6 General Secretary of the World Council of Churches 1948-1966

Abstract
This chapter explores the central role Visser ’t Hooft played in the World Council from 1948 to 1966, showing how his vision and style influenced the direction the World Council took in dealing with issues like syncretism. We see the strong practical bent of the World Council in topics like the Cold War and international crises such as South Africa, Cuba and Cyprus. The chapter traces how Visser ’t Hooft involved the missionary nature of the church at every turn. We also learn how the revival he hoped for did not materialise. Instead, after 1960, secularisation grew, and Visser ’t Hooft’s ability to appeal to younger generations began to wane.

Keywords: Visser ’t Hooft family life, Assembly Evanston 1954, International Missionary Council (IMC), Ecclesiology, International crises, Assembly New Delhi 1961

6.1 Introduction

Visser ’t Hooft’s position at the helm of the World Council was undisputed during most of the 18 years that followed its founding. With the council now having left the stage of continuous improvisation behind it, his leadership of the quickly growing international religious organisation was energetic. That did have consequences. He had never been at home much, but now, when the children were leaving home one after the other, his work became all-consuming. In contrast, Jetty accompanied him less often and withdrew more and more (6.2). On the one hand, Visser ’t Hooft was a manager, but he was also the man with the vision on the other. He was quite demanding, but he did know how to motivate his staff by letting them feel that their contribution was indispensable to the larger whole (6.3). In the early 1950s, Visser ’t Hooft was almost completely absorbed in preparations for the
second assembly of the World Council of Churches, which would be held in Evanston near Chicago. The intention was that this assembly would deal with the problem of the Cold War from the World Council’s own perspective, a perspective that transcended division. That was too much to ask, however (6.4). After 1948, he took the lead in responding to all kinds of questions concerning the identity of the new council. The CCIA began to think more actively, professionally, and systematically on international developments. With new crises continually arising on the international stage, the World Council did not suffer from any shortage of occasions to speak out in public. But Visser ’t Hooft and his staff made ready use of quiet diplomacy. The CCIA’s approach was usually business-like and down-to-earth, but, as far as Visser ’t Hooft was concerned, it needed to speak like the prophets, to give a warning and a guiding word to the world. There was no shortage of situations in which the Council made its voice heard that could be discussed in this biography. We will look at four themes that, together, give a good picture of both the strengths and weaknesses of Visser ’t Hooft’s approach as general secretary in these years. One issue in which he had to tread carefully was that of Israel and the Palestinians; with respect to racism in South Africa, he believed in a committed but moderate approach; the Cyprus crisis revealed the lack of unanimity in the World Council itself and Visser ’t Hooft had to walk a tightrope between these positions; the Cuba crisis showed the dilemma between acting quickly but at the same time being able to speak in a representative way, working on gaining support and having Visser ’t Hooft respect the responsibilities of others (6.5). Missions continued to have a major emphasis for Visser ’t Hooft at this time. This task had become trapped between decolonisation in the East and secularisation in the West and, as a result, was experiencing an identity crisis. Visser ’t Hooft did not discern that immediately and in reaction clung to old values that ultimately failed to save classical missions. What he did achieve was that young churches, no longer the ‘daughters’ of Western churches, could see their new status confirmed in joining the World Council (6.6). Around 1960, young people began to act differently, and Visser ’t Hooft was unable to reach them as effectively (6.7). The third assembly was held in New Delhi in 1961, where the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the World Council was arranged. The Russian Orthodox Church, together with a few other Eastern Orthodox churches, joined the Council, the pinnacle of Visser ’t Hooft and his staff’s efforts and policy. But New Delhi was also a moment of alienation. For the first time, it became clear that Western churches, together with Visser ’t Hooft’s generation, were losing their dominance (6.8). Visser ’t Hooft’s habit of thinking in slogans was both his strength and
his weakness. A number of fundamental ecclesiological starting points on which his work was built were challenged at the beginning of the 1960s by experts, which cut him to the quick. Nevertheless, he saw new opportunities as well. Just before his departure as general secretary of the World Council, a major Life and Work conference on church and society was held in 1966. While thinking about the church in terms of an institution, a line of thought he was associated with, had already come under critique, he and his people succeeded in mobilising new forces and in raising a new contemporary voice. As long as the balance between attention for faith and attention for the questions of the world could be guaranteed, this seemed to him to be the formula for the future (6.9).

6.2 ‘Atta’ at Home and ‘Le Patron’ at the World Council

During the war, many Protestant churches had strongly relativised their denominational forms of organisation, which often included a nationalist component. Visser ‘t Hooft saw the concrete foundation of the World Council in 1948 as a tangible result of this relativisation. In the 1950s, ecumenicity seemed to have turned into an acceleration of globalising thinking connected with the renewal of the churches. Protestantism now began to focus, also with respect to church institutions, more and more on international collaboration. Not everyone saw it that way, and a number of small conservative churches remained on the sidelines, but both friend and foe had to acknowledge that the World Council, which had been founded in 1948 and was under Visser ‘t Hooft’s leadership, had become an important non-governmental religious organisation. The historian James Kennedy speaks of ‘a particular kind of religious international’.\(^1\) Causes that were traditionally viewed in Protestantism as important, such as evangelisation and missions, social justice, education for the disadvantaged, and humanitarian aid, were presented – much more than before the war – as a joint project, i.e., a shared challenge for which people together shared responsibility. The World Council had the look of renewal about it and played a major role not only in the churches but also in the media.

People expected a great deal from Visser ‘t Hooft. He was fully aware of that and stepped wholeheartedly into the role of inspiring leader who knew how to use the media, thereby radiating knowledge of affairs and authority. A great many photos and films were made of the general

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\(^1\) Kennedy, ‘Protestant Ecclesiastical Internationals’, 2012, 292-318; quote 295.
secretary sitting behind his large desk with, from the perspective of the visitor, his large bookcase on the left and a reproduction of the Isenheimer altar on the right, while the top of his desk was strewn with important papers, Gauloises cigarettes, and the ashtray near his hand. ² He combined erudition with practical diplomacy and the style of a manager who would always be an aristocrat and fraternised with bishops, other church leaders, statesmen, and rulers with apparent ease. Trained as a theologian, with a great deal of experience in the youth movement, he now stood at the head of a quickly expanding organisation with a number of field workers in many countries. Visser ’t Hooft readily left the daily management of finances of the World Council to his right-hand man, Frank Northam, head of the department of finance and administration since 1948. He could always fall back on the Swiss banker Gustave Hentsch (1880-1962), who supported the World Council anonymously with his own money. Visser ’t Hooft did consult regularly with both of them on business issues.

Visser ’t Hooft took the opportunity of his fiftieth birthday on 20 September 1950 to take stock. The felicitations and memories of others led him, as if it was simply a matter of course, to reflect on his position and his career. The Swiss minister, Nils Ehrenström, director of the study department from 1948 to 1955, confronted him with the fact that he had now dedicated precisely half of his life to the ecumenical movement:

Most people think either that I am far younger or that I am far older. ... Ehrenström put it to me in the form that it was also my twenty-fifth anniversary in the ecumenical movement, for I was privileged to attend the Stockholm conference in 1925. So on that day I ... remembered with gratitude how the ecumenical work has grown in these 25 years and what a joy it is to be allowed to do this work.³

For Visser ’t Hooft and his wife Jetty – the children called them Atta and Mammie – the month of September 1950 was one of rare rest.⁴ The

² See the photo on the dust jacket of this book. Karl Barth also had the Isenheimer Altar of Matthias Grünewald, with John the Baptist pointing at the crucified Jesus, hanging above his desk. Busch, Karl Barth. Lebenslauf (1975), 128 and 423.
³ Visser ’t Hooft to H. Høgsbro, 22 September 1950, WCC general correspondence 674.
⁴ Visser ’t Hooft was called Atta by his children and later their spouses. The term came from Homer. In chapters 16 and 17 of The Odyssey, Odysseus’ son, Telemachos, calls the leader of the shepherds ’Atta’, i.e., Little Father. It started as a joke, perhaps because Visser ’t Hooft, like Odysseus, was always travelling.
general secretary was home in Geneva for the whole month with his wife and his three children who were now on the threshold of adulthood. Their childhood years had flown by. At the end of the 1930s and during the war, when he had to assume full leadership in his work for the World Council and activities for the Dutch government without much staff and travelling a great deal, he had put raising the children completely in
Jetty’s hands. She often found that too much and was helped by a nanny, like Germaine, or the deaconess, Sœur Yvonne. Jetty wanted to support her husband and was present in Amsterdam in 1948, where, at her urging, special attention was given in a workshop to the relation between men and women in society. But the tragedy here was that she herself did not thrive in this period. She was an intelligent woman, who read a great deal and thought and published articles in which she defended women’s rights. Not without reason, she often had the feeling that she was not heard, and that bothered her. She was something of a dreamer. She participated in a World Council Wives group but did not enjoy standing next to her husband at busy ecumenical receptions and playing hostess time and again to other church leaders and prelates. As Atta and Mammie, Wim and Jetty were parents who loved their children, but sometimes neither of them noticed when one of their children was hurt or had a problem. Nevertheless, the large house on the Chemin de Crêts-de-Champel was a good place for the children to grow up, with a large garden where they could play with the shepherd dog Miro.

The Visser ’t Hooft children left the parental home, one after the other, at the beginning of the 1950s. Anneke studied theology in Leiden. Hans left for Paris in the autumn of 1950, after which he continued his law studies in Leiden. Only the youngest son, Kees remained at home for another year. Of the three children, he was the one most interested in technology and had his own hobby room in the attic. But in Visser ’t Hooft’s view, university was the only serious education and theology the best subject. He was a strict and usually distant father, and it was very difficult for him to take an interest in Kees. Without realising it himself, he could sometimes give people the feeling that what they were interested in was not that important, and that was true also with respect to Kees. Looking back later, Visser ’t Hooft did regret not having had the time he wanted to give to his wife and children. He then also expressed his gratitude, with apparently some slight amazement, that the children were nevertheless doing fine.

The three Visser ’t Hooft children now each went their own way. Anneke married the Italian Mario Musacchio in 1953, who entered the ministry in the Waldensian church in Riesis in Sicily. They had two daughters, Erica and Martine. The family lived in different places in Italy, but Mario became dissatisfied with the work of a minister and began to question the faith. Anneke taught Dutch at the university in Trieste. Hans (1930-2008) earned

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5 H. van Run, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Markant: Visser ’t Hooft’, NOS Television, 8 December 1977, Sound and Vision Archives.
Figure 33  With his grandchildren Erica, Marcus, and Martina, ca. 1957

Figure 34  At the doctoral defence of his son Hans, Leiden, 11 December 1957

At the World Council, Visser ‘t Hooft felt he was the right man in the right place. He, a Dutchman, became rooted in Geneva. He had good friends here, such as the artist and minister Max Dominicé and Henri d’Espine, instructor in practical theology and chairman of the Fédération des Églises Protestantes de Suisse. When the missionary theologian Hans Hoekendijk approached him in 1953 to become the ecclesiastical professor of practical theology in Utrecht for the Reformed Church, he was indeed flattered but could not be tempted. Nor was he, in his own view, a suitable candidate for a church professorship. It was with a bit of false modesty that he gave his reasons for his decision, but he also meant them.

Because of a marvellous course in my life, my relationship with theology has been a wonderful mixture of personal interest and dilettantism. But the emphasis has to fall on dilettantism, given that, in all those years, I have had to abandon all forms of systematic study. In addition, an ecclesiastical professor has to have church experience, and that means in an actual congregation. If I were a student, I wouldn’t take a professor seriously if he had never been responsible for a church but taught practical theology.

In the 1930s, he had always said ‘no’ to positions that were offered to him in the Netherlands or in the Dutch East Indies. Although he did occasionally yearn for a quieter and more focused job, Visser ‘t Hooft felt that he was where he should be in Geneva. The executive committee informed him that

7 Visser ‘t Hooft to J.C. Hoekendijk, 16 December 1953, WCC general correspondence 663.
it would like to see him stay until the third assembly. The World Council needed continuity, and the experience of the first years, the committee found, had to be processed into a more permanent structure of the work.

To the staff, as their supervisor, Visser ’t Hooft was le patron or ‘Doctor Visser ’t Hooft’, words that were said with a sense of awe. On the one hand, his leadership style was authoritarian and demanding, whereas he gave his staff a great deal of latitude within boundaries he set on the other. Some were afraid of him or found him authoritarian, but most of them were overcome with admiration. With his dark piercing eyes, it seemed as if he wanted to transfix everyone who came into his office. The economist and ethicist Harry de Lange, who was a member of the central committee after Visser ’t Hooft retired, stated on the occasion of his death that the highest form of praise he regularly received from Visser ’t Hooft was a reprimand. But Marjolaine Chevallier, one of the staff, pointed to his smile, which compensated for his sternness. When he sensed a ‘mischievous’ answer coming to a journalist’s question, his eyes sparkled and the corners of his mouth curled up. He himself was always precisely on time at his office, 8:30 a.m., and had already read Le Monde by then. Staff who arrived too late could expect a reprimand from le patron. From his office above and to the right of the entrance, he could observe the path to the front door of the villa on the Route de Malagnou. Latecomers or staff members who were not, in his view, appropriately attired received a scolding. He once sent someone who showed up at work on a hot day in lederhosen home to change.

Although he was known to be authoritarian, he could listen well in debate and often unfailingly set out and chose a middle position. Staff member Albert van den Heuvel described how he often wrote something on a small scrap of paper or on the back of a cigarette pack, read it out loud, and then spoke the legendary words: ‘Is this possible, do you think?’ He treated people of his own age who were on a comparable level with him in a friendly way, but at the same time he preserved a certain formal style and was not entirely open, which betrayed his elitist upbringing. His speech always retained some affected ‘Leiden’ quality. There are numerous anecdotes on

10 Istina, 42.
how he dealt with younger people or less experienced contacts both within and outside the World Council. The Dominican René Beaupère felt extremely ‘provincial’ when he visited Visser ‘t Hooft for the first time in the 1950s at his office. He began to get nervous when Visser ‘t Hooft’s secretary told him he had to wait. Sitting across from Visser ‘t Hooft later, he felt completely outdone in age and life experience and had the feeling that he only asked stupid questions. Later, however, he began to appreciate him more and more as ‘le conférencier au parler simple’; ‘le prédicateur chaleureux’ and ‘le commensal agréable’ (‘the speaker of plain language’, ‘the fervent preacher’, and ‘the agreeable table companion’).

