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At the Helm of the Number One French-language Protestant Network, *Jesus.net*

Pierre-Yves Kirschleger

Abstract

The history of the site *TopChrétien* is that of a “success story”. This pioneer website was set up in 1999; its purpose is evangelism on the sixth continent: Internet. It was able to build a large audience and today it presents itself as the first Christian French-speaking portal. Since its inception, the site has continued to grow, to expand, to explore all the possibilities offered by new technologies, so that it now offers through all its applications a global religious culture ; it grew into a larger network, called *Jesus.net*, which proposes online guidance and counseling, online religious practices and sacred spaces.

Believers in Protestantism are not subjected to any hierarchical control: the role of self-proclaimed charismatic leaders should be emphasized, and initiatives are teeming in a virtual world where deregulation and decompartmentalization are facilitated. This contribution proposes to present this successful network built outside the ecclesial structures. Based on interviews and surveys of stakeholders, our study analyzes the vision and strategy developed by the founder (pastor of a Pentecostal church) and his entourage.

The initial idea of the website was substantially amended: the site was basically simple and non-specialized (an internet directory of Christian sites); but the dynamic created by the explosive growth of the Internet led creators of *TopChrétien* to develop a new vision: by pooling their individual and collective experience, they will be able to innovate to adapt the use of the Internet to the religious question.

Keywords

Protestantism; Evangelical; French-language network; Internet; Religion; virtual church; open-source evangelisation

1 Introduction

If it were not a matter of religion, there would certainly be much talk about the success story of the site *TopChrétien.com*, which had the honour of having a television programme devoted to it in June 2007¹; this resulted in an influx of 1,220 surfers onto the server and the dispatching of 200 forms with questions or comments, such as this one by Blandine from Lyon: “I have just heard of you through the programme *66 Minutes* on the M6 channel. I want to be connected to this spiritual warmth!”².

While this Protestant site is, of course, far from being the only one to have resolutely set off down the path of technological modernity (Kirschleger 2011), several aspects set *TopChrétien* apart: first of all, it is a pioneer site, created as long ago as 1999; secondly, it is a “federating site for enthusiastic French-speaking Christians”, to cite the university academic and Protestant convert, François Bernot. It is run by a committed team of Christians who see themselves as missionaries on the sixth continent – the Internet (Bernot 2006). It has succeeded in building a large audience and today describes itself as the number one French-language Christian portal. Lastly, it is a site which has never ceased to evolve, enrich its services and explore all the possibilities that the new technologies³ have opened up; thanks to all the applications it offers, it has come to constitute a global religious and cultural world and has grown into wider network called *Jesus.net*, offering all-round cyber-ministry and spaces for religious practices.

In a Protestant context, where religious authority is not subject to any hierarchical regulation and where initiatives by charismatic leaders abound, and in a virtual world that facilitates decompartmentalisation and transversality, this article sets out to present (see Barats 2013; Bourdon & Schafer 2012.) this successful network that has been built outside of any ecclesiastical structures. While for the creators of *TopChrétien*, the initial idea behind the site was simple and general, the rapid rise of the Internet led them, tentatively and experimentally, to develop a new vision, the principal challenge of which is to adapt use of the Internet for religious purposes.

1 Even back 2005, Sébastien Fath highlighted the “remarkable success” of *TopChrétien* as proof of the social media activism of the evangelical Protestants (Fath 2005). Similarly, in his book *Dieu et Internet* (2011), the journalist Jean-Baptiste Maillard presents, *TopChrétien* as “the spearhead of evangelisation via the Internet”. The last item in *TopChrétien*’s credo states: “We believe in the legitimacy of using all modern means of communication to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ all over the world.”

2 *En direct du Top*, September 2007, p. 4.

3 In the light of this very great capacity for innovation and change, we should point out that the cut-off point for our study was February 2013.

