

Sacred Journey

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a Companion for Rudolf Schwarz's

The Church Incarnate

G E R A L D R O B I N S O N

Wipf & Stock • Eugene, Oregon

SACRED JOURNEY

a Companion for Rudolf Schwarz's "The Church Incarnate."

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Wipf and Stock

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3,

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9898-9

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-9899-6

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9900-9

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Some of the material in this work also appears in *Rebuilding the Church on a New Foundation*, published concurrently by Wipf and Stock.

Cover:

interior of St. Fronleichnam Church in Aachen, Germany, 1928.

Rudolf Schwarz, Architect.

see page 60.

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Romano Guardini's Foreword to the 1938 German edition of Rudolf Schwarz's "The Church Incarnate."

Translation: Gerald Robinson

With this foreword I would like to do more than just say that the book that follows is important, because I feel this book requires an introduction. The book comes from a new starting point and has an unfamiliar way of seeing things. Its thoughts are interwoven in many ways, flowing in deep streams, so it's not easy to read. Now I could be wrong. Perhaps it will seem familiar and liberating to some who have been waiting for years for such a work to appear. Others, however, will find it dark and difficult, but they too should read it.

This is a book about which one could easily write a much larger book; in fact it's more a topic than a book: a group of themes full of light and potential, so I see my role as pointing out their significance. This may serve the reader as a set of instructions for the use of the book: instructions to be set aside once he commences reading.

Above all, I noticed something hardly to be expected in a volume about church construction: its strangely intense approach to the human image. This is an attempt to discover in the proportions of the human body a connection between the body and the world by saying, for example, that man is that being which has a hand. This human image is very concrete and exists through all areas of being from the material to the heights of the mind, even a mind infused with the holy spirit. In determining the form of the human being the essence of the world is also named—for every real human form is a broad image—and out of each rises a wonderfully vital overall form of existence. In order to reach this point the author has had to put aside what is generally assumed about man and his world, but you should follow him with confidence because he sees with clear eyes and feels with a warm heart.

This way of being arises from a true encounter with reality. The artist, above all, is aware of this connection; but many a thinker, philosopher or theologian could also be open to such a possibility; a possibility which he could not find within his own discipline. The book could also be welcomed by any person who finds it comfortable to live in such a reality. It seems to me that it should be possible to translate the deep thoughts of this writing into a very simple language; I'm sure there are many who would wish this to be true.

Furthermore, this book embraces a very primitive consciousness of what we call a church. Even the illustrations of churches are not based on concepts of construction but of a living happening. "Church" here is presented as a process, a process passing through world-time. This is a very dynamic picture which does not deny the conventional view of the church but wonderfully complements it. The reader also feels how the local community which is present in celebrations of the Holy Mysteries is constantly condensing from that great event; but this gathering to which we belong every Sunday receives from such a context a wonderful world.

The third thing that I felt when reading this book is not easy to express. I wondered where I had ever experienced the mental or spiritual flow that it embodies. Where does it spring from, what is its provenance? At first there seemed to be a connection to the small forgotten writings of the historical Gethsemane by Konrad Weiss, but going further back; for instance to Paracelsus, to Eckhart, to the hymns of Notker and to the world of early Nordic Christianity. These would be promising connections, the character and meaning of which would not be easy to grasp—one would then have to write that second book of which there has been much discussion.

Out of these connections architectural problems arise. The architectural forms of church appear as great interfaces between man and his world, between human history and divine action; as clarifications of that mysterious procession in which the people of God travel through time; as huge symbols on which the Christian being can be seen in time, and as the liturgies in which it takes place.

I have said a lot about this book, but I hope not too much. I am used to being criticized—one is often criticized over details without the total experience being appreciated, and if total clarity were demanded one could hardly publish anything. Newly created connections cannot be presented in full clarity immediately, and time must be allowed for discussions about the extent of the possible. In any case, the book is not only worth reading, but offers itself as a valuable source for meditation. It will be a great force for the interpretation of divine order.

ROMANO GUARDINI
Berlin, 1938

PART I

The Foundation

Beginning the Journey

Rudolf Schwarz, a German architect and mystic, is famous for designing some beautiful churches, but he is more renowned for his 1938 work¹ *Vom Bau der Kirche* (from Building to Church.) In that work he proposed a system of ideas, what he called “The Six Plans” that would embrace all the worship of the Christian Church. It was extraordinary that Schwarz could record these tender insights into prayer and adoration at a time when Germany was entering its darkest hour. The nation around him was being led by dark forces and entranced by manic visions of a destiny for its blood. Fear was being institutionalized, and religious rituals were being subverted to the glorification of the state and for an eternity that was to last for a millennium.



