Towards a World Council of Churches
Reconciliation and Reconstruction, 1945-1948

Abstract
Chapter 5 concerns itself with the foundation of the World Council immediately after the war. It shows how the World Council, under Visser ’t Hooft’s unique style of ‘diplomatic’ leadership attempted to deal with issues such as meeting the needs of post-war society and reconciliation, with respect to the notion of the ‘responsible society’. The chapter reveals how Visser ’t Hooft’s earlier theological development came to fruition in this period and shows his strong practical approach in the various aspects of the World Council’s programmes. The days of provisional acting and improvisation were over, and professionalism and institutionalisation gradually took over.

Keywords: reconciliation, Church reconstruction, German rehabilitation, Responsible society, Assembly Amsterdam 1948

5.1 Introduction
For Visser ’t Hooft, the unity of the church was not an ideal to strive for but a starting point – a reality, in his view, given by God in Jesus Christ to humanity. Just as there was one Jesus Christ, so there was one God, and one world, available for one humankind. For him, it was not only a task but the duty of the churches to acknowledge their unity and, based on that, to work at healing the divisions in the world. The word ‘must’ appears quite often in his lectures and sermons in this period. The tension between reality and that task was great. A battered Europe was licking the wounds left by the war, and the world was not sitting around waiting for Visser ’t Hooft to tell it what to do. Nevertheless, there was also a yearning for a message of hope, and he threw himself into the development of the World Council of Churches, working on founding it officially; here he found help for this with

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a new permanent staff and a continually growing ecumenical network. While the refugee problem required immediate assistance, the two major fields where the notion of ecumenical unity was tested were reconstruction and reconciliation.

In the first years after the war, the nascent World Council of Churches had to operate with very few staff members at the office in Geneva, but American money was quickly available and new enthusiastic people could be hired. That gave Visser ‘t Hooft the opportunity to shape the action-oriented side of the World Council into a medium to large international non-governmental organisation, which was for him a necessary profiling of churches in action. That he had integrated ecumenical refugee work into the World Council already during the war meant that he was personally closely involved in this. In this chapter, we will explore what his priorities were in post-war refugee work (5.2). A second major theme that had to be promoted was reconciliation. All through the war, Visser ‘t Hooft stayed in constant informal contact with leading figures in the German church who had distanced themselves from Hitler. Because of that, it was not difficult to pick up the thread again, and the German churches would be able to participate fully in the founding of the World Council in 1948. How Visser ‘t Hooft dealt with the question not only showed the importance he attached to reconciliation but also his view of the reconstruction and unity of post-war Europe (5.3). In the ecumenical context, many problems could arise during the processing of the war and which Germans could be trusted (5.4). The fact that an ecumenical contact who had had a good reputation had to appear before the tribunal in Nuremberg was a source of confusion when Visser ‘t Hooft was confronted with it (5.5). During the war, Visser ‘t Hooft had learned the lesson that church attention for the people of the world should move beyond moral indignation. Now, together with some others, he focused on setting up a first-rate commission of the World Council for international affairs (5.6). He was dedicated to training young people by means of study and international encounters. He was constantly working therefore on developing an international ecumenical institute, where education and encounter would be central (5.7). The climax, not only of these post-war years but of ten years of ecumenical work, was the foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. He was the driving force behind this major international conference that made such a great impression so shortly after the war (5.8). Two major churches were lacking in Amsterdam, and he could not let that be (5.9).
During the war, the nascent World Council had to make do with a handful of staff, no more than eight; but, after the war, the number of staff members quickly expanded. Co-ordination was necessary, especially for refugee work and the countless activities for supporting churches that were involved in the work of reconstruction. The World Council had an important role in the work of distributing the money that the American churches made available for refugee work and reconstruction. It was also American money that allowed the purchase, before the end of the war in 1945, of a villa in a park-like garden that could be used for their office. The address was 17 Route de Malagnou, on the east side of Geneva, one of the arterial roads leading to the French city of Annemasse. The building quickly proved to be too small, and the growing World Council also bought the adjoining properties in 1946 and 1947, and a few other properties on the Route de Malagnou were added later.1

1 Numbers 15 and 39, Route de Malagnou. Barracks were also placed in the garden later, and even the smallest corners of the attic were used.
Visser ‘t Hooft now saw golden opportunities to develop the World Council of Churches as a network that could be used for reconciliation and aid in a number of places, not only in Europe. Not only was money available, but people also seemed to be open to the churches taking on another role. In the view of many, the war had relativised dogmatic differences, and the benefit of collaboration between churches was clear. There was a great deal of interest in a well-reasoned vision of the revival of the church. Geneva established and made contact with Protestant churches in almost all European countries and North America and via the International Missionary Council and participating churches, with many ‘daughter churches’ in the colonies. The ecumenical network had survived the war intact, and the existing contacts now needed to be confirmed and expanded. To that end, Visser ‘t Hooft attended the first post-war synod of the Dutch Reformed Church at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam as a guest.\(^2\) As a distribution hub, the World Council was not only able to see to it that money from American churches was used in reconstruction programmes but also to place its own staff members on projects. The chairman of the reconstruction committee was the Swiss minister Alphons Koechlin. Visser ‘t Hooft himself was personally closely involved with many projects. Dutch examples, set up with the help of the World Council, were the Kerk en Wereld (Church and World) institute in Driebergen, under the leadership of Wim Kist, and the educational centre associated with that, De Horst, based on ideas formulated by Jopie Eijkman.\(^3\)

Church buildings had been destroyed or poorly maintained and run down. There was often no money to pay ministers. But, as far as Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned, spiritual renewal was primary. He presented it as follows: the churches had emerged from the war purified and had learned an important lesson. He considered the continuation and deepening of this awareness essential, not only for the reconstruction of Europe but also for a sustainable world peace. In 1947, in connection with a draft of a four-year plan intended for primarily American donors, he wrote in an analysis:

\[\text{I have no doubt that there is more real Christianity to-day in Europe than 20 or 50 years ago. In Norway, Holland, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Greece there are movements of renewal such as have not been}\]

\(^2\) Wat er gebeurde in de Nieuwe Kerk op den Dam rond 31 October 1945 (1945).

\(^3\) After the foundation conference of the World Council in Amsterdam, the first stone of the Eijkman house was laid in September 1948 by the moderator of the Presbyterian Churches of the USA, which had given the gift via the World Council that made the building possible. Cf. Zeilstra, ‘Van evidente betekenis. De oprichting van de Wereldraad van Kerken en de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk’, 1998, 38.
seen for many generations. This is especially true among intellectuals. The Student Christian Movements are alive. The various types of professional lay associations show that large numbers of Christians mean business. And we have not had so much vitality in the theological realm for (perhaps) centuries. Do not give our American brethren the impression – which many have anyway – that Europe must be written off. It is important to show (and this is true) that there are churches worth helping in Europe.\(^4\)

Visser ’t Hooft found that the present projects in the draft brochure, intended for the Americans, were described much too theoretically. He knew how Americans thought and argued for more facts and concrete illustrations, examples, and figures. Only those things would impress the Americans. Projects like evangelisation in Hungary, theological education in Berlin and programmes for training lay leaders like Kerk en Wereld in the Netherlands had to be ‘sold’, as it were, to the Americans.

As general secretary, Visser ’t Hooft wrote an estimated 50,000 longer and shorter letters.\(^5\) As a rule, he dictated them by heart to his secretaries who usually spoke several languages. During the period when the World Council was founded, that was Simone Mathil, and Aat Guittart was his support and mainstay in the end. Visser ’t Hooft could work well in general with men he considered his equals. When he was hired by the YMCA in 1924, he had to reinvent the wheel there too, and so he now threw his staff into the deep end right away.\(^6\) He wanted to inspire them but left the details and the organisation to them. But when it was a question of policy for which he as general secretary was responsible, he preferred to keep control of the reins himself. In the meantime, however, everything he had to do was actually too much work for one person. In 1944, Visser ’t Hooft was given permission by the administrative committee to look for an assistant general secretary. For a time, he thought he had found a good candidate in the New Zealand minister Herbert Newell,\(^7\) who was secretary of the National Council of Churches in New Zealand. He was originally a congregationalist but had transferred to the Anglican Church. Newell had also been active in missions. Visser ’t Hooft knew him from the Student Christian Movement, and he seemed to be a promising candidate. But nothing came of it, and the position was not filled.

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\(^7\) Visser ’t Hooft to the members of the administrative committee, 11 September 1946, in: Besier, G., ‘Intimately Associated for Many Years’ (2015), 344.
To make the ecumenical refugee work that had been set up by Life and Work in the 1930s more effective, reorganisation and a close integration into the World Council as a whole was needed. In the final year of the war, Visser ’t Hooft worked closely with the American Samuel McCrea Cavert to achieve this. On 12 October 1945, this resulted in the new World Council Department of Reconstruction and Interchurch Aid. The above-mentioned reconstruction committee fell under this. The Scot James Hutchinson Cockburn was the director of this department. The following individuals, among others, also served consecutively as directors of the refugee work: Adolph Freudenberg, Elfan Rees, Wolfgang Schweitzer, Richard Fagley, and Boudewijn Sjollema. They worked closely with the United Nations in several countries.