2 Founder's intuition

In the beginning was the founder, the Pentecostalist minister, Éric Célérier. Born in 1964 in Toulouse, Éric Célérier grew up in a Christian family which gave both him and his brother a religious upbringing; he was confirmed, then turned away from religion, while his parents divorced. According to his memoirs⁴, Célérier was a teenage rebel, heavily into alcohol, parties, drugs and Tibetan philosophy. Then, under the influence of his mother, who had begun attending an Evangelical church in Pontoise, and of members of that church, Célérier converted: at the age of 18 he became a "Christian" and chair-stacker for his church. He was in search of a vocation, spending three years at a chef school and a period at the Toulouse Faculty of Computing. After his military service, he was offered the chance to join the team organising Billy Graham's evangelisation campaign in France in 1986: "I've no idea who Billy Graham is," he replied, "but I accept with joy." This was Célérier's first salary, but first and foremost an experience that gave his life a direction: Graham's crusade was certainly a spectacular event, but one which had a substantial impact on thousands of lives (Baubérot 1988; Fath 2002.). Célérier then took up a course of study at the *École Biblique* and became a Pentecostalist minister in the Assemblies of God.

In 1997, he was given the mission of setting up a church near Lyon, at Givors. He decided to create a simple Internet site to present his church. His first contact was with a Brazilian who was studying Spanish and looking for Christians who could offer him a place to stay in Europe: it was then that Célérier realised the full potential of the Internet. The following year, he set up an evangelising site in collaboration with *Réalités de la foi* magazine⁵. On the advice of a Pentecostalist minister friend, Fabien Créteur, who was encouraging him to create a Christian portal on the Internet, Célérier contacted Estelle Martin, a qualified statistician, a doctor of mathematics at *École polytechnique de Lausanne*, and director of *Mégaphone*, a sound-equipment company based in French-speaking Switzerland founded by her husband, which had been building up its Internet department since 1996. This is how, in July 1999, *TopChrétien* was launched. At the outset, the idea was to build a directory and a kind of ranking of Christian sites: the name was initially intended to be *Hit-parade francophone* ("French-speaking hit parade"), but this was abandoned for the more self-explanatory *TopChrétien francophone*, that is the top Protestant and Evangelical sites. For Estelle Martin, the idea of ranking sites lacked interest in itself, but was a good way of promoting quality: *TopChrétien* therefore gave advice to webmasters on how to improve their sites and get

4 This kind of tale is by no means unique among religious leaders.

5 *Réalités de la Foi-Digest*: for a quarter of a century this magazine, founded in 1965 by Erwin Buchmann, offered a selection of the best articles from the press and literature devoted to the Christian faith. Taken over by Alliance Presse in the early 2000s, the magazine did not succeed in gaining a new lease of life. Publication ended at the end of 2008.

themselves known.⁶ The site was hosted free of charge by Mégaphone, at www.megaphone.ch/top, after which an address was created for the portal: www.topchretien.com. From 1999 to the present, *TopChrétien* has never ceased to develop: designed as a portal to help Christians find their way around the gigantic maze of the World Wide Web, *TopChrétien* has become a veritable missionary and evangelising tool specially designed for the Internet.

3 Supports

To achieve what he set out to do, and especially to allow information to be added to the site and be updated, Célérier needed a team and a structure for managing the portal: a non-profit association was created under the French 1901 associations act and declared to the Loire prefecture in November 2000 – *Top Chrétien Francophone*, the purpose of which is “to bring French-speaking Christians closer through the Internet”. Following Éric Célérier’s move in 2004, the association was transferred to Seine-et-Marne and offices were rented in Ozoir-la-Ferrière. The *Amis suisses du Top Chrétien francophone* association was created in Switzerland in January 2005: this centralises donations from Switzerland and uses them to fund the IT servers and maintenance. At the end of 2009, for example, virtually all its resources were used to purchase a new server: since then *TopChrétien* has had two dedicated servers at Mégaphone, hosting all the sites belonging to the network.

A new structure was created in 2006 – the *Top Mission* association, which is registered Strasbourg and manages the permanent staff: this “association under local law” (under an act of 1908) is recognised as being in the public interest, which entitles donors to tax reductions, thus providing an incentive to donate⁷.

In 2009, the two French associations merged, keeping only the more advantageous of the two, *Top Mission*. This is managed by a Board of Administrators, which is elected by the General Meeting and has five members, two of whom are employed; it is assisted by a “council of elders”, called the Governance Council and made up of 10 ministers, well-known names on the French or African Pentecostalist and Evangelical scene⁸.

6 Interview with Estelle Martin, by Jean Hassenforder and Françoise Rontard, November 2002 (www.temoins.com).

7 This status entitles donors to a tax reduction on 66 % of donated sums. Moreover, *Top Mission* is approved by the *Fondation du Protestantisme*, an organisation which is recognised as being in the public interest, which entitles donors subject to the wealth tax (*impôt sur la fortune*) to a 75% tax reduction.

