The Cold War, the Unity of the Church and Eastern Orthodoxy, 1948-1966

Abstract
Chapter 7 traces Visser ‘t Hooft’s activity as a (controversial) bridge builder during the period of the Cold War, on the unity of the church, and Eastern Orthodoxy. Despite the Cold War, which prevented Eastern Orthodox churches from joining the World Council, Visser ‘t Hooft held firmly to the direction set by the World Council as a third way between East and West, utilising insights he laid out in earlier publications. At the same time the World Council had to deal with the question of churches recognising other churches as true. In this chapter we see how Visser ‘t Hooft inspired people to apply ecumenicity across the East-West divide. The chapter also looks at criticism of Visser ‘t Hooft’s approach.

Keywords: Cold War, Eastern Orthodoxy, communism, Russia, religious persecution

7.1 Introduction

In his 1933 book Le catholicisme non-romain Visser ‘t Hooft had already concluded that Eastern Orthodoxy was an indispensable part of the world church. In the period after the Second World War, when the Cold War made contact considerably more difficult, he had resolved to do what he could to draw the Eastern Orthodox churches into the World Council. He had built up many Orthodox contacts in his youth and student work, and these contacts played a major role in policy while he developed a strategy with the tacit but preset goal of having the Russian Orthodox Church join the World Council. He took great care not to annoy the Russian contacts that did exist but to appreciate their presence (7.2). His personal fascination with Orthodoxy helped him to win over church leaders. But how did that work out in practice, including those aspects that had to do with fundamental
theological beliefs? (7.3). During that period, the world seemed obsessed with the opposition between communism and capitalism. How did Visser 't Hooft deal with this politically paralysing divide while trying to strengthen the ties between the World Council and the Eastern Orthodox churches? Over the course of time, he did manage to break through the impasse at least in the area of ecumenics (7.4). The attention he paid to the Orthodox churches was not separate from the concrete experience of a crisis in Europe. Everything seemed to revolve around Berlin. Visser ’t Hooft dealt with this in an extremely cautious though committed and especially independent way. He was concerned with looking at what the churches could do for peace in the 1950s (7.5). To convince the leaders of the Russian Church, he returned time and again to the starting points that the central committee of the World Council had adopted in Toronto in 1950. The World Council was not a super church, and becoming a member did not mean explicitly recognising other member churches as fully church (7.6). Everyone knew that the KGB was looking over the shoulders of the delegates from the Church of Russia who received permission from the Soviet authorities to form contacts in the outside world. How did Visser ’t Hooft deal with this? (7.7). A breakthrough was reached in 1961: the Russian Orthodox Church became a member of the World Council and, with an estimated membership of 50 million, was by far the largest member church. Some other Eastern Orthodox Churches followed in its wake. How did Visser ’t Hooft himself evaluate the significance of this then and later? (7.8). How did others assess this development? (7.9).

7.2 Building on Old Contacts

With respect to Orthodoxy, it was not only Visser ’t Hooft’s desire to connect as many churches as possible to the World Council that played a role here. In Orthodoxy he saw a precious aspect preserved of what it is to be church that the West urgently needed. This aspect had attracted his attention already when he was a young man. It was not theology but Russian literature, particularly Dostoyevsky, that first awakened Visser ’t Hooft’s fascination in the 1920s with the world of the Orthodox. It was not the church, but the experience of faith that was central here. In 1920, Germanos, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople who presided over about twenty non-autocephalous Greek Orthodox churches all over the world, had addressed an encyclical to Christians everywhere with the purpose of setting up a ‘fellowship of churches’ that would offer spiritual support to the League
of Nations. This call went unnoticed by the young Visser ‘t Hooft at that time, but the autocephalous Orthodox churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania became involved in the then still informal ecumenical movement. In his work for the YMCA and the WSCF, Visser ‘t Hooft had met representatives and members of these churches everywhere in the Balkans, and the discussion about the ecumenical call of 1920 had taken place. He later often referred to the importance of this Orthodox encyclical, and – also after 1948 – constantly underscored its, in principle, ecclesial character. The question remains whether all his Orthodox dialogue partners – if they were already familiar with the content of the encyclical – shared the conclusions he drew from it or the implications that he attached to it in connection with the significance of the World Council of Churches. As far as he was concerned, the foundation of this organisation was the decisive answer to the 1920 call of the Patriarch and all Orthodox churches belonged in the World Council.

Visser ‘t Hooft gradually learned through his experience in the 1920s and 1930s a great deal about the wealth of the Orthodox tradition and Orthodox sensitivities. Shortly after the First World War, the Orthodox churches had followed the missionary activities of the Protestant YMCA in East European countries with a critical eye. These activities quickly resulted in Orthodox accusations of proselytism, attempts to convert the youth to Protestantism. Russian and Bulgarian churches even forbade their youth from participating in YMCA activities. That led Visser ‘t Hooft to become involved in a whole series of encounters between YMCA and WSCF leaders on the one hand and the Orthodox on the other, in Denmark 1926, Sofia 1928, Thessaloniki and Athens 1930, and Bucharest 1933, in which the most important objective was to calm the fears of the Orthodox. In these meetings, the Russian Student Christian Movement, primarily active among Russians outside communist Russia, informed the Western Protestants of the specific situation in each country. In 1933, a settlement could be reached between the YMCA and the Orthodox churches. It was agreed that the activities of the YMCA in Eastern Europe would, in principle, be Orthodox in character, albeit with room for contributions from other confessions. Bible studies would be carried out in line with the Orthodox view of Scripture. Every form of proselytism was explicitly rejected, and the activities of the YMCA would be supported by the Orthodox church. This agreement was accepted at the time by the Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Alexandrian

churches and by part of the Russian émigré hierarchy, that is, by the Russian Orthodox clergy who had left Russia because of state communism. As a result, there was fruitful collaboration between the YMCA and the Orthodox in the Balkans for some time.

Visser ‘t Hooft was a personal friend of Athenagoras I, the metropolitan of Corfu, who hosted a youth conference on this island in the winter of 1929. In 1931, Athenagoras was the Greek Orthodox archbishop of America and then Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople from 1948-1972, a title that he, Visser ‘t Hooft felt, did justice to. While the Church of Russia did not join in the work of the WSCF, the Russian Orthodox refugees did. The young Russian émigrés were in the process of rediscovering their faith, a process that fascinated Visser ‘t Hooft. This revival was an important topic of discussion at a conference on religious upbringing and education that he organised in Sofia in 1930. The Orthodox tradition seemed to be very vital in a spiritual sense among these young people, but secularisation was quickly taking root in the Orthodox countries. Visser ‘t Hooft became more and more convinced during this year that it was would be of great value to strengthen both the contacts between East and West and the contacts between the Orthodox churches. The 1933 study *Le catholicisme non-Romain* was the book in which he referred to Orthodoxy as an authentic and indispensable part of the ecumenical movement. Promoting the modernity of the twentieth century and the major questions that accompanied that could only truly be done on the basis of the roots that gave nourishment in a continuing Christian tradition. As far as Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned, the doctrines of the Orthodox Church were part of that, and the West had a major interest in learning to understand them better. Visser ‘t Hooft felt personally called to work on this, and in 1947 he argued before the provisional committee for the recognition of the value of the ‘objectivity’ of the Eastern Orthodox churches:

> [T]he Eastern churches have maintained a sense of the objective reality and the cosmic dimensions of the drama of salvation which the Western churches need to recapture.\(^2\)

But while there was clear rapprochement between the World Council on the one hand and the Ecumenical Patriarch and the autocephalus, i.e. the administratively and spiritually independent, Greek, Serbian, Romanian, and Bulgarian churches on the other, the distance between the World Council and the Russian Church was the greatest for a long time.

The network that he built in the Balkans in the 1930s served him well after the Second World War. Many who were in involved in youth work at the time ended up in high positions. Germanos Stenopoulos (1872-1951) was active in the WSCF and Faith and Order and was the archbishop of Thyateira, with his seat in London, and exarch of West and Central Europe. The Greek Orthodox Professor Hamilcar Alivisatos from Athens, Professor Stephan Zankov from Bulgaria, Bishop Ireneus from Novi Sad, and Patriarch Athenagoras from Constantinople were all men he had early learned to appreciate and trust. Already during the war, in 1942, Visser ’t Hooft could establish on the basis of his information sources that most Orthodox churches would probably accept an invitation to have themselves represented by a consultative conference.3 And, indeed, with the foundation of the World Council in 1948, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Greek Orthodox Church, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem joined and became members immediately.

In a quantitative sense, the Orthodox were completely overshadowed by the Protestants in the World Council, which meant that the Orthodox voice was scarcely heard in the early years. To his regret, after some time, Visser ’t Hooft had to conclude that an Orthodox minority complex did exist. The limitation of Orthodoxy to Greek and Eastern Orthodox was, he felt, not the contribution to ecumenical dialogue that this venerable tradition was owed, given its place in church history.4 Germanos Stenopoulos was chosen in Amsterdam to be one of the presidents of the World Council. He was a striking figure, a defining presence as he sat at the table on the podium at the World Council's foundation. But Germanos died in 1951. On the one hand, there was now the danger of the Orthodox members becoming ‘inhibitors in permanent employ’. Visser ’t Hooft sensed that the conservative Orthodox could stand in the way of clear ecclesial statements. On the other hand, Visser ’t Hooft was concerned that the World Council could be seen primarily as a ‘pan-Protestant’ movement.

