adopted it and they already have fewer doubts about their faith. They feel closer to God and live a life better aligned with their convictions" he adds.

Thanks to e-ar, temptations are now 'discouraged' by the lecture of verses, while sins are followed by aural punishments. The earpiece also knows how to demonstrate attention. Repentance works well after recitations, biblical texts repetition or immediate confession. Entertainments, always virtuous, are also included, starting with the continuous flow of mass and praise songs coming from *MyWay* archives. The new version of e-ar as designed by the *Believers' Evangelical Church* is an invitation to rectify the path taken by its faithful, leading to a wiser and more balanced lifestyle. They're simply empowered to become the best versions of themselves.

Buzz, trend or new worship practice?

After a product launch orchestrated through a powerful marketing campaign, the first feedback posted on social media are rather enthusiastic. On his blog, Patrick Johnson, an engineer in the energy sector and user of the e-ar 2.0 since its launch, describes the technology as "a simple and direct tool to put God's precepts into practice" since "there is no need to go through the pastor's lens to be guided anymore". "The point is that using technology is an impartial way of reading, judging and applying a belief", he notes. In his opinion, e-ar helps as a "true spiritual advisor" and "encourages a healthier lifestyle", where the faithful missteps can be avoided.

For a few observers, this is a logical next step for the *Believers' Evangelical Church*, which never failed to enlist new worshippers to the point where it started to behave like a real company. Amel Mansouri, PhD in Sociology specialized in contemporary cults at Columbia University (New York, US), notices that from the end of the XXe century, the evangelist cult has tended to "leak out the space of church to meddle with TV and radio spaces. The successive emergence of smartphones, reading apps, instant messaging and spontaneous gatherings exacerbated this transformation in religious practices. We face a stunning decentralization of these practices, from church prerogatives to clergy-free and autonomous cults, tailored to the individualization of our society". Pastor Gordon MacStewart explains, however, that "the idea is not to supersede traditional worship locations and religious authorities, but to accompany the faithful in the transformation of its routines and maintain a daily connexion with them".

Will normalization through technology be an asset of religious dogma?

e-ar is a sensitive marker of a deeper shifting in religious practices, following the pace of society. Where digital transition seemed to make the promise of a faith built collectively and concerted through exchanges with the community, practices prove to be more individualistic and remain top-down. Yesterday reigned the televangelists, tomorrow comes the reign of a smart object, mystical for some, mysterious for others. Personalization is also part of the process: the smart object reads in you, 'understands' you and recommends a text or a penance. On this last point, whether atheistic or not, critics of the e-ar are stepping up. The earpiece would be a breach in what is most intimate, it would condition ourselves a uniformly flatten the way we practice a religion. It would play on users' fears and frustrations to make them addicted. Such critics make echo to the ones often addressed to new technologies from our digital area. Mansouri highlights the fact that we are facing the emergence of a dematerialised and algorithmic clergy: "Whichever their attitudes, faithful users delegate their responsibility to technology that analyze and stigmatize their behaviors in a binary way. Eating a burger becomes a sin, since it refers to gluttony; giving money to a homeless person is right because it echoes to the virtuous spirit of giving". Religious consciousness would then be shared and integrated by the faithful in real time, without any critical examination on their part. It would become a standardized product, in line with the dogma, but commercial this time. Eventually, e-ar seems to be able to rectify a lot of things in our lives, excepted maybe from our ability to be conditioned.