In Rome, Vienna, and Athens, so-called ‘field offices’, small offices, were established close to where the refugees were found. The accent lay on practical assistance without regard for persons. Most attention was paid in the first years after the war to German refugees. The German population in Poland and East Prussia went through horrible times under the Russian occupation.
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Millions of Germans who lived on the eastern side of the Oder-Neisse border had to leave and from 1945 on were transported in cattle wagons to what was left of Germany. It is estimated that two million people died. A new category arose: the Heimatvertriebenen (expellees).

For a long time, effective assistance was almost impossible. An important contact person for Visser ’t Hooft in Germany and a staff member for the refugee work of the World Council was the former Lutheran minister of the American church in Berlin, Stewart W. Herman. Herman had been doing refugee work since 1939. Heinrich Kloppenburg, a member of the High Consistory of Oldenburg who had been active in the Confessing Church, became the German secretary for refugee work in the World Council in 1947. He maintained contact with Protestant churches in the rural areas of the Russian zone of occupied Germany and reported on them to Visser ’t Hooft.8 The latter did what he could to support the workers in the field but often felt powerless. Along with the German victims, he had to deal with the catastrophe that Hitler had left behind and concentrated on reconciliation with the German churches. He continued to show great interest in the experiences of staff members who worked with refugees.9

5.3 Stuttgart 1945: ‘Help Us, So We Can Help You’

In the spring of 1945 Visser ’t Hooft travelled to the United States. Over a few weeks, he worked through a busy schedule of meetings and lectures and preaching in church services.10 Despite the fact that the trip was a success, particularly in raising funds, the visit itself was a disappointment for him. People were certainly interested in the ecumenical work among refugees and what was necessary for the reconstruction of Europe and the role of the churches in that. But there was hardly any interest in the United States for his report on the German resistance and the fight fought by that resistance to base European unity on Christian values. There was primarily a feeling of joy over Nazi Germany’s defeat. People were full of the ‘Victory in Europe’, and the surrender of Japan was soon expected. In the meantime, the mistrust of the increasing influence of the Soviet

8 Rapport H. Kloppenburg, untitled, 20 February 1948, YDS-4, 166.
10 Cf. M.J. Hoffman to Visser ’t Hooft, 17 May 1945: ‘I was deeply impressed with the Service last Sunday. You are making a lot of friends, not only for the cause so many of us have at heart, but also for the Netherlands, especially in these trying days.’ WCC general correspondence 665.
Union in East Europe was growing. Visser ‘t Hooft realised that the ideals of a united Europe, as cherished during the war by resistance members like Adam von Trott zu Solz and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was now not a good paradigm for characterising the ecumenical movement. The World Council would have to emphasise other things: reconciliation, refugee work, and reconstruction.

That is not to say that Visser ‘t Hooft abandoned the notion of European unity. But he was level-headed enough to see that a federal Europe serving peace and justice, which the resistance had dreamed of, was not a theme that could achieve results so soon after the war. At the same time, the post-war reconstruction and the continuation of the search for values on which Europe could be based were connected for him explicitly to both the resistance and the revival of the church:

What then is the true raison d’être of European unity? What is the basis on which Europe can stand, be itself and accomplish its mission in the world? That question cannot be answered by historical or cultural analysis alone. For Europe has been visited by a great and terrible judgement of God. And the present mission of Europe can only be understood if we grasp the meaning of that judgement.

To his belief that the church had emerged ‘purified’ from the war, he connected the hope that an exhausted Europe would discover this church anew as the place where the promise of the kingdom of God was alive. Need taught them to pray. During the war, the churches had been full. Now they could seize the opportunity and make a real contribution through their involvement to new spiritual foundations for society. Collaboration was the current reality of the ecumenical task. Small pioneering groups of men and women would be able to break through impasses. As far as Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned, these groups could consist just as well of socialists who realised that workers did not have enough on bread alone as Christians who understood that moral advice and correct theology were insufficient. He hoped that Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy and laity would all be involved and expected that churches would really give their ecumenical vanguard a chance.

According to Visser ’t Hooft, Europe was not a concept to be defended but an idea of unity to be immersed in. He read in § 6.7 of *The Epistle to Diognetus* from the second century about Christians that they ‘hold the world together’:

The soul, shut up inside the body, nevertheless holds the body together; and though they are confined within the world as in a dungeon, it is Christians who hold the world together.\(^\text{13}\)

Visser ’t Hooft believed in a special timeliness of what he called ‘the office of reconciliation’. In his view, people had an urgent need for reconciliation with God, with themselves, and with others. True reconciliation was thus, according to him, only possible at the cross of Christ, that is, after the willingness as a human being to confess one’s sins to God and in the belief that Christ had suffered so that forgiveness was possible. People should not be afraid of others thinking they are ‘antiquated peculiarities’.\(^\text{14}\) This, according to Visser ’t Hooft, is how one showed one’s faith while living in a secularised world. A Christian had to demonstrate this wherever the problems were the greatest.

Germany formed, in his view, the first great challenge in which the reconciliation between God and people in Christ needed to be made concrete in the conflicts between people. In 1945, Germany was shattered – both spiritually and materially. Millions had been displaced. The German churches had come out of the war heavily battered, internally torn, and morally damaged. The fear of nihilism, advancing moral decay, and totalitarian communism was great. People worried in particular about German youth: the values they had grown up with in Nazi Germany had been tarnished through Germany’s fall. Visser ’t Hooft must have experienced feelings of déja vu sometimes when he thought back to the years after 1918. Once again, there were all kinds of assistance and recovery programmes. But now he was in a much more influential position than then, and he was determined to make maximum use of it. The big question was how to deal with the German churches. The majority of German Christians had believed that the government had its own responsibility. They had supported Hitler and had held to the experience of their faith as a spiritual matter. Not until the

\(^{13}\) *‘Epistle to Diognetus’* (1968), 137-151, quote on page 145. Ἐγκέ-κλεισται μὲν ἡ ψυχὴ τῷ σώματι, συνέχει δὲ αὐτὴ τὸ σῶμα. Καὶ Χριστιανοὶ κατέχονται μὲν ὡς ἐν φρουρᾷ τῷ κόσμῳ, αὐτοὶ δὲ συνέχουσι τὸν κόσμον.

\(^{14}\) Visser ’t Hooft, *Heel de kerk voor heel de wereld* (1968), 13.
government issued an occupational ban (Berufsverbot), thereby prohibiting ethnic Jews from being Christian ministers did they become indignant. A small minority had resisted, but the reputation of the Confessing Church did not make much of an impression. Nevertheless, few German church leaders were convinced Nazis. The number of church leaders, such as the bishop of Hannover, A. Mahrarens, who paid lip service to the regime for tactical reasons, was greater. Now it was time for cleaning up, also in the church. After the collapse of the Third Reich, reform-minded church leaders began working quickly on reform in order to turn the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (German Evangelical Church) into the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Evangelical Church in Germany, EKD) which had been purified as much as possible. How could the German Protestants find a way to link up with the international ecumenical network?

For Visser ’t Hooft, there was no doubt that these reformers deserved a positive response from the international ecumenical movement. He was still convinced that the German Protestant church had to be rehabilitated as quickly as possible after the war. For the sake of the reconstruction of Germany, the development of the ecumenical movement, and the peace of Europe, feelings of hatred and rancour had to be denied any chance of taking root. In 1945, therefore, connections and ties had to be energetically re-established. He told anyone who would listen, both within and outside the World Council, that he believed that the German Protestant church would emerge strengthened from this ‘time of trial’. Here Visser ’t Hooft did need ‘good Germans’ urgently. The network of Young Men’s Christian Associations (YMCA) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) was very useful in this search.15

Visser ’t Hooft saw the Protestant Church as the only institution, ‘the only coherent body’ in Germany, that was suited for assistance and social work. Only this church, without any striving for power, was able to connect the necessary political consequences to the Christian message. A new, more ‘agressice’, form of evangelisation was necessary to fill the spiritual and moral vacuum. Church collaboration with the Allies was a sore point here. The extensive bombing of German cities in the final years of the war had left a great deal of bad blood. Christians were afraid of being seen as traitors if they worked with the Allies. But there was no better institution than the church to promote new, untainted politicians. One of these ‘untainted politicians’ was Gustav W. Heinemann, who was later the president of the

Federal Republic of Germany, in whom Visser ’t Hooft recognised a true ally in ecumenism. But the new German church leaders could not immediately act as representative, and Visser ’t Hooft understood that they needed more time. But there was not much time to lose. Disappointed by the nihilism of the Nazis, people were searching and open: they could be reached with dangerous propaganda but also with the Gospel. Visser ’t Hooft saw people everywhere in Germany who were embracing the Christian faith anew. There was some wishful thinking here, but there was also a new sense of urgency.