FIGURE 1. Rudolf Schwarz 1897–1961

It was extraordinary that in this hate-filled environment Schwarz could conduct his gentle inquiry into forms and spaces of worship. After surviving the devastation of his nation and the deaths of its leaders it was even more extraordinary that he would be made responsible for the planning and rebuilding of the central area of the city of Cologne, a task for which he was

1. Schwarz, Rudolf. *Vom Bau der Kirche*. Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1938.

entrusted as he was one of the few German architects who had not been associated with the previous Nazi regime.

Twenty years later, in 1958, an English translation² by Cynthia Harris of Schwarz's book titled *The Church Incarnate* with a foreword by Mies van der Rohe was published. The Canadian Architect magazine received a review copy, and the editor, John Kettle, invited me to write the review. I had just arrived in Canada after graduating with a Master of Architecture degree from the Urban Design Studio at Harvard, but my real background was as a structural engineer which perhaps explains why I found the book so incredibly difficult to read. Its repetitive poetic style and elliptical imagery would send me to sleep, its undulating prose a lullaby, so at the end of a page I would have no memory of what I had just read. At the same time, perhaps because it was so foreign to me, I felt there was something of real value in the book, something just out of reach. I phoned John Kettle to say I needed more time. I needed a lot more time—several years in fact. By the time I was able to write the review the book was out of print! It took me ten years to be able to read Schwarz's book, taking it a little at a time. It took another ten years to be able to put it to use, and a further ten years for me to be able to teach it.

There is general agreement that the work is difficult. In his preface to the German edition (I've attached my translation as a Foreword) Fr. Romano Guardini, a friend of Schwarz, wrote³ "The book comes from a new starting point and has an unfamiliar way of seeing things. Its thoughts are interwoven in many ways, flowing in deep streams, so it's not easy to read." These sentiments were echoed in the English edition, both in the Foreword by Mies van der Rohe and the Translator's Invitation by Cynthia Harris.

From a superficial reading of the "Contents" page many have assumed that after an introductory chapter the book examines six church plans, finds them all wanting, then proceeds to a seventh plan which tests out. Nothing could be further from the truth. Schwarz's sacred journey is not a straight line; it is a combination of a maze and a labyrinth. A maze because it opens up all sorts of seductive avenues which turn out to be dead ends; and a

2. Schwarz, Rudolf. *The Church Incarnate*, Translated by Cynthia Harris. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958.

3. Guardini, Zum Geleit: *Vom Bau der Kirche*.

labyrinth because its value lies not in its inevitable conclusion but in the insights gained along the way. Schwarz chose not to eliminate from his prose those non-essential decorations which he carefully excised from his architecture. It brings to mind a quotation⁴ by Paul Claudel: “the parts that you don’t understand, they are the most beautiful of all!”

Cynthia Harris’s translation of Schwarz’s work has been my companion for sixty years. For sixty years I have enjoyed her beautiful evocative prose that reads like poetry yet remains true to the original. My reverence for this book does not mean I understand it; in fact I don’t believe that such a thing could be possible. To understand means to perceive a meaning in something, but Schwarz’s words change their meanings from sentence to sentence. He dwells in a spiritual dimension where he was able to see qualities beyond those of our physical world. Sometimes he is worldly, and sometimes he is God-centered. In that world words may have multiple meanings, and opposites are free to co-exist, so in his writings: that which is open may also be perceived as closed, dark may be light, clear may be opaque, space may become an object, and all directions may be reversed. All this can create confusion. In his world one has to surrender to the moment and avoid importing the logic of the physical world into the spiritual. For an example of this layering of meanings we could look at his illustrations of a curved wall (figures 2 and 3) which is a barrier between inside and outside, but also may be the reflector of a searchlight sending a beam of light into heavens, or a telescope focusing on a distant star, so it could either project or receive light.

A further layering lies in his title for this formation. He calls this light-filled space “The Dark Chalice,” possibly to indicate the process by which the space empties itself of light and thus creates darkness.

In another version the wall itself could be dematerialized, becoming a pathway along which the people could form a procession, and do that in two directions, as coming and going, as indicated by the tiny arrows in a following illustration (fig. 4).