The experience of being outdone or feeling uncertain around him was the experience of many. Boudewijn Sjollema joined the staff of the World Council in 1958 in connection with the migration issue. Not only does he remember his first interview very well, he also remembers how impressively it went.

Everyone was actually a little bit afraid of him. Visser ‘t Hooft was a closed and very direct man. I called him: ‘I would like to make an appointment.’ Visser ‘t Hooft: ‘I don’t have any time right now. I will call you this afternoon at 2.’ I sat expectantly beside the phone. Visser ‘t Hooft called at 2: ‘Come now!’ You were expected to give a logical coherent account. No small talk. Don’t talk about the weather. That was time wasted. Don’t write anything down – you can do that later from memory. Large desk, large window behind Visser ‘t Hooft, by which you saw his profile in the light. Piles of books left and right. You were offered a very old sagging armchair which you sank into completely. He thus sat higher and after a bit began to walk around the room. After I explained the complex issue [on competence issues] Visser ‘t Hooft finally sat down next to me, thus on my level and began to answer. The ecumenical movement is like a diamond, a brilliant whole, with all kinds of colours and facets. You are one extraordinarily small piece, but nevertheless one of the many facets of that large diamond. After that, Visser ‘t Hooft began citing a list of ecumenical topics that the migration issue was a part of and finally fit in. After it was over, my boss came up to me and asked: ‘Tu as vu le patron?’ (Have you seen the boss?)

Visser ‘t Hooft could also have sudden outbursts of anger. During a cruise in 1971, after a lecture near Antioch on Paul and the early church which the audience responded to enthusiastically, Visser ‘t Hooft, to everybody’s

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amazement, was extremely irritated. After he was on-board ship, he exploded because no attention had been paid in the lecture to the preaching of John Chrysostom (345-407) against the debauchery that the people in Antioch had engaged in in his time.\(^{15}\) It is remarkable that justifications of Visser ’t Hooft’s behaviour often followed negative characterisations of him. When the journalist Bert Stoop spoke with him on the occasion of his 60th birthday, he observed:

> There are people who are afraid of him. That isn't strange, for he can be unreasonably angry, temperamental, and rude sometimes, even though these uncontrolled responses were the result of a justified feeling of disappointment or protest. ... On the outside, Dr. Visser ’t Hooft does not stand out. Only his eyes are striking. They look at you as if he sees through you completely. His always somewhat red mouth, which was given a sense of doggedness by his lips pressed together, is deep and heavily wrinkled.\(^{16}\)

Many people accepted his occasional lack of self-control by the general secretary as something that was inseparably connected with his decisiveness and heavy responsibilities. It made it difficult for him sometimes to be patient with people whom he felt thought ‘more narrowly’ than he did or who missed an aspect he thought to be precisely important. Most forgave him.

### 6.3 The Vision

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, a general secretary usually implements the agreed upon policy more than taking the initiative. Visser ’t Hooft, however, did not view himself at all as someone who simply executed what others had put together. Taking a wait-and-see attitude was not for him. In 1950, for instance, he put five priorities on the agenda during an important meeting of the central committee to decide policy in Toronto. As a ‘religious international’ with churches, the World Council was a new phenomenon, and Visser ’t Hooft understood that the mission and vision of the World Council had to be crystal clear. These priorities were interchurch solidarity, mobilising support, interchurch dialogue, stimulating joint witness, and the articulation of the meaning of mission for ecumenicity and vice versa. The five starting points

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\(^{15}\) Beaupère, ‘Rencontres avec W. Visser ’t Hooft’, 2003, 39. St John Chrysostom was a famous preacher and Archbishop of Antioch 398-403 AD.

were unanimously approved.\textsuperscript{17} The basis for these points was a confidential study that Visser ‘t Hooft had published as early as October 1947, before the actual foundation of the World Council, called ‘Die Bedeutung des Oekumenischen Rates’ (The Importance of the Ecumenical Council). This text was later included as a chapter in \textit{The Universal Church in God’s Design}, the first part of the material that was used in the foundation assembly in Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{18}

Following this line, the central committee accepted an important declaration in Toronto, whose central point was to refute the misunderstanding that the goal of the World Council was to form a superchurch. Directly connected with that was the stipulation that becoming a member of the World Council could never mean recognising all other member churches as fully church.\textsuperscript{19}

In Visser ‘t Hooft’s view, this Toronto declaration was only the beginning of a fundamental ecclesiological reflection on the significance of membership in the World Council. One reason behind this was to do away with objections to the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

But the suspicion would not go away. The word ‘misunderstanding’ regularly appears in the defence articulated by Visser ‘t Hooft in the 1950s.

One dangerous misunderstanding consists in the presupposition that the only alternative for disagreement would be a monolithic, centralist, and imperialist superchurch, a kind of clerical Leviathan.\textsuperscript{20}

According to Visser ‘t Hooft, the insinuation that the World Council was set on organising a superchurch could only be refuted by showing that true ‘fellowship’ between the various churches was possible. He saw the method for seeking consensus through discussion as an important tool in this. He disputed the view that, as critics asserted, that unity could only come at the expense of truth. These critics argued that churches that thought differently about matters of faith would necessarily deny their faith when meeting each other.\textsuperscript{21} They did not trust the claim of the World Council that the autonomy of every church would be completely respected.

\textsuperscript{17} Visser ‘t Hooft, ‘De Wereldraad van Kerken. Huidige situatie en uitzicht’, 1950, 439-450.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The First Six Years, 1948-1954} (1954), 12, WCC 994.2.15/5.
In his defence of the World Council, Visser ’t Hooft stated expressly that neither the so-called *notae ecclesiae* of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity nor the essential attributes of *koinonia*, the New Testament word for fellowship, were not (to be) applied to the World Council. 22 The World Council was what the word said: a *council*, nothing more and nothing less. According to him, therefore, the council had no pretensions or ambitions to be or become a superchurch. Such a varied collection of member churches could not allow a complete joint confession of faith and the full fellowship of the sacraments as real objectives. That was why the base formula of the World Council was not a ‘confession’ in the true sense of the word.

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. 23

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22 The four *notae ecclesiae* (marks of the church) were set by the Council of Constantinople and refers to 1 Corinthians 12:27; *koinonia* is the Greek word used in Acts 2:42 to indicate the fellowship of the first Christian community.

Many suggestions were put forward after the meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 to reformulate this sentence, but not one proposal was accepted. For Visser ’t Hooft, the meaning was that the Lord of the Church had come to people in Christ and was still building his Church himself by bringing his children together in the body of Christ. Nor was there any actual joint message covering proclamation. But such a unanimous New Testament kerygma, proclamation or news, could not be expected from the World Council either. 24 That was the task of the member churches. The World Council itself was both a task and promise at the same time and had to address the world both prophetically and in terms of content. The council itself, according to Visser ’t Hooft, should see itself as an instrument that the Lord made available to the church in order to achieve his purpose with the churches and the world.

That Visser ’t Hooft spoke of ‘misunderstandings’ in connection with disagreements was one of his deliberate strategies. 25 For example, he could present himself as someone who rose above the problem and knew what the solution was. He did not convince everyone. The former staff member Albert van den Heuvel pointed out decades later that the staff from around 1960 themselves did believe that the World Council was intent on having churches become one with respect to organisation and administration. 26

Clarity on the foundation of the World Council was certainly needed, and Christ played a central role in this in Visser ’t Hooft’s view. He viewed the base formula of the World Council as a biblically justified interpretation of the incarnation, i.e., the becoming flesh of Christ as described in John 1. According to Lukas Vischer, director of the Faith and Order department from 1966 to 1979, the base formula was also essentially Visser ’t Hooft’s own personal ‘confession of faith’. In any case, he always strongly defended this, but he did not take it ill of any one if he or she had difficulty with this basis. The base formula, which was accepted in Utrecht in 1938 and expanded in a trinitarian sense in 1961 at New Delhi, was critiqued right from the beginning. That Jesus Christ was presented as God and Saviour was a dogmatic interpretation that many thought went too far. Not everyone was as tolerant as the Dutch liberal Lutheran professor C.W. Mönnich, who viewed the base formula as an unfortunately formulated ‘pietism’ that

24 Cf., Romans 16:15.
25 Cf., The First Six Years, 1948-1954 (1954), 12, WCC 994.2.15/5.
Visser ’t Hooft refused to abandon the base formula, but he always looked willingly at criticism from, for example, Czech Protestants or Unitarians in the United States. He understood that the base formula was not perfect, but at the same time he saw these imperfections as an indispensable sheet anchor for keeping the World Council in balance.

Visser ’t Hooft was a man with a vision. At no time would he have been content to be a manager, plant foreman, or just ‘le patron’ of a bureaucracy. For him, it was a question of imposing the fundamental unity of the church not only on the division between the churches but also on that of the world. He realised that the Greek term oikumène, from which the modern terms ecumenism and ecumenicity derive, was a neutral term in the Hellenic world in which the New Testament came into being. In the New Testament itself, the word oikumène meant something like ‘the inhabited world’ or ‘mankind’. Gradually, however, it became a term for the unifying force of faith in God and the significance of that for the world, particularly with respect to the seven great ecumenical councils of the Christian Church (325-787). The Lutheran Book of Concord of 1580 referred to confessions of faith as ‘ecumenical’. Visser ’t Hooft could point to various times in the 19th century in which the concept ‘ecumenical’ was used in a more deliberate way, more in the sense of a subjective attitude and a desire, than as a fact. Since 1846, the term ‘oekumene’ had been used in Evangelical Alliance circles. But in Visser ’t Hooft’s view, the modern meaning in which it concerned making the world church visible as Una Sancta in word and deed only became clear during the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. He himself used the definition from the Oxford Life and Work conference of 1937 in his own work:

[The churches] are ecumenical in so far as they attempt to realise the Una Sancta, the fellowship of Christians who acknowledge the one Lord.

From this perspective, he saw the churches as active subjects that had been called together to give shape to their calling, i.e., unity in Christ, in the World Council.

28 The Washington Post, 30 November 1953, WCC 994.1.35/1.
30 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘De Oecumenische Beweging’, 1958, WCC 994.2.16/15.
6.4 Evanston 1954: Hoping ... but for What?

The 1954 assembly in Evanston near Chicago was the first major international meeting of the World Council after its foundation in Amsterdam. The theme of the conference was ‘Christ, Hope of the World’. Visser ‘t Hooft would have liked to have seen the World Council giving a spiritual foundation, with an eschatological, Christocentric perspective, to the hope for a breakthrough in the many impasses of the time. People in World Council circles were convinced that many in the first half of the 1950s were holding on to false hope, both in the West and in the East.\(^{32}\) Capitalism and the free market could offer no redemption from misery, and the same was true of state communism and a command economy. The theme was thus intended in both a critical and a constructive way, but it proved difficult to keep any kind of balance. The discussion on this was very lively at times even during the preparatory stages. Visser ‘t Hooft wanted to elaborate on the relation between the Kingdom of God and history with a view to the contemporary situation and the impasse world politics was stuck in, and in that way, they could continue to build on the foundations that had been laid in Amsterdam. But the theme was full of pitfalls. If Christ was the hope of the world, what was the content of this hope? While some clung to a literal expectation of the second coming of Christ, others viewed this as a flight into ‘otherworldly thinking’. Visser ‘t Hooft and his staff had no control over the confusion that followed.

The World Council attracted increasing attention in this period, certainly in Europe and the United States. Even though it took place in the nervous atmosphere of the witch hunt for suspected communists, the new media in the host country, in which television as the new medium played a continually greater role, showed a great deal of interest in the assembly. Visser ‘t Hooft participated in the televised course ‘Man and Religion’ broadcast by the American broadcasting company NBC before the Evanston assembly. He viewed the second assembly as a wonderful opportunity to raise an alternative Christian voice. In one of his speeches during his preparatory travels, he attacked McCarthyism with its allegations directly. He praised the Presbyterian Church for openly opposing the witch hunt.\(^{33}\) In his view, the United States was undergoing an intense ‘spiritual struggle’: ‘They learn almost for the first time to distinguish between church and world.’\(^{34}\)


\(^{33}\) The Washington Post, 18 November 1953, WCC 994.1.35/1.

\(^{34}\) Visser ‘t Hooft to J.C. Hoekendijk, 16 December 1953, WCC general correspondence 663.
The theologian behind the theme ‘hope’ that was chosen for the second assembly was the Swiss Emil Brunner who now – in contrast to the first assembly – contributed a great deal. He argued for a balance between a ‘futuristic’ interpretation of a kingdom of God that would some day arrive in the distant future and a ‘realised’ eschatology that was fulfilled in the present. Some, however, found ‘hope’ too vague, and Visser ‘t Hooft had to admit that the word ‘hope’ by itself could be used in all kinds of ways. In contrast to that, he introduced the New Testament hope that, according to him, meant certainty: ‘Christian hope is counting on the completion of the plan of God as it is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.’ And then it was not a matter of supernatural events but the victory of Christ over sin and death becoming manifest in a torn world.

For Visser ‘t Hooft himself, in his role as general secretary, Evanston was a time of trial with many problems and crises. The international political situation was full of incidents. The war in Korea had ended a short time before through a ceasefire, but the war in Vietnam would soon break out. In retrospect, the location was not very appropriate, but the choice to have it in America was obvious. American churches had contributed significantly to the World Council both financially and with respect to content. They were also in a position to give this conference allure: dramatic national events occurred prior to the conference. Meeting on a campus close to a major city was more practical than meeting in all kinds of various buildings spread throughout the city centre, as in Amsterdam during the first assembly. But the United States was one of major parties in the Cold War, and the mood was tense.

Visser ‘t Hooft did not have the idea that President Eisenhower understood much about the ecumenical movement. Eisenhower attended a church service at the end of 1953 in Washington that had the theme ‘A Living Hope’. The service was led by Visser ‘t Hooft during the weeks that he was in United States to prepare for the conference in Evanston. The only thing that Eisenhower is reported to have said after the service was: ‘That was a good thought.’ This was, in the mind of the general secretary, a little superficial. Nevertheless, he was honoured when he, together with the head of Northwestern University in Evanston, was later allowed to accompany Eisenhower on a ride through the city before the president addressed the

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36 Visser ‘t Hooft, Summary of Address to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., May 1954. WCC 994.2.15/13.
37 Presbyterian Life, 26 December 1953, WCC 994.1.35/1; Visser ‘t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 250.
assembly. Visser ’t Hooft was quite satisfied with Eisenhower’s call to the delegates to pray for peace because the president thereby gave the impression that he had confidence in the churches.