German church leaders who understood that their people bore a heavy responsibility and were prepared to deal with the consequences now saw ‘nationalism’ as a pagan power that also had to be critiqued by the church. Visser ’t Hooft included Otto Dibelius, Theophil Wurm, and especially Martin Niemöller among these leaders. Reinhold von Thadden-Trieglaff became the permanent representative in Geneva of what was now called the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. But the most important ‘good German’ for Visser ’t Hooft was Martin Niemöller (1892-1984). He was a conscript and submarine captain during World War I, and after the war he became a theologian and minister. He was once a member of the Nazi party, but after Hitler introduced the so-called 'Aryan paragraph' in 1933 that allowed organisations to turn away Jews, Niemöller turned into one of the fiercest church critics of the Nazi regime in 1934. That led to a seven-year prison sentence with the status of ‘personal prisoner of the Führer’, which led to his becoming widely known outside Germany.

In August 1945, the leaders of the Lutherans, Reformed churches, and Uniatists met at Treysa, where they decided to prepare for the founding of the EKD. The first official meeting with a delegation from the nascent World Council followed quickly on 18 and 19 October in that same year in badly damaged Stuttgart. The arrival of non-Germans surprised the Germans. Visser ’t Hooft had not been able to announce the visit because of defective communication channels, but the agenda was immediately adjusted. Without any extensive consultation with the member churches, the general secretary was planning to promise a complete restoration of ecumenical relations. The only people he had discussed this with were the members of his delegation. But it was not clear beforehand if they would succeed in finding enough common ground with the German church leaders. As far as Visser ’t Hooft was concerned, everything depended on their willingness to acknowledge guilt in such a way that the foreign guests could convince their constituencies that the Germans were sincere. A moment of confessing ‘public’ guilt, because nothing else would do, also fitted pars pro toto into his theological presuppositions, but afterwards people could face each other with heads held high.
Once in conversation, people were impressed with each other's good intentions. The ice was actually already broken by Niemöller's sermon on Jeremiah 14:7-11 on the first day, 17 October, in which the Nazi period was presented as a divine judgment on everyone and to which, Niemöller also declared, only the confession of guilt could be a fitting response. In this service, Niemöller asked forgiveness from God for the German people and for the church as part of that. This set the tone for the discussions the following day.

The German representatives heard Visser 't Hooft make an urgent appeal: 'You said: Help us. That is what we want to do, but we will ask a question in return and say: Help us so that we can help you. That is the purpose of our dialogue.' These words were suggested to him by his good friend and pastor Pierre Maury. He called the German church leaders to a clear public confession of guilt in the form of a statement that could be referred to. He wanted to hear clear statements about the guilt of the German people, a condemnation of the regime of terror and the German occupation of a large part of Europe. The suffering that this led to for the churches and the Jews had to be stated explicitly. In Visser 't Hooft's view, such a declaration was necessary to summon the inclination to forgiveness and to be able to organise foreign aid for the German churches. He was heeded, even though it did not go completely as he wanted, as he would say later: 'Then they spontaneously said: we want to compose a statement.' One of the most important originators of the confession of guilt in Stuttgart was, in addition to Niemöller, the minister of Berlin-Schöneberg, Hans Asmussen. In the middle of the war, in 1942, he had written a long letter to Visser 't Hooft in which he expressed his confidence with the words: 'Gott arbeitet unter der Oberfläche' (God works below the surface). Questions of guilt had to be dealt with sincerely by the churches and should not be left to political

17 Visser 't Hooft always denied that the German confession of guilt was a condition for the re-entry of the German churches into the ecumenical movement: cf. Reinhold von Thadden-Trieglaff and Kurt Scharf, in: Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt, 21 July 1985. But that was the impression that had been given: cf. Frits Groeneveld, who asserted that after the war Visser 't Hooft had 'forced' the German churches to confess guilt for their lack of resistance against godless national socialism. NRC, July 1985, and K. van Oosterzee, in: De Bazuin, 20 September 1985: Stuttgart 1945 made Amsterdam 1948 possible.
18 H. van Run, interview with Visser 't Hooft, 'Markant: Visser 't Hooft', NOS Television, 8 December 1977, Sound and Vision Archives.
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This letter made a deep impression at the time on Visser 't Hooft, who also constantly referred to the spiritual struggle behind the visible world.

This attitude was now translated into a declaration. The famous beginning of the confession of guilt of Stuttgart reads:

We are all the more grateful for this visit because, with our peoples, we not only know of a large community of suffering but also solidarity in guilt. With great sorrow we say: our guilt has brought infinite suffering to many peoples and countries.

The members of the German delegation thus confessed guilt while they identified with their people as a whole. But their status was not clear. Did they represent churches or a German ecumenical council? They could not of course claim to speak for the German people as a whole. But it could not be said of the foreigners either that they were operating under instructions and consultation. Getting visas for this small group was already very difficult; it was a pluriform group that had been put together with some improvisation. Visser 't Hooft was in Stuttgart together with the Dutchman Hendrik Kraemer, who had been in a concentration camp himself. For the rest, the delegation also consisted of Visser 't Hooft’s French friend, Pierre Maury, the American representative for the ecumenical movement. Samuel McCrea Cavert, the American Lutheran Sylvester C. Michelfelder, the Swiss Alphons Koechlin, and the British Anglican bishop George Bell. A Norwegian had been expected in Stuttgart, but he did not make it in time.

Stuttgart was a disputed milestone, but in 1945, for the German Protestant churches, Visser 't Hooft was the ‘man with the outstretched hand’. They were grateful to Visser 't Hooft because he avoided reproaches. Niemöller spoke of a ‘substantial contribution’ and ‘diplomatic skill’. At the low point of German history, Visser 't Hooft showed what ecumenicity could mean. He presented the ecumenical delegation as members of European churches that had suffered from German aggression and who

spoke ‘from their churches’, but they were looking for the restoration of brotherly relations with the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Evangelical Church in Germany). Fascism had brought an end to a promising start to international ecumenism in the 1930s, but personal contacts continued. It was important that Visser ‘t Hooft, on behalf of the World Council, now invited the Evangelische Kirche to become a full member of the nascent World Council as soon as possible. He scribbled in his personal notes on the discussions in Stuttgart:

Now want resume full relations for a) We need the witness of German Church in the ecumenical movement; b) We desire to help in the reconstruction of church life in Germany and to do our share in meeting the physical needs of the German people as churches and through the churches.  

He certainly saw obstacles, but these had to be cleared out of the way as quickly as possible. The mistake that should not in any case be made was, as had happened after the First World War, to allow the ecumenical atmosphere to become poisoned by endless discussions on guilt that would take years. In Stuttgart, not only did Visser ‘t Hooft ask the Germans to confess guilt, he himself also made a modest confession of guilt.

Our own churches and the World Council have not recognised sufficiently early and sufficiently clearly the evil force which had been let loose and have therefore not acted sufficiently courageously when there was still time to act. And we are too clearly aware of the witness and suffering of many in the German Church. We see clearly in what happened to the German nation and church ‘both the kindness [Güte] and severity of God [Ernst Gottes]’.

Thus, with respect to the World Council, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland cast itself in Stuttgart as the representative of associated state churches, including the Lutheran churches. That caused a great deal of confusion within the German church. The most prominent objection expressed was that the delegates had nevertheless given the impression that they could speak on behalf of all the German people. Many in Germany, as

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21 Visser ‘t Hooft, personal notes Stuttgart 1945 and ‘Main points to be made by World Council delegation in Stuttgart-discussions’ (draft), no date, YDS-4, 29 and 30.
22 Ibid.
well many in countries that had suffered under German occupation, felt that such a moment of reconciliation had come too quickly after the war.

Visser ’t Hooft was fully aware that a meeting with a handful of church leaders did not mean that reconciliation had found its way into the hearts of people. But he primarily saw a growth in awareness. The composition of the Barmen Declaration in 1934 and reflection on the role of the church in post-war German society in Treysa in 1945 had had a unifying effect, and that was why the confession of guilt in Stuttgart was possible. Now the Evangelische Kirche began a new phase, and they could work on getting the support of their constituencies. On 31 October Visser ’t Hooft gave a report on the discussion with the Germans in a turbulent meeting at the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. In November 1945, he related via a memorandum to those involved in the ecumenical movement how things stood with respect to the German church. In his view, the foundation had already been laid in Barmen, and they could now build on that. Thus, he was also responsible for the German church struggle becoming an important element for ‘the format’, i.e., the paradigm, of the World Council. In other words: the way in which the World Council was now organised by Visser ’t Hooft and his fellows was prompted by the priorities developed during the time of the German church struggle.