4. Claudel. *Le Soulier de Satin*. (prologue to Act 1)

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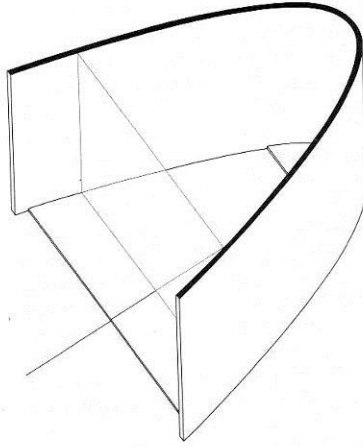


FIGURE 2. *The Church Incarnate*, page 159. The parabola as wall.

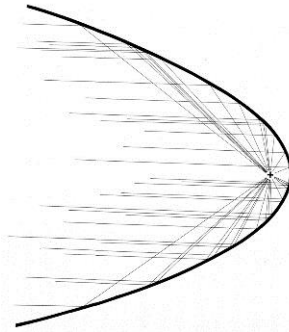


FIGURE 3. *The Church Incarnate*, page 174. The parabola as reflector.

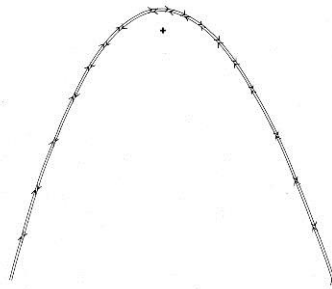


FIGURE 4. *The Church Incarnate*, page 175. The parabola as pathway.

Clearly these must be conceptions of different realities. As an engineer my attention had been focused on the single reality of an objective, ordered, and predictable non-quantum universe, but in studying Schwarz's book I experienced how multiple worlds may co-exist. This expansion has important implications for architecture, design and theology, but he does not make it easy. I followed him as best I could, being dragged through swamps, led up blind alleys and having to leap over chasms, but I had the sense that the journey was a Sacred Journey, with a worthwhile goal of service, not at the end but along the way. To assist other seekers I offer this work, not as a substitute for Schwarz's work but as a companion to it. Guardini himself felt that a companion volume would be useful, saying⁵: "This is a book about which one could write a much larger book . . . it seems to me that it should be possible to translate the deep thoughts of this writing into a very simple language."

Instead of the "much larger book" Guardini mentioned, it's my ambition to attempt a book which, by the clarity of its "very simple language," could be much smaller. Compared to *The Church Incarnate* this work that I am offering is both more and less. More: because it bridges gaps and makes connections that Schwarz only hinted at, and less: because it avoids attractive detours and seductive dead-ends where he sometimes gets bogged-down. And all the while, on the way, a companion offers friendship and the agreement that there is a common goal. In this case, the goal is for the knowledge and insights picked up along the way to be useful; to be of service to humanity.

In his very first sentence Schwarz writes that the spirit may find its expression in multiple physical forms, and a physical form may have multiple spiritual significances. He notes that in former times the term "the body of Christ" could be applied to many things: to an altar, to the congregation, to the building where the people meet, or to the whole earth. And for him, as for those ancient congregations, these were not metaphors, they were descriptions of a reality that was layered with holiness. Thus the worship space in a church building, looked-upon as Christ's body, was perceived as a real body. The space in the chancel was the head, the transepts were the outstretched arms, the body was the nave, and the crossing was the

5. Guardini, see Foreword

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heart. Tradition states that when Jesus died on the cross his head fell to the left, so in some medieval churches the chancel was also turned slightly to the left, creating a so-called “weeping chancel.”

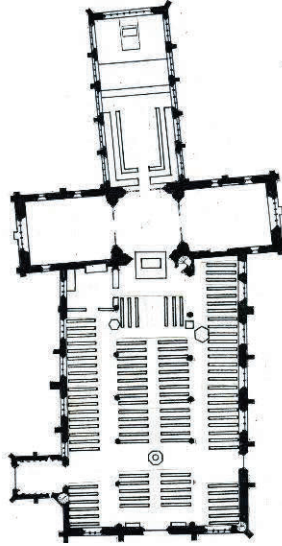


FIGURE 5. The Church of the Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon. A natural response for us when we are in such a church is for us too to turn our heads slightly to the left; a gentle offering of ourselves to share an experience and express a unity with the Savior.

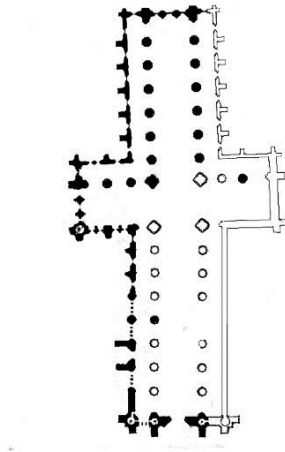


FIGURE 6. The ruins of Whitby Abbey also reveal a Weeping Chancel.