That other Orthodox churches, in countries under communist rule, responded negatively to the foundation of the World Council caused unrest in the Greek Church. The Greeks made it clear to Visser ’t Hooft that people in their church doubted whether they should continue their membership if there was so little Orthodox influence. A major stumbling block was that the Greeks were very hesitant about the status of other churches that had

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3 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Notes on the Situation of the Eastern Orthodox Churches’, 1942.
4 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 254: ‘the contribution to the ecumenical dialogue which they [the orthodox churches] were entitled to make in view of their place in church history.’
joined the World Council. Were all those Protestant denominations true churches? How could that be? The Orthodox collaboration with the World Council threatened to become a short-term phenomenon, something that Visser ’t Hooft did not at all approve of. In 1951, there was a major festival in Athens and a pilgrimage to Athos in honour of the apostle Paul who had proclaimed the Gospel on the Areopagus 1900 years previously. Visser ’t Hooft rejoiced that he had succeeded in strengthening the bonds with the Greeks during this festival. But, in his eyes, it was still extremely important to bring the Eastern Orthodox churches into the World Council. The key to that was the Russian Church.

7.3 Theology and Practical Reality

The programme was ready. Visser ’t Hooft had outlined his theological presuppositions in the much-read book that he had written in 1937 with Joseph Oldham for the Life and Work conference in Oxford. He described a palette of churches and their position with respect to church unity, in which the ecclesiology that the Orthodox churches espoused had an important place. It was precisely in the Orthodox faith that Visser ’t Hooft found a profound view of the church as the living image of eternity in time. The Orthodox based their view of unity on respect for the tradition as a means of revelation by God. In that respect, they were close to the Roman Catholics. But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the church was the mystical and sacramental unity of all believers, past, present, and future, of which Jesus Christ was the head. The visible hierarchy, synods, and bishops were primarily a reflection of that unity in Christ the head. The unity of the church’s members was expressed in the liturgy of this church more than it was in doctrines. The Russian concept of sobornost described this spiritual unity that was attributed to the church and often placed in opposition to Western individualism. The Russian philosopher in exile, Nicolai Berdyaev, had pointed this out to Visser ’t Hooft already around 1930. It was in these terms that Visser ’t Hooft argued for his inclusive view of the importance of concretising church unity in a language that could be understood in the East. He underscored the catholicity of the local or national church on the one hand and the vertical dimension of universality that the Orthodox faith fostered on the other. While the highest authority was ascribed to the pope in the Roman Catholic Church and to the Bible in Protestantism, in the

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Eastern Orthodox tradition, the church itself, as the criterion of catholicism and apostolicity, was central. Eastern Orthodox churches recognised other churches as true but defective parts of the body of Christ, and this was a problem. Already in 1937, however, Visser ‘t Hooft asserted in hopefulness that, while sacramental unity could be achieved only through doctrinal agreement, the Orthodox could work closely with other churches on practical matters. There was always a shared confidence that God used the church to change the world from the inside out in line with his purpose for creation.

But the invitation to join the World Council of Churches when it was founded in 1948 was rejected by the Moscow conference of Orthodox church leaders.6 It was precisely in that year that they celebrated 500 years as an autocephalous church. The Vatican, the Anglican Church, and the World Council that was to be founded were all subjected to criticism in strongly worded resolutions. In a response, Visser ‘t Hooft indicated that the rejection of the invitation by the Russian Orthodox Church and associated churches was deeply disappointing and in his view ultimately based on a mistake. On the one hand, the Russian Church’s non-participation was a consequence of the state forbidding it. On the other hand, the church leaders were under the mistaken impression that the World Council of Churches was striving for power. After writing that response, Visser ‘t Hooft expressly kept the door open for the Eastern Orthodox churches. Misunderstandings had to be cleared up, something to which he felt personally called.7 But there was a serious problem. The Russian Church kept its distance from society:

At the same time we should not close our eyes to the fact that between Moscow and ourselves there stand not only a series of misunderstandings, but also a very real divergence of conviction as to the role of the Church in the world. Since its very beginnings ... the ecumenical movement had believed that the Church has to proclaim the Lordship of Christ over the world and has the right and the duty to speak its mind concerning the affairs of this world. But the present leaders of the Church of Russia deny this. According to them the Church must abstain from any judgement concerning the state or society.8

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Was the ‘otherworldly’ theology of the Eastern Orthodox churches inherent to the church itself? In Visser ’t Hooft’s view, that was indeed the case. The focus on the internal spiritual life of the church and the purity of age-old doctrines could not be understood only as a survival strategy. Orthodox churches experienced an almost complete expression of Christian life and of the church in liturgy and mysticism, where the Eucharist was central. Visser ’t Hooft expected that rapprochement would take a long time. In the meantime, the World Council had to set its own course and, as had also been decided in Amsterdam, reject choosing sides in the Cold War. The ‘third way’ had to be worked out again and again with respect to content. He felt that people should not allow themselves to be thrown off when they were possibly misunderstood in the East and the West but continue to hope and especially persevere in prayer.9

Visser ’t Hooft knew that the Russian Orthodox Church had not had a strong tradition of exercising its prophetic role over against the powerful in the time of the czars either. He also saw that people were afraid of losing the few privileges that Stalin had granted the church during the war. Nonetheless, Visser ’t Hooft continued to believe that Eastern Orthodox churches were not the petrified, cumbersome structures that many in the West felt them to be. He pointed to a yearning in these churches for spirituality and to a new generation that wrestled with current issues against the background of secularisation that held both Eastern and Western Europe in its grip. With a sense of hope, he also felt that he could already assert that the ecumenical encounter with the Western Protestants brought together various Orthodox churches that had hardly any mutual contact outside the World Council.10

7.4 A Third Way between East and West

For years, Visser ’t Hooft worked purposefully on a strategy to reach the Eastern Orthodox churches. He was convinced that he had to begin in Moscow. If the Russian Orthodox Church could be won, other Orthodox churches would follow. The isolation into which state communism had brought it had to be broken. Visser ’t Hooft’s most important source of information on the Russian Church was, until his death in 1948, Nikolaj Berdyaev, and for a time, after the Second World War, Father Seraphim

9 Visser ’t Hooft, ’Notes on the World Council of Churches as between East and West’, 1949.
Rose, an Orthodox priest who lived in Paris. But Visser ‘t Hooft also needed other people with current contacts in Eastern and Central Europe. In 1946, he managed, after after considerable persistence, to convince the Czech theologian Josef L. Hromádka to return to Prague from Princeton, where he was a professor. In Visser ‘t Hooft’s view, the Czech Protestants could play a major role here and needed strong leaders. Hromádka would have a unique position in Prague and exercise great influence through his place in the Hus faculty. Visser ‘t Hooft wrote:

[W]e would turn to you very often for your help in all matters related to the Church in Central Europe as well as the delicate problems of relationships between the Churches of the West and those of the East orthodox countries.\(^\text{11}\)

The year the World Council was founded – 1948 – was a turbulent year for Czechoslovakia. Hromádka refused to condemn the new communist regime in Prague and argued for a dialogue between Marxists and Christians. That was going too far, even for Visser ‘t Hooft, but he defended Hromádka constantly in these years.\(^\text{12}\) When Hromádka went even further in the 1950s and accepted money from the Russians for setting up the Christian Peace Conference, he became less interesting for Visser ‘t Hooft as a contact person. But Visser ‘t Hooft continued to appreciate him as a theologian.\(^\text{13}\)

Visser ‘t Hooft himself saw four possible positions: Russia and communism, the West and capitalism, a position in between, or a retreat into an ‘other-worldly realm of the spirit.’ He argued for the active development of a third way between capitalism and communism. In January 1948, he spoke on this topic to students in London, where his message was that young people had to accept the existing fronts and had to open up a third front: ‘Tertium datur’.\(^\text{14}\) The church was not above the chaos of the world but was now being sucked into the division of the Cold War. Only the Gospel could produce a breakthrough in a sterile political dilemma. Only through conversion and taking a radical position, which was to be expected from the new generation, would true Christian solidarity come to light. Visser ‘t Hooft saw it as a good sign that the World Council was being attacked by both communists

\(^{11}\) Visser ‘t Hooft to J.L. Hromádka, 5 March 1946, WCC general correspondence 686.
\(^{12}\) Visser ‘t Hooft to J.L. Hromádka, 12 March 1948, WCC general correspondence 686.
\(^{13}\) Visser ‘t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 365.
Visser ’t Hooft, 1900–1985

and supporters of capitalism. He saw the fact that the criticism came from both sides as confirmation that the World Council really was setting its own course. At the meeting of the central committee in the summer of 1949, in Chichester, every type of capitalism was condemned, whereas no side in the Korean conflict was chosen. Visser ’t Hooft regularly repeated the lesson that had been taught in the Second World War: that God’s acts with his people took place as a specific salvation history behind the scenes. The World Council thus did not have to let its agenda be prescribed by the catastrophes of the world.15

A weak and vulnerable church was busy setting itself up on a global scale and learned, once again, what it was to carry out a spiritual battle. Becoming aware of its roots thus enabled the church to act as the most important guardian of human values – not theoretically but in practice. In Eastern Germany and in the countries of Asia that were experiencing unrest, he heard the young saying that the church was the only place where they felt they were still taken seriously as people. According to Visser ’t Hooft, this confirmed something essential that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had called attention to. It was up to the World Council to emphasise as much as possible the inclusive community in which both East and West were involved. Bonds between churches on both sides of the Iron Curtain had to be strengthened and maintained. Churches had a special capacity for peacebuilding that was sorely needed in the world.