5.4 Dealing with the Past: Niemöller as Ecumenical Prophet

In Visser ’t Hooft’s eyes, Martin Niemöller was the German who managed to hit the right note in Stuttgart. After that, he brought him into the foreground internationally as a reliable representative of the other Germany. The purpose was to have the reconciliation of Stuttgart take effect in churches in countries that had been occupied by Germany. For Visser ’t Hooft, Niemöller was the post-war face of the German church as a partner in the ecumenical movement and the contemporary prophet that Europe needed. In March 1946 he asked Niemöller to work for isolated

23 There was always criticism. According to the journalist Frits Groeneveld, Visser ’t Hooft had ‘forced’ the German churches to confess their guilt for their lack of resistance to Nazism, and nothing was said about the persecution of the Jews. F. Groeneveld, in: NRC Handelsblad, 5 July 1985.
German churches and provide pastoral care for prisoners of war for two months that summer out of the World Council office. The energetic and engaging Niemöller did not disappoint him. Visser ‘t Hooft could count on him, also in connection with prickly questions, as in the case of the Lutheran bishop Theodor Heckel (1894-1967), who had promoted the foreign relations and thus the international ecumenical affairs of the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche since 1928. Heckel had not been a Nazi but had helped with Hitler’s anti-Jewish measures. From 1939 on, he had also been tasked with working among German prisoners of war. When, after 1945, he simply continued and kept on contacting, in ecumenical contexts, German ministers in Italy, Visser ‘t Hooft felt that this was definitely harmful to the international image of the German church. He asked Niemöller to pressure Heckel into withdrawing, and Niemöller did so. Niemöller had personally reconciled with Heckel but, like Visser ‘t Hooft, thought that Heckel’s collaboration with the Nazis had made him permanently unsuited to act on behalf of the German church in the international ecumenical movement.26 Heckel withdrew as the representative for the ecumenical movement and only stayed active in a commission for pastoral care among Germans who were prisoners of war of the Russians. He would later, however, assume a number of important church positions in Bavaria. For Visser ‘t Hooft, Heckel’s departure was a relief, for he could not stand him, and Heckel could have been a permanent stumbling block for the contact between the World Council and the revived German churches.

In the summer of 1946, Niemöller wanted to explain himself with respect to his actions in the Third Reich in the United States. When the Allies prevented him from travelling because he was German, Visser ‘t Hooft used his quiet diplomatic skills and did what he could to prevent Niemöller from being ‘crippled’. Niemöller finally succeeded in travelling to the United States, and his appearances there in 1947 were a great success. Visser ‘t Hooft was enthusiastic:

My question really amounts to this: are you quite sufficiently grateful for the quite wonderful work for which you are being used? There is almost no other man in the world whose word and work is so clearly and visibly blessed.27

26 M. Niemöller to Visser ‘t Hooft, 8 July 1946, WCC 42.0059.
27 Visser ‘t Hooft to M. Niemöller, 17 February 1947, WCC general correspondence 1026 and WCC 42.0059.
Not only did Niemöller seem to be a worthy ambassador for both Germany and the ecumenical, but he was also an important advisor for Visser ‘t Hooft. When the date of the foundation of the World Council, 23 August 1948, approached, he warned Visser ‘t Hooft that he had to make sure that the German delegation did not end up standing in the dock. That would increase the existing tension. Visser ‘t Hooft was in agreement. When Karl Barth and Thomas Mann reproached the German churches for self-pity, Visser ‘t Hooft fully supported Niemöller and guaranteed that the Evangelische Kirche could send twenty official delegates to Amsterdam. They would not be accused and could participate fully, without any restrictions, in all parts of the assembly. Two extra places were reserved for the German Mennonites and Old Catholics.

In the meantime, there was still a great deal of resentment against the German people in the first post-war years, in the churches as well. Visser ‘t Hooft and Niemöller were both aware of this, and this was still the case after the conciliatory discussions in Stuttgart. Visser ‘t Hooft asked for patience.

The great question is ... what will happen when the time comes for a frank discussion. At that time two dangers will arise, namely, that the German Church should deny or minimize the particularly heavy responsibility of the German nation for the suffering of these years and that the other churches should take a Pharisaical attitude to the German Church.

The great suffering that had now come over the German people was understood by Visser ‘t Hooft as a punishment of God. But he felt that there was no point in adding to that suffering. In connection with the shortage of reliable church leaders and ministers, he argued for an early release of theologians who were prisoners of war because they had served in the German armed forces.

Not until 1947 did the World Council receive permission from the Allied authorities who administered Germany to name a permanent representative for the German churches, who could travel freely and have a permanent position. Visser ‘t Hooft found the Danish Lutheran minister, Halfdan Høgsbro willing to accept this difficult position. He settled in Bad Homburg, near Frankfurt am Main in the American zone and reported on his work directly.

28 Visser ‘t Hooft to M. Niemöller, 30 May 1947, WCC general correspondence 1027 and WCC 42.0059.
29 Ibid.
to Visser ‘t Hooft. Høgsbro quickly advised him that the World Council had to become more involved with the American and British trials of German war criminals. Many Germans, he had observed, had no confidence in a fair trial. Visser ‘t Hooft responded that the people in Geneva had neither the expertise nor competence to get involved in those issues. But the German church leaders themselves, he wrote, could appeal to the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs that was chaired by the American Lutheran O. Frederick Nolde.30

There was a great deal of mutual distrust among the German churches, Visser ‘t Hooft noted. The Lutherans were very attached to their identity, and many in the Evangelical Lutheran state churches were afraid of losing regional independence. They feared a weakening of the confessional character of the church. In a formal sense, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland was not a church but a federation of several churches. Having every state church as an individual member of the World Council was not feasible and would not look good. But many German church leaders were very principled on this question and not very flexible. Everything depended on the credibility of the EKD representation in the ecumenical bodies, which was arranged in article 18 of the church order for the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. When the occupation zones gradually changed into two countries, East and West Germany, the trustworthy Otto Dibelius was chosen, to Visser ‘t Hooft’s joy, bishop of Berlin in 1949. Finally, to his relief, the umbrella Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland was accepted – also by the leaders of the state churches – as the church body that would represent Protestant Germany in the World Council.

In the meantime, the processing of the German war trauma was not an easy process, not for those who were actively involved in the ecumenical movement either. The past of Germans who were involved in the World Council was not unblemished. In addition to the above-mentioned bishop Theodor Heckel, persona non grata in the ecumenical movement, other German ecumenical contacts, such as Eugen Gerstenmaier, who was Heckel’s right-hand man, and Hans Schönfeld, the study secretary of Life and Work in the ecumenical movement, were more or less tainted as well.31 Visser ‘t Hooft found Schönfeld to be a difficult man but had never given up on him. He wrote to Adolf Keller from Interchurch Aid, with whom he collaborated a great deal in refugee work during the war:

30 Visser ‘t Hooft to H. Høgsbro, 6 December 1948, WCC general correspondence 672.
31 Documents on E. Gerstenmaier, YDS-4, 40-42.
I am sorry to read about unpleasant discoveries which you have made. But I believe that you should keep in mind that it has become very clear in the last few months that Schönfeld has always had an abnormal element in his make-up. The most sad situation in which he is today is obviously not simply an illness which has overtaken him recently, but rather the breaking out of certain abnormalities which have made his life difficult for a very long time and which made cooperation with him such a very real problem. I believe that we cannot quite hold him responsible for certain things which he has done.32

As the study secretary of Life and Work during the war, Schönfeld played a double game, whereby he had to give his superiors at the foreign desk of the Lutheran Church in Berlin, such as Heckel, the impression of being useful to them, while he, according to Visser ’t Hooft, primarily promoted the ecumenical ties with his dangerous trips. He made handy use of the diplomatic post between the German consulate in Geneva and the office of Ernst von Weizsäcker, state secretary from 1938 to 1943 under Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin. But when less attractive things came out after the war about Schönfeld’s behaviour and his health quickly declined, Visser ’t Hooft could no longer keep him on in Geneva.

5.5 ‘We Do not Wish to Call Wrong Right’

A more serious situation arose with respect to Schönfeld’s contact at the ministry, Ernst H. Freiherr von Weizsäcker (1882-1951). He was a naval officer and diplomat, one of the people with whom Visser ’t Hooft had been in contact in the first years of the war via Schönfeld and who had played a role in the background in the ecumenical peace initiatives of the Norwegian bishop Eivind Berggrav in 1940.33 He came from an aristocratic family of lawyers and theologians. His membership in the SS and his function as diplomat was supposed to have been his cover for his resistance work. The ecumenical movement was shocked when this committed member of the Evangelische Kirche, who had appeared to be a ‘good German’, had to appear before the tribunal in Nuremberg in 1947 for war crimes. Since 1943, Von Weizsäcker had been the German envoy at the Vatican. The story

32 Visser ’t Hooft to A. Keller, 18 September 1950, WCC general correspondence 744.
33 See 3.3.
was always that he had used his position as a cover for his own resistance activities and those of others. Now he was accused of active participation in the preparation of the German invasion in Czechoslovakia and giving the order for a Jewish transport from France to Auschwitz. His son Richard von Weizsäcker, a lawyer, mayor of West Berlin, and president of the Federal Republic from 1984 to 1994, defended him during the so-called Ministries Trial (Wilhelmstrasseprozess). But it was to no avail. In 1949, the Military Tribunal IV sentenced Von Weizsäcker to seven years because of crimes against humanity, which in the end became five years. After more than three years, including remand, he was released in 1950 in an amnesty and died in 1951.