The delegates from the 160 churches that were members of the World Council in 1954 met in the stifling hot college classrooms of Northwestern University. According to Visser ’t Hooft, only listening to God’s Word would enable them to rise above division. But division could not be avoided all the time, as when electing the new members of the presidium. Visser ’t Hooft wrote to the missionary theologian Hans Hoekendijk: ‘at this Assembly we learn better every day that we are not in control. Sometimes, it’s as if we’re just sitting there watching what happens.’ Visser ’t Hooft was deeply impressed by the secretary-general of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. The latter argued in his speech that, as a unique basis of hope, the cross of Christ was to be invoked not exclusively for the church but inclusively, that is, for all humankind. That was a different Christology than Visser ’t Hooft himself had, but he was intrigued by it. Not until after Hammarskjöld’s sudden death in 1961, when the publication of his book

39  Visser ‘t Hooft to J.C. Hoekendijk, 16 June 1954, WCC general correspondence 663.
Figure 37  Wim and Jetty at Niagara Falls, 1954
*Markings* made his mysticism public, did Visser ’t Hooft – who himself was sometimes called ‘the Hammarskjöld of the churches’ – have a better idea of what Hammarskjöld had intended in his speech.\(^{40}\)

An assembly always had to end in a *Message*. In the Message of Evanston, the delegates sought for an answer to the division of the world in the unity of Christ. But that was too vague for Visser ’t Hooft – it did not make the contemporary translation he had been hoping for.\(^{41}\) In his view, the hope in Christ given to people had to be concretely visible by involving the unity of the church in identifiable oppositions in the world. It was clear that the churches fell short here and shared the responsibility for the tragic impasses of the arms war, racism, migration streams, and food shortages in which the world found itself. To reach that goal, the church had to be renewed.

Renewal was also a topic in the years around 1948, but after Evanston Visser ’t Hooft began to emphasise this theme more and more. He wanted to raise the question again of the old *semper reformanda* of the Reformation, i.e., that a living church is always reforming itself. In 1955, he devoted the Dale Lectures, lectures that he could give in Oxford, to this theme.\(^{42}\) The unity of the church itself was, Visser ’t Hooft argued, a given and should be gratefully accepted as a gift of God. But that acceptance created obligations. He considered it a sin to do nothing with that gift. The Christian task was not to prove the existence of God but to take the incarnation of God’s salvation in Christ very seriously. Belief in Christ involved a personal God. Any relativisation of that reduced Christ to an ethical system and thus denied the community among people that Christ wanted to found. The key term was: *koinonia*, fellowship.\(^{43}\)

He found one of the most important images of this in 1 Corinthians 12, where the apostle Paul speaks of one body of Christ that consists of many members, with varied gifts.\(^{44}\) He considered a restoration of church appreciation for these charismatic gifts, that is, these capacities given by God out of grace, to be essential. He emphasised the importance of the mutual recognition that different people could not do without each other if they wanted to do God’s will: the different Christian traditions could learn from and supplement each other. He spoke of an ‘economy of the charismata’. Some thought this sounded very dogmatic, but others


\(^{41}\) *Evanston Speaks. Reports from the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (1954), 9-11.


\(^{43}\) E.g., in Acts 2:42. Cf. 6.3 and 9.12.

\(^{44}\) Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Renewal and Wholeness’, 1950.
saw a kind of theological *lingua franca* in Visser ’t Hooft’s neo-orthodoxy, a kind of colloquial way of speaking that actually did help in ecumenical encounters.45

### 6.5 The World Council as Watchman

The World Council of Churches wanted to raise a prophetic voice on the international stage. Visser ’t Hooft had learned the importance of this in the war. To enable the churches to speak, they needed to keep a close eye on world events and to explain them in light of God’s intentions with human beings and the world. For the most part, he seemed to ignore the fact that the prophetic voice in the Old Testament usually went precisely against the institutionalised religion of temple and priests. The desire of the World Council to speak prophetically did not only mean that there was an important role for the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), under the leadership of quite down-to-earth analysts like Kenneth Grubb and O. Frederick Nolde, but also for general secretary Visser ’t Hooft himself.

There were a considerable number of international crises on the agenda of the World Council during the 1950s and 1960s. Visser ’t Hooft understood that, in order to have a voice in the international world, they had to deal sparingly and diplomatically with ‘speaking prophetically’ and be completely up to date. There also had to be sufficient support for a statement, first in the relevant committees of the World Council, particularly the international affairs committee, the CCIA, but also among the member churches.46 At the same time, the experience of the church’s speaking out against Nazism had taught him that the World Council could speak not always on behalf of the church but to the church as well. In his conclusion as general secretary to the report of the period 1954-1961 – in retrospect, actually the time in which he was able to achieve most of his ideas – he summarised it as follows:

> There are things which the Spirit says to the churches when they submit themselves together to the revealed truth of God. When the churches speak and act together there is that ‘plus,’ that new dimension which

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belongs to the mystery of God’s unity and fellowship and through which the divine truth is seen in fuller proportion. And so the voice of the Council is at the same time a voice of the churches and a voice to the churches. It is both institution and movement, instrument and leaven; its calling is both to serve and to challenge.47

The claim that the World Council was an instrument of God’s Spirit to speak the truth on behalf of and to the churches went along with a warning by the general secretary about the rising danger of ecumenical institutionalism. Now that there were hundreds of personnel working for the World Council in Geneva, care had to be taken to avoid turning it into a bureaucracy that was removed from the actual church.

Nor did Visser ’t Hooft hesitate to take the opportunity to turn himself with full conviction into a church diplomat in a short time. It was no mean feat to look at contemporary history with an active role for the churches. But he had the spirit of the times with him. At this time there were, relatively speaking, quite a few politicians who respected the church, who would at

least listen politely to what the World Council had to say, albeit very rarely with approval. It also helped that, after the war, dozens of men and a few women from Visser ’t Hooft’s extensive network, built up when he was active in the ecumenical youth movement, were appointed to responsible positions in the international world.

When Visser ’t Hooft spoke in December 1957 on Radio Bern on the efforts of the church for world peace, he described church talk about peace as being committed to total peace, by which he meant peace between God and humankind, between people and between the individual and his conscience. Through the message of the Gospel, so he argued, the churches had a special contribution to make to the development of an international ethos that was suited for a strong international rule of law. They also needed to exercise what he called by the Barthian term Wächteramt, i.e. ‘office of watchman’. Here he meant that they had to speak a warning and give instruction in the spirit of the biblical prophets when it had to do with concrete decisions that nations and governments had to make with each other. In that way, he put into practice what Karl Barth had always urged. Despite the tensions that had existed between them and the fact that Barth was not at all enthusiastic about the ecumenism of the World Council, Visser ’t Hooft was convinced that Barth’s theology was indispensable. At Barth’s 70th birthday in Basel in 1956, Visser ’t Hooft declared that the ecumenical movement was inconceivable without Barth’s theology. In working this out later, he emphasised human rights in addition to the notion of the responsible society. But in the first half of the 1950s, the concept of human rights had not yet been used very much by the World Council. In that period, it usually concerned one of the human rights in particular, namely, the right to freedom of religion. That linked up with Barth’s view.

The precise effect of the statements of the World Council and the interference of the general secretary with what took place on the world stage cannot be measured. But there certainly was influence. To give a complete overview of all activities which the general secretary and his staff developed in the

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49 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Message Oecumenique’ in: Remède de Cheval (1956), 43-45, quote on 44: ‘Ce qui est vrai, toutefois, c’est que le mouvement oecuménique serait tout à fait inconcevable en dehors de la théologie de Karl Barth’ (It is true, nevertheless, that the ecumenical movement would have been utterly inconceivable without the theology of Karl Barth.). Cf. ‘Karl Barth 80 jaar’, NCRV Radio, 9 May 1966, Sound and Vision Archives.
50 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Church and State in the History of the Ecumenical Movement’, lecture at Bossey, 1977, WCC 994.2.29/35.
1950s is impossible within the confines of this book. There are, however, four important dossiers that – each with a different aspect of working this out – illustrate well how Visser ’t Hooft gave content – with varying degrees of success – to his vision and his view of his own task in that. The four examples here chosen are: Israel and the Palestinians, racism in South Africa, the Cyprus crisis, and the Cuba crisis.

I A Difficult Topic: Israel and the Palestinians

On 14 May 1948, a few months before the World Council of Churches was founded, on the day before the expiry of the British Mandate, the State of Israel was founded. That event made a deep impression on many, not only from a historical point of view but also from a theological one. Was this a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy? Could something of God’s eternal covenant with Israel be seen here? But what did that mean for others? Visser ’t Hooft would rather have given this event an ecumenical interpretation, but he was not successful. There were a number of reasons. First, the mission to the Jews was still an important topic in ecumenical circles. Nor was there any basis for consensus in the World Council on a theological view of Israel.

In 1931 the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews was founded. This was a semi-independent organisation with its
own budget, allied with the International Missionary Council. When the American missionary Conrad Hoffmann, who had worked with prisoners of war and Jews, was made the director, it became a joint commission of the World Council and the Missionary Council. Visser ’t Hooft bore some of the responsibility for the programme that Hoffmann set up, called ‘The Christian Approach to the Jews’. The conversion of Jews to faith in Jesus Christ was central to this. The provisional committee of the World Council met in Presinge from 2 to 4 February 1947, where Visser ’t Hooft got them to agree on the line set by Hoffmann. The discussion concerned primarily the methods to be used, but nothing about starting points. Hoffmann argued for a humble attitude on the part of Christians, but conversion to the Jews was the objective. The extremist violence of Zionism in Palestine was seen by him as a consequence of the insufficient Christian aid to Jewish refugees during the period of persecution under Hitler’s regime.51

At the foundation meeting of the World Council in Amsterdam in 1948, the view regarding Israel came up, particularly in section II on ‘The Church’s Witness and God’s Design’ in a chapter that the French committee had written on the witness to Israel, called, ‘The Approach to Israel’.52 That chapter dealt with both combating anti-Semitism as well as engaging in evangelisation among Jews. Hoffmann concluded in his report:

We believe that the Jews as a people are a symbol as no other people of the disorder of man both in the past as in the present. We further believe that the Jews – Israel – are in some mysterious and divine manner, most intimately a factor in the design of God for mankind. To change the disorder in our relationships with the Jews to a state in accord with the design of God, will require Christ-like living. It is because of this conviction that we feel the Church through the World Council of Churches should share with the International Missionary Council the responsibility for the Christian Approach to the Jews. If Christ is the supreme revelation of God’s will for man, then the Church must so proclaim to the Jew as to the gentile.53

No special attention was paid in Amsterdam to the foundation of the State of Israel, probably because the organisers of the assembly assumed that it

51 C. Hoffmann to N. Ehrenström, 9 March 1948, WCC general correspondence 666.
would be seen as a purely political matter by the delegates. The topic was too sensitive, and there was too little time to come to a well-balanced view. The organisers kept a deliberate distance from the mutually exclusive claims that reigned in the Middle East.

But Visser ‘t Hooft was not satisfied. Despite his efforts, he did not manage in the years following to ask the committees of the World Council to investigate what theological significance the founding of the Jewish state could have. In the eyes of most participants in the ecumenical conversation, Israel had been replaced by the church as the people of God, and the claim of universal salvation, which was central to the ecumenical movement, had taken the place of the particular claim of the Jews. Under Visser ‘t Hooft’s leadership, in close collaboration with staff members Frederick Nolde and Elfan Rees of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), the World Council continued to follow critically, in a more than theological way, the developments concerning Israel in a humanitarian sense. For example, from 1 to 8 May 1945, a conference on the Palestinian refugee problem was held on the campus of the American University in Beirut, under the auspices of the World Council and the International Missionary Council. The statistics showed 750,000 Palestinian refugees who could not and would not be ignored. It was unanimously established that these people were being treated unjustly. There was a strong sense of urgency. Visser ‘t Hooft was struck by the hopelessness because no hope was offered to people who thought in 1948 they would be able to return home soon. In the meantime, resentment in the Arab world against the West was great. The feeling had arisen that people were saddled with a European problem: the Western countries seemed to accept the foundation of the State of Israel because of their guilty conscience about what had been done to the Jews in Europe in the Second World War.

After the conference in Beirut, Visser ‘t Hooft and Robert C. Mackie, director of the Department of Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid, made a trip through Israel. As a delegation of the World Council, they were received by the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs, where, according to Visser ‘t Hooft, they had a meaningful discussion. But he was surprised at the lack of knowledge among responsible Israeli leaders concerning the extent and seriousness of the Arab refugee problem. Visser ‘t Hooft then had an encounter with the Austrian-Jewish philosopher of religion, Martin Buber (1878-1965), with whom he spoke about reconciliation between Jews and Arabs, and the importance of conducting dialogue. Visser ‘t Hooft was
particularly impressed by Buber. In his reflections on the I-Thou relations, on becoming aware between distance and nearness, Visser ‘t Hooft found the tone that the World Council also needed to acquire:

I have come back with the strong conviction that we must build up groups of Christians who approach the whole problem of Israel and the Arab nations in a non-partisan spirit and refuse to let themselves be used for propaganda on either side.55

But he could not manage it. For Visser ‘t Hooft, where Israel was concerned, a piece of unprocessed theology stood in the way. At Evanston in 1954, when they discussed the hope of the people of God, it was exclusively the Christian church that was meant. But was that completely right? Was there not still another people? To Visser ‘t Hooft’s regret, a reference to Romans 9-11 did not make it into the Message of Evanston at the final vote. In that text, the apostle Paul speaks about the still to be expected fulfilment of the promises of God to Israel. Visser ‘t Hooft was struck by the fact that most of those who voted against any reference to that text came from countries that had not been occupied by the Nazis. Most of those who voted for it were too well acquainted with German anti-Semitism. He felt that this was not a coincidence and said to himself: ‘the spectre of Hitler is present’.56 Visser ’t Hooft heard the proponents and opponents talking past each other, and emotions ran high. Some felt that special attention for Israel was itself a form of discrimination. Others held that leaving out any concrete reference to Israel was a denial of the significance of the Jewish people. There were 24 delegates, almost all of them Europeans or Americans, including a few friends and kindred spirits of Visser ’t Hooft, such as the promising Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof, who found a reference to Israel indispensable. They could not accept the failure at having such a reference included in the Message, and they proposed a statement on the hope for Israel, which was added to the closing documents of Evanston.57 The writers emphasised that their intentions were ‘purely biblical'and should not be confused with any political position regarding the State of Israel. Visser ’t Hooft sympathised with the initiative but observed, as general secretary, that Israel was not a fruitful topic for the World Council because it brought about more division than unity.

