Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985
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1 The World Opens Up, 1900-1924

Abstract
This chapter traces Wim Visser ‘t Hooft’s life from his birth at the beginning of the twentieth century in Haarlem in the Netherlands to his move to Geneva as international secretary for the YMCA in 1924. The chapter stresses his patrician and Remonstrant background, pointing out how this background shaped his worldview and taught him to think and act independently and on his own initiative. The chapter also traces important early influences on his thinking and theology, such as the NCSV (Dutch Christian Student Society) and Karl Barth. His work in student relief after the war showcased his networking and problem-solving capabilities. The qualities he developed were decisive for his career in the World Council of Churches.

Keywords: patrician elite background, Haarlem, the Netherlands, remonstrant protestants, grammar school, Dutch Student Christian Movement (NCSV), Jetty Boddaert

1.1 Introduction

Wim Visser ‘t Hooft spent his youth in Haarlem in the first decades of the twentieth century. He grew up in a close family that belonged to the social upper crust of the city. The family were Remonstrants, and his parents were broad-minded for that time and gave their three sons a great deal of freedom. Nevertheless, the adult Visser ‘t Hooft later remembered his youth as having been spent in a very quiet city, a safe ‘bubble’ far from world events. That feeling was probably nurtured by the fact that the trips abroad that the family made in the years before the Great War suddenly became impossible in the summer of 1914: ‘We were stuck inside our borders, but we were also spiritually and intellectually cut off from the rest of the world." Against this

1 Visser ‘t Hooft, Leren leven met de oecumene (1986), 11.
Figure 1  Wim (Visser) 't Hooft, ca. 1916
background, the vacations spent in the youth camps of the Nederlandse Christen Studenten Vereniging (NCSV = Dutch Student Christian Movement, i.e. Dutch branch of the World Student Christian Federation) played a major role for Visser ‘t Hooft. The end of the war in 1918 meant that the world opened up and that Visser ‘t Hooft found himself confronted by new challenges coming at him at great speed. In this chapter we will look at the values that he received and how he personally developed them (1.2). During his time in secondary school, which proceeded without any major incidents, Visser ‘t Hooft spent a great deal of time reading (1.3). His personal development at this time took a surprising turn as he chose theology and enjoyed the life of a student for a few years. What role did his belief in God play, and what task for his life did he derive from it? (1.4) In 1924 he married Jetty, a young woman from The Hague. What did she mean for him in this period? (1.5)

1.2 A Family with Status and Traditions

Willem Visser ‘t Hooft grew up in a patrician milieu. His parents, Hendrik Philip ‘t Hooft and Jacoba Clasina Lieftinck, were educated liberal people with a broad interest in culture. Their self-awareness was accompanied by a certain natural feeling for style and no need to show off their status, not to mention claiming positions that accompanied that status. In actual fact, they were genteel patricians, not nobility but ‘regents’ whose forefathers had filled leadership positions in Dutch society for generations simply as a matter of course. That boys learned to step forward and speak up while growing up went without saying. But it was not very formal in the Visser ‘t Hooft household. The sons Frans, Wim, and Hans were almost always challenging each other and formed a lively threesome. Frans was the oldest; he initially showed an interest in academia and later primarily in business. The youngest son, Hans was the athlete of the three and went on to study medicine. Wim was primarily interested in the world of literature, and already as a child, he read a great deal. But no one suspected during his school years that he would choose to study theology.

Like his father, Wim liked family traditions and developed a feeling for history already at a young age. He was interested in his family background. Countless portraits, objects, and diaries had been preserved in the family from various ancestors and their country residences. He was fascinated by the stories and anecdotes he was told about them.

Later, he loved being able to