Many in the ecumenical movement could not believe that Von Weizsäcker was guilty. Bishops, like the Norwegian Berggrav and the Briton George Bell, argued for his innocence. Bell even wrote a letter to President Truman.34 According to Schönfeld, it was because of Von Weizsäcker that Bonhoeffer, Von Trott zu Solz, Gerstenmaier, and Schönfeld himself could travel internationally during the war and could develop their activities that undermined national socialism.35 Thanks to officers like Von Weizsäcker, some ecumenical assistance could be given in Germany among prisoners of war and refugees during the war. Von Weizsäcker himself stated that he did know something about situations of 'Jewish slave labour ending in death' in Eastern Europe. But he claimed that he did not hear about the gas chambers of Auschwitz until the summer of 1944, when he was in Rome. Adolph Freudenberg, who had been active in the refugee work of the World Council since 1939, who himself had a Jewish wife and was seen as an expert on the background of the persecution of the Jews, stood up for him. In Von Weizsäcker’s defence, he argued that the Swiss press only reported on the eradication of the Jews in 1943 and then initially primarily about the ghetto of Warsaw and not about Auschwitz. A petition started by friends to have Von Weizsäcker released was signed by Freudenberg but not by Visser’t Hooft, possibly because Bishop Heckel had signed it.36

As far as the German invasion of Czechoslovakia was concerned, Von Weizsäcker’s defence was that he was in no way actively involved and had secretly worked more against the Third Reich than helped it. Regarding

34 G. Bell to H.S. Truman, 19 May 1949, YDS-4, 38. This letter was sent on to the Military Governor of the American zone in Germany.
the Jewish transport that left under his orders in March 1942 from France to Auschwitz, he claimed that he had understood that the Jews would be safer in the East than in the West. Visser ’t Hooft was also called to appear as a witness for the defence in the Von Weizsäcker case. But in the end he did not testify. Possibly, he did not want his position as general secretary of the young World Council to suffer if Von Weizsäcker was convicted. Just before the trial went to appeal he must have seen that the chance of a conviction was quite great. But the fact that Visser ’t Hooft was planning to defend Von Weizsäcker is apparent from the fact that he had prepared himself seriously for this. He wrote the following for his witness statement intended for the tribunal but which he thus never made in court:

As President of the Commission for Prisoners of War of the World Council of Churches, and as such their only delegate to prisoner of war camps in Germany from 1940 to 1942 ... I realised forcibly in Germany itself, that without the help of someone like Mr von Weizsäcker it would have been impossible to fill my mission. I witnessed the dangers to which those who helped us in our task exposed themselves, and I cannot express strongly enough my admiration for them. ... There is also a second reason. After visiting Germany twice in recent months, I realise strongly that to in the first place try to develop in the Germans a sense of justice, without exercising justice towards them, is a hopeless task. Surely we do not wish to call wrong right, but confronted as we are by such an astounding sentence [seven years], we think that the verdict far from developing a sense of justice, will tend rather to atrophy it. 

37  Major Schäffer to Visser ’t Hooft, telegram 12 August 1949, YDS-12, 78.
38  See: Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law, no. io, vol. XII, (1946-1949), 243: W.A. Visser ’t Hooft was named as a witness, but he does not appear later in the documents. Cf. A. Keller to Visser ’t Hooft, 25 April 1949. WCC general correspondence 743: ‘I believe [...] I remember that you or the Ecumenical Council have already testified for Mr von Weizsäcker, namely with the reference that a good part of our work for refugees and prisoners was possible only through his friendly attitude to our work and thus obviously also through his attitude that was not friendly to the Nazi system in any way.’ (‘Ich glaube [...] mich zu erinnern, dass Du oder de Oekumenische Rat bereits schon für Herrn von Weizsäcker eingetreten seid, namentlich mit dem Hinweis, das sein guter Teil unserer Arbeit für Flüchtlinge und Gefangene nur möglich war durch seine freundliche Stellung zu unserer Arbeit und damit selbstverständlich auch durch seine Gesinnung, die dem Nazi-System durchaus nicht freundlich war.’)
39  Visser ’t Hooft, untitled, no date. YDS-4, 38.
Von Weizsäcker’s assertion that he did not know until very late about the existence of the extermination camps turned out to unbelievable not only for the tribunal. Documents discovered later show that Von Weizsäcker and others at Foreign Affairs must have been thoroughly informed at an early stage of the large-scale nature of the murder of the Jews in the Polish concentration camps. Also, criticism increasingly appeared of the view held for years that the Berlin Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and particularly the ‘Abwehr’, the espionage branch of defence, had to be seen as a bulwark of resistance against Hitler. This view was characterised as a myth by the notorious 2000 study, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* by Eckhart Conze.40

5.6 Diplomacy Based on a ‘Genuine Meeting of Minds’

In 1945 the victorious Allies decided to set up a new, more decisive organisation to replace the League of Nations in which human rights would be given an important role. This United Nations Organization included 51 countries when it was founded. In ecumenical circles, it was often argued that the League of Nations lacked a spiritual root or even ‘a soul’.41 Visser ‘t Hooft was convinced that the new World Council had to be that soul to the UNO. The challenge was not only to equip the Council for that purpose with respect to organs but also to provide a staff out of the churches with the knowledge and spiritual baggage to be able to take on that role. In a plan from 1943 on the post-war tasks of the World Council, Visser ‘t Hooft argued for a permanent organ of top theologians and lawyers where fields of international tension could be be discussed. Collaboration had to be striven for especially in the area of human rights, refugees, and freedom of religion. Building and maintaining informal contact should prevent the Vatican and the World Council from contradicting each other in public.42 This body would not be concerned with exercising power, but with building up influence through the ecumenical movement on the basis of consensus among experts. Visser ‘t Hooft was a major proponent of active ecumenical diplomacy – largely behind the scenes, for every suspicion that churches were becoming involved in politics had to be nipped in the bud.

42 Visser ‘t Hooft to W.W. van Kirk, 28 May 1946, WCC general correspondence 772.
In February 1946, the provisional committee of the World Council founded the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA). The idea for this foreign commission had emerged from the conference of lay specialists that the nascent World Council had organised in July 1939 in the hotel Beau Séjour near Geneva. That conference was unable to do anything to prevent the outbreak of war, but Visser ‘t Hooft later saw this as the start of realistic ecumenical thinking about international affairs. Shortly after the foundation of the CCIA in June 1946, international tensions increased considerably because of the Cold War. Some were even afraid that a third world war would break out, and there were calls from various quarters for a prophetic word from the churches that were united in the nascent World Council. But Visser ‘t Hooft was reluctant at this point and gave a typical response for him:

Now I do not believe in statements that are just drawn up in this office or by one or two offices and which have not grown out of a genuine meeting of minds.43

He wanted to wait until August when the CCIA would meet officially for the first time, which was expected to lead to a clear statement based on consensus. But that proved much more difficult than he thought, for there also appeared to be great differences of opinion within the CCIA on, for example, the question how Christianity and totalitarian systems were related.

The CCIA was set up as a common organ of the International Missionary Council and the World Council together. Visser ‘t Hooft considered the Missionary Council very important in this connection because of its close-knit network in the colonies. The secretariat of the CCIA was made up of Visser ‘t Hooft and the American Walter W. van Kirk on behalf of the American Council of Churches, but in fact it was Visser ‘t Hooft who, as a diplomat, was the face of the policy. His demand that the members of the commission always be well informed about what was going on in the world of international relations and that they refrain from pious sermons set the tone. He was convinced that what people sought in politicians and diplomats was not moral indignation but to be helped on the basis of expertise and an ethics informed by Christianity. In addition, according to Visser ‘t Hooft, concrete proposals and recommendations were needed. They had to be value-driven, based on Christian convictions but also comprehensible to all.

43 Visser ‘t Hooft to W.W. van Kirk, 4 June 1946, WCC general correspondence 772.
It was experts, however, who could play a pioneering role here, not church leaders. His friend, the experienced and scholarly professor of international law in Leiden, Frederik M. baron van Asbeck, was, in Visser ’t Hooft’s eyes, the foremost example of the type of expert he had in mind. Van Asbeck’s tenure as chairman of the CCIA, from 1948 to 1965, lasted for almost all Visser ’t Hooft’s time as general secretary.

With the CCIA, Visser ’t Hooft wanted to make sure that the voice of the church would be taken seriously in the international arena. He set himself and his staff the task of exploring whether the World Council needed to make a public statement whenever a serious international crisis arose. Where possible, the CCIA could intervene, in, for example, the form of informal explorations of opportunities for peace. Some argued for a separate International Committee on Religious Liberty, but Visser ’t Hooft did not find that a good idea. He was a proponent of an integrated approach in which religious argumentation and other motives were considered together. The executive committee consisted of the Englishman Kenneth Grubb, chairman from 1946 to 1968, and the American O. Frederick Nolde, director from 1946 to 1969. They succeeded in regularly making the voice of the churches heard in the world of international diplomacy. The CCIA was one of the first non-governmental organisations to receive a consultative status in the economic-social council of the United Nations. Visser ’t Hooft was happy with it, but he did find that the CCIA had to remain strictly independent and had to be careful to avoid becoming involved in the decision-making process of the United Nations. Whatever the World Council brought to the United Nations, it could not be idealism. That was never Visser ’t Hooft’s intention: he believed in an approach that combined Christianity and realism, not in international idealism.44

5.7 A Study Centre at Bossey: Towards a New Science of Ecumenism?

Visser ’t Hooft expected a great deal from study to develop the unity of the church. Misunderstanding would decrease through knowledge over time. The chances of consensus would increase. He took his zeal for work among Christian students, developed by the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), with him to the World Council, especially in the Life and Work study department. But it did not stop at that – he also wanted to nourish an

44 See 2.6.
Towards a world council of churches

ecumenical impulse that would have an effect across the board theologically. For example, in 1945, Visser ’t Hooft gave a series of lectures at the Theological Faculty of the University of Geneva on biblical social ethics, in which he placed the emphasis on exegetical methods that could help students derive a contemporary message from Bible texts. According to Visser ’t Hooft, a good reader understood that the Bible was not a book with ready-made rules and solutions but required hard study of the texts so that one would gradually become aware of what God's salvific plan was, both for the personal life of the reader and for the world. The criticism made in 1948 that the World Council had no interest in Christian education hit him hard. The person who sent this message was F.L. Knapp from New York, general secretary of the World Council of Christian Education (WCCE), a successor of the Sunday School Association. Visser ’t Hooft responded indignantly. Not until 1971 would the WCCE become part of the World Council of Churches.