8 The Board of Administrators is made up of Nathalie Texier (president), Gérald Branum (vice-president), Bénédicte Girard (treasurer), Éric Célérier (visionary and founder) and Michael Foucault (secretary). The Governance Council is made up of ministers Michel Balverde (CIJEM, Clamart Evangelical Church), Yvan Castanou (Christian Impact Centre), Ronan Jezequel (Chalon-sur-Saône Evangelical Church), Mamadou Karambiri (Centre International

The development of *TopChrétien* soon exceeded the bounds of a simple association, which is not allowed to make a profit: in December 2003, it became necessary to create a limited liability company– SARL *Trilogie Concept*⁹, a programming company – to manage the profit-making business.

4 Economic model

All the services offered by the *TopChrétien* mission are free, all costs being covered by the mission. There are three pillars underpinning *TopChrétien*'s operating activities: the association, which manages the volunteers; the team of permanent staff, called missionaries; and its commercial business.

For a long time run solely by volunteers, *TopChrétien* recruited its first employee in 2003. A team of permanent staff was gradually built up to reach a maximum of seventeen in 2008-2009, which subsequently fell back to fourteen, two of these in Africa.

Volunteers thus play as crucial and major a role today as they did at the beginning. The *TopChrétien* portal is nurtured by the work of numerous volunteers, evaluated at eight or nine-tenths of a full-time post; prospecting for donations takes the equivalent of two full-time posts: it needs to be underlined, of course, that the association lives almost exclusively on donations¹⁰. Thanks to its energy, it has succeeded since 2009 in creating a fairly sound financial basis for itself, with more than 1.2 million euros of donations per year, which enabled it to purchase the *TopChrétien* offices in 2010.

For a number of years, the financial spin-off from the sales projects of SARL *Trilogie Concept* made it possible to cover some of the overheads (office rental, the salaries of six of the permanent staff, running costs), although there has been a change of strategy since 2010, when the company was incorporated into a Dutch business undertaking called NEEMA¹¹.

d'évangélisation-Mission intérieure africaine, Burkina Faso), Mark Ost (Centre Foi, Espérance et Amour, Protestant Evangelical Church), Francis Pfister (Apostolic Church), Jean-Pierre Riche (vice-president of FEPEF), Samuel Rodrigues (Montreuil Protestant Evangelical Church), Mohammed Sanogo (Vase d'honneur Church, Côte d'Ivoire), and Jean Mallet (formerly of Toulon Reformed Church).

9 *Trilogie Concept* funds design and distribution projects for multimedia tools (CD cards, DVD, *TopBoutique*, etc.).

10 The campaigns for donations for *TopChrétien* are held once a year (usually at the end of the year) and last one month. On the *TopChrétien* site they take the form of a banner at the top of every page: users of the site and anyone who uses the different services offered by *TopChrétien* are invited to take part.

11 We do not know the exact reasons for this change in strategy, but we have noticed a decrease in the business of the SARL in proportion to the growth of the Top Mission association.

The most delicate problem seems to be that of how to fund the team of paid staff: in 2011, the association *Top Mission* paid only nine of the fourteen permanent members of staff, including the two leaders. This means that the permanent staff have to seek financial support from external partners, notably the association Agapé France¹² or American missions.

5 Vision and tools

The team of permanent staff and volunteers serve the founder's vision, which has developed considerably. The initial idea was to bring Christians together, a conviction that Célérier acquired during Billy Graham's crusade: "With *TopChrétien* of which I am the head," he stated, "I seek unity between all the denominations, it is not a good thing to work solely for your own chapel, parish or church."¹³

TopChrétien is first and foremost a portal with a directory and search engine: the sites are listed and ranked by number of visitors, number of likes and number of votes, or by subject. There are four main subjects: mankind, faith, communication and general sites. Thanks to it, visitors had access to more than 800 Christian sites in 2001, 2,000 sites in 2005, and 4,400 sites in 2010.

But "bringing together" is not an end in itself: Célérier wishes to use the Internet as a means of encouraging Christians; the idea is to offer Web surfers free access to resources every day to encourage them to let their spiritual life grow. This is why *TopChrétien* develops numerous free services: "thought of the day"¹⁴, virtual greetings cards, services to help the webmasters of Christian sites, all designed for adults, but also for children, such as the letter for 7-13 year-olds called *TopKids*.