Visser ’t Hooft continued to defend Hromádka, even when he took a position in 1948 that was diametrically opposed to that of the American John Foster Dulles, an important figure in American ecumenism at the time, and became even more radical in the succeeding years.16 Hromádka stretched the principle of the third way to its utmost, and even Visser ’t Hooft had serious disagreements with him about this.17 But Visser ’t Hooft praised Hromádka repeatedly for his sincere ecumenical attitude and viewed him, with his great interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, as a valuable advance post eastwards for the World Council that had to be preserved. Hromádka was living proof that the World Council was truly impartial. Even when Hromádka came under heavy criticism because he refused to condemn the Russian invasion

16 Visser ’t Hooft to R. Niebuhr, E. Berggrav and others, 23 April 1948, WCC general correspondence 686. Hromádka defended his position in the memorandum ‘Between Yesterday and Tomorrow’, 1948, that was sent with this letter. Ibid. Visser ’t Hooft to J.L. Hromádka, 31 December 1948, WCC general correspondence 687.
17 Visser ’t Hooft to J.L. Hromádka, 6 April and 18 October 1950, WCC general correspondence 687.
of Hungary in 1956, Visser ’t Hooft still tried to take his side. He did find that Hromádka now confused a Christian view of history with a political interpretation.18

7.5 What Can the Churches Do for Peace?

Not everyone could agree with the independent course of the ‘third way’ of which Visser ’t Hooft was such an advocate. The Cold War rhetoric in the West was strongly anti-communist. For example, there was fierce criticism in the Netherlands from Arie Kok, secretary-general of the small International Council of Christian Churches, which presented itself as the fundamentalist counterpart of the World Council and was intentionally also founded in Amsterdam – shortly before the World Council – on 11-19 August 1948. Kok published an article called ‘De vijand in het kamp; modernisme en communisme binnengedrongen in de jonge zendingskerken van Z.O.-Azie’ (‘The Enemy in the Camp: Modernism and Communism Invading the Young Missionary Churches of Southeast Asia’) in 195019 that attacked the World Council for refusing to take a position on the side of the ‘free world’ towards communist states, particularly the atheistic Soviet Union. Visser ’t Hooft felt called to justify himself. In his analysis of communism, he distinguished between three different phenomena.20 First, he saw a major world movement in which the less privileged of humanity asserted their existence. There were millions looking for recognition and improvement of their lot, and Visser ’t Hooft could understand why some of them reached for the communist paradigm. That held a certain power of attraction for them, and who could hold it against them that they desired a social revolution? Second, Visser ’t Hooft characterised communism as an illusionistic philosophy that had originated in the nineteenth century with Karl Marx and reflected the brotherhood of people but did not truly understand the spiritual needs of people. A third type was communism as a contemporary political phenomenon that attracted not only power-hungry regimes in countries like the Soviet Union and China but also liberation movements in colonies.

According to Visser ’t Hooft, Christians would do well not to confuse these different meanings of communism. They were not to look at the mistakes of communism but to look seriously at the needs of people everywhere where possible, not only the material needs but also the spiritual needs. Resisting communism was good, but it had to be done in the right – for him the Protestant – way by going to God and first confessing one’s own sins, accepting God’s judgment, and showing the fruits of repentance in one’s behaviour to others. Where it concerned state communism as a temptation for young countries that had just been decolonised, Christianity had the answer, according to Visser ’t Hooft. As church, people had to demonstrate in everyday life that religion in the form of the Gospel was not at all the opium of the people that Marx had claimed it was; to the contrary, it was the only power that guaranteed a liberated personal life.

In February 1950, Martin Niemöller, as president of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Evangelical Church in Germany, EKD), entreated Visser ’t Hooft to address the synod to be held in April in Berlin in the Russian sector. Reinhold Niebuhr had cancelled. Acting in his personal capacity, Visser ’t Hooft gave a speech in Berlin called ‘Was können die Kirchen für den Frieden tun?’ (‘What Can the Churches Do for Peace?’). The chairman was Gustav W. Heinemann, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic in the Adenauer government. It was a tense period. Shortly before, the Russians had attempted to isolate West Berlin, and in 1949 first the Federal Republic was declared, and a few months later the German Democratic Republic, resulting in two German states. In the part of Germany under Soviet domination, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany was attempting, with Russian support, to gain power, while West Germany, stimulated by American help, seemed to embrace capitalism. In the East, they hoped for a clear position by the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, which still brought representatives from all across Germany together.

Visser ’t Hooft said that what preoccupied people in 1950 was not so much a matter of being for or against peace. It was a struggle between two ideologies. Precisely now churches had to raise a clear independent voice. The fear complex that dominated the world and divided it into camps had to be forcefully combatted – the task Christians were charged with was to be reconcilers. Christ was king, high priest, and prophet, and the focus on him was essential. Absolute sovereignty, of whatever country, was pride, and the community of states could not correspond to any ideal but was intended to serve humanity which was created by God as a unit. Every

justification of a possible war between East and West therefore had to be rejected in principle.

The man of 1950 has to experience that he is taken seriously as a person in the church. The church cannot be silent if refugees or members of a certain race or a certain class are treated as second-class people. ... Whoever remembers what happened in the last war will reject all war propaganda as the worst temptation. The atom and hydrogen bombs are a question we cannot avoid. The answer of the church can be nothing else than a strong ‘No’ to every game that has the possibility of becoming a war.22

His conclusion was that the church had to distance itself from every form of power politics.

Visser ‘t Hooft made a deep impression with his lecture in Berlin. There was a Western-leaning paper that would rather have heard words about liberty and the struggle against communism from the general secretary at this time than peace: ‘The church ... must, if it is not to lose its influence and its significance, also join the community of fighters against communism.’ There was no getting around it.23 Diametrically opposed to that was the criticism of the communist newspaper, Neues Deutschland, which accused Visser ‘t Hooft of inconsequential theological word games: ‘Through ... theological-diplomatic tricks, Visser ‘t Hooft invalidated the warning that he so eloquently directed at the atomic politicians.’ Visser ‘t Hooft had submitted his text to the leaders of the German synod in advance, and the synod accepted a statement that closely reflected his words. In a church service in a packed St. Mary’s Cathedral, Visser ‘t Hooft called the Protestant youth of Berlin not to leave actual missionary witness to ministers but to

23 Der Telegraph, 25 April 1950, YDS-4, 17: ‘Die Kirche [...] muß, wenn sie ihren Einfluß und ihre Bedeutung nicht ganz und gar verlieren will, mit eintreten in die Gemeinschaft des Kampfes gegen den Kommunismus.’
24 Neues Deutschland, 30 April 1950, YDS-4, 20. ‘Durch [...] theologisch-diplomatischen Künste hob Visser ‘t Hooft die Mahnung faktisch wieder auf, die er zungengewandt an die Atompolitiker richtete.’
take action themselves and courageously proclaim themselves members of a church.\textsuperscript{25}

He remained cautious. When the Danish bishop Halfdan Høgsbro began to organise unofficial meetings at this time across the Iron Curtain, Visser ‘t Hooft did not think the time was ripe for the World Council to support this action. The wrong impression could easily arise in Eastern Europe that the kind of collaborators were being encouraged who were busy ‘selling out the church’. The greatest challenge was to build up real contact with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The question of a representative from the Moscow Patriarchate is already far more difficult, for they are likely to send a man who represents more the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs than the position of the Church.\textsuperscript{26}

Visser ‘t Hooft advised Høgsbro to try to convince Metropolitan Nicholas Boris Dorofeyevich Yarusevich,(1892-1961), and metropolitan of Krutitsky and Kolomna since 1947, and the chairperson of the department of external ecclesial relations, to send ‘a true churchman’ from Russia.

Visser ‘t Hooft took the situation in Berlin to heart. In August 1951, he was in the city again, now for the church congress of the Evangelical Church.\textsuperscript{27} He based his speech on Romans 8:35-39: ‘Wer will uns scheiden von der Liebe Gottes’ (‘Who shall separate us from the love of God’) and later gave a meditation in the Olympic Stadium on 2 Corinthians 13:4: ‘Ob er wohl gekreuzigt ist in der Schwachheit, so lebt er doch in der Kraft Gottes’ (For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power). He told his audience that a few weeks earlier he had stood on the Mount of Olives opposite Jerusalem and there saw a torn city in a torn country. In Visser ‘t Hooft’s view, the cross of Christ was as much in the midst of the world in the city of Berlin as it was in the Holy Land. By crucifying the peacebuilder Christ, Visser ‘t Hooft proclaimed, ‘a city without peace and a world without peace’ had made clear that they would not tolerate any interruption of their violent plans. People could not endure God’s peacebuilder Christ, and they had rejected him. But Visser ‘t Hooft also related how he had stood on the Areopagus in Athens with thousands of Christians and celebrated the Feast of St. Paul. He had realised then that,

\textsuperscript{25} Der Tag, 26 April 1950, YDS-4, 18.
\textsuperscript{26} Visser ‘t Hooft to H. Høgsbro, 29 November 1951, WCC general correspondence 674.
\textsuperscript{27} Visser ‘t Hooft, speech at the church congress, Berlin, 1951, WCC 994.2.14/6.
after an initial failure, it was, in the end, the message of Paul (Paul, the apostle) about this ‘Christ and him crucified’ that had conquered strife among people.\textsuperscript{28} He characterised this development figuratively as the victory of the small bare rocky hill of the Areopagus, the symbol for the wisdom of the Gospel, over the powerful Acropolis, the wisdom of the world. God’s peace movement was thus stronger than the enmity of people as was so clearly experienced in Berlin.