Already before the war, Visser ’t Hooft had been planning to set up an international ecumenical study centre. The lectures he gave in 1945 also helped to breathe new life into this plan. The first courses started in October 1946. It was intended to be an ‘energising centre’ of encounter and study, a place for training people in ecumenicity, an ‘ecumenical laboratory’. The great themes in the early years here were also reconciliation and reconstruction in Europe. Students were trained to be able to play an important role in these respects in their countries of origin. The missiologist Hendrik Kraemer, Suzanne de Diétrich, and Henry-Louis Henriod – the latter two experienced WSCF staff members – were in charge of the institute, while numerous well-known guest instructors with ecumenical experience were recruited. There was a course for laymen, for which there were thirty enrollees when it opened, but the focus was on the theologians’ programme, which was aimed at older students of theology and young ministers. The ecumenical institute was established in 1950, thanks to a gift by the American John D. Rockefeller Jr. to Visser ’t Hooft for this purpose, in the Bossey castle near

46 Ibid.
47 Visser ’t Hooft to F.L. Knapp, 23 November 1948, WCC general correspondence 785. They did collaborate throughout the years, but the WCCE would not become part of the World Council of Churches until 1971.
Visser ’t Hooft, 1900-1985

Céligny.48 Visser ’t Hooft himself gave guest lectures with great pleasure into old age.49

He hoped that Bossey and those who were educated would contribute to a new theological discipline that he himself called ecumenism but would later, in the Netherlands for instance, often be called ‘oecumenica’.50 This discipline was to focus on the study of the dynamic relations between the churches in which social questions played a great role. In connection with this, Visser ’t Hooft would give a speech in Melbourne in February 1956 in which he argued for ‘ecumenism’ as a new theological discipline:

Ecumenism is the discipline which seeks to provide a comprehensive description of the faith and life of the Christian churches, as well as

49 For example, lecture notes of A. Parmentier-Blankert lectures on ‘Social concern of the ecumenical movement’ by Visser ’t Hooft. Bossey, 28-30 November 1973. In the author’s possession.
the ways in which they co-operate and manifest their unity and which also deals critically with the issues which have arisen as a result of the encounter between the churches for the churches themselves and the ecumenical movement.\(^5\)

According to Visser ‘t Hooft, this discipline should involve more than ‘descriptive ecclesiology’. He thought of a dynamic and motivational curriculum that could also fit well into the education programme of missiology if there was a good manual. The ecumenical movement needed the help of vibrant seminaries to reflect better on the deeper questions that the World Council was now confronted with.\(^52\) Most church historians were, according to Visser ‘t Hooft, too much influenced by secular historiography. What was needed then was what he called a ‘theological criticism’ of church history. He found the volume on the history of the ecumenical movement, which was edited by Ruth Rouse and to which he himself had contributed an article on the word ‘ecumenical’, too factual.\(^53\) The argument for the engagement of the academic scholar, something on which he had often written and spoken already in the 1930s, was revived again.\(^54\) He himself wanted to contribute to such ‘theological criticism’ with his article ‘Our Ecumenical Task in the Light of History’: ‘We should dare to make theological judgements about historical happenings.’\(^55\) An ecumenical-theological analysis of the Reformation seemed to be a good starting point for him. To what extent was this sixteenth-century movement a true renewal of the church and to what extent the work of the devil because of the division and violence it led to?

In various Dutch churches – and not least in the Dutch Reformed Church, soon to be Visser ‘t Hooft’s own church – the resolution of the leaders of the World Council to have the foundation conference of the World Council take place in Amsterdam in August 1948 was greeted with enthusiasm.\(^56\) In the

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\(^{52}\) One example of such a centre was the Centre for Intercultural Theology, Interreligious Dialogue, Missiology, and Ecumenics (Centrum voor Interculturele Theologie, Interreligieuze Dialoog, Missiologie en Oecumenica [IIMO]), that existed from 1969 to 2004 in Utrecht. In 1968, Visser ‘t Hooft officiated at the opening of an ecumenical centre in Rotterdam that bore his name, where academic theology and business together would research norms and values in business, but this was closed again after a few years.


\(^{54}\) See 2.5.


run-up to the foundation, it became clearer and clearer that many countries and churches recognised Visser ’t Hooft as one of the main players in the ecumenical movement. In 1947, he was invited to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton in the United States. With the theme ‘The Kingship of Christ’, Visser ’t Hooft gave an overview of the most important theological developments in the interbellum. He sketched the clash between the church and the totalitarian state, particularly in Germany, but he also gave examples from Norway and the Netherlands. With respect to the theological impasse between European and American theology, on which he had written his dissertation in 1928, he was now optimistic. An important lesson had been learned on both sides of the ocean. People were thinking more practically in Europe now, whereas a theological deepening had occurred in the United States. In this period Visser ’t Hooft expected a quick breakthrough in ecumenical dialogue. A concentration on the kingship of Christ would lead to rapprochement. With such an approach, Visser ’t Hooft managed to influence the orientation of the World Council in a Christocentric sense. That would be apparent not only during the foundation meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 but also from the ambitious theme of the second assembly in Evanston in 1954: ‘Christ, the Hope of the World’. Visser ’t Hooft decisively rejected the criticism that ecumenism would lead to relativism: ‘The ecumenical conversation must be a struggle for truth. Excessive politeness is sometimes a greater hindrance to ecumenical advance than frank facing of difference.’ The question of truth itself was at stake here. In the summer of 1948, Visser ’t Hooft was ordained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, and, after having done the colloquium pro forma, he became a minister in general service without salary. For a while he was a little worried about being accepted for ordination, for his Hebrew had become quite rusty.

5.8 Amsterdam 1948: A ‘Responsible Society’

Shortly after the war, Visser ’t Hooft began to develop strategies and to set out a time schedule for the definitive foundation of the World Council of Churches. In February 1946, the provisional committee of the Council organised a modest and deliberately plain ‘conference of Christian unity’ in the St. Pierre Church in Geneva. Visser ’t Hooft saw to it that Martin Niemöller was also present. It was here that the decision was made to hold

57 Visser ’t Hooft, The Kingship of Christ. An Interpretation of Recent European Theology (1948).
the foundation meeting of the World Council in Amsterdam in 1948. Other preparatory meetings of the provisional committee occurred in Buck Hill Falls in the United States, in Geneva, and in London. The plans became increasingly concrete.

There was also a matter of concern. Faith and Order and Life and Work had both been absorbed into the World Council but did not always make an equal contribution. The work of Faith and Order was allocated to a department, whereas Life and Work often seemed to give form and content to the whole, and there was also a Life and Work study department. It was not without reason that people from Faith and Order claimed that the practical work was often higher on the agenda than the content of the faith. Canon Leonard Hodgson, a professor at Oxford, attacked Visser ’t Hooft personally about this point in March 1948. As the secretary of Faith and Order, he felt that the Life and Work study department had been given too much room in the new Council. But Visser ’t Hooft stated that all organs of the World Council were in fact organs of the churches themselves and that there was no reason at all to fear that Faith and Order would be snowed under.\footnote{Visser ’t Hooft to L. Hodgson, 9 March 1948, WCC general correspondence 659.}

One crucial aspect was the invitation policy for the assembly in Amsterdam. Visser ’t Hooft preferred to have all first-class speakers, leaders in their area. It was important for him that the intended speakers thought in terms of the church. He was delighted that Karl Barth, who personally wanted to have little to do with the World Council as such, was willing to speak. Some found that Visser ’t Hooft’s list of speakers was determined too much by his preference for ‘Barthians’; this was true to a certain extent, but not completely. The American Henry Van Dusen and the Swede Anders Nygren could not be called Barthians. Anglicans especially, who had been raised in natural theology, such as the World Council president, Geoffrey Fisher, and the Bishop of Chichester George Bell, played an important role. But the dialectical method, which Barth firmly endorsed and in which the revelation of God was presupposed as opposed to human culture, did have great influence through Visser ’t Hooft himself and others as well.\footnote{Cf. Pathil, \textit{Models in Ecumenical Dialogue} (1981), 310-311 and 318-319.}