However, while it is Christians' duty to try to attain God's holiness, their duty also lies in being present in the world, to accomplish their obligation of being Christ's missionary: from encouragement to evangelisation, *TopChrétien* pursues the same goal, offering Web surfers searching for spirituality or asking themselves existential questions the Good News of Jesus Christ in response to the needs of their soul. Serving the goal of evangelisation, *TopChrétien* created a third section, entitled "Questions of faith", on its portal at an early stage. It exploits all the

12 A missionary association founded in France in 1972, emanating from the American evangelical organisation, *Campus Crusade for Christ*, created in 1951 by Bill Bright: initially aimed at evangelising students, it has since expanded its activities to include young athletes, musicians, families and minorities.

13 Interview with Éric Célérier by John K. Kamga at SEBILIC (Bible and Christian Book Week) in Cameroon in 2003.

14 As an indication of the quality of this "Thought of the Day", the Catholic Jean-Louis Pascal Ballif cites it three times in the bibliography of his work *De l'eau vive pour tous les hommes. L'eau vive, symbole de la Parole de Dieu*, Publibook, Paris, 2010.

possibilities that the Internet offers: reading, of course (the Bible online, Word of the Day, frequently asked biblical questions), watching (short videos or flash animations, screensavers and desk tops, and even the Wall of Lamentations live¹⁵), listening (audio messages, Christian radio stations, Christian mp3 music), and lastly, dialoguing (a discussion salon and forum where people can share their faith; a chat room for teenagers; and over twenty Christians, called “Philippe online”, who bear witness and reply to visitors’ questions).

Pursuing the same idea, the *TopChrétien* team developed video and computer products: DVDs, such as the film *L’Espoir*¹⁶ in 2005, CD-cards (*Toute la Bible sur une carte de visite* – “The Whole Bible on a Calling Card” – in 2003, *Le sens de la Croix* – “The Meaning of the Cross” – produced in 2004 on the release of the film *The Passion of the Christ*). 100,000 of these CD cards were distributed at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, for example. But that was venturing outside the bounds of the Internet: the experiment was not repeated and the *TopChrétien* team returned its focus to the Internet.

The structure of the portal underwent its first strategic change in 2002: services took precedence over the sites and gained substance, with *TopInfo*, which provides news on Christian topics worldwide, *TopLeader* for Church leaders, small ads, *TopDétente* for online gaming; in 2003 *TopPrière* for prayer subjects, *TopAction* for humanitarian projects; in 2004 *TopBoutique*, *TopFéminin* and *TopÉvénements*, in 2006 *TopMessages*, while other services disappeared or underwent transformation. The services offered by *TopChrétien* are continuously evolving.

In April 2005, the evangelical aspect was stepped up: the *devenir chrétien* (“becoming a Christian”) page became a site in its own right, *ConnaitreDieu.com*. In April 2006, the *Évangile* (“Gospel”) section took precedence over the sites section. In July 2008, the portal underwent a revolution: a new version of the site, a new design and first and foremost a new structure, still with three sections but redefined – with *TopMax*, which contains all the resources available on *TopChrétien* (texts, audios, videos)¹⁷, in blue; *TopActu*, i.e. news, events and sites¹⁸ in red; and *TopContact*, the social networking site set up by *TopChrétien*, in orange: from their personal account, profile or internal messaging service, members are able to communicate and share information¹⁹. In December 2011, the three sections were renamed for greater clarity (*Connectés à l’essentiel*, *Connectés pour agir*, *Connectés ensemble* – “Connected to the essential”, “Connected to

15 The evangelical Protestants consider the history of the Bible as their history, and the land of the Bible as a kind of adopted homeland. But Israel is not only the place where Christ did his ministry and was crucified: the Holy Land is also the focal point of prophecies announcing Christ’s second coming.

16 *L’Espoir. Le tour de la Bible en 80 minutes*, 2005, published by Trilogie Concept.

17 *Pensée du Jour*; *Top TV*; *Top Messages*; *Top Famille*; *Top Féminin*; *Top Bible*; *Top Kids*; *Top Ados*; *Top Témoignages*.

18 *Top Info*; *Top Événements*; *Les Sites*; *Top Radio*; *Top Humanitaire*.