55 Visser ’t Hooft to W.W. Van Kirk, 19 May 1951, WCC general correspondence 773.
56 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 248.
57 Tweede Vergadering van de Wereldraad van Kerken (1954), 196-198.
At the assembly in New Delhi in 1961, Visser ‘t Hooft wanted to prevent a repeat of Evanston. The Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews was now called the Commission on the Church and the Jewish People, a controversial change because the element of the mission to the Jews had now disappeared into the background. Visser ‘t Hooft attached a great deal of value to a resolution being accepted that condemned anti-Semitism as a sin against God and people. This modest declaration, which was prepared by a committee under the leadership of Robert Mackie, stated that the events that led to the crucifixion of Christ should not be attributed to the Jewish people, but that humanity as a whole was responsible. The acceptance of the resolution did not happen easily, however. A number of delegates wondered why one form of racism had to receive special attention. Others, in contrast, such as the American John C. Bennett of the United Churches of Christ, wanted to involve more theological aspects of the relation between Christians and Jews. They wanted to have it mentioned that anti-Semitism was partly the result of the misuse of the teaching of the church and of church confessions. The Swiss C. Schnyder of the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches asked for a clause in which it was stated that the Jews were still God’s people. But Visser ‘t Hooft cut the discussion short. He pointed to the great differences of opinion that had been already established earlier, which meant that discussion on such a proposal was pointless. 58

The World Council, with Visser ‘t Hooft at the helm, was reproached for not doing justice to the question of the Jews and Israel. 59 Adherence to a general humanitarian ethos would blind people to the particular significance of the Jewish people, first theologically but then also concretely in terms of righteousness. Christian replacement theology was viewed as the most important cause of this blindness. Christian baptism had replaced Jewish circumcision. This theology in fact denied Jewish people the right to existence by presenting the church as ‘the new people of God’ in which all Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled. That the World Council subsequently regularly defended the rights of the Palestinians did not make the council any more popular among these critics. But Visser ‘t Hooft did not have a lot of latitude. Like many of his generation, he felt obliged to witness to the redeeming salvific work of Christ, to Jews as well. But he was primarily dependent on a majority in the assembly and the central committee with respect to policy. And after he retired as well,

there was never a majority that wanted to attribute theological significance to the existence of the State of Israel. One could ask whether the leaders of secular Israel were really interested in such a development. During a consultation in 1965, organised by the Committee on the Church and the Jewish People and held in the ecumenical study centre at Bossey, one of the Jewish delegates present summarised the problem as follows: ‘Most Christians are unable to engage in dialogue about faith and most Jews are unwilling to do so.’

II A Moderate Approach: Apartheid in South Africa

Visser ’t Hooft had more success with the apartheid question. There was wide support in the World Council for an active policy concerning racism, particularly in South Africa. The ‘office of watchman’ could be exercised to its full extent. As early as the 1920s, John Oldham had published a critical study in which he condemned racism in general on the basis of the Christian faith. The central committee of the World Council felt it was a good idea to send an ecumenical, multiracially composed delegation to South Africa to talk about apartheid. But such a delegation was refused in advance by a number of churches in that country. As a compromise, the general secretary was then sent, and Visser ’t Hooft made a visit to the South African churches in the spring of 1952. It was an extraordinarily intense trip for him. According to Visser ’t Hooft, he gave 57 speeches and had countless meetings and discussions with individuals and groups. The six denominations in South Africa that were members of the World Council were, in addition to the Dutch Reformed Church of Transvaal, the Reformed Church, the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Congregational Union. But Visser ’t Hooft also visited various Bantu churches, black churches where the services were in one of the Bantu languages as well as in English. He took an explicitly moderate line: his goal was to form a good picture of the situation and to attempt where possible to remove ‘misunderstandings’, as he himself like to call them. White supporters of apartheid, however, greeted him with suspicion.

Visser ’t Hooft saw the ‘trek’ of Bantu workers to the great industrial areas as one of the major problems – this move disrupted the social coherence of

61 Oldham, Christianity and the Race Problem (1924).
their society: communities had disintegrated, and families had fallen apart. Nevertheless, Visser ‘t Hooft was not against apartheid in an absolute sense.

But apartheid does not necessarily mean such discrimination. It can mean separate development of the races so that each may have the fullest opportunity for growth.63

This view had been previously defended by the diplomat Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, sister of the Indian Prime Minister Nehru, and many missionaries working in South Africa held this view as well. According to Visser ‘t Hooft, not much constructive work could be done at that point because of the African National Congress, which organised resistance to apartheid. In his view, an impasse had come about in which everyone was talking past each other, and the white Afrikaans-speaking minority felt trapped. Visser ‘t Hooft pleaded for understanding and for less sensationalist reporting on South Africa. Since he could understand Afrikaans because he was Dutch, he considered himself better able to understand how church and society were intertwined among the white Afrikaans-speaking population group. In his eyes, the Dutch Reformed Churches followed the Afrikaans-speaking politicians relatively uncritically. Primitive justifications of white domination, such as Ham theology, he thought, no longer played any meaningful role. In that theology, blacks were presented as the descendants of Ham, whose father, Noah, had cursed him and thus condemned him to a life of slave labour.64 Visser ‘t Hooft recommended that the World Council invest in ecumenical contacts and to temporarily postpone sending a multiracial delegation.

UNESCO (Organisation of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture) showed interest in Visser ‘t Hooft’s trip to South Africa. His analyses were published in 1954 in a series on racism.65 In this booklet, Visser ‘t Hooft looked at the historical backgrounds of racism, not only in South Africa but also in Nazi Germany and in the United States. His primary purpose was to give insight into the involvement of churches in the problem and to explain how difficult it was for ecumenical conferences to make clear statements about race issues. In the second part of the booklet, he discussed, among

63 Ibid., 181.
other things, the Christian conceptualisation of race, the relations between
the races in the society and the pros and cons of ethnic churches. According
to Visser ‘t Hooft, it was not primarily ignorance and prejudice that was to
blame for racial discrimination. At bottom, what was lacking was a true
sense of fellowship among people, which was precisely what the churches
were called to as the new people of God. He referred to Charles Darwin’s
theories to demonstrate that racial pride was connected to the human
instinct for survival. But in their ecumenical connectedness, churches were
equipped to bridge the gaps that divided humanity in the awareness of one
brotherhood recognisable in the Christian faith.

The most important preparatory work for discussing racism during the
assembly at Evanston in 1954 was carried out by Frederick Nolde of the
Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA). Section V
concerned for the most part the question of being church in the midst of
racial and ethnic tensions. The most difficult problem, Visser ‘t Hooft felt,
was churches that profiled themselves in an explicitly ethnic way. By doing
that, they were choosing an identity that was at odds with the essence of the
church because they viewed themselves as privileged by God with respect to
other groups in society. Reflection was needed. He formulated the following
as a task for the churches worldwide: churches needed to understand their
mission in the world as the new people of God on the road, whereby they
actually gave an answer to racism. 66

In the meantime, tensions were rising in South Africa. Many people
were killed during the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, and a state
of emergency was declared. All that Visser ‘t Hooft wanted to do was to
stimulate the network of the South African churches, with the World Council
as catalyst, to come up with a peaceful solution. In December 1960, they
succeeded in bringing delegates from eight South African churches for a
multiracial meeting in Cottesloe College of the University of Witwatersrand
near Johannesburg. This ‘Cottesloe Consultation’ was prepared with a great
deal of difficulty by the American secretary of the World Council, the
Presbyterian theologian Robert S. Bilheimer. The delegation from the World
Council consisted of the Americans Franklin Fry and Charles Parlin, the
Briton Ernest A. Payne, the German Wilhelm Niesel, the Ceylonese Lakdasa
de Mel, and Visser ‘t Hooft. A text was composed during the discussions that
most of those present could agree with, the draft for which came from the
Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and was moderate in tone. Among other
things, there was no biblical command against racially mixed marriages but

they were also not recommended. No one could be denied parliamentary representation or participation in a church on the basis of colour or race. ‘Every adult male’ had the right to participate in the government of the country he lived in.

For Visser ‘t Hooft, this was an example of what he called ‘the ecumenical method’. Churches that lived past each other had been brought into contact and had formulated a joint position. Visser ‘t Hooft was very satisfied with Cottesloe. But the South African government thought very differently about it and considered the work of the World Council as unwanted foreign interference in South African affairs. There was also a setback in that not only did the small South African Reformed Church leave the World Council in protest after Cottesloe, but the synods of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Transvaal and the Cape could not agree internally about the results of the conference. A positive response came from the Dutch Reformed minister C.F. Beyers Naudé. He founded a Christian institute to work out what had been achieved in Cottesloe.

Time and again, Visser ‘t Hooft tried to place the problem of racism in the perspective of world historical development. At the large colloquium on racism that the World Council organised in Notting Hill in London in 1969, he presented a historical overview of ecumenical activities for combatting racism from 1925 to 1968. The American minister Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), was supposed to attend the World Council Assembly of 1968 in Uppsala but was assassinated a few weeks beforehand. Visser ‘t Hooft was not really a proponent of the great emphasis that followed in the World Council policy on combatting racism in the special Programme to Combat Racism. He was not much of a believer in separate action programmes; he believed rather in a church that combatted racism on the basis of the universal Christological foundation given to it in its very being.

He would rather have seen the struggle against racism embraced in an integral sense as part of the ecumenical work as a whole of the church. While he had not argued originally for the immediate rejection of apartheid, he did move in that direction – also under the influence of the hardline South African governmental policy. Beyers Naudé, Alan Boesak, and Desmond Tutu were prophets in his eyes. Visser ‘t Hooft remained moderate in his own statements about apartheid. Nevertheless, over the course of the

67 Visser ‘t Hooft, Report to the central committee, St Andrews, August 1960.
69 Interview Zeilstra with B.C. Sjollema, 20 August 2013.
1960s he began to more and more clearly reject apartheid as irreconcilable with the Gospel and with the notion of a 'responsible society', especially because all inhabitants of a country had to have the chance to bear actual responsibility.\textsuperscript{70}

III Through the Eye of a needle: The Cyprus Crisis

The third example in which the office of watchman had to be practised and showed very well how Visser 't Hooft dealt with such matters was the prolonged Cyprus Crisis that the World Council paid a great deal of attention to in the latter half of the 1950s. It was a problematic case for Visser 't Hooft, for he was personally attacked by the rank and file of the member churches themselves for the position the World Council took, especially in the Anglican Church, and thus ended up in a thorny situation. Already in 1954, the World Council publicly declared that it supported the right of the island to self-determination, which was the wish of primarily the Greek majority on the island. The Turkish view, however, was that Cyprus – where a considerable Turkish minority also lived – belonged to Turkey because of its geographical position. But the Greek government viewed Cyprus historically as a Greek island and was supported in this by the Greek Orthodox Church. There were violent incidents regularly between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The British, who governed the island as a Crown colony until 1960 and had made the island their most important base in the Mediterranean Sea, did not consider leaving and sent troops who themselves were attacked by Greek insurgents. The Greek archbishop and ethnarch of the island, Makarios III, refused to condemn the Greek attacks on the British and was thus seen by the British as instigating terrorism.

On 6 and 7 September 1955, Turkish gangs in Istanbul engaged in a violent pogrom of the Greek inhabitants, leading to a Greek exodus from that city and threatening the ancient Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Patriarchate had joined the World Council in 1948 and, along with some twenty scattered Orthodox churches, represented a venerable tradition. Visser 't Hooft pressed the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey F. Fisher, to show support by the Anglican Church for the patriarch.\textsuperscript{71} Up until a short time beforehand, Fisher had, been president

\textsuperscript{70} Visser 't Hooft, in: 'Een ton d'r op', VPRO Television, 5 May 1966, Sound and Vision Archives. See: 9.3.

of the executive committee of the World Council, and in 1948 he was the one who pronounced the solemn words of foundation. Visser ’t Hooft hoped a sympathetic declaration by Fisher would prevent a threatening conflict between the Orthodox and Anglicans in the World Council, but he was disappointed.

A declaration of solidarity by Visser ’t Hooft on behalf of the World Council concerning the riots in Istanbul was later approved. The CCIA then demanded at the beginning of 1956 that the United Kingdom recognise the right of the Cypriot people to self-determination. They also proposed a transition period of self-government until the Cypriots themselves would be able to choose what the future of their island would be.72 But the British authorities in Cyprus had no interest and banished Makarios, whom they accused of political incitement, to the Seychelles in March 1956. The Greek Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople were deeply offended, especially because the dignity of an archbishop had been violated. They therefore put the World Council under great pressure to protest against this sacrilege.

