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Religion: Fresh Look at the Exile Priest

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In his last months, he lived in a drab New York City hotel room, forbidden by his superiors in the Roman Catholic Church to work in his beloved Paris, surrounded by few friends. He died at 73, on Easter Sunday, in 1955. The earth at the cemetery near Poughkeepsie was still frozen; when he was finally buried, only gravediggers were in attendance. Yet the gaunt figure of this French priest in exile, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, looms large over the intellectual history of 20th century Catholicism.

At his death Teilhard was known to the public largely as the “missing link” priest, the handsome, aristocratic paleontologist who helped to analyze the Peking Man and other protohuman skulls unearthed in China. But there was also a hidden Teilhard: the writer-mystic who integrated his scientific and spiritual passions into a grandly eccentric philosophy of the evolutionary progress of mankind. During his lifetime, only a narrow Catholic elite was aware of this private Teilhard. Wary of his ideas, and prodded by Vatican censors, the Society of Jesus, Teilhard’s then deeply conservative religious order, forbade him to publish his books, severely restricted his lecturing and kept him away from his native Paris as much as possible.

Shortly after his death, however, friends arranged for the publication of his major work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. Other hitherto suppressed

books soon followed. Teilhard became a theological sensation just as the Catholic Church was entering the period of intellectual freedom stirred by the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. Since then, the Teilhard boom has waned considerably, though he continues to have a strong following—a cult, some would say—in many areas, notably France and the U.S.

Omega Point. The Jesuit priest-scientist's following may expand with the publication of Teilhard (Doubleday, 360 pages, \$10), the first full-scale biography of him in English in a decade. The book, by Freelance Writers (and sisters) Mary and Ellen Lukas, is not the full-dress exposition of Teilhard's thought that English Actor-Author Robert Speaight achieved in his 1967 *Life of Teilhard de Chardin*. The Lukases' reportage tells of the man behind the legend, providing much new material culled from ten years of interviewing Teilhard's friends and acquaintances.

Teilhard is still widely celebrated among Catholics as one of the church's major doctrinal martyr figures in the decades prior to Vatican II. His then unpublished writings were deemed so threatening that they were implicitly attacked in *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII's 1950 encyclical against dangerous opinions about the evolution of mankind. In 1962 the

Vatican went so far as to publicly censure Teilhard by name in a so-called monitum (warning).

Teilhard never recanted his basic notion about the existence of a spiritual reality that suffused all matter (man and animals included) and had evolved into a “noosphere”—his term for a layer of human awareness that enveloped the earth like some psychic biosphere. As this envelopment progressed, Teilhard believed, man would eventually transcend his individualism and converge at the “Omega Point” with the Omega—God. Instead of God’s creation at the beginning of time, Teilhard emphasized instead his ongoing and future creative activity. To orthodox critics, this vision destroyed the distinction between man and nature, and veered perilously close to pantheism.

In the new book, the man with these radical ideas emerges as a charming, courtly Frenchman who proved singularly attractive to women. One major figure in the Lukases’ story is Lucile Swan, a well-to-do American sculptress separated from her husband. She talked long hours in Peking with the priest and eventually became embittered at his total commitment to celibacy. Teilhard could willingly suffer the privations of expeditions into the northwestern wastes of China. But he seemed more at home attending salon gatherings with personalities ranging from Biologist Julian Huxley to Actress Linda Darnell.

The Lukases found a Teilhard curiously detached from events that surrounded him, even while he constantly urged upon his church the importance of the material world. He lived through 23 turbulent years of Chinese history, yet knew few Chinese and, the Lukases report, never learned a word of their language. In 1937, while observing from the deck of a ship Chinese cities ravaged by fire and cholera, he completed his most optimistic essay (Human Energy) on mankind’s prospects. When he learned that the Piltown Man find—in which he had played a minor

role—was a well-planned hoax, he preferred to suppose that “someone innocently threw the bone fragments from a neighborhood cottage into the ditch.” In his philosophy, evil was to be endured as part of inevitable progress toward good. Sometimes, in fact, his optimism could overwhelm his apprehension of evil; once during a debate that covered the Nazi experiments at Dachau, he told an astonished audience that “man, to become fully man, must have tried everything to the very end.”

Teilhard’s works have become “the property of a cabal of admirers, quite outside the mainstream of modern thought,” assert the Lukases.

Opinions vary on whether that will change. The secular scientists whom Teilhard had hoped to attract tend to ignore his work. British Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper recently dismissed him as one of the “great charlatans” of modern letters. His influence among Protestant thinkers is minimal.

Among Catholics, many conservatives, embarrassed by the church’s treatment of Teilhard during his lifetime, now go out of their way to find and praise valuable insights in his writings. The Jesuit-run Pontifical Gregorian University reports with pride that Teilhard leads its compilation of the most-read Catholic thinkers over the past ten years. Even so, says French Theologian Yves Congar, “it is certain that his influence is diminishing.” American Jesuit Avery Dulles thinks Teilhard’s impact persists, though mainly through writers who were influenced by him.

Shadow of Wagner. There is a growing tendency to evaluate Teilhard’s significance in terms of his broad approach rather than the specifics of his complex theory of evolution. Catholic philosophers today generally credit Teilhard with being instrumental in loosening the long, tight grip on church thinking of the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, with their rigid distinctions between spirit and matter, essence and existence, act and potency. Teilhard was particularly popular in the 1960s, notes Catholic

Lay Theologian Michael Novak, because he fitted the “surge of optimism” in the world and in the church of that period. But his concept of the integration of man and nature is also reflected in the ecological concerns of the 1970s.

University of Chicago Theologian David Tracy describes Teilhard as “a poet of science—a rare cultural type.” Perhaps that is how Teilhard himself understood his own role. Tellingly, he once reached for a musical allusion when talking about his philosophical goals. He did not seek to propagate a “system,” he wrote to a friend in 1927. Rather, he wanted to promote “a certain taste, a certain perception of the beauty, the pathos, and the unity of being ... It would be more to my purpose to be a shadow of Wagner than a shadow of Darwin.”