Some speakers were not welcome – including dialectical thinkers – even if they were influential theologians. For example, Paul Tillich was not invited, even though he had made an important contribution to the Life and Work conference in Oxford (1937). Visser ’t Hooft and Tillich did not get along, but, more importantly, Tillich did not think in church terms: he was not really interested in the institutional side of church unity, which was precisely
what Visser ’t Hooft was insisting on. Tillich felt unpleasantly passed over in 1948. 61 The Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner, who was also a dialectical theologian, felt himself set aside in a similar fashion. 62

The Amsterdam assembly began on 22 August 1948, with a service in the Nieuwe Kerk. Visser ’t Hooft had difficulty believing that, after ten years, the time had finally come. The actual foundation of the World Council of Churches took place the following day in the Concertgebouw with the solemn proclamation of the foundation text by Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury. This was the milestone they had been looking forward to for more than ten years. With the memories of the war still fresh in their minds, there were tears in many eyes while the text was being read. Members of very different churches felt bound together and ready for

62 Cf. Jehle-Wildberger, Adolf Keller (2008), 499: ‘It seems that Visser ’t Hooft wanted to marginalise theologians who did not unconditionally support Karl Barth’s line (’Es scheint, dass Visser ’t Hooft Theologen, die die Linie Karl Barths nicht bedingungslos vertraten, an den Rand schieben wollte.’)
a common mission in a quickly changing world. The important thing seemed to be that modernisation and renewal were thus not the same thing as secularisation. Churches united in the World Council accepted the challenge of a new age with complete self-confidence. At least, that was how their leaders – who were, for the most part, white Protestant men from Europe and North America – experienced it. Despite the feeling of connectedness, however, the differences remained visible. For example, in that week, churches from the Calvinistic Reformation celebrated the Lord's Supper in the Nieuwe Kerk, while other denominations like the Lutherans, Anglicans, and Greek Orthodox held their celebrations in other churches in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam meant consolidation and completion of the policy that was developed in Oxford, Edinburgh, and Utrecht. A few important pioneers, such as the Anglican archbishop William Temple, had died. But the continuity was great. When the Council was actually founded, most members of the provisional committee of the nascent World Council moved to what would now be called the central committee. Visser ’t Hooft felt that the period of 13 days that was reserved for the assembly itself was actually too short. So incredibly much had to be done. For example, a series of far-reaching decisions were made about the nature and function of the new Council. He was keen to establish that Amsterdam was free to ‘invent itself’; after all, there were no precedents and therefore, in principle, no church order stipulations from participating churches could be violated. It was decided that there would, in principle, be a major assembly every six years, deliberately not called a synod or a council, with delegates from all member churches. During an assembly, the general secretary, who daily supervised a growing number of staff members, was required to give an account of the Council’s activities, finances, etc. at the assembly. The central committee would consist of a hundred members chosen by the assembly and would meet annually. This committee would, in turn, choose the small executive committee. The general secretary was officially also the secretary of both the central committee and the executive committee. The staff worked in departments under directors who reported directly to the general secretary. The parallels with the organisational structure of the United Nations were striking. But Visser ’t Hooft wanted to temper the high expectations. Clear statements were expected from Amsterdam, but it would not be easy to reach a consensus on the major themes. He was also aware that ‘World Council’ was a huge word for an organisation that had almost no representatives from Africa and South America, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church. He was keen to present
Amsterdam as a start. A World Council existed – that was a fact. But the real work still had to begin.

The theme of the Amsterdam assembly, ‘Man's Disorder and God's Design’, was a heavy one. It was subdivided into four sections, and in each section the unity of the church was brought to bear on one aspect of the chaos in the world: The Universal Church in God's Design, The Church's Witness to God's Design, The Church and the Disorder of Society, and The Church and the International Disorder. Everything that happened during this foundation meeting could be interpreted in a political way by the outside world, even though it was intended in a spiritual sense. The supporting concept ‘responsible society’ was conceived by Visser ‘t Hooft and John Oldham and defined as follows:

A responsible society is one where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it.

In coining the concept ‘responsible society’, they were looking for a link between the ethics of divine command that came out of revelation theology on the one hand and a more teleological contextual ethics that came out of the tradition of natural theology. Visser ‘t Hooft was a proponent of the former approach, but he wanted to do justice to the latter approach as well. Again and again, the World Council would, in the following decades during the Cold War, return to the concept of ‘responsible society’ in order to defend its independent position between East and West.

Visser ‘t Hooft gave a report at the foundation meeting on the ten years since Utrecht. Reassuring statements were made to the effect that the World Council was not a superchurch with authority over the member churches and that it would not strive after political goals were important. He himself found that such a large assembly with an overloaded programme should not expect any deep clarification concerning reflection on the nature of the Council. But he himself was astute and organised careful press times and facilities and – for that time – modern interpreters’ services with portable

65 Ibid. See also: 3.5.
receivers for the 351 delegates, the specialists, the guests, and the press. Nevertheless, moments of confusion, conflict, and misunderstanding could not be prevented. For example, the American John Foster Dulles came into conflict with the Czech theologian Josef Hromádka. During the war, Dulles had done important ecumenical work as chairman of the Commission on a Just and Durable Peace set up for the American churches and would soon become Secretary of State under President Truman. Hromádka was viewed by Visser ‘t Hooft as an independent thinker who could help the World Council steer an independent course between East and West. Visser ‘t Hooft got along well with both of them. But while Dulles became increasingly fiercely anti-communist, Hromádka called for Christians to work together with moderate communists. To Visser ‘t Hooft’s satisfaction, Section 3 on the church and the disorder of society in the final declaration called upon the churches to reject the ideologies of both communism and laissez-faire capitalism.

The unity of the church was, as far as Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned, to be regarded as a gift from God. This was what the churches were now rediscovering. The basic formula laid down in 1938, ‘Jesus Christ God and Saviour’, was

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67 Visser ‘t Hooft, lecture at Theological Conference, 29 December 1947-2 January 1948, WCC 994.2.12/9
adopted without too much opposition as the basis for the World Council. That was very reassuring for Visser ’t Hooft. O. Frederick Nolde, director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), wrote an important contribution on human rights and the Commission’s collaboration with the United Nations and other international organisations ‘as essential for a stable world order’. In the policy of Visser ’t Hooft, Nolde, and Grubb, the accent lay on a realistic approach. With regard to human rights, freedom of religion and the freedom to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends
of the earth were central. They explicitly asserted that there were three determinative, special components for Christians. The first was that the belief that the human being is created in God's image constituted the basis for the Christian concept of freedom. As the second component, it was stated that the dignity of the human being that was claimed in human rights, as listed in the Charter of the United Nations, was confirmed in God's love for the human being and visible in Christ. The third component consisted in the right of every human being to freedom to respond to God's call. It was stipulated that the most important source was the revelation of God and that arguments on the basis of natural law had only supplementary value.

In the run-up to the assembly, in the spring of 1948, Visser ‘t Hooft was watchful: anything could go wrong. A number of major themes were prominent in international politics. The Russians were threatening to isolate West Berlin from the rest of the world. The threat of a nuclear war was on many people's minds. The decolonisation process was going much faster than the European powers had expected, and tensions were running high. The partition of British India in 1947 into an Islamic West and East Pakistan and a largely but not completely Hindu India claimed hundreds of thousands of victims. The Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies was followed by the Bersiap Period (1945/1946) and an Indonesian struggle for independence that few in the Netherlands understood. The foundation of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 had provided a home for Jews, but it also meant a history of flight and eviction full of suffering for Palestinians. Visser ‘t Hooft feared chaotic scenes during the assembly. The number of plenary meetings also had to be limited, and there had to be room in the working groups for discussion. There had to be good interpreters, familiar with church jargon. It was not only during the actual assembly in Amsterdam, which took place from 22 August to 4 September 1948, that Visser ‘t Hooft was busy and under pressure. The nascent World Council held its last meeting of the provisional committee in Woudschoten near Zeist on 20-21 August before the opening of the assembly. The new central committee of the World Council met for the first time on 5 and 6 September immediately after the assembly. An ecumenical youth conference took place from 6 to 9 September; on 7 and 8 September the commission concerning the study department met; from 7 to 13 September the conference of theology students linked to the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF); from 8-10 September the conference of the International Missionary Council; and, finally, in September, the meeting of the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the

Jews. Though Visser ’t Hooft could not be everywhere, he did coordinate everything. He worked hard on the preparations and involved everyone he knew in the Dutch churches. He controlled countless strings behind the scenes, including during the assembly itself.