7.6 A Strategic Thinker in Toronto

When it was a question of winning new churches for the World Council, Visser ‘t Hooft understood that it would be detrimental for the council to claim too much for itself. An ecclesiological approach that reached too high would deter candidate churches that viewed themselves as the complete and full body of Christ. That could apply to some small Reformational churches, but it obtained in particular for the large Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. It came down to making clear that membership in the World Council would in no way harm the belief of any church that it was the embodiment of the pure church. It had to remain clear that membership did not imply that the church in question recognised that all other member churches were fully church. But the council could not be an informal platform of encounter either. In short, the ecclesiological implications of the World Council constituted an important issue.

The tone for the discussion with the Orthodox was determined by the important policy document, ‘The Church, the churches and the World Council of Churches’. This was the result of the discussions in the central committee in 1950 in Toronto, where Visser ‘t Hooft managed to find support for his diplomatic approach to the ecclesiological meaning of the World Council.\textsuperscript{29} This was not the beginning of a super church, nor was it an informal encounter platform or an assistance organisation. Visser ‘t Hooft deliberately did not start by raising the bar too high: ‘The World Council exists in order to deal in a provisional way with an abnormal situation.’

The member churches of the World Council consider the relationship of the other churches to the Holy Catholic Church which the creeds profess as a subject for mutual consideration. Nevertheless, membership does

\textsuperscript{28} 1 Corinthians 2:2.

not imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word.\textsuperscript{30}

This formulation for allaying fears was very controversial at the time – some found it unacceptable for member churches to look at each other in that way. But it was Georges Florovsky, an émigré Russian Orthodox priest from Paris who presented the problem in a clear fashion and demanded this formulation. Visser ’t Hooft understood that it was the only way to provide room for the Orthodox to take part. Nevertheless, he would also work at raising the World Council above this ecclesiological minimum of Toronto, without it being unacceptable for the Orthodox.\textsuperscript{31} He hoped that this would promote rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church, but that would prove even more difficult than with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

\section*{Searching for Saints in Russia}

It came down to a question of building up contacts with reliable people in the Russian Church. Visser ’t Hooft was confident that opportunities would present themselves. Martin Niemöller was a valuable pioneer behind the Iron Curtain, but not everyone in ‘the free West’ appreciated him. First as an ecumenical leader and then as a German, he visited the Soviet Union after the war in December 1951 and January 1952. He had been invited by Alexi I (1877-1970), who was Patriarch of Moscow from 1945 to 1970, the officially recognised (by the state) head of the Russian Church. Niemöller carefully investigated the possibility of developing relationships between the patriarchate and the ecumenical movement but received no answer to the question whether the church in Russia served Stalin or Christ in the first place. In 1927, Alexi was one of the signatories to a document in which the synodical members promised unconditional loyalty to the Soviet state. A hardline atheistic policy was implemented for years, but in 1943 Stalin had given the church a bit more room, with a view to the war effort. That did not mean that Alexi could act against Stalin. When the patriarch spoke, the Committee for State Security, the KGB, listened attentively.\textsuperscript{32} Visser

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{ellis} Ellis, \textit{The Russian Orthodox Church} (1986), 270.
\end{thebibliography}
't Hooft did not feel it advisable to invite the Russian Church to the World Council assembly in Evanston in 1954. But he did send all documentation to Russia, and there were two Eastern Orthodox observers present.33 Although

Evanston recommended that the contacts with the Eastern Orthodox be developed further, Visser ’t Hooft could only take small steps, for there were differences of opinion right up into the central committee of the World Council itself. The Russian observers found the whole approach to the unity of the church as presented at Evanston completely unacceptable.

Nevertheless, after Stalin’s death in March 1953, something truly changed, and after 1954 Visser ’t Hooft slowly but surely made progress in improving the contacts between the World Council and the Russian Orthodox Church. An open question here was whether the better contacts with the World Council would help or harm the freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. The World Council attempted via various means to establish contacts, for example, via leaders of the Russian Church in the United States, who could speak out more freely. Visser ’t Hooft continually received new signals that, despite the many things that could be condemned, the Russian Church fought a true fight for the Christian faith. Contact was finally made with the Patriarchate of Moscow via the Russian Orthodox bishop of Berlin, and Visser ’t Hooft understood that the whole process of rapprochement would stand or fall with reliable Russian clergy who were willing and able to act as contact persons for the World Council.

When it finally appeared that a personal meeting between delegates would occur, a popular uprising broke out in the latter part of 1956 in the People’s Republic of Hungary. The World Council supported the right of self-determination for the Hungarians in a statement. But 13 days later, on 4 November, Soviet troops invaded Hungary and the uprising was put down with a hard hand. Under such circumstances, the Russian Church leaders had to cancel, and the meeting was postponed. But Visser ’t Hooft did not give up. He was helped by leaders in the field such as Timiadis Emilianos, who was active in Western Europe and was the permanent representative in Geneva of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the American Metropolitan Iakovos Coucouzis, titular bishop of Malta, and especially the archpriest Vitaly Borovoy, who was part of the staff of the World Council and became the director of the liaison office of the Russian Church in Geneva in 1962, the Greek Nikos A. Nissiotis, former WSCF member, and the American Lutheran Franklin C. Fry, moderator of the central committee and the executive committee of the World Council from 1957 to 1968. On 5 December, 1957,

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35 Visser ’t Hooft to W.W. Van Kirk, 16 November 1955, WCC general correspondence 773.
36 Visser ’t Hooft to H. Hauge, 9 October 1956, WCC general correspondence 622.
in a press release intended for the journal of the Russian Orthodox Church, Visser ‘t Hooft called for this church to contribute its own voice and identity in the ecumenical movement with no reservations.

I can testify that I have received and learned from them many things in the realm of theology and of spiritual life which I consider essential parts of my own existence. It is sometimes said that the ecumenical movement needs the Orthodox in order that it may not become a pan-Protestant movement. That is true, but it is a superficial truth. The ecumenical movement needs the Orthodox and the Orthodox need the ecumenical movement in order to be true to the mandate given to the Church of Christ – to manifest that the Lord gathers his scattered children.37

He threw his full weight into the struggle by reporting that he had been in contact with Orthodox churches for more than 30 years.

For Visser ‘t Hooft, the fundamental unity of Europe was an important footing in this connection.38 In the late 1950s, he related his previously formulated ideas on this to the division in Europe into two parts, and he worked them out in a speech in Sankt Gallen on 29 April 1958 on Christianity as a shaping power.39 The tensions with the communist East, in his view, had to be seen as a challenge to take up the struggle in a spiritual way rather than in a military or economic way, and so regain not only peace but also the soul of the European man. He thus looked forward to a Europe that had learned to discern that it had to be about people and that was prepared to serve the world as Europe. When the initiatives of the World Council were thwarted by the foundation of the Conference of European Churches, Visser ‘t Hooft was unpleasantly surprised. The goal of this more informal organisation, which the president of the Evangelische Kirche of Westphalia, Ernst Wilm and the Dutch secretary of the Hervormde Kerk (Reformed Church in the Netherlands), Egbert Emmen, started to work on in the mid-1950s, was to work towards reconciliation, dialogue, and friendship between churches from all European countries, including those in the Eastern bloc. While Visser ‘t Hooft and his staff were thus completely occupied with the Russians, this initiative arose outside the World Council. And then yet another Christian peace conference was founded in Prague by Josef Hromádka and the German

39 Visser ‘t Hooft, ‘Das Christentum als Gestaltende Kraft Europas’, Sankt Gallen, 29 April 1958, WCC 994.2.16/22
Hans Joachim Iwand. It all became very complicated. He did not think that what Hromádka did was very wise, for it increasingly stood in the way of what Hromádka could do for the World Council. From that point on, Visser ’t Hooft ignored him as much as possible.\footnote{Visser ’t Hooft to G.K.A. Bell, 7 October 1957, 10 October 1957, and 20 November 1957, in: Besier, ‘Intimately Associated for Many Years’ (2015), 1098-1104.} But he was very displeased with the initiative of Wilm and Emmen. He found the idea of the Conference of European Churches badly timed, amateurish and inadequately thought through with respect to strategy. For some time he kept his distance and took care that the World Council did not establish any formal ties. But in 1959, he agreed to address the first official conference in Nyborg in Denmark. He did see opportunities but also warned against neglecting the global ecumenical movement.\footnote{Schubert, Willem Adolph Visser ’t Hooft (2017), 112.} This rapprochement with the Conference of European Churches led to fierce criticism of the World Council by those who were afraid that the latter was risking its connection with the free West.\footnote{H. van Run, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Markant: Visser ’t Hooft’, NOS Television, 8 December 1977, Sound and Vision Archives.} But Visser ’t Hooft was not concerned about that; he continued to advocate an independent course and addressed the Conference of European Churches various times in the 1960s.

As for relations with the Russians, for a long time time it seemed like carrying coals to Newcastle, but Visser ’t Hooft slowly began to make headway. On 7 August 1958, concrete exploratory talks at the Hotel des Pays Bas in Utrecht were organised, with a serious Russian delegation present led by Metropolitan Nicholas. The World Council sent Franklin Fry, Metropolitan Iakovos, and Visser ’t Hooft, who used all his charm, to represent it. Gifts were exchanged and stories told. Visser ’t Hooft’s starting point was still that it was primarily misunderstandings that needed to be cleared up. The basic formula of the World Council was not a creed. A talk on the value of Trinitarian expressions, which the Russians valued so highly, was always possible. But the World Council itself did not want to be a church and could not be accused of watering down the nature of the church of Christ. The latitude Toronto offered could be exploited. Visser ’t Hooft gave a speech in Utrecht on the World Council’s striving for peace, but he made it easy for the Russians by deliberately avoiding current politics. In the end, nothing more than a vague final communiqué could be produced. But step by step, the Russians were won for the World Council.