19 *Espace personnel*; *Les Membres*; *Groupes*; *Top Cartes*; *Top Annonces*; *Top Prière*; *Joy In Heaven*.

act”, “Connected together”). In doing so, *TopChrétien* created a common, central space (Beaude 2012).

But these changes in presentation are first and foremost an indication of a more fundamental revolution, with a threefold hallmark: *TopChrétien* definitively abandoned its initial idea, that of being a directory of sites; *TopChrétien* moved into the interactive age and adopted the “online religion” model, to use the now classic definition coined by Christopher Helland²⁰; lastly, *TopChrétien* opened up a new phase in its development with the creation of the *Jesus.net* network. Launched in autumn 2009 by Éric Célérier and his friend and supporter Jan-Willem Bosman, media director at Agapé Netherlands, the *Jesus.net* project is an additional extension of the missionary aspect: from the conceptual point of view, the idea was to make a smoother transition between the virtual and physical worlds – both to connect Christians online and to facilitate connection offline; geographically, the idea was to move outside the French-speaking world to roll out a global evangelisation project via the Internet and to achieve this, *Jesus.net* was designed as an open-source evangelisation network.

The general structure was thus redesigned and is now made up of several levels following the “stepping stone” strategy. The *Jesus.net* page acts as a home page for Web surfers who do a search on Google: the aim is to position the site on the modern market for all things religious where people idly wander²¹.

The first stone, *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, is an offer to discover God on an interactive journey. After the testimonials, the Internet user enters into a dialogue with God thanks to an animation consisting of an effective mix of graphics and sound and is invited to pray – since, according to Evangelical Christians, prayer and personal experimentation are the foundation stone of the Christian life. Clicking means praying sincerely to receive Jesus as their Lord – that is the first stage in the conversion and on *TopChrétien*, one can follow prayer “decisions” on a map in real time: here, to set the example is to bear witness – modern technology is a good means of pursuing “God’s work”.

Internet users who discover Jesus are then invited to grow with Jesus. The new online “converts” can join a virtual church, *monEglise.net*. When it was launched, the site offered six direct links a day, introduced by a presenter, to a church service or a time of worship with a virtual community; however, since it cost too much to record services in a studio and audience figures were

20 Back in 1999, Christopher Helland at Dalhousie University (Halifax, Canada) made the following suggestion: to distinguish between “religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (*online religion*) versus the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (*religion online*)” (Helland 2000).

21 “In a context where the consumer is being increasingly solicited to make a choice, offers of to provide meaning, just like any other, have to adapt in order to maintain or increase their market share” writes Sébastien Fath (2005b).

low²², the site now offers church services broadcast directly from several churches on Sunday, and during the week two programmes that are repeated non-stop every two hours. To counter the idea of an impersonal Internet entity²³, the aim of the designers of *monEglise.net* was to create a communion of fraternal users: members' pseudos (M Martin 2012) and photos are displayed and participants can chat; visitors join an emotion-based community, a community of prayer and song, a community quite purely and simply (Lodombé 2012) – at the risk of disturbing certain users: “I find that the discussion salon on *monEglise.net* is more like MSN Facebook than a Bible discussion group”, commented Yvonne, for example, shortly after the launch²⁴.

Forestalling criticism, the designers explain that it is neither a “virtual church” nor a substitute for the local church: *monEglise.net* is a space for people belonging to no community who discover faith and what a Church is; a transitional church where people are encouraged to join a local church near to their home.

Of course, *TopChrétien* remains the principal stepping stone, the backbone of the organisation for French speakers with its Christian content, Christian music and Christian training courses.

The next stepping stone is for Internet users who want to bear witness to their faith: sure of salvation, converts can, in their turn, set out to conquer the world thanks to the widget *Jesus.net*. The vocation of this tool is to help any Christian site, whether individually or church-owned, to become a point of easy access to the Gospel. Internet users can then invite their friends to the *Jesus.net* pages on the social networks: *Jesus.net* is a “Church Facebook” in its own way.

Lastly, there is a search engine called *ChristianGo.com*. The aim is now to offer a place for sharing and fraternal communion in the shape of an inter-denominational French-speaking community centred on Jesus. But the aim is also to associate religion at home and religion in a community, to offer searching Internet users a point of connection with local communities so that they can meet Christians in the flesh and become disciples of Jesus: *Jesus.net* is designed to be a global tool with local impact.