5.9 Two Rejections Become Two Challenges

In 1948, 147 churches from 44 countries joined the World Council when it was founded. Most of the churches were Protestant. Visser ’t Hooft felt it was essential for the ecumenical character of the council that a number of Orthodox churches wanted to be ‘co-founders’: the Church of Greece, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, a number of small Eastern Orthodox churches, the Russian Orthodox Church in exile, and the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America. Shortly after the council’s foundation, the ancient patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem associated themselves with the World Council. Visser ’t Hooft interpreted the successes of Amsterdam as a victory of the Holy Spirit over the weaknesses of people and their mutual division, seeing Amsterdam as a high point in the history of the church during an extremely vulnerable phase of world history. But he also saw the darker sides. There were two important rejections. While the contact with the Greek Orthodox Church and with the Orthodox churches under Constantinople’s authority was still good, this could not be said for the relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. This church, and those associated with it in East Europe, rejected the invitation to Amsterdam. From Moscow, it was reported that they could not work with the council ‘in the present form’. Visser ’t Hooft could have accepted this if it had happened for political reasons, given the Cold War. But an unacceptable theological argument had been used. The Russian church leaders asserted that the World Council would try to gain power over member churches and thus submit to the temptation that Christ had resisted. Visser ’t Hooft stated openly that they did not understand what the World Council was all about. He considered it a challenge to convince the Russian church leaders of the opposite and was planning to build up his contact with the Russians in a strategic way. Numerically, with tens of millions of adherents, the Russian church represented by far the largest part of Orthodoxy. During the 1950s, he made one small step after another until he reached his goal. ⁶⁹

⁶⁹ See chapter 8.
That the World Council under Visser ‘t Hooft’s leadership was determined to have a unique approach to East and West was not really understood in the White House in Washington either. Prior to the foundation conference, Visser ‘t Hooft received – to his surprise – a visit from the American diplomat Myron Taylor, who was studying, on President Truman’s orders, how religious movements could be mobilised in the struggle against communism. This clumsy attempt at lobbying, together with the Russian rejection in which, in addition to its theological argument, he suspected the influence of the communist state, confirmed for Visser ‘t Hooft that the World Council had to follow a strictly independent path and not be the lackey of either the West or the East. That he possibly underestimated, in this consideration, the dangers of totalitarianism in the East, fitted in with his strong conviction that the true threat was secularism and moral uprooting in East and West. For a long time, Visser ‘t Hooft concentrated on rapprochement between the World Council and the Russian Orthodox Church, seeing here the means for a breakthrough. Because of that focus, he did not have much interest initially in setting up the Conference of European Churches in which the accent was on contact between all European churches. That would change later.

The second rejection came from the Roman Catholic Church. It was not expected that it could be a co-founder, but Visser ‘t Hooft knew that there were individual Roman Catholic clergy who were very interested. A Roman Catholic monitum (an official warning from the church) issued on 5 June 1948, however, stipulated that no Roman Catholic could attend an international meeting organised by the World Council without official permission. The request by the Dominican Yves Congar to Cardinal Jan de Jong from Utrecht to allow 14 Roman Catholic observers to attend the foundation meeting of the World Council of Churches was in vain.

After the foundation of the World Council, the Roman Catholic Church responded with an instruction from the Holy Office: De motione ecumenica. This instruction now recognised the value of the non-Roman Catholic ecumenical movement and viewed it as inspired by the Holy Spirit. But the Vatican’s reaction was reserved for the rest. Visser ‘t Hooft was disappointed: Roman Catholic observers would have been more than welcome at the foundation meeting. Nevertheless, there were some interested Roman Catholics in Amsterdam while the meeting was going on. Without being literally present at the consultations, they remained at some distance from

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70 Visser ‘t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 207.
71 See 7.7.
the sessions in a hotel. They were carefully kept up to date by Visser’t Hooft and provided with material.

5.10 The Firm Pragmatist

There was much to do in the world of 1945. Both on the national and the local level, churches needed support to be able to play a role anew in post-war Europe. That was primarily where Visser’t Hooft and his nascent World Council directed themselves immediately after the Second World War. For him, in 1945, it was a major challenge to make the World Council of Churches visible and relevant for post-war society. First, the council had an important contribution to make to the alleviation of need in the world. The most important means here were a closely-knit international network, good ideas on reconciliation, and looking out for each other. Many creative people and American money helped in this. In the years after the war, activities concentrated on reconstruction, work among refugees, and steps towards reconciliation with the German churches. With continually more means at their disposal, financed by primarily American sources, Visser’t Hooft could expand the capacities of the new council. He kept firm hold of the reins in the central leadership and was anything but someone who simply carried out the ideas of others. He gave his staff a great deal of responsibility, demanding from them their own initiative. But he did have a well-defined perspective on the future, and, as general secretary, he organised the nascent World Council according to his own insights. He was gradually transforming the small office into a well-oiled global player, able to speak as a non-governmental organisation on behalf of the member churches in the world of international relations. Justice and peace should, in his view, flourish if the churches were revived and if this was accompanied by the conviction that God would build his kingdom on earth in the deeds of people. For example, in refugee work he combined a strong Christocentric belief with realism and pragmatism. There could be no credible witness concerning the love of Christ for people without deeds. For him, important principles in assistance were that help was done when possible in collaboration with those needing help and that the coordination would occur close to the field.

In the first years after the Second World War, Visser’t Hooft saw reconciliation as a major task, an office actually. He chose the way of personal contacts, improvisation, and the outstretched hand and sensed that a formal mandate on behalf of the churches and consultation so soon after the war could overload the process of reconciliation and could even bring it to a
halt. Germany was a country in crisis, and a rancorous attitude did not fit in with the churches, certainly not with the ecumenical movement. He felt that it was essential that a positive report be released to the world quickly to the effect that there were representative Germans with a sense of guilt, and that church delegates from the Allied countries were willing to forgive them. Help and collaboration had to be organised as quickly as possible, and, to get the best result, a firm and pragmatic approach was necessary.

Visser ‘t Hooft used deliberately sympathetic identification figures to demonstrate that reconciliation in Europe was possible. He pushed the ‘good German’ Martin Niemöller into the foreground and took the group of church leaders around him seriously. Because of this, Visser ‘t Hooft made it possible for the largest German Protestant church (the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) to join the World Council in 1948, while the World Council was given the chance to approach Germany and, where possible, to help in time of need. By being able to accept Germany without rancour as quickly as possible as a reliable European partner and a suitable building block for the unity of a stable Europe, Visser ‘t Hooft acted in the spirit of Adam von Trott zu Solz and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He found dealing with Germans who had collaborated with the Hitler regime problematic to a lesser or greater degree: there was a large grey area between right and wrong. Visser ‘t Hooft had to deal with this carefully. Ernst von Weizsäcker’s trial for war crimes in front of the war tribunal in Nuremberg deeply shocked the ecumenical movement. After all, he was known as a ‘good’ German. Visser ‘t Hooft was inclined to testify in his favour but did not do so. The risk of bringing the World Council into discredit so shortly after the war was too great.

A strong commission for international affairs was indispensable for the World Council, and Visser ‘t Hooft was constantly searching for experts. He did not want too many theologians on the Commission of the Churches for International Affairs (CCIA). The constant publication of ecumenical statements whenever there were international tensions was meaningful only if they had sufficient support in the churches, and they could make an impression on the responsible politicians and diplomats only if there was a consensus among experts who had been hired. The CCIA formed the basis for Visser ‘t Hooft to now develop into a church ‘diplomat’.

Visser ‘t Hooft invested in the training of young men from countries that until shortly before had been at war with each other, by means of study programmes and international encounters. He wanted young men to learn not to shun debate with those who held different views but to be able to serve peace with well-founded arguments and by being informed. For example, he wanted to train young men in a value-driven but not unscientific
‘ecumenism’. Together with Hendrik Kraemer and others, he set up an ecumenical institute that would be established after a few years in the Bossey Castle near Céligny in the Geneva canton.

The foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam was a high point for Visser ’t Hooft, a success that he also could count among his achievements. Without any fuss or opposing candidates, he became the general secretary of the new organisation as a matter of course. This position fit him like a glove. Through his gift for organisation, and the way in which he was able to translate theologically based insights into social questions, he seemed to be the right person to lead the new World Council. He was both well known in the Netherlands and the most well-known Dutch theologian outside the Netherlands. The period of provisionality and formation that began in 1938 ended in the definitive establishment of an ecclesiastical international organisation with worldwide aspirations. While 147 churches were members, the accent still lay strongly on Europe and North America, but Visser ’t Hooft again and again emphasized that all churches were welcome as members. Together with John Oldham, he coined the concept ‘responsible society’ as the core of the task. As general secretary of the World Council, he now had an ironclad position in the ecumenical movement. Many young men who had been active in the YMCA and WSCF in the 1920s and 1930s ended up in leading positions in church and society in this period. Everyone knew Visser ’t Hooft, and Visser ’t Hooft knew a great many of his former members. Personally, he saw the blessing of God in the foundation of the World Council of Churches. Amsterdam gave him the confirmation he needed to get to work. The unity of the church had been tested by schism and war but had now received a fixed form. The new World Council of Churches seemed to have been enthusiastically received by the world, and the provisionality and improvisation now belonged to the past. Step by step, it was now increasingly a matter of professional, institutionalised work. Visser ’t Hooft saw a lot of heavy work before them in 1948 but also a very promising future.

Two large churches, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church were missing at the foundation meeting in Amsterdam. This could not have been a surprise. That they made this public in a condescending way was disappointing, but Visser ’t Hooft saw this primarily as a challenge. He attributed it to ignorance and misunderstanding concerning the questions of what the council was really about and was certainly not planning to leave it at that. He was intent on devising a strategy to have these churches join the new World Council as soon as possible.