Visser ’t Hooft, who cherished the good contacts the World Council had with Orthodoxy, felt that what had happened was unacceptable.73 Because he could not reach the then chairman of the executive committee, Franklin Fry, who was in Russia, he personally assumed responsibility for presenting a declaration in which he requested that Makarios’s banishment be revoked. This was done with the approval of the vice-chairman, Ernest A. Payne. The affair quite quickly became very complicated for the World Council, primarily because of internal division. Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher was furious. On 15 March 1956, there was a debate on the question of Cyprus in the House of Lords, and English bishops took opposite sides. The Anglican bishop of Chichester and good friend of Visser ’t Hooft, George Bell, called the banishment of Makarios a major blunder by the British government. He went further than Visser ’t Hooft on this question, but the impression was that Visser ’t Hooft thought about it in precisely the same way.74 Fisher criticised Makarios because, in his view, he was not acting like a bishop but like a politician. He also made no secret of the fact that he thought Visser ’t Hooft had gone too far and presented his own peace plan. He wrote Visser ’t Hooft an angry letter that the latter experienced as a rap on the knuckles.75 He was not used to being treated this way by the leader of one of the most important member churches. Visser ’t Hooft did not apologise but explained his position in a polite letter to Fisher and delicately pointed out that there were quite a few friends of the United Kingdom who had the same view and also condemned Makarios’s banishment.76

He hoped that he could still play a mediating role in the Cyprus question and went to Ankara to talk to the Turks. It was quiet diplomacy, and thus he had to be careful about publicity. His most important contacts in Greece were M.C. King and Professor Hamilcar Alivisatos, the secretary of the Greek Inter-Church Aid Comité. But in March 1957, Archbishop Dorotheos of the Greek Orthodox Church suddenly demanded that all communication from the World Council was to be conveyed from that point on via him personally and via the synod of the Greek Orthodox Church. Visser ’t Hooft acceded to this unreasonable demand against his will. He attempted to see a positive sign in that the Greek bishops wanted to take the work of the World Council

73 Visser ’t Hooft to M.C. King (the representative of the Greek Orthodox Church in the World Council), 4 April 1956, WCC general correspondence 760.
75 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 297.
Visser ’t Hooft, 1900–1985

seriously, but he did call it an ‘ecumenical earthquake’ and felt it was tragic that Alivisatos, who had been in charge of the ecumenical relations between the Greek Orthodox Church and the World Council, was now dismissed.77 It would come down to making a virtue out of necessity and to involve this church, which had always been so strongly internally directed, more in the content of the topics the World Council dealt with.78

Through everything, Visser ’t Hooft viewed it as his task as general secretary to keep the relationship of the World Council with the Greek Orthodox Church and thus with the rest of the Orthodox world as intact as possible. There were major interests at stake. The Greeks symbolised the fact that the World Council was more than a purely Protestant movement. Behind the scenes, progress had been made in having the Russian Orthodox Church join the World Council. But the undiplomatic Fisher, who had been correctly associated by the Greeks with the World Council because of his role in and after its foundation, threw a spanner into the works again. In the summer of 1958, he accused Makarios of being a bad man and a political powerbroker. Visser ’t Hooft was shocked. Not only did he think that it was unwise of Fisher to speak out in that way, but it was, in his view, untrue. Makarios was not a bad person in his eyes, but he was trapped and did not have an independent mind.79 For a moment Visser ’t Hooft feared that the Greek church would leave the World Council.80 He felt forced to distance himself on behalf of the council from former president Fisher, a painful matter for him. At the beginning of December 1958, the Greek bishops accepted a pointed declaration in which they condemned what they saw as the weak position of the World Council. But that was primarily rhetorical, and it went no further than that.

The meddling of the World Council by Visser ’t Hooft and his staff with the Cyprus question was meaningful, as can be read in the report of the assembly in New Delhi in 1961.81 The World Council gained access not only to the highest government representatives and the United Nations but also to the people it affected. For example, representatives of the World Council made a fraternal visit to Cyprus itself in January 1959. The crisis did not end with Cyrus joining either Greece or Turkey but a provisional agreement

77 M.C. King to F.H. House, 8 March 1957, WCC general correspondence 762.
78 Visser ’t Hooft to M.C. King, 14 May 1957, WCC general correspondence 762.
80 Visser ’t Hooft to M.C. King, 28 June 1958, WCC general correspondence 763.
about the independence of the island was reached in 1960. Makarios became president of the Greek part, and in August 1959 the executive committee of the World Council met on Rhodes. There was peace once again between the World Council and the Greeks, but Visser ‘t Hooft had the feeling that he had crawled through the eye of a needle.

IV Procedural Problems: The Cuba Crisis

Whenever a major international crisis developed, an emergency meeting took place in Geneva at the World Council headquarters, and a decision had to be made as to whether it made sense to make a statement. Timing was very important here. Because there was usually no chance to present a draft statement to the hundred-member central committee, and even the executive committee could often not be consulted, a very small number of staff members had to make the decision. The three main figures were the chairman of the executive committee, the vice-chairman, and the general secretary. But if possible, the leaders of the international committee, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), could weigh in as well. This is how declarations were made on the initiative of leaders of the World Council on the Suez crisis (2 November 1956), the Hungarian crisis (5 November 1956), anti-Semitism (6 January 1960), and the nuclear tests that Russia carried out (8 September 1961). But major difficulties arose during the Cyprus crisis, also through the solo activity of Visser ‘t Hooft. Because of that, a number of new rules were instituted during the assembly in New Delhi in 1961. It was recalled that, just as William Temple expressed it in Utrecht in 1938, declarations by the World Council derived their authority from the weight they had as a result of their own truth and wisdom.82 Only in exceptional emergency situations could a statement be issued purely on the authority of the chairman of the central committee, after consultation with the vice-chairman and the general secretary. Such a statement could not conflict with the policy followed up to that point by the World Council.83

These seemed to be clear agreements, but in the hustle and bustle of international relations, it could be difficult to put them into practice. In 1962, Visser ‘t Hooft made an error of judgement. A conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union concerning Cuba, where Fidel Castro

had recently assumed power, got seriously out of control in October and the threat of nuclear war loomed large. The boycott of Cuba by the United States that followed was deplored in a statement from the World Council. Internally, however, this occasion led to an intense debate. In the member churches there appeared to be more different views on this issue than had been suspected. Visser ’t Hooft was reproached for allowing the statement to be issued before the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs was consulted. Staff members of this department found the statement one-sided and felt embarrassed. Various measures were taken to limit the damage, but the damage had been done. The disagreement, including that between member churches, could not be hidden from the outside world. Visser ’t Hooft defended himself by claiming that solidarity and commitment to victims sometimes merited priority above formal procedures.

But he also understood that it had not gone well, and he proposed that he himself draft a few strongly limiting rules, in addition to those made at New Delhi. First, the World Council Assembly and the central committee would from that point on have to adopt a position on the issue on which a statement was to be issued. Second, the problem presented should not be too filled with technical-legal jargon, as, for example, in terms of international legalities, so that it could be understood by other people and not just experts. Third, a statement by the World Council would be rejected if it was expected to lead to more rather than less international tension. That he himself proposed these very limiting measures was a shrewd strategy by the general secretary. It is difficult to understand that he did indeed want to limit his own freedom of movement so much, but he wanted to show that, for the sake of the relevance of the statements, the World Council had to accept a certain risk.

After long discussions, the executive committee shied away from implementing the strict rules: they would restrict far too much the possibilities of responding adequately to world news. This confrontation with the dilemma was exactly what Visser ’t Hooft had in mind: ‘It was in the nature of the case that you could not elaborate a “crisology”.’ The playing field continued to be determined by the guidelines that were accepted in New Delhi. It was emphatically stated that staff members had to do their utmost to consult the CCIA or other committees that were relevant for the topic. The latitude to respond quickly was retained, but Visser ’t Hooft would from that point

84 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Memorandum on Statements by the WCC Officers at Times of International Crisis’. February 1963, WCC 994.2.19/5.
85 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 308.
on take some time to think before he bypassed the committee. Prophetic speech could not do without a careful use of the procedure.

More than a year and a half later, Visser ’t Hooft led a memorial service in the Cathedral de St. Pierre in Geneva on the day after the assassination of the American president John F. Kennedy. He preached on Psalm 142:2-3, a lament to God, and praised Kennedy for his courage and imaginative power ‘not merely to speak of peace, but to act in such a way that the international climate began to become less intolerable.’

### 6.6 The Indispensability of Mission

Visser ’t Hooft had a warm heart for mission. Here he saw the missionary shape of the church become clearly visible. When T.Z. Koo, in 1933 a representative of the then still flourishing Chinese mission in the student movement, proposed bringing the various Asian Student Christian Movements, thus national and colonial departments of the WSCF (World Student Christian Federation), together for a conference on Java, Visser ’t Hooft was immediately enthusiastic. It was an unforgettable trip for him. There were participants from China, India, Japan, Burma, the Philippines, Ceylon, and the Dutch East Indies. A Javanese chapter could thus be constituted as a Student Christian Movement of the WSCF and therefore as the Indian counterpart of the NCSV. Here Visser ’t Hooft became acquainted with the struggle for independence that thrived among Asian youth. Some friends from this time were ultimately given leadership positions in the new Indonesia.

That Dutch authority could not be restored after the Japanese withdrew in 1945, despite so-called ‘police actions’ (*politieele acties*), which were in fact military operations, had great consequences for missions. Neither in the Netherlands nor in the International Missionary Council, according to Visser ’t Hooft, did people understand that it now had to do with the inevitable process of an Indonesia that was discovering itself. He considered the Dutch action a tragic mistake and felt directly involved. When the second World Conference of Christian Youth took place in Oslo in 1947,

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86 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Sermon preached by Dr. W.A. Visser ’t Hooft of the World Council of Churches at a Memorial Service for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy at the Cathedral de St Pierre Geneva, 23 November 1963’, HDC-PE, NCSV 725-3.
87 See 2.8.
88 Visser ’t Hooft to J.C. Hoekendijk, 24 April 1946, WCC general correspondence 661.
Visser ‘t Hooft distanced himself as speaker openly and publicly from the violence that the Netherlands was then using in Indonesia. In his response at the end of the conference, the Indian theologian Madathilparampil M. Thomas said that Visser ‘t Hooft’s words had aroused in him a sense of the communal human guilt before God so that his own judgement about the behaviour of the Dutch crumbled. But a wave of indignation welled up in the Netherlands at Visser ‘t Hooft’s words, and he damaged his goodwill for a long time for many. 

While the World Council was founded in Amsterdam in 1948, the struggle for Indonesia was not yet over. Visser ‘t Hooft, who was aware of the ambivalent feelings of the Indonesians present, proclaimed a confession of guilt at the assembly. Because he did not want the Indonesian participants to decline their reception by the queen, Visser ‘t Hooft used Karl Barth, who did manage to get the Indonesians to the point that they went to the palace, by stating that he himself was also going as a republican. When Visser ‘t Hooft visited Java again in 1949 after the conference, his attitude regarding Indonesian independence in 1947 in Oslo and in 1948 in Amsterdam appeared to have strengthened friendships there.

Daughter churches in the new states, such as Indonesia and India, were becoming autonomous denominations. During the trip that the general secretary made with others through Southeast Asia in the winter of 1949/1950, he was impressed by the energy that the decolonisation process released, but he was shocked when he saw that, along with the rediscovery of their own identity, all kinds of new religious forms with old roots were flourishing. For example, Gandhi, the Indian champion of self-government and non-violent resistance who was assassinated in 1948, was regularly depicted as surrounded by the Buddha, Krishna, and the crucified Christ. The Holy Spirit was compared with the principle of the Advaita, the identity principle of Hindu pantheism. Visser ‘t Hooft could not accept that. In his view, this did not do enough justice to the exclusive uniqueness of Christ ‘crucified under Pontius Pilate’. He saw this as syncretism, by which he understood the mixing of elements from different religions, without the contradictions being resolved or reaching a deeper synthesis. Such syncretism, which was sometimes officially propagated by the state to give coherence to the country, filled Visser ‘t Hooft with great concern. He saw a secular indifference in

this and an agnostic form of absorption, whereby a proper awareness of the problem was lacking, actually a form of abuse of religion. During this trip, Visser ’t Hooft attended a conference of East Asian Christian leaders, which was held from 4-11 December 1949 in Bangkok under the auspices of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches. The Indian Protestant Paul D. Devanandan pointed to the importance of interreligious dialogue.92 Visser ’t Hooft respected Devanandan, whom he knew from his work with students, but he was in no way planning to trade mission for interreligious dialogue in the World Council. He did understand that he could not demand that the new churches blindly take over Western theology, but the uniqueness of Christ was non-negotiable. Here he forgot that his thinking was also based on a concept of Jesus that was also contextually determined and interpreted in a certain way in West European culture.93 He never used the term ‘syncretism’ in a more objective sense of the term nor did he recognise that every form of religious appropriation had syncretistic aspects by definition. Scholars have pointed to power factors in the exclusive claim to have the true interpretation of Christ, for example, as church or to represent mission organisations. In the interest of interreligious dialogue and the full participation of ‘laymen’, i.e., non-religious people who were involved professionally and officially, in the religious discourse and the experience that is part of that, it is relevant in this context if the clergy or other professionals do not exclusively monopolise religion. The idea of a ‘pure’, ‘uncontaminated’ religion should be viewed as a fiction.94 A self-assured missionary with well-organised supporters who worked in an underdeveloped colony could afford a superiority that had more to do perhaps with power than with truth. Visser ’t Hooft did feel that missions had to abandon this attitude in the context of decolonisation but adopted the attitude of the apostle Paul on the Areopagus, who sought dialogue with the Greeks in a certain symmetry of respect but without betraying the conviction of being right.95

Visser ’t Hooft felt that he had a duty to warn against syncretism, and he did quite often wherever he went. After his journey through Asia, he

92 In 1956 Devanandan became the director of the Centre for the Study of Hinduism in Bangalore.
95 ‘For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse’ (Romans 1:20 (translation NIV)).
expressed his concerns in February 1950 in a confidential report to the central committee of the World Council. Syncretism seemed to have become the new semi-official religion of Asia.

Syncretism happens to be the easy and superficial solution to the religious problem and is now advocated in the most influential quarters. It does not unfortunately stop before the doors of the Churches and makes its influence very definitively felt among the younger generations of Christians. The only answer to this syncretist philosophy, taught as it is in leading intellectual circles, is a clear theological one. And that answer must not take the form of a mere repetition or imitation of Western theology. It must be a creative answer expressed in terms which are fully relevant to the Asian spiritual and ideological situation. That is why it is no exaggeration to say that to a large extent the future of the Christian Churches in Asia will depend on their ability to produce a living, relevant, but at the same time truly biblical and Christocentric theology. 96

He did not feel that Western churches or missionary societies were doing much to stimulate such a sound theology in Asia. To his regret, he observed that most theological training in the new states was still given by Western missionaries, whereas the solution, in his view, had to come from native theologians.

According to Visser ’t Hooft, a healthy mission could not exist without youth. Just as in the 1930s, young people were called during youth conferences to become missionaries, but the call was no longer sounded just in Europe and North America. He admired and romanticised the simplicity of young people in Asia, who were building their churches with great enthusiasm. In his eyes, the somewhat naive way in which many young East Asian theologians believed was an example for Western Christians who had been ‘affected’ by what he called Western ‘scientism’. 97 He respected the tradition of missions being organised by societies but felt in principle that mission was part of the church itself. This vision, i.e., that the church itself was to be fundamentally a missionary movement, was well received in the Netherlands as well. After a long period of preparation, the Dutch Reformed Church adopted a new church order in 1951 that attempted, in a variety of areas, to loosely connect a decidedly national and yet ecumenical orientation.

96 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Concerning the theological situation in Asia’, 13 February 1950, WCC 994.2.13/24.
97 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Universality of the Bible in Relation to Missions’, no date, probably 1937.
The missiologist Hendrik Kraemer was also responsible for the fact that the ‘apostolate’ preceded the confession of the church, which showed the desire to state that the missionary attitude was more essential than the precise wording of the confession of faith with respect to the identity of the church. In the same light, the International Missionary Council (IMC) should by nature be at home under the roof of the World Council of Churches.