If Internet users have questions during their journey through *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, more than 300 selected online counsellors are there to follow them up²⁵. If Internet users click on a prayer, a

22 Boris Beaudé's analyses (2012) give reason to believe that the Internet is less a space for synchronisation (a process that consists of providing a common tempo) than a space for “synchorisation” (a process that consists of providing a common space for being and doing).

23 Isabelle Jonveaux emphasises this risk in her study entitled “Une retraite de carême sur internet” (2007).

24 A comment posted on the *TopChrétien* site, 6 January 2010.

25 “14% of people visiting the site tell us that they have said the prayer to receive Jesus as their saviour, and 5% have left us their details (last name, first name, email, etc.) for a follow-up by one of our 800 counsellors” (*En direct du Top, TopChrétien* newsletter, January 2008).

list of partner churches or the list of Alpha courses²⁶ close to them is displayed; they can also get a Bible free of charge. If Internet users leave their details, *TopChrétien* passes them on to a partner Church: the partner Church undertakes to get in contact with users, respond very rapidly to their emails and to provide the same follow up as they would for anyone who came to church for the first time (phone calls, visits, invitations to attend church, etc.). As a partner, the local Church enables the Internet to leave the virtual sphere. *TopChrétien* has 269 local partner churches²⁷ in mainland France, and these have to belong to the National Council of Evangelicals in France (CNEF) or an evangelical denomination of the French Protestant Federation.

Outside the French-speaking world, *Jesus.net* groups more than 40 partner Christian organisations. The most innovative have made their initiatives available to the others: the French *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, the Dutch *WhyJesus?* course²⁸, the Swiss *MyStory*²⁹ – which are gradually being translated into all languages: *ConnaîtreDieu.com* is available in 20 languages³⁰, sometimes in several versions (4 sites in German, 4 sites Spanish, 3 sites in English, 2 sites in Portuguese) – the objective being ultimately to be available in all 35 of the major languages used on the Internet. On the Internet, we are seeing what the sociologists of religion have shown in the physical world: the globalisation of movements thanks to the creation of worldwide networks, the concrete manifestation of which, in this case, are two annual conferences, the *Global Christian Internet Alliance*, created in 2001, and the *Jesus.net* conference, created in 2009³¹.

26 Created in an Anglican parish in the centre of London in the late 1970s, the Alpha courses are meals where people can talk to one another about God and the meaning of life. In one series of meals, the Alpha course aims to provide an opportunity to discover (or rediscover) the foundations of the Christian faith in a church in its neighbourhood in a friendly and informal atmosphere. Cf. La Barbe 2007.

27 *En direct du Top*, April 2012.

28 *WhyJesus?* is an interactive online course for people with questions about life, religion and belief: it attempts to build a bridge between askers on the Internet and offline communities (churches or Alpha courses). It is a five-week course about the bases of the Christian faith, which gives participants the possibility of interacting with one another.

29 *MyStory* gives Christians a chance to recount their personal story with Jesus: “Your personal experience with Jesus is important and perhaps crucial for the people that you meet in your everyday life,” the site explains. Perhaps their personal story has some resemblance to yours...”

30 The site was launched in Dutch back in 2005 (*IkzoekGod.nl*), in Chinese (*RenshiShen.com*), in German (*GottKennen.com*) and English (*LookingforGod.com*) in 2006, in Arabic in 2007 (*MaarifatAllah.com*), in Spanish (*EnbuscadeDios.com*), in Russian (*PoiskBoga.com*), Italian (*ConoscereDio.com*), Portuguese (*ConhecerDeus.com*) and Turkish (*Allahitanimak.com*) in 2008, etc.

31 The *TopChrétien* team has been a part of the GICIA (Global Christian Internet Alliance, launched in 2001 in Chicago) since 2002, thereby building contacts with some twenty heads of major portals in other countries, such as the United States, Germany and Chile. The *Jesus.net* conferences were held in 2009 and 2010 in Paris, in 2011 in Rotterdam, and in 2012 in the United States in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association centre.

6 Conclusion

The momentum of the Evangelical and, above all, Pentecostalist movements is legitimised by their duty to be effective; consequently, *TopChrétien* is continuously evolving and forever experimenting³²: from its initial idea, which was to raise the profile of Christian sites by means of a directory and, through that, facilitate contacts between Christians, the site has developed an innovative strategy that grew from simply being religion over the Internet to cyber-religion. *TopChrétien* views itself as an avant-garde platform for evangelisation: “The world is evolving and new technologies are available,” explains Éric Célérier. “It is our duty as Christians to see how we can use the new technologies to comply with Jesus’ great command, which is to go into all the world and preach the good news.”