Visser ’t Hooft sought for some kind of footing in his belief that there was still so much true Christianity among the Russian people.\footnote{Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Die Bedeutung der regionalen kirchlichen Zusammenarbeit’, 1959.} He knew that
there were collaborators among the leaders of the church, but there were also leaders for whom he had the greatest respect because of wisdom they showed in dealing with their difficult position. Half jokingly, Visser ‘t Hooft once said – no one knows exactly when – to his fellow staff members Lukas Vischer, Nikos Nissiotis, and Albert van den Heuvel: ‘Go to Russia and find me some saints!’

They went and found one, the scholarly theologian and archpriest Vitaly Borovoy (1916-2008), who made a fascinating impression on them as a man of integrity, ‘a living Dostoyevsky’, both witty and pious, and someone who was willing to affiliate with the World Council. Visser ‘t Hooft was very taken with him. In the next meeting of the central committee on Rhodes, Borovoy was one of the Russian Orthodox observers. The theme was the significance of the Eastern and Western traditions for Christianity. When opening the meeting, Visser ‘t Hooft reminded the committee of how 40 years ago, in 1920, the Synod of Constantinople had issued the famous encyclical that called for an ecumenical league of churches. Russia joining the World Council was very important in light of that call.

Shortly afterwards, Patriarch Alexi I of Moscow issued an invitation, and in December 1959 a delegation from the World Council travelled to Russia. Apparently, the Soviet regime had decided to allow the Orthodox Church to establish these contacts. Visser ‘t Hooft was excited and experienced the visit as an important breakthrough. The patriarch appeared to speak good French, and he asked Visser ‘t Hooft interested questions about the ecumenical movement and the World Council. Visser ‘t Hooft had the impression that he had now convinced the Eastern Orthodox that their claim to be the undivided church of Christ was not in conflict with the objectives of the ecumenical movement but would come into its own in that movement precisely. Visser ‘t Hooft’s capacities as a diplomat proved useful in dealing with the hierarchy that was so important in the Russian Church. He was respectful, patient, and accepted entirely that the leaders in the church considered themselves representative, both in a spiritual and a material sense. If he was at all irritated by all the ceremony, he did not let on. He managed to avoid difficult questions and praised Russian hospitality and the deep faith he saw everywhere in Russia. When some of his staff sometimes found it all very formal and wondered where the church and believers could be found in all of this Orthodox structure, he reprimanded them strongly.

It was not unimportant that, during his visit to Russia in 1959, Visser ‘t Hooft was able to respond not only to the Russians

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45 Ibid.
but to all Orthodox on the issue of the basic formula. During a breakfast in Leningrad, he suddenly understood that what the Russians asked for was not at all that a dogmatically, precisely formulated descriptive confession should be inserted in the basis of the World Council. All they wanted was the Christology to be expanded into a Trinitarian doxology, and he, as he himself later stated, dashed off his solution on a menu. Visser ‘t Hooft proposed supplementing the existing basic formula that was adopted from Faith and Order in Utrecht in 1938 and accepted in Amsterdam in 1948, i.e. ‘a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour,’ be supplemented by ‘and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’

This formulation would be accepted in 1961, at the assembly in New Delhi, with the addition ‘according to the Scriptures’ as the expansion of the basic formula of the World Council of Churches. In his report to the central committee on the visit to Russia in 1959, Visser ‘t Hooft noted with amazement that the Russian Church had withstood the test of the great persecutions under totalitarian communism and had not made any bad compromises. He had confidence in the Russian Orthodox Church as a genuine church of Jesus Christ.

One of our companions quoted to me the remark of an Orthodox professor: ‘The Russian Orthodox Church has passed the test.’ This is an interesting remark because it would seem to be true in one sense and untrue in another. It would seem to be true in the sense that, when the great persecutions came, it was expected that the Church would collapse, but it did not do so. It remains a tremendous fact that the Russian Orthodox Church exists and that is not all, for it is also important that the Church has not become a syncretistic body as were the deutsche Christen in the National Socialist period in Germany. One does not get the impression that any attempt is made to create a synthesis between Christianity and Marxist ideology. But to say that the Orthodox Church has passed the test would seem to be wholly untrue if it means that this is the only test which it will be asked to pass during this period of history. It would seem that one of the biggest tests is yet to come, namely, whether the Orthodox Church

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47 ‘The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’
has anything relevant to say to Marxist or post-Marxist humankind. The great issue would seem to be whether, in spite of its unmistakable spiritual life, the Church may not in fact become an anachronism. Its strength is in its faithful adherence to its tradition. But this strength may become a weakness if that adherence is not only to the spiritual content of that tradition, but also to its forms.49

Not everyone appreciated this smoothing out of the wrinkles. A well-known Dutch critic of this policy was the theologian and ecumenical specialist J.A. Hebly. Hebly felt that the World Council was blind to the paradox that it was precisely when ecumenical contacts between East and West were flourishing that believers in the Soviet Union were suffering from domestic persecution and the limitation of religious freedom.

It was not true that the Russian Orthodox Church had not made any bad compromises. Alexi was the personification of the church that had adjusted to the totalitarian state. He rapped the knuckles of every bishop who spoke up against injustice or had them retired ‘because of bad health’.50 While Visser ’t Hooft worked on strengthening the connections of the World Council with the Russian Orthodox Church, the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev unleashed a new era of religious oppression in 1959 that would last till 1964. The West was not immediately aware of this, nor could Visser ’t Hooft be aware of it at that time. Nevertheless, that he did not mention this serious discrepancy in his Memoirs, which he wrote at a time when he did know, came across as harsh.51 The greatest test for Orthodoxy would, according to Visser ’t Hooft, come when the current situation had to be addressed by the World Council. But an effort to participate in this respect had to come from the Russian Church itself.

During the visit to Russia in December 1959, the World Council representatives were accompanied by the same five Russians for the whole trip, and this led to an informal atmosphere. Visser ’t Hooft spent a lot of time with Archimandrite Boris G.R. Nikodim (1929-1978). Nikodim first had a sceptical attitude towards the World Council, but after long discussions with Visser ’t Hooft, he began to come round.52 Visser ’t Hooft truly thought he had achieved something and had changed Nikodim’s mind.53 But it is

49 Visser ’t Hooft, report on trip to Russia, 1959; cited by Hebly, ‘The State, the Church, and the Oikumene’, 1993, 120-121.
50 Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 263.
52 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 268.
53 Nikodim always denied that religious persecution existed in the Soviet Union. In 1975, he was chosen as one of the presidents of the World Council.
not at all clear whether that indeed was what had happened. Nikodim was an intelligent theologian, but he was also a career clergyman, a true Soviet functionary with good contacts with the KGB and answerable to Metropolitan Nikolai. Nikodim climbed up the ladder quickly, from assistant to the metropolitan in the department of foreign affairs of the church, to the head of that department, which he would remain from 1960 to 1972. In 1964, he himself was Metropolitan of Leningrad and later had the opportunity to succeed Alexi I. Visser ’t Hooft is reputed to have said: ‘How do we get Nikodim to the point that he would make Borovoy his teacher?’

The encounters led to official requests for the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox churches of Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland to be admitted as members. In 1960, Visser ’t Hooft sent a report to the central committee of the World Council and recommended that these requests be accepted. He received a great many compliments for this result. Friends who were initially critical, such as Eelis Gulin from Helsinki, Bishop of Tampere since 1945, whom Visser ’t Hooft had had good contact with in the winter of 1940, were now enthusiastic: ‘You have made a wonderful service there.’ The nomination would take place during the assembly in New Delhi in November 1961. But when Metropolitan Nikolai objected in April 1960 to Khrushchev’s antireligious campaign, he suddenly fell out of favour with the Kremlin and disappeared shortly thereafter. The 32-year-old Nikodim was now the head of the delegation of the Russian Church. Right up to the last moment, it was unclear whether the Eastern Orthodox churches would indeed join. A riot broke out during the Orthodox church service preceding the assembly when the delegation from Moscow walked out of the church because the émigré bishop of San Francisco, which had split with Moscow, participated in the service. The next morning Visser ’t Hooft called Nikodim for an explanation, spoke to him severely, and said that people could not treat each other in that way in the World Council. Nikodim offered his excuses but also said that he could not have done anything else.

At the end of 1961, while the Cold War became focused in Berlin and the Berlin Wall was being built, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox churches of Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland joined the World Council. The applications for membership, not only from these churches but also those of 19 others, primarily African churches, were accepted in New

55 E.G. Gulin to Visser ’t Hooft, 2 January 1960, WCC general correspondence 605.
Delhi by an overwhelming majority. The change in the basic formula of the World Council was also accepted. Visser’t Hooft was relieved that the Russian delegates, notwithstanding earlier tensions, had in the end acted primarily like church people in New Delhi. Borovoy was a permanent representative of the Russian Orthodox Church and a staff member at the World Council in Geneva from 1962 to 1966 and even later in a period from 1978 to 1985. Nikodim became a member of the central committee in 1962 and would become one of the presidents of the World Council in 1975. He turned into a loyal supporter of the World Council. But his predecessor, Metropolitan Nikolai, died a week after the assembly under suspicious circumstances. At the same time that the Soviet Union was showing a milder side by giving the church the opportunity to establish international contacts, persecutions were taking place in Russia. This had everything to do with a redefinition of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union under Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev.