The integration of the World Council and the Missionary Council that Visser ’t Hooft strove for was not without its difficulties, however. The Orthodox were afraid of a new wave of the Protestant compulsion to convert others, of proselytising, while the conservatives feared a further watering down and decline of the mission to preach the Word. Still others warned of a paralysis of both the World Council and the Missionary Council because they believed that organisations of such a colossal size would collapse under their own weight and turn into bureaucratic monstrosities. The most important players in the area of Protestant missions were divided. Committed Americans supported integration, but the English were primarily against it because they felt that an independent missions organisation would be more effective. Many objections could be traced to the fact that, traditionally, mission organisations were not set up by churches but had flourished in the form of ‘societies’.98 While daughter churches, which had grown out of mission posts in former colonies, were now independent churches where ‘being missionary’ was part of their identity, churches that had existed for a long time had to discover and develop anew their missionary character. All of that, Visser ’t Hooft felt, had to come together in one dynamic mission-oriented World Council.99

In the 1950s, Visser ’t Hooft saw people everywhere – in the East and the West, the North and the South – searching for new ways and experimenting with new mission methods. Hans Hoekendijk and Steven van Randwijck were important correspondents for him on this topic. ‘It looks as if,’ he wrote to the missiologist Hoekendijk in Indonesia, ‘we have arrived in a period in which a new crystallisation process can begin, and I am very grateful that we will now have the chance to play our role.’100 Van Randwijck had been the director of missions of the Verenigde Nederlandse Zendingscorporaties (United Dutch Missionary Societies) in Oegstgeest, a position he would hold until 1951, when he became secretary-general of the Dutch Reformed Church’s Council for Missions, where he would stay until 1966. In 1949,

100 Visser ’t Hooft to J.C. Hoekendijk, 1 April 1949, WCC general correspondence 662.
Hoekendijk assumed the leadership of the Secretariat for Evangelisation at the World Council. After his departure in 1953, he felt there was only one aspect of the faith that was important: the diaconal. Hoekendijk saw the church at this time purely as an instrument of Christian service in the world and increasingly rejected the ecumenical structures. For Visser ‘t Hooft, that went much too far, and he was very disappointed in Hoekendijk. In his view, it was precisely the ecumenical movement that was able to give a true ecclesiastical answer to the consequences of decolonisation and the crisis of missions.

To his joy, he succeeded in bringing the International Missionary Council and the World Council continually closer to each other at this time. Questions about proclamation, service, and fellowship (the New Testament term koinonia) were reflected upon again in a ‘joint committee’. The intention was to decontaminate the word ‘missions’ in its association with colonialism. But it was not only the situation in the former colonies that increased the insecurity about the legitimation of Christian mission – the rise of secularism in Europe contributed to this as well. Visser ‘t Hooft found it difficult to evaluate its significance properly. What was to be proclaimed? By whom to whom? He did want to change with the times but did not actually change much. On 2 May 1958, he delivered a passionate plea for missions at World Expo ’58 in Brussels and, as he always did, against syncretism. What was striking here was that he asked for understanding with respect to the role communism played in the former colonies in Asia. There he saw people without many possessions reaching for communism as an ideal to make something of their lives. That was, nevertheless, much different than communism as a system of repression, as in Hungary. He called upon the Asian churches to confidently give their own answer to the call of Christ by actively taking part in the ecumenical movement. He also saw more and more sharply that an enormous and unstoppable process of change was occurring. But what was the right answer to that?

Long ago, at the great missions conference organised by John Mott in Edinburgh in 1910, it was their optimistic intention to win the world for Christ in one generation. Now, however, this much was clear to Visser ‘t Hooft: Edinburgh was not the beginning, but the end, of an era. The last years before the First World War were the final days of the era of Emperor Constantine

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101 Hoekendijk, De kerk binnenste buiten (1964).
in which church and state were still closely connected, according to Visser 't Hooft in 1959. The First World War had suddenly brought an end to the cultural optimism of the time. Never again would Europe be rightly seen as an obvious centre of Christian values that deserved to be spread across the world. Following the Indian writer and historian Raimundo Panikkar, Visser 't Hooft spoke of the age of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer who had discovered the sea route to India and thus became a symbol of the possibility of spreading the Christian faith around the world in the wake of the political and commercial interests of European countries. But at no time did Visser 't Hooft condemn missions itself as a form of ethical imperialism. To the contrary, he used Panikkar's argument for his own advantage. It was the liberal protagonists of Christian Europe who had neglected to develop a critical prophetic attitude, thereby robbing Christianity of its essence. They, and not the missionaries, the proclaimers of the Gospel in the field, were the cause of the general identification of missions with Western cultural and economic penetration. Looking back at what has been called the golden age of missions, Visser 't Hooft spoke of a truce between 1850 and 1950, in which the natural opposition he saw between church and world was less fierce. Despite the fact that that time was now gone forever, he nevertheless continued to expect major new opportunities for missions in the 1960s, but that required the reorientation and awareness of the churches.104 The United Nations designated the 1960s as the 'Development Decade', and the churches became actively involved. Visser 't Hooft and his staff were looking for new forms and distinguished between mutual services between churches, the alleviation of world need, and activities geared to social reform. In missions, activities of the Department for Inter Church Aid and forms of diaconal aid were discussed more and more in terms of development aid. The content slowly changed along with the change in label, but Visser 't Hooft was decidedly no proponent of turning classical missions work into Christian development aid.105

Syncretism continued to be the great taboo for him in the 1960s. In 1963, he felt called to publish a comprehensive study on this problem called No Other Name, in which he described how waves of syncretism had washed over the world in the course of history.106 The church's raison d'être was, however, of a different nature. God's gift of grace to people was at right

104 Visser 't Hooft, 'Missions as the Test of Faith', 1964, quote on 253.
105 Visser 't Hooft, Heel de kerk voor heel de wereld (1968), 20.
106 Visser, 't Hooft, No Other Name. The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism (1963).
angles to all those waves, in Visser ‘t Hooft’s view.107 He raised the rhetorical question in this book as to whether the integration of various elements, as happened in art and science, could also happen in religion. His answer was that this could indeed be the case if religion was experienced as a form of expression of human struggle and need. But if God had truly spoken, then that revelation should not, according to him, be compared with a work of art produced by humans. Here he referred to Aldous Huxley’s 1945 work, *Perennial Philosophy*, in which Huxley is looking for the largest common denominator of all theologies.108 Huxley thought he would find the truth in that, but, according to Visser ‘t Hooft, Huxley had – paradoxically enough – instead exposed the tragedy that this had been a step backward because all that was left was nothing more than a thinly watered down morality. Any ethics based on this was bound to fail.

It was a defensive argument. Visser ‘t Hooft was making a point he had already made so often. He did not succeed this time with producing any truly new insights when it came to missions but retreated to well-known positions. He did so, for example, in 1963 during the great missions conference of the IMC in Mexico City, where the theme was ‘Mission to Six Continents’. There it was stated that Europe and America now had to be viewed as mission fields themselves because of secularisation. In his contribution, Visser ‘t Hooft cited the challenges that emerged from this and said: ‘Life is a continuous examination, and God is the examiner.’109 He considered a dynamic missionary witness in this context to be a specific touchstone for a living church. In his view, the descent of an actual God should be witnessed to as an established fact. Effective missions would show that the Word of God cannot be bound to a particular culture. Nevertheless, the section ‘The Witness of Christians to Men of Other Faiths’ did not lead to any consensus or clear recommendations.110

Visser ‘t Hooft deplored the fact that Christian missions were increasingly rejected in public, also by intellectual supporters of universal tolerance. Writers like Simone Weil, Simon Vestdijk, Arnold Toynbee, Carl G. Jung, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Aldous Huxley ridiculed missionaries and, in his view, did not understand the nature of mission in their criticism. In the modern novel, the missionary was a narrow-minded figure who understood nothing of the people and the culture he worked with. He did

107 Ibid., 75.
understand that Christians who acted as if they had a monopoly on truth were to be dismissed as arrogant. But the critics did not understand the essence of the problem because it was not a question of the messengers who made mistakes but one of truth itself. For Visser ’t Hooft, all this meant that a new time of testing for missions had dawned: believers should not be surprised if they were hated by the world. He attempted to find an answer by pointing out it was precisely on the eve of the Second World War, at the moment that the church began to take on universal characteristics and took to heart the significance of missions, that the world began to prepare itself for a violent battle. That could not have been a coincidence. Visser ’t Hooft saw a pattern and attempted to clarify the crisis with his old arguments. Now as well, an untrustworthy world was doing what the world was good at, but Christians should not allow themselves to be duped.

6.7 ‘Angry Young Churchmen’

Around 1960, the world of young people and students in Western Europe and North America began to change radically. Visser ’t Hooft was not well prepared. He saw it happening but did not know how to respond. On 14 April 1956, he gave a speech in the Dom in Utrecht for the Nederlandse Christen Studenten Vereniging (NCSV – Dutch Christian Student Society), which was celebrating its 60th anniversary. That was a ‘home game’; he spoke as he had in the 1930s about the past and future, about the crisis in missions, as well as about the battle being fought for the hearts and minds of intellectuals at universities. In no way did he express any concern about the future of work among Christian students or attempt to sharpen the students’ thinking about the future. The speed with which the Christian youth movement collapsed in the 1960s caught everyone off guard, including Visser ’t Hooft. He looked at it differently later, but at that time Visser ’t Hooft still wanted nothing to do with pluralism. Only in a joint view of the task of all Christians could the mission of the church of Christ, in witness, service, and fellowship, end in the unity and integrity of God’s people on earth. That was also the heart of a number of lectures that Visser ’t Hooft

111 Visser, ’t Hooft, No Other Name. The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism (1963), especially 116-117.
112 Cf. 1 John 3:13.
113 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Feestrede zestigjarig bestaan NCSV’, 14 April 1956.
114 The NCSV was dissolved in 1985, and the WSCF (World Student Christian Federation) became a shadow of its former self.
Visser ’t Hooft, 1900-1985
gave in September 1957 as the Taylor Lectures at Yale Divinity School.115 And that was also his message for the world conference of the World Christian Student Federation (WCSF) in Strasbourg in July 1960.

But the student world was changing rapidly in this period. At the end of the 1950s, the universities were filling with young people from all strata of society. The value of specific Christian organisations and thought was increasingly criticised by students. The theme of the conference in Strasbourg was ‘Life and Mission of the Church’, where the emphasis lay on Christian education, but most students appeared to want to hear more about the world than about the church. An experiment was tried with interactive group discussions, and Visser ‘t Hooft did not perform badly, as this random snapshot by the Belgian Jan Grootaers shows:

Visser ’t Hooft had a great ability to feel and translate the mood of the moment and to maintain direct contact with young people. That is how we also experienced him in Strasbourg during ‘informal talks’ with some forty students who were seated in a large circle around the veteran from Geneva. His answer to the burning questions that were asked sounded candid but balanced, multifaceted but sharp, often with some humour to soften the sharp edges. We have never forgotten the experiment of this discussion: it always sounded exciting, sometimes dramatically charged, always contemporary with the major issues of the time that were examined: Congo, Africa, the Catholic Church, religious relativism in Asia, Cuba, South Africa, the ‘One Church’. This was not the ‘institutional’ but completely ‘the prophetic’ Visser ’t Hooft in conversation with the young people of 1960.116

But the long monologue that Visser ’t Hooft presented for NCRV television in response to the somewhat obligatory question asked by a young person did not show that he was adept at new forms of communication.117 Many did not find Visser ’t Hooft’s lecture convincing: it was too theological, too binding, and too demanding of obedience, and above all too much directed at the church. The proclamation of biblical images as an objective revelatory reality to which the experiential world of young people only had to find some connection no longer worked at a youth conference like that in 1960.118

115 Visser ’t Hooft, The Pressure of our Common Calling (1959).
116 Grootaers, ‘Het gesprek van De Maand met Dr. Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft’, 1963.
117 Visser ’t Hooft on the world youth conference in Strasbourg, NCRV Television, no date, 1960, Sound and Vision Archives.
The time that young people were willing to listen patiently to the answers of the experienced church expert was over.

That could be seen when Visser ‘t Hooft gave the William Belden Noble Lectures in December 1963 at Harvard University. He spoke on, among other things, the theme ‘Preparing the Churches for Full Unity’.119 After proclaiming the fundamental biblical motifs of unity that could be found in, among other places, John 17 and 1 Corinthians 1:13, Visser ‘t Hooft argued that the spirit of the past had to be overcome and sometimes Christians had to be liberated from age-old complexes. Ecclesiastical self-examination, the confession of sins, and the display of remorse were, according to him, unmistakably a part of this process. The fear of unity needed to be banished. Visser ‘t Hooft used the word ‘exorcising’ in this lecture. But there were young people who found that all too slow: to them, whom Visser ‘t Hooft called ‘angry young churchmen’, he argued that a great deal had already happened in the last 30 years.120 To demand at this time a completely new start for ecumenism, as some young men were doing, was not realistic, he felt. According to Visser ‘t Hooft, a choice would need to be made between a slow death and an active attitude of evangelisation. But precisely now the walls between churches could of themselves become transparent, he said, if people dared to witness to the faith.

6.8 New Delhi 1961: A Crowning Success and an Estrangement

Now a period of harvests and high points began for Visser ‘t Hooft. Because the number of staff members of the World Council continued to grow – the office in the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva had as many as 200 staff – they had to look for larger accommodation. Visser ‘t Hooft used his influence and authority where possible and did his utmost to explain to the public that there truly were no other options and that a major leap forward had to be made.121 Their location on the Route de Malagnou was simple and pleasant, and the garden gave it an informal atmosphere. But it was no longer suited

120 A. H. van den Heuvel, in: Wending, October 1963. Albert van den Heuvel, who became head of the Youth Department of the World Council in 1958, was himself one of the impatient ‘angry young churchmen’.
121 To prevent criticism, a documentary was made that was broadcast in the Netherlands: ‘Geef ze de ruimte’, director: Erik de Vries, IKOR (Dutch inter-church broadcasting: Interkerkelijk Overleg Inzake Radioaangelegenheden, later IKON) Television, 18 February 1962, Sound and Vision Archives.
for a professional, international organisation. After the war, the CCIA, youth work, Faith and Order, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Presbyterian Alliance joined the World Council. For some time they were unable to find a site on which they could build. Geneva was expensive for an office complex, and they considered moving the headquarters to another city. Finally, with the co-operation of the city council, they managed to buy some land in the district on the west side of the centre, close to the airport. 122 After a few years of designing and building, the offices of the new Ecumenical Centre in Grand-Saconnex was opened in April 1964. On 11 July 1965, the official opening occurred with an initiation celebration in the chapel, which had to do double duty as a place of meeting and mutual equipping. Visser ‘t Hooft preached the sermon. 123 He was happy that the chapel had been completely

integrated into the building, so that prayer and working would go together: *ora et labora*. From his new office he had a clear view of Mount Blanc in the distance.

