

Winfried Scharlau

Who is Alexander Grothendieck?

Anarchy, Mathematics, Spirituality, Solitude

A Biography

Part 3: Spirituality

Translated from the German by Melissa Schneps



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About this book

Alexander Grothendieck was one of the most prominent mathematicians of the twentieth century, notably in that he revolutionized algebraic geometry. His life contains unusual drama. In 1970, at the age of 42 and after a brilliant scientific career, he gave up his professorship at the renowned *Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques* in Paris, withdrew from scientific activity, and soon after from mathematical research altogether. For a few years he devoted himself to the peace movement and the emerging ecology movement. Eventually his life became increasingly determined by philosophical, religious and esoteric ideas. Initially Buddhism played an important role, but later he drew closer to a more Christian vision. He wrote a much discussed retrospective account of his time as a mathematician entitled *Récoltes et Semailles* (Reaping and Sowing), and composed other philosophical meditations which remain unknown. In 1991, after undergoing severe psychological crises, he unexpectedly disappeared from public life. This book covers Grothendieck's life from 1970 until 1991.

The author is a professor emeritus of mathematics at the University of Münster. He has been researching and working on Grothendieck's biography for many years. Besides several textbooks and numerous scientific articles he has published two novels and the first volume of this biography.

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Publication information

The manner in which life fared with me would
fill many books which have not yet been written.

Alexander Grothendieck, in a letter to a
schoolfriend dated 29 September 2006

Foreword

The third volume of Alexander Grothendieck's biography covers the years from 1970 until 1991, the years from "the great turning point" in his life until his disappearance from the public sphere. It is with some doubt and only after much hesitation that I present this volume to the public. One reason is that various relevant documents were not available to me, and many contemporary witnesses could or would provide only fragmentary information, so that many large holes remain in my account and without doubt some errors have slipped in. On top of that Grothendieck himself designated my biographical work as "undesirable", although he did not demand that I cease to work on it. Furthermore, it is well-known that in 2009 he wrote several letters in which he forbade the publication or republication of his scientific papers, his "meditations" and his correspondence.

After much reflection and based on well-considered reasons, I have nevertheless arrived at the conviction that this subjectively understandable desire of his should not be taken into account. This view could certainly be formulated in a more conciliatory manner, but in a case of such extraordinary significance as this, it seems to me appropriate to state one's position clearly. As already said in the foreword to the first volume of Grothendieck's biography, Grothendieck's life is so unusual, so unique, that it cannot belong only to him.

Even more than in regard to the first volume, I am immensely grateful to a great many people for their assistance in completing this project. I will say more on this in the afterword.

To conclude I would like to remark that the work on this biography is an ongoing adventure which continues to take astonishing twists and turns, while providing abundant food for thought.

Winfried Scharlau

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