Visser’t Hooft was excited about the Eastern Orthodox churches joining the World Council. In his eyes, their long isolation had come to an end. The concern about their continued existence and freedom of action was, from that point on, shared with churches all over the world. This meant, according to them, that governments from communist countries had to take world opinion concerning religious freedom into account. But that appeared to be wishful thinking. One of the most important experts on the Soviet Union to advise the World Council at this time was P.B. Anderson. He wrote a memorandum, dated 20 February 1962, in which he warned the staff of the World Council about what was going on in the Soviet Union. While Visser’t Hooft’s good intentions and those of his staff did not need to be doubted, the value of the quiet diplomacy he strove for was limited.

57 The membership of the Russian Orthodox was accepted with 142 votes for, 3 votes against and 4 abstentions. Visser’t Hooft (ed.), Neu-Delhi 1961. Dokumentarbericht über die Dritte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen (1962), 16-17.
58 Ibid., 178.
60 Nikodim died suddenly in Rome in 1978, at the age of 49 of a heart attack, during an audience with Pope John Paul I.
61 Van der Bent, Historical Dictionary of Ecumenical Christianity (1994), 293.
62 Bourdeaux, ‘The Russian Church, Religious Liberty and the World Council of Churches’, 1984, 6. Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 263: Nikolai ‘was widely believed to have been murdered.’
64 Hebly, ‘The State, the Church, and the Oikumene’, 1993, 110.
Analysts pointed out that the wool was being pulled over the eyes of the staff at the World Council.\textsuperscript{65} Put more strongly, a certain 'ecumenical' paralysis emerged with respect to religious persecution or discrimination in the Soviet Union and the satellite states. This state of affairs recalled the problems faced by the German church in the years shortly before the Second World War. The policy Visser 't Hooft followed definitely cost the World Council a certain amount of credibility.

### 7.8 The World Council Enriched?

Visser 't Hooft focused on the content of the faith. As far as he was concerned, the Orthodox presence enriched the World Council immediately, particularly with respect to the Easter faith and its strong Trinitarian character. With its sense of the mystery of the faith, Orthodoxy helped in his view to keep the more activist side of the World Council in balance. At the end of his career, Visser 't Hooft signalled the danger of the World Council becoming a bureaucratic institution that could, over time, even become a hindrance for the progress of the ecumenical movement. He expected that the Trinitarian basis could function repeatedly as an inspiring reason for reflection.

The basic question actually always concerned and concerns a very simple question: How can we make clear what it is that keeps us together and does not let us rest until we actually coexist? The answer can only be: It is the Lord who died on the cross 'to gather the scattered children of God together' (John 11:52). Only a living Lord can do that. And the Lord lives as the Son of the Father and does his work through the Holy Spirit. Thus, living ecumenicity can only exist where it is seen in the light of the belief in the three-in-one.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{65} For example, Bourdeaux, 'The Russian Church, Religious Liberty and the World Council of Churches', 1984, 7.

\textsuperscript{66} Visser 't Hooft, draft of a preface for: Theurer, \textit{Die trinitarische Basis des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen} (1967). WCC 994.2.22/17. 'Es ging und geht in der Basis-Frage eigentlich immer um eine ganz einfache Frage: Wie können wir deutlich machen, was uns zusammenhält und uns nicht ruhen lässt bis wir wirklich zusammenleben? Die Antwort konnte nur sein: Es ist der Herr, der am Kreuze gestorben ist, damit 'er auch die Kinder Gottes, die zerstreut waren, zusammen brächte' (John 11:52). Das kann aber nur ein lebendiger Herr tun. Und der Herr lebt als Sohn des Vaters und tut sein Werk durch den Heiligen Geist. So kann es nur lebendige Ökumene geben, wo sie gesehen wird im Lichte des trinitarischen Glaubens.'
From 1961 on, Geneva seemed – metaphorically – to lie between Constantinople and Rome. In a number of respects, regarding both content and liturgy, the Orthodox churches were closer to Rome, but they rejected the idea of the church as having only one head and traditionally had great appreciation for the concept of conciliarity, i.e., the idea that God’s Spirit worked through the gatherings of the Church. This notion played an important role in the World Council. With more than half of all Orthodox believers in communist countries, the reception of what truly happened in the World Council was not simple. In Russia itself, Nikodim did not receive much attention for the questions he dealt with in Geneva. 67

Actually, there were two filters, one for the government, and one for himself. Nikodim and his fellow church leaders held that not everything by far that was thought to be important in Geneva should be passed on to the clergy and laity of the Russian church. They were aware that the Soviet authorities kept a close eye on them and that they had very little latitude. 68

68 Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 270-271.
Visser ’t Hooft could be enthusiastic, but it was a long time before Orthodox theology could make meaningful contributions. That did not prevent friendly meetings, and the presence of the Orthodox was appreciated. Visser ’t Hooft spoke of a ‘new economic reality’. Nikodim explained these words as if the World Council was ‘a sort of embryo of a true Una Sancta’. One could wonder if they understood each other. Within the Russian Church, the young Nikodim was well known as an innovator who fought for using Russian in the liturgy instead of Church Slavonic, whereas others, such as his rival archbishop Pimen, saw the strength of the Russian Orthodox Church as lying primarily in the tradition. Nikodim was interested in the Roman Catholic aggiornamento, the ‘bringing up to date’, under John XXIII and also sought an opening here. At the same time, he was completely loyal with respect to the Soviet regime and he was accused of being an extremely successful KGB infiltrator.

In February 1964, the executive committee of the World Council, under the chairmanship of Franklin Fry and at the invitation of Nikodim met in Odessa in Ukraine. On the preceding Sunday, the representatives in Moscow were received by Patriarch Alexi. Visser ’t Hooft preached during a service in the Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul in which he praised the Russian Church for holding fast to the faith in all circumstances. That Eastern Orthodoxy now came into contact for the first time with the new churches in Asia and Africa was, in his view, an enriching challenge for all involved. Thus, new opportunities arose for the reconciliation between peoples and races. It had to do with help for refugees in various African countries and about religious freedom worldwide and the imminent successor to Visser ’t Hooft.

What it did not concern, at least not publicly, was the appeal by the anonymous group of Russian Orthodox believers to the executive committee of the World Council and in which attention was asked for the persecutions in Russia. The leaders of the World Council ignored this group. After their discussions, the members of the executive committee were received by the local chairman of the Soviet district governing council, Piotr Ivanhuk. Visser ’t Hooft subtly solved the problem that no typewriters were made available by casually remarking that it would make a strange impression in the West that a country that made such impressive achievements like space flight suffered from a shortage of typewriters. The absence of typewriters was

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70 Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 228-229.
71 Ibid., 291.
very quickly rectified. He therefore felt he could get other things arranged as well. But it did not escape Western journalists that, at the same moment that the World Council was arguing through Frederick Nolde for religious freedom worldwide, the representatives of the Soviet Union in the United Nations were arguing for the freedom to be atheist. But Franklin Fry declared afterwards that the hospitality of the Russians was unsurpassed, and a return visit followed quickly. On 24 September 1964, Visser ’t Hooft was able, as general secretary, to address His Holiness Patriarch Alexi I of Moscow, who was received with ceremony in the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva. Visser ’t Hooft received the Order of St. Vladimir of the Orthodox Church of Russia in 1964 and became a commander in the Order of St. Andreas of the ecumenical patriarch. Not everyone could see that as a high point, however, for the religious persecutions continued in Russia in the meantime.

7.9 Debating Policy

There has been a great deal of debate on the policy followed by Visser ’t Hooft and his staff regarding the Eastern Orthodox churches during the Cold War. To begin with, the Russian Orthodox Church itself assessed the value of ecumenical contacts very differently. Interest was always at a minimum at the base of the church, if anything at all did filter through about what was going on in the ecumenical movement. For the leaders of the Russian church, it was beneficial to be involved and not to be excluded when other Orthodox churches, such as the Greek and the Coptic churches, were included in international Christian networks. But viewed from the ideology of the communist party, the World Council in those years remained a suspicious organisation, part of the Western capitalist system. The political leaders were always looking over the shoulders of the church leaders. What they saw, for example, was that the World Council had many African churches as members as well. A number of new states were emerging at this time in Africa as a result of the decolonisation process. Thus, infiltrating the World Council and other international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO, and the World Health Organisation, was politically interesting for the Soviet Union. Contact with churches from the

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emerging states was used, where possible, for propaganda and increasing influence. The possibility of this kind of manipulation was, however, seldom stated aloud in the World Council of Churches. But everyone knew that the party leadership in Moscow was not interested in an open dialogue between East and West that was inspired by the churches.

In the meantime, the agenda of the World Council contained all kinds of issues, including subjects for which the Russian Orthodox delegates neither had the required expertise nor the opportunity to discuss them with their own church members. They usually chose a safe attitude for such topics, namely, a religiously conservative approach. That was the case with topics like racism, militarism, faith and science, feminism, and sexism. A topic like liberation theology, which flourished in Central America and was highly valued by the World Council, was much too horizontalist for most Russian Orthodox and, in their view, did not have much to do with the content of real faith. Nor did they want anything to do with the idea of women in ecclesiastical office, which was beginning to play an increasingly greater role in the World Council. They thought about cancelling their membership several times. The Soviet political authorities saw the World Council primarily as a critical Western peace organisation that they felt could easily be used in the service of their own objectives.