It was at the same period, the end of the 1950s, that Wim and Jetty bought a house for the first time. The most important criterion that their
son Kees had been given in looking for a house for his parents was that the rooms had to be high enough to accommodate the large antique cupboard, an inheritance piece with blue vases. The house he found was located at 13 Chemin des Voiron in Chêne-Bougeries, a free-standing villa on a
no-through road. The villa had a large garden bordered by a railway line and was located to the east of the city centre of Geneva. Jetty accepted the move with some reluctance. She became more anxious and withdrew more and more.

During this period, Visser ’t Hooft was busy with the preparations for the third assembly of the World Council to be held in New Delhi. The conference was to take place in November 1961 in the Vigyan Bhavan, an enormous conference centre, with the theme ‘Jesus Christ: Light of the World’. Visser ’t Hooft had high expectations of this conference and compared the rooms of the centre with the meeting rooms of the United Nations in New York. But the programme was overfull, and it would once again be a challenge for Visser ’t Hooft and his staff to manage it properly. In contrast to the two previous assemblies, the member churches, including many young churches, were now expected to make relatively large contribution. The encounter of Christianity with other religions was also on the agenda for the first time. As such, the assembly itself was a manifestation of the new multifaceted nature of the World Council. The word ‘dialogue’ was used more and more in this period. There was now a true need for a more precise description of the purpose of unity and the concrete tasks in society, such as youth work and the reception of refugees. The brochure ‘Jesus Christ, the Light of the World’ was published in 32 languages. Visser ’t Hooft was proud when the Indian premier Jawaharlal Nehru, whom he had once met in 1953, gave a speech. Nehru warned against thinking in terms of camps that were connected to the Cold War, which Visser ’t Hooft could personally appreciate. Nehru was always seen by Visser ’t Hooft as a great man because he felt that, in contrast to, for example, the Indonesian Kusno Sukarno, the Indian leader was always himself, true to his principles and never thought too highly of himself. The assembly at New Delhi was a success, but Visser ’t Hooft had great difficulty with the lack of organisation at the meeting. Evanston was difficult because of the lack of consensus, but New Delhi was chaos. The discussion went in all different directions. No longer was it older white men, theologians, intellectuals, who could determine the agenda of the assembly with their questions, answers, and discussion style. Of those who had been working in the World Council already before the Second World War, Visser ’t Hooft was one of the last who were still active. His old network had unravelled, and that was alienating.

124 This house still exists and was inhabited until the summer of 2018 by their daughter Anneke Musacchio-Visser ’t Hooft and her husband, Mario Musacchio, their daughter Erica and her husband.
125 H. van Run, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Markant: Visser ’t Hooft’, NOS Television, 8 December 1977, Sound and Vision Archives.
Personally, he went to great pains to ensure that a number of Eastern Orthodox churches joined the World Council in New Delhi and that the International Missionary Council was integrated into the World Council and was constituted as the Division of World Mission and Evangelism. He expected that this would contribute to many young member churches, which were the fruit of mission activity, quickly feeling themselves to be full members of the World Council. But he did understand that this process would change the Council radically. How could this continually growing ecumenical movement be held together both organisationally and in terms of content? After 1961, in his final years as general secretary, Visser ’t Hooft would be intensely preoccupied with this question. He sought for footing in stimulating dialogue, letting himself be inspired by Martin Buber, whom he had met in Israel and who had called dialogue the basic form of all human relations.126 Visser ’t Hooft felt that it was important that the World Council remain ‘Christ-centred’ after New Delhi. As far as he was concerned, it was a narrow path between remaining true to starting points, not becoming

introverted and totally turned inward but neither so turned outward that the
Christian churches would lose themselves in their contact with the world.

6.9 No Ecumenical Consensus on Ecclesiology

At the beginning of the 1960s, it was very important to Visser ’t Hooft that
he seek an ecumenical consensus within the World Council on ecclesiology,
i.e., the teaching about the significance of the church. In 1962, Pope John
XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council. Visser ’t Hooft believed there
was a possibility of the Roman Catholic Church joining the World Council;
he would never say it openly, but that is what he hoped.127 From Karl Barth
he had learned that the unity of the church could only be built on the unity
of Scripture. In relation to this, he saw the 66 canonical books of the Bible as
a close unity in which God had revealed his will and continued to reveal to
good readers. The conceptual building blocks that were given in Romans 12:
discernment, prophecy, serving, teaching, exhorting, communicating, giving
leadership – everything from which the idea of church was compiled – could
thus, in his view, not be a compilation that arose through coincidence but
were inspired by the Holy Spirit.128 These characteristics were, as the Roman
Catholics asserted, recognised in the tradition of the church, but, as far as
he was concerned, Scripture was the norm. He would rather have given the
cohesive power of the World Council a permanent root in the theology of
Karl Barth. Liberation theology, feminist and ‘black’ theology had a certain
contextual and challenging value for him, but he saw them as one-sided and
passing in nature. Rudolf Bultmann had pointed to relative and time-bound
elements in the biblical text itself. When students of Bultmann, like the
German theologian Ernst Käsemann, started to contradict him increasingly
in this area and pointed to all kinds of ecclesiologies in the Bible, Visser
’t Hooft became furious. This was not how a church was built; it only led to
confusion.129 That could not be the task.

This happened in the summer of 1963, when, during a Faith and Order
conference in Montreal, the ecclesiological significance of the World Council
of Churches was again on the agenda. It was the first conference in which

127 See 8.7.
128 In studying the Bible, Visser ’t Hooft attached great value to Kittel, Theologisches Wörterbuch
zum Neuen Testament, 10 volumes (1933-1979).
129 Interviews with H. Berkhof, A.H. van den Heuvel, and H.M. de Lange, Brood en Spelen, IKON
Radio, 6 July 1985, Sound and Vision Archives.
the Eastern Orthodox played an important part, and it was precisely these churches that, with respect to this topic, were very sensitive and concerned. They were afraid that the World Council, despite earlier assurances, would begin to apply the traditionally defined marks of the church, the *notae ecclesiae*, to itself and that it secretly viewed itself as a world church in the early stages. That would contradict the Toronto statement of the central committee in 1950 and was also not the intention, but it is very telling that there were concerns about it. The Orthodox had an exclusive view of the true church, which they applied to their own churches, and argued for an emphasis on the Trinity instead of Christocentrism, and striving for unity was not a goal for them in the concrete sense of the word.130

The German theologian Ernst Käsemann from Tübingen particularly articulated the challenge that the ecclesiological problem posed to the World Council. He put his stamp on the conference when he demonstrated that the New Testament has not one but seven ecclesiologies, i.e., theologies of the church that could not be easily harmonised. Käsemann pointed out that, for example, an ‘early Catholic’ ecclesiology can be formulated on the basis of the letters by Paul to Timothy and Titus, with the emphasis on office and sacrament. On the other hand, there are writings that can be understood as the precursors of more activist forms of being a community, such as the letter of James. Käsemann himself opted for what he called ‘Christ outside the gate’, based on Hebrews 13:12, a non-churchly form of being church, outside of the customary frameworks. In sharp contrast to the discussions on the Bible during the conference, serious race riots were taking place at the same time in the United States, and the American staff member Eugene Blake, who was very involved with the demonstrations against racism, could not leave it alone and applied Käsemann’s view to that situation. The response to the context was, in his view, determinative for the value of the community of Christ. Visser ‘t Hooft was very upset.

If the unity of the Bible is denied, that means that the unity of the church loses its necessity. A Bible that is viewed as a collection of various Christologies and ecclesiologies cannot be a basis for our call to unity. Our movement can only be a dynamic movement for more unity if we together listen to the one voice that gives us our marching orders.131

130 See 6.3 and 7.6.
To his friend, the Dutch dogmatist and biblical theologian Hendrik Berkhof, who was also present at this conference, he said that if Käsemann had been right, his whole life's work was undermined. Berkhof attempted to alleviate his concern by pointing out that in the New Testament this unity was reached only via the detour of diversity and that both were just as essential. He also explained 1 Corinthians 12 on the diversity of gifts in the church in this way. But a shocked Visser ’t Hooft was not reassured. He was afraid of letting go of the simplicity of biblical ecclesiology and losing sight of the unity of the church. His Christocentric ecclesiology thus hampered him in interreligious dialogue. He also found it difficult to integrate new expressions, like black theology and the theology of revolution in the United States, and liberation theology in Central and South America, into his older thought.

At the meeting of the central committee of the World Council in August 1963 in Rochester, New York, Visser ’t Hooft flatly opposed the French Roman Catholic theologian and journalist Bruno Chenu and the German Lutheran theologian and social ethicist Ulrich Duchrow. They saw the super church in the Toronto declaration of 1950 simply as a diplomatic solution to bring various churches together in the World Council. An indignant Visser ’t Hooft distanced himself from every suspicion of strategic opportunism. He pointed out that the description of the young church in Acts 4:32 mentions unity of heart and soul and that an ecclesiological approach by the World Council was possible. The confusion remained. Albert van den Heuvel said in retrospect, on the commemoration of the 69th anniversary of the World Council:

The motto of the World Council that churches should be administratively and organisationally one, thus one large organisation with the Pope at its head or whatever, with one large synod. ... it was a major lowpoint for me when I discovered that this was not adequate. That was what we believed. I had also worked for years for that.
There were fierce debates on this in Rochester in 1963, but it proved to be a rearguard action. It was not a question of what the church was or had to be that was central in the following years. Over the course of the 1960s, interest in key discussions on the more precise ecclesiological relationship between member churches and the World Council quickly declined. Visser ’t Hooft would later often complain that the media did take interest in the controversial actions of the World Council but scarcely any for the content of the theological discussion. Nevertheless, there was also an occasion in Rochester for Visser ’t Hooft to give a speech. More than 25 years after the meeting in Utrecht in 1938, where it was decided to found the World Council, he presented a historical review in which he expressed once again his trust in God’s leading in the history of ecumenicity.

History is in the last analysis a mystery and church history is a particular mystery within that general history. We have been led into it. We have been used for purposes larger than we had in mind.

These words must have sounded like an imploring answer at the time to Käsemann and other critics. What was being done was not a matter of coincidence. In answer to what, in Visser ’t Hooft’s eyes, was an excess of relativism, he asserted that the ecumenical movement was God’s work in which the staff members were led by the grace of God.

Including the period before the actual foundation of the World Council, that same year, 1963, Visser ’t Hooft had himself worked for the World Council for 25 years, and his colleagues put together a jubilee book called The Sufficiency of God. Visser ’t Hooft thanked them warmly in a circular. Various chapters had helped him to have a better understanding of the last 25 years. The contribution of staff member Mackie, who came from the WSCF and with whom he had worked since the beginning of the 1930s, touched him in particular.

[A]bove all Robert Mackie’s all too generous appraisal of my work have made me even more deeply astonished and grateful that I have been drawn in to a movement and used for a purpose of such profound meaning and...
a movement in which so many of completely different backgrounds have come to an interpretation of each other’s minds. 138

In addition to being a tribute to him, the book formed an encouragement and a confirmation for a general secretary who understood very well that he had entered his final years in that role.

While Visser’t Hooft was nonetheless becoming more and more well-known in this period, it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to interpret new developments and to give meaningful ecumenically grounded answers. This had been noted by sharp observers since the 1950s. In an article in The Observer on the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the World Council, a journalist noted as the complaint of an American professor: ‘Wim thinks in slogans.’ 139

He has the defects of his virtues. He upsets some people, usually self-opinionated people, by his brusque way of insisting upon his own views or dismissing theirs. And his mind, though extremely quick, likes sharp, clear concepts more than subtle distinctions. 140

This was clearly both Visser’t Hooft’s strength and his weakness. He knew his strength very well; he knew that he was a good speaker. In 1963, for example, Visser’t Hooft heard the famous German-American theologian Paul Tillich speak at a party on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the weekly news magazine Time, before almost a thousand ‘celebrities’ from the world of politics, sports, film, and theatre. All those still living who had once been on the cover of Time had been invited. Visser’t Hooft was extraordinarily proud that he had once been on the cover of Time as ‘World Churchman’ with the tag ‘Second Reformation’. 141 But Tillich’s ‘profundities’ were lost on someone like the boxer Jack Dempsey, one of the young Visser’t Hooft’s heroes. According to him, Tillich completely missed the point on this occasion. The philosophical discourse went completely over the heads of the celebrities. Visser’t Hooft would have liked to have addressed the guests instead of Tillich with what he considered to be a comprehensible word of proclamation for everyone. In his view, Tillich’s speech was a missed

138 Visser’t Hooft to Dear Friends, Reinhold Niebuhr, 17 September 1963, WCC.42.0059. General correspondence 1023.
139 The Observer, 6 April 1958.
140 Ibid.
141 Time, 8 December 1961.
opportunity at *Time’s* gala dinner. He heard in that speech a confirmation of his choice as a young man to distance himself from such scholarly cultural theology.142 He enjoyed it when he spoke first with the Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida during the great *Time* gala, and immediately after that with

Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, and with the politician Pierre Mendès France. He loved being seated next to the American general and diplomat Maxwell D. Taylor at the table.