The originality of *TopChrétien* is certainly to have designed both an all-encompassing strategy and a strategy of proximity with local churches; thanks to the different Internet tools it offers, it is easier to have “access to the Gospel” and grow in faith; thanks to the partnerships that have been formed with a certain number of churches and associations, there is an effort to create physical links with the Internet users. The individual and the individual’s spiritual edifice are indeed at the centre of the *Jesus.net* project.

This explains why today, *Topchrétien* describes itself as the number one Christian portal for the French-speaking world, with one million visits a month³³. *TopChrétien*’s social network has over 115,000 members. As for the Facebook indicators, they reveal 19,000 fans of *Topchrétien*, 11,000 fans of *ConnaitreDieu.com*, and 286,000 fans of the *Jesus.net* network.

These figures say nothing about the origins of the members, as the Internet has transformed the very notion of space: on the Web, geographical distance has no meaning; ignoring national borders, *TopChrétien* recruits from the entire French-speaking world, its members residing – in decreasing order – in France (47,953), Côte d’Ivoire (10,120), Canada (7,553), Belgium (4,489), Cameroon (4,362), Switzerland (3,207), the Congo (3,147), etc³⁴.

32 In February 2012, *Jesus.net* won the *RNB International Innovation Award*, awarded by National Religious Broadcasters at its annual convention.

33 According to figures supplied by *TopChrétien*, the site posted: 101,000 visits in 2000; 575,000 visits in 2001; 1,587,000 visits in 2002 and... 7 million visits in 2006; 35 million visits from 1999 to 2007; 60 million visits in ten years.

34 In her article ‘Une congrégation pentecôtiste congolaise à Montréal’ (2008), Géraldine Mossière pointed out that “the minister was proud to have his community referenced on the French-speaking site *Top Chrétien* where he makes his sermons publicly available and thanks to which he says that he corresponds with French-speaking Pentecostalists all over the world”.

As for *monEglise.net*, it does not appear to have met with the anticipated success³⁵, even if the visitor figures are far from negligible: 3,000 Internet users on Sundays, an average 500 on weekdays, and in its first year, 2,000 people who wished to join one of the partner Churches.

The overall success enjoyed by *TopChrétien* has attracted some criticism. In an article posted on 1 January 2013 on the site *Actu-Chrétienne.net*, an evangelical webzine, Samuel Foucart, a Pentecostalist minister who formerly worked on *TopChrétien*, reproached the latter for enjoying “a greatly overvalued aura”: “This start-up, aimed at evangelising the world,” he wrote, “now does next to no evangelising but continues to maintain the illusion of doing so, while receiving the dividends reserved for the missionaries.” Without going into the details here of a controversy in which much has been left unspoken, let us simply note the tensions that have grown up as a result. To criticism of the emphasis placed by the site on the highly controversial prosperity theology³⁶, *TopChrétien* responded by giving less publicity to its “scores”³⁷; to this renewed criticism of its expenditure, *TopChrétien* responded by greater transparency, publishing all its reports and accounts online.

In an evangelical world where debate is traditionally carried on without any mincing of words, on the Internet, through blogs and the digital media this same culture is finding a new form of expression, perhaps ensuring a new form of regulation suited to the era of new technology.

35 Several comments posted on the site by Internet users show how difficult it is to satisfy audiences: some preferred “the old presentation”, now find the message “too short”, or suggest finding a “presentation between the two [versions]”.

36 “Prosperity theology” or the “prosperity Gospel”, emerged in certain American Pentecostalist milieus during the 1960s: placing Christian salvation and material wealth on the same level, it promises believers health, wealth and freedom from demonic influences on the premises that a “child of God” should not be poor or suffer. In a text adopted in 2012, the National Council of Evangelists of France (CNEF) denounced “the practices of certain parties who use this theology to exploit those weaker than themselves and to instil guilt in Christians who, despite authentic faith, remain ill in accordance with God’s will”.

37 On 13 January 2009, for example, one million decisions in favour of Jesus were announced on *ConnaitreDieu.com*. This kind of sensationalist announcement no longer appears.

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Biography

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