In the West, not everyone by far could share in Visser ‘t Hooft’s enthusiasm about the membership of the Eastern Orthodox in the World Council. Some thought the Russian delegates would attempt to exercise political influence in the executive committee, for example, but Visser ‘t Hooft defended his policy in 1964 by pointing out that only eleven of the 110 members of the central committee were representatives of churches in communist countries and that none of the members in the presidency or among the leaders were from those countries. According to him, the influence of the Russian representatives in the World Council should not be overestimated. Though they represented the largest church, even with the other Orthodox they still only formed a minority among many Protestants. There could be no possible intentional Marxist penetration in the World Council or real manipulation. Visser ‘t Hooft was well aware that the Kremlin had its own reasons for approving the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church in the World Council. But he appealed to the American ambassador in Moscow, George Kennan, author of the famous ‘long telegram’ of 1946 that had given occasion

75 Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 270.
for the politics of ‘containment’, the Western striving to restrain the Soviet sphere of influence. Kennan had said that what the Kremlin saw as an advantage did not necessarily have to be seen by others as a disadvantage. Visser ‘t Hooft felt that the World Council did nothing else than draw the consequences from the policy decisions made in Amsterdam 1948 by not admitting, in principle, the primacy of the political lines of division on the world stage. Some, like the French Protestants, openly rejoiced at the admission of the Russian Church, but others, such as Zoltan Beky of the Hungarian Protestant Church in America, warned the World Council as early as 1961 that the World Council underestimated the hidden agenda of the Soviets. His church abstained from voting in New Delhi.77

After some years, Visser ‘t Hooft himself was somewhat disappointed. The Russian Church proved to be more traditional than he had thought, and it was difficult to get a real discussion on faith started.78 But he continued to believe that it would turn out all right. Under his leadership, the World

Council had followed a middle path and remained true to the commission of Christ. In his eyes, the Russian Orthodox Church could not help ending up in isolation and needed time to learn to play the ecumenical game.

Unfortunately, a considerable number of the Orthodox churches were being held back enormously. And they were being held back of course by the simple fact that they were so dependent on the communist regimes under which they lived, and that is why it is so terribly difficult to find out what they actually mean in all kinds of areas, for there are all kinds of things they cannot say in order to avoid getting into trouble.79

Visser ’t Hooft remained convinced that precisely the Eastern Orthodox churches had a lot to offer the West.

At this time in the West, we are in a period in which we are to some extent losing certain deeper elements of the faith. We have become very ... horizontal, very worldly. Such an Orthodox church in which the true religion in the literal sense of the word with all the trimmings is contained, the liturgy, and prayer and the whole spiritual attitude with respect to the religion that plays the central role, we actually need that very much so that our spiritual sources in the West do not dry up.80

In the Orthodox faith experience he saw an antidote to the new paganism that had accompanied secularisation.

Visser ’t Hooft had always claimed that he had not minced words when it concerned clearly asserting to Russian political leaders and their officials the lack of spiritual freedom in the Soviet Union, his critique of the policy of not being allowed to build churches, the prohibition against religious education and church publications. A Russian bishop who had once listened

79 Interview by L. Pagano and G. Sonder with Visser ’t Hooft, Magazine, AVRO Radio, 17 August 1980, Sound and Vision Archives: ‘Helaas zit een heel aantal van de orthodoxe kerken met een enorme rem. En die rem is natuurlijk dat ze eenvoudig zo sterk afhankelijk zijn van de communistische regimes waaronder ze leven en dat daarom op allerlei gebieden het verschrikkelijk moeilijk is om erachter te komen wat ze werkelijk menen, want ze kunnen allerlei dingen niet zeggen, om niet in moeilijkheden te komen.’
80 Ibid.: ‘Wij zijn op ’t ogenblik in het Westen in een periode waarin we zekere diepere elementen van het geloof een beetje kwijt raken. Wij zijn erg [...] horizontaal geworden, erg werelds. Zo’n orthodoxe kerk waar de echte godsdienst in de letterlijke zin van het woord met alles wat eraan vast zit, de liturgie en het gebed en de hele geestelijke houding ten opzichte van de godsdienst die de centrale rol speelt, hebben we eigenlijk erg nodig, opdat onze geestelijke bronnen in het Westen niet uitdrogen.’
while Visser ’t Hooft had summarised a whole list of complaints, is said to have whispered afterwards: ‘Très bien’. ⁸¹ One of the concrete examples of the independent course he could, in retrospect, name was that the declarations made about nuclear tests in 1961 were directed against both French and Soviet policy. According to Visser ’t Hooft, the World Council constantly fought for religious freedom wherever it was called for in the world, including in communist countries. If the World Council did take a position that was close to that of communist governments concerning the struggle against racism, for example, then that was pure coincidence, in Visser ’t Hooft’s view, for the World Council consistently followed Christian insights developed in the ecumenical community. He felt that criticism of the Russian church leaders was unnuanced and unjust. They were not to be blamed for the oppression by the state but, instead, were to be helped where possible. Why was China not viewed as critically, where there was infinitely less freedom of religion than in Russia? ⁸² Various analysts saw it differently and claimed that there was definitely Russian influence on a number of statements by the World Council and pointed to the advantage that Orthodox membership had for the communist party. ⁸³ Others saw that also but also saw the value of the personal contacts, the destruction of prejudices, and the mutual learning process. ⁸⁴

Visser ’t Hooft was right insofar as the Russian Orthodox Church had never initiated a major social debate of political significance in the World Council and that there was no political influence in this sense. On the other hand, however, topics that could irritate the authorities in the Soviet Union were regularly kept ‘small’ intentionally. With his own quiet diplomacy, Visser ’t Hooft was quite defenceless against this form of paralysis. A major public debate on religious freedom in Marxist socialist countries was not discussed with the Russians at all in Geneva. Most of the Eastern Orthodox delegates were fine with social criticism, especially, however, with criticism of the Western system. As far as the communist East was concerned, they wanted understanding for and confirmation of the legitimacy of the collaboration between the church and the state. In the atmosphere of the 1960s, they joined in Western self-criticism and the uneasy conscience many had regarding

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⁸² Interview with Visser ’t Hooft, Actua, TROS Television, 16 August 1976, Sound and Vision Archives.
⁸³ Fletcher, ‘Religious and Soviet Foreign Policy’, 1975. See also: Curanovic, Religious Factor in Russia’s Foreign Policy (2012), 55.
⁸⁴ Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 271.
the period of colonialism. For the sake of peace, the World Council gave low priority to the problem of the systematic lack of freedom in the Eastern Bloc countries. In the 1950s, the World Council paid quite a bit of attention to the topic of religious freedom, and a statement was issued on this topic at the end of 1961 in New Delhi. At that time, Visser ’t Hooft was fully confident that it was precisely the Russian church’s membership that would enable the World Council to defend Christians in the Soviet Union. Looking back, it is difficult to maintain that this was the case. After the Eastern Orthodox churches joined, for a long time the committees in the World Council paid little attention to dissidents and their writings, the so-called samizdat literature. Visser ’t Hooft was too optimistic. In the meantime, in contrast, a situation developed in the World Council that can best be characterised as self-censorship: the pitfall of Visser ’t Hooft’s quiet diplomacy.

Two of the 22 members of the executive committee present at Visser ’t Hooft’s farewell as general secretary of the World Council in 1966 were representatives of churches in communist countries. Of the 99 members of the central committee, eight were from communist countries. According to Visser ’t Hooft there were no communists among them. 85 But the special secretariat of the World Council for religious freedom was dissolved in 1968 at the assembly in Uppsala and absorbed into the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. There it had a lower status, and there was always a delegate from the Eastern Orthodox churches. The World Council’s attention shifted in the years following his retirement more and more towards ‘Third World’ countries. For the delegates from the Russian Orthodox Church, this was a relatively safe theme, for it offered a good starting point for criticism of the West. The World Council programme for combatting racism required a great deal of attention. Intense debates on social and political problems in the West were constant. What proved more difficult for a long time was an open discussion in the countries under state socialism in Eastern Europe. One exception was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, but that led to great problems for the Russian Orthodox delegates at home. 86

Personally, Visser ’t Hooft viewed the membership of the Eastern Orthodox churches in the World Council as one of the high points of his career. He ignored its dark side in his Memoirs, idealising the Russian Church, which, in his view, belonged in the World Council. Accidental, historical

circumstances did not change any of that. Unanimity on, for example, a statement by the World Council in reference to the Prague Spring in 1968 could not be achieved. The Eastern Orthodox churches always had to be taken into account. His argument was that the Czechs understood very well that much more could be achieved with ‘a personal conversation’ than with a public statement.87

In 1969 Visser ’t Hooft was back in Russia, where he was part of a larger ecumenical delegation. At that time, he found it a relief to be in a country in which there was order. That was quite different in France, where the streets seemed to rule in Paris. To his surprise, he was picked up from the airport by the second man of the Soviet governing committee of Religious Affairs, Piotr Makartsev, one of the five Russians who accompanied the delegation in 1959 and whom he had got to know well.88 From the hotel ‘Russia’ he had a fine view of the Kremlin, where he – in the very large hall that was also used for party meetings – attended a performance of the opera Don Carlos. At a certain moment, the whole podium was dominated by a large crucifix while the heroine sang her song. Visser ’t Hooft was overcome by the feeling that the Russian world would never be able to lose its religious tradition.89 The foundation for his policy regarding the Russian Orthodox Church was his fundamental trust in the Russian belief in God.

Together with Nikodim, now a member of the central committee of the World Council, he was a guest for an evening in Makartsev’s dacha somewhere in the forests near Moscow, where the vodka flowed freely and they could talk without mincing words. Visser ’t Hooft wrote in a letter to his family: ‘It gives me ... a chance to tell him which aspects of the situation here we do not like.’90 Makartsev knew how to deal with this apparently, for the atmosphere remained good.91 The high point of the visit was an official reception of the whole international ecumenical group by the 92-year-old and sick Alexi I who had been Patriarch of Moscow for 24 years by then but was not very active in leading the church. It was an honour for Visser ’t Hooft to address the prelate. Alexi nodded approvingly while Visser ’t Hooft spoke in French about the importance of the role of the patriarch in bringing the Russian Church into the international ecumenical movement.

87 Speech by Visser ’t Hooft to the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in: Kenmerk, IKOR Television, 9 September 1969, Sound and Vision Archives.
88 In 1972 Visser ’t Hooft had dinner again with Makartsev and the patriarch. Visser ’t Hooft to ‘Dear Family and Friends’, 7 March 1972, Visser ’t Hooft Family Archives.
89 Visser ’t Hooft to ‘Dear family’, no date, probably 1969, Visser ’t Hooft Family Archives.
90 Ibid.
91 Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church (1986), 15.
Visser ’t Hooft enjoyed Moscow and left it with the feeling that a good future lay in wait for the people and church of Russia. At the same time, he was a youth worker by nature, and he understood that a lot more had to change before this arch-conservative and introverted church could appeal to the youth. In his Memoirs Visser ’t Hooft looked back with satisfaction on the whole process of rapprochement between the World Council and the Russian Orthodox Church. He again showed a deep trust in the salvific strength of this church, both with respect to Russian society and world peace. In the liturgy, after all, this church celebrated the mystery of the indwelling of God. That was indestructible. Because of that, he considered his diplomatic policy, which entailed that the church and state in Russia should not be harshly and openly criticised, completely justified.

Visser ’t Hooft’s vision endured. The later leaders of the World Council looked back positively on his way of working with respect to the Eastern Orthodox churches at the time of the Cold War. People learned from each other. Protestant students received instruction in Bossey, of which the Greek Orthodox N.A. Nissiotis was director, on the history of the Orthodox churches and studied the Orthodox liturgy. Journals like Irenikon, issued by the Benedictine monks of Chevetogne, and Istina, issued by the Dominicans in Paris, found their way into the ecumenical network, and caricatures were dismantled at study conferences. The familiar damaging forms of proselytism, the Western compulsion to convert, always a fear among the Orthodox, were actively opposed by the ecumenical organs. John Arnold, president of the Conference of European Churches in the 1990s, stated that Visser ’t Hooft’s striving was right and absolutely necessary if the World Council was actually to be a representative committee for the whole world. But Arnold did not deny the difficulties. However independent the World Council wanted to be under Visser ’t Hooft’s leadership in the 1940s and 1950s, just like the United Nations, the World Council was formed in the space that was created by the victory of the Allies and the idealism that was associated with that. Now the priorities had shifted, and that was good for the delegates from the Russian Orthodox Church. Nikodim was both a man who served the Soviet authorities and a believing Christian, a skilled debater who knew how he could paralyse the council when he wanted to prevent sharply worded statements that were to the disadvantage of his fatherland. A price for ‘the third way’ was definitely paid, paradoxically enough at the expense of a completely independent course.

93 Cf. 7.5.
The contribution these churches made to the World Council was greatly appreciated by one of Visser ’t Hooft’s successors, Konrad Raiser, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches from 1993-2002.\textsuperscript{94} Not only did the Orthodox help sharpen the ecclesiological questions and enrich the basis of the World Council with the Trinitarian doxology, they also set in motion a deeper understanding of the church fathers for the churches of the World Council and made the notion ‘conciliarity’ i.e., that the church understands the wisdom of God’s Spirit through councils and discussions that were conducive to church unity. That these councils were at bottom rooted in the Eucharistic community – in other words, the experience of the unity of the faithful as the people of God around the celebration of the Lord’s Supper – was an insight that the Orthodox first had. That this community was not yet visible in joint celebrations of Christians from all churches did not stop the Orthodox from contributing greatly in the ecumenical conversation that was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on baptism, the Eucharist, and the Lord’s Supper. In 1982, that resulted in the important Faith and Order-paper 111, \textit{Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry}, in which, for example, baptism in churches other than one’s own was recognised.\textsuperscript{95} Important contributions were made as well with respect to missions and diaconal work, including, among other things, an increasing consciousness of the connection between liturgy and the service-minded form of the church in the world. While the Orthodox delegates saw their participation in the World Council primarily as giving witness to what they considered to be the true apostolic tradition and thus in no way a watering down of the Orthodox claim to be the true church, they were also challenged, however, by their presence in the World Council to join in reflection on current issues. The common great question which remained, Konrad Raiser asserted in 2003, was what it meant at the bottom to be the church.

7.10 The Controversial Bridge Builder

Visser ’t Hooft was convinced he had been given an important task. He felt called to break through the impasse of the Cold War using the notion of the ecumenical church. In connection with this, he was privileged to have a network of contacts in the West and the East, albeit his opportunities in the churches that fell under the patriarchate of Moscow were limited. He was determined to use the results of the assemblies in Amsterdam and


\textsuperscript{95} See also 9.10.
Evanston as a mandate granted by them to involve the Eastern Orthodox churches in the World Council as far as possible and to nominate them for membership. A deep confidence in the church’s own strength drove him in this context to take up the role of a tireless bridgebuilder. Independent of historical circumstances, the membership of the Eastern Orthodox churches in the World Council would represent an intrinsically enriching value for that council. Crisis moments in the Cold War threw a spanner in the work at various times. By firmly holding fast to the World Council’s own course between East and West, Visser ’t Hooft attempted to convince both the Russian church leaders and, indirectly, the Soviet authorities as well that the people in the World Council were open to talking. Josef Hromádka and Martin Niemöller were two of his most important pioneers in this respect.

The theological insights into Orthodoxy, that he had already set down in publications in 1933 and 1937, came in useful again and again during this process. He succeeded in presenting himself as an expert in this area. He linked the fundamental experience of unity in the Russian Church, in which mysticism, not politics or ethics, took a central place, to the striving for unity in the World Council, and he could thus win trust in both the East and West and act as a catalyst. His view of the Russian Orthodox Church transcended the East-West antagonism of the Cold War. He convinced many but certainly not everyone.

Visser ’t Hooft appealed assertively to the independent course of the World Council that was set out in Amsterdam in 1948, and he carried out a consistent policy between East and West. With his defence of Josef Hromádka, who did not want to condemn the Czech communists, he showed that he was serious about this. He succeeded in preventing the World Council from bearing a Western stamp. By speaking various times at mass church meetings in Berlin, when it began to get tense at the beginning of the 1950s, Visser ’t Hooft made a deep impression and became very well known, not only in Germany. With his view that the churches were able to break through the impasse of the Cold War, he gave many courage and created support for rapprochement with churches on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

A crucial meeting of the central committee of the World Council took place in Toronto in 1950. There it was laid down that member churches of the World Council did not automatically relativise their own identity. That was of major importance for the churches that were convinced they were the true church, such as the Russian Orthodox Church. By keeping the ecclesiological claims of the World Council itself modest, Visser ’t Hooft managed to keep the bar for membership low. The price that that required was a certain vagueness, for if the World Council did not want to be a ‘super
church', what did it want to be? The problem was more averted than solved and would play a role explicitly with the rapprochements with the Roman Catholic Church and cause confusion. It was empathically shown in the dossier of Eastern Orthodoxy how much Visser 't Hooft had the gift of connecting with people with whom he could share his objectives. He won the trust not only of a number of Orthodox prelates but also of the largest part of the central committee, of the staff members closest to him, and the delegates of most of the member churches.

A breakthrough was made in 1961. The Russian Orthodox Church became a member, together with various other Eastern Orthodox churches. For Visser 't Hooft personally, this event was the crowning moment of a long period of deep investments. There were objections, however, that had to do primarily with suspicions that the Russian delegates, the staff and workers, could misuse the World Council as a political podium. Visser 't Hooft was willing to listen to those objections but not to be convinced by them. He was fully aware of the fact that the delegates from the Eastern Orthodox churches were usually not free to say in public what they thought about something, and he wanted to have patience with them. But he did have confidence that it would turn out well because of the character of the church itself, the heart of which he saw come to light precisely in the Russian Orthodox Church: the mystery of God dwelling among people.

Critics of Visser 't Hooft's policy were certainly not lacking. Already in 1948, the refusal of the leadership of the World Council to speak openly for the free West called up accusations. The friendly connections with the Russian Orthodox Church, while the Soviet Union was carrying out religious persecutions, discredited Visser 't Hooft's diplomacy in the eyes of many. An early example was the criticism expressed by the Dutchman J.A. Hebl, who wished that the World Council would limit itself to purely faith contacts with the Eastern Orthodox churches. He did not trust the intentions of the church delegates when they were accused of being answerable to the KGB. Moreover, Hebl found it a matter of concern that the World Council, because the Russians were members, was hardly able to defend the faith persecuted in the Soviet Union and the satellite states.

Within the World Council, his successors continued the policy Visser 't Hooft began. Konrad Raiser, who was general secretary from 1993 to 2003, found, in retrospect, that Visser 't Hooft was right to involve the Eastern Orthodox churches in the World Council of Churches, thus promoting the ecumenical challenge that arose at the time of the Cold War. Indeed, the membership of the Eastern Orthodox churches enriched the multi-coloured nature of the World Council. But for that they paid the price that Hebl spoke of.