But his retirement as general secretary of the World Council was approaching with alarming speed. In anticipation of it, Visser ’t Hooft, whom Société d’Études et de Publications Économiques included as one of 250 persons who made up the intellectual elite of the world, was asked to fill in a questionnaire, intended to be the basis for an article in the international magazine Réalités.143 Every respondent was expected to give fascinating answers in pithy phrases to a series of core questions. The answers Visser ’t Hooft gave provide insight into his thinking shortly before his retirement. Visser ’t Hooft pointed to the tensions between rich and the poor countries as the most important question of the coming 20 years, agreeing with the views of the secretary-general of the United Nations, U Thant, whom he received in the offices of the World Council in 1966.144 As the most important problem in his own area, he cited, not surprisingly, the unity of the church. The meaning of the history of humankind was, for Visser ’t Hooft, that it was a preparation for the kingdom of God, of which there were clear signs, he felt, in the present time. He was against euthanasia because he felt that people had seen in the time of Hitler what that meant. When asked if he would rather live under American, Russian, or Chinese domination if it was necessary in order to avoid nuclear war, he answered that a Christian had to be prepared to live in a world as it was, whoever the dominant power was. But, he added, a world dominated by one power would always be a world of tyranny and that should always be resisted. Here, in his answer, Visser ’t Hooft combined the insights of both Luther, who pointed out that a person had to submit to the government, and Calvin, who assumed not only the right but also the duty to resist a tyrannous government. Visser ’t Hooft did not think that putting a man on the moon deserved high priority. He felt that it was much more important to develop a just and peaceful world. When he met the Apollo 9 astronaut Russell L. Schweickart a few years later, in 1969, Visser ’t Hooft asked him if the time had not come to use the money that was spent on space travel from now on to solve the problem of poverty in the ghettos of the United States. Schweickart did not think so: the exciting dream of the exploration of space was, in his view, an essential human need.145 Visser ’t Hooft’s opinion was very different.

143 Réalités, June 1966, WCC 994.2.21/26.
144 This topic occupied him very much during this time. Cf. W. de Jong, interview Visser ’t Hooft, VARA Radio, 23 July 1966, Sound and Vision Archives.
145 Visser ’t Hooft to Dear Family and Friends, 12 June 1969. Visser ’t Hooft Family Archives.
For him, as he responded to the questionnaire, finding meaning in life was more important than ‘happiness’, which he found a meaningless term. It all depended on the definition. Although people were not equal, in his view, they had to be treated as equal. Fundamental moral values that should not be transgressed could be found in the ten commandments. These were summarised in *agape*, the love commanded by Christ in the New Testament. The human being was not free but could be freed by the truth.\(^1\) For human beings, death did not mean a total disappearance into nothingness nor did it mean the survival of part of his being. For Visser ’t Hooft, the hope of Christians was the ‘resurrection of the dead’, as promised in the Bible. When he was asked for the names of ten great men who had served humanity, he listed the following: Moses, Socrates, Paul, Augustine, Dante, Martin Luther, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Pascal, and Dostoyevsky. He added: ‘I have not included Jesus Christ, because he does not belong in any list. His name is above every name.’

The ecumenical movement as well as the churches was more and more explicitly confronted with pluralism. In the year he retired, 1966, Visser ’t Hooft felt called to give an analysis of pluralism in an article called ‘Pluralism

\(^1\) John 8:32.
– Temptation or Opportunity’.\textsuperscript{147} It was a very significant argument in which the retiring general secretary expressed his well-known slogans, while also wanting to point to the opportunities that presented themselves at that time. Societies were more and more strongly developing a pluralist character, after all. To long for a restoration of an exclusive Christianity would, according to Visser ’t Hooft, be a mistake. It was the inclusive character of the Christian faith that had to be emphasised without relativising values. If pluralism meant that everyone was right to a certain extent and converting others would be pointless, then Christians needed to resist it as much as if the devil himself was behind it.

For it would then breed a race of spiritually spineless human beings who would live in the sort of night in which all cats are grey. No one would any longer have to face the ultimate questions of life. One would not have to answer the questions of Jesus: ‘Who do you think I am?’ and ‘Will you follow me?’ It would be a terribly dull world in which one would begin to long for a serious spiritual conflict. Fortunately we do not live in that world. We live in a world where the man who wants to live responsibly must choose, whether he likes it or not.\textsuperscript{148}

Visser ’t Hooft thought it was a healthy human trait to try to convince others of one’s own position and a sign that they were defending their view and understanding of truth. The church had to accept a pluralistic society without regretting the bygone time of the Corpus Christianum. But the church also had to realise that a credible witness, precisely in that plurality, could be comprehensible if church unity was visible as Corpus Christi: ‘The pluralistic world society is too tough for a divided church.’ It is striking that in this analysis Visser ’t Hooft abandoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially his modern disciples:

Bonhoeffer and his followers are wrong in thinking that revelation can live without religion. We need a new Christian civilisation and it is perfectly possible to pass from a traditional type of Christian society to a renewed Christian society without passing through the stage of dechristianisation.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. Quote on 140. See also WCC 994.2.20/28.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid. Quote on 136.
It was during this period that the radical interpretation of Bonhoeffer and the so-called ‘God is dead’ theology began to arise. Visser ’t Hooft wanted nothing to do with it.

Despite secularisation, Visser ’t Hooft took into account the possibility of what he called a ‘genuine renaissance’ of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in this order. The role of these world religions was far from finished.

[I]t is clear that for many years to come the main historic religions will be powerful factors on the world scene, that all of them are developing increasingly a consciousness of world-wide missionary responsibility; and that, just as Christianity has penetrated into territory, so they will penetrate into territories which have been traditionally Christian.¹⁵⁰

But, in Visser ’t Hooft’s view, if there was something people in the ecumenical movement could learn, it was that the future did not belong to people. In the last major speech he gave as general secretary, in Buckhill Falls in April 1966, he presented the church as an example of the responsible society. The purpose was not ‘institutional unification’ but fellowship as intended by the New Testament term koinonia, and that had to be constantly clarified. This shift in accent was remarkable for someone who had always been working on an institution. What was also new was the attention he paid to ecumenical relations between the generations. This had to do with his imminent retirement but also with his concern about the growing generation gap.

I do not believe that there has been any other period in the history of the ecumenical movement when the danger of estrangement between the generations has been as great as it is today. This is of course part of the wider problem of our time: the tension between a younger generation which takes nothing for granted, which does not trust any established values or institutions and an older generation which seeks to defend often without strong conviction or good reasons these values and institutions.¹⁵¹

The dialogue between the generations was the new test of ecumenicity. Should older people be prepared to listen to the ‘often irritating questions’ of the young people? Should people make a distinction between what needed to be defended because it belonged to the essence of the Christian truth and

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. Quote on 132.
what could be dropped because it belonged to the status quo? And were
people prepared to show that the ecumenical movement intended to put
practice first and that the institutional church was intended to serve and
not to dominate or ‘freeze’ the work of the Holy Spirit? It is also interesting
that, for the first time, he now felt the freedom to argue for taking seriously
the concerns of conservative evangelicals, who very quickly had the idea
that striving for unity went at the expense of the truth.

But, in the view of the departing general secretary, the World Council
needed to speak more clearly than previously concerning world problems,
such as, for example, human rights, disarmament, and Vietnam. And the
struggle against racism was far from over. There was no room for defeatism.
Visser ’t Hooft felt that the most important thing was that churches had
to communicate a clear faith. In response to those who asserted that God
was dead or dying, he asked: ‘Which God is dying?’ According to him,
the answer was clear: the God that was dying was the ‘self-evident God’.

It is the self-evident God, the God of natural theology, the God that
everyone believed in, the God whom we exploited in our speeches as
the guarantee of our human purposes. But it is hardly news that that god
is not alive. Through the combined efforts of Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Freud
and Marx, but also of Kierkegaard, Barth and Bonhoeffer we have learned
not to put our faith in such a god. But does that affect the faith in the God
of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Jesus Christ, not of the philosophers, of
Pascal, the faith in the God who gives ‘the light of revelation, the revelation
of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’?

The future of the ecumenical movement and of the Christian faith as such
depended, in his view, on willingness to be directed to the centre of the
Christian message, and that was the coming of Christ in an uncertain world.

The influence of what at this time was called the ‘Third World’ was becoming
more strongly noticeable in ecumenical committees. That became particularly
visible during the Life and Work conference on church and society that was
held in Geneva in 1966 and where, for once, it did not deal with ecclesiological
questions at all. This was the last major conference organised under Visser
’t Hooft’s responsibility. The American Baptist Paul B. Abrecht, staff member
since 1949, took care of the organisation and the follow up. Delegates from

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152 Robinson, Honest to God (1963), and Cox, The Secular City. Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective (1965).
Western churches were no longer in the majority here. Four hundred and twenty delegates met in Geneva from 12 to 26 July 1966. Most of them had been sent because of their expertise, not as clergy. While the war in Vietnam was raging, racial conflicts flaring up in the United States and in South Africa led to indignant reactions, and faltering disarmament talks between East and West dominated the news, current social issues like hunger, social oppression, and injustice were discussed. The participants were asked to speak without instructions or consultation. ‘We ask you to speak to us all’, Visser ‘t Hooft said at the opening of the conference, and he hoped that primarily long-term tasks would be formulated. The major discussion was on the meaning of contextuality. This question cut right across the denominations, he noted. How should the biblical message be translated in constantly changing circumstances? Once again, just as in Amsterdam in 1948, the call for a ‘responsible society’ was sounded. A newer, higher degree of organisation of world society required a new application. Visser ‘t Hooft referred to the vision of the Old Testament prophet Amos, who had to pass on the Word of God:

‘I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.’ That is the warning. But the Lord says also: ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.’ These are our marching orders.

Geneva 1966 was a critical conference that not only posed questions but also dared to give answers. Purely quantitative economic growth as a goal was rejected. The ‘developing countries’ were called to not simply imitate the industrialised ones: a contextual approach and forms of qualitative growth were recommended. Visser ‘t Hooft was satisfied and viewed the conference as a great success, in any case externally, because the gap between rich and poor countries, which was an underestimated threat to world peace, was dealt with here. He felt he could retire at a high point in the development of the World Council. But it needs to be remarked that it was buzzing with revolutionary ideas, which Visser ‘t Hooft simply seemed to ignore. The concept of ‘responsible society’, which had been coined by Oldham and Visser ‘t Hooft, moved to the background.

155 The Ecumenical Review, vol. XVIII, no.4, 425. See also WCC 994.2.21/24.
6.10  The Theologian as Diplomat

In the period between 1948 and 1966, Visser ‘t Hooft played a central role as general secretary in the World Council of Churches. This was the flourishing period in which the World Council quickly developed into a global religious non-governmental organisation (NGO) with hundreds of staff. Visser ‘t Hooft did not fit into an existing profile of general secretary; rather, the position was written for him. He had built the organisation from the start and was also much more than a supervisor after it was founded. Visser ‘t Hooft was not only an erudite theologian; he was also someone who knew how to tackle issues, who gave firm leadership to the office, grew into an able diplomat, developed vision and strategies and responded in an alert way to current developments in the world. His enormous network and his immense knowledge of the issues contributed to his increasing authority in these years. In addition, he adhered to his ‘Barthian’ training in a Christocentric ecclesiology and his strong rejection of syncretism, which was almost his trademark at this time. It was rigid but also clear, and it held together in one way or another, in his view, the many divergent types of Christianity recognisable in the hundreds of churches that were members of the World Council.

The general secretary did not always succeed, however, in giving the concrete form he wanted to the connection between theology and the role he saw for the World Council on the world stage. To have more conservative churches involved more in the work of the World Council, to resist secularisation, and to increase the support of the member churches, he dedicated himself very much in the 1950s to the necessity of the renewal of the church. He sometimes overplayed his hand or had unrealistic expectations. The latter happened in Evanston, where the choice for the theme of hope seemed too much at the time of the Cold War. Basically, Visser ‘t Hooft’s concerns really regarded nothing less than the salvation of this world. The unity of the church could not only be a marginal or purely internal church matter in that world in need. Hiding behind his optimistic nature was a saviour complex and a very definite view of truth. This would make him vulnerable when it became clear that the concrete renewal of the church that Visser ‘t Hooft had so strongly expected in the 1950s did not continue and would ultimately not turn the tide of secularisation.

Every time an international crisis arose in the 1950s, the World Council and the general secretary felt called to produce warning and guiding public statements. Sufficient support in the churches was needed for such statements. When that was lacking, Visser ‘t Hooft usually responded in a
reserved way, as in connection with the biblical meaning and legitimation of the modern State of Israel. In South Africa, he could gain trust for a time with a diplomatic approach. But internal tension arose with the Anglicans during the Cyprus crisis. In the case of the Cuba crisis, the general secretary
had to recognise that he had spoken out of turn, but he finally achieved the mandate to continue on the path chosen.

That Visser ’t Hooft was so attached to the missionary shape of the church, to a Christocentric proclamation, and continued to resist any recognition of possible positive aspects of syncretism became clearly visible in his struggle to retain mission in its classical form. He did see that mission had declined a great deal in that period and had to be renewed, but he did not really know how to set about this. A fundamental insecurity in the West was accompanied by new, self-chosen ways of young churches in the East. Visser ’t Hooft worked hard for the integration of the International Missionary Council into the World Council in 1961, hoping for a revival of mission. But he could not deal successfully with the growing emphasis on development aid and interreligious dialogue between equal partners, which slowly began to replace mission.160

After 1960, Visser ’t Hooft felt increasing tension with young people who thought that it was all taking too long and saw too few concrete results. The discussion on the theologically defended and institutional unity of the church seemed to be of increasingly less interest to a new generation. He did want to understand that, but his response was primarily a call for patience. Social ethics, forms of liberation theology, and the more activist call for justice and room for young people were becoming more important as themes in the ecumenical movement. Visser ’t Hooft understood that he had to respond, but his urge to preach always got in his way when he truly wanted to listen to the experiences of young people. There were only a few of his own friends from before the war present at the third assembly in New Delhi. The meeting was also less dominated by old white men from Europe and North America. Nevertheless, for Visser ’t Hooft, it was the crowning of years of work when the Eastern Orthodox churches joined the World Council and the International Missionary Council was integrated into the World Council.

Visser ’t Hooft had always connected his view of the unity of the church with his trust in the unity of the body of Christ in the world, the unity of the Bible, and, most fundamentally, with the unity of God. When theologians began to tell him that there were various models of the church possible on the basis of the Bible, he had great difficulty with it. An all too nuanced approach felt to him like the sweeping away of an indispensable foundation from under his feet. He did not accept this and for a long time continued to protest against a more cultural historical and thus relativising approach. That seemed to him to be the pitfall he had vaulted over in his youth.

The major conference on church and society in Geneva in 1966 was the last one in which he could make a major contribution as general secretary. Together with his staff, Visser ’t Hooft managed to bring hundreds of experts together, most of whom were laymen. There were also many delegates from the ‘Third World’ at that meeting. Current burning issues on the world stage were discussed extensively. During this last, great meeting that was organised under his leadership, the topic was not so much the church itself but ‘the church’ was the occasion to give space to topics of world significance. Visser ’t Hooft considered the conference a success, but he needed to understand that an important paradigm shift had occurred, away from the concept of a ‘responsible society’ as set by himself and Oldham. Revolution was now the buzzword. Was this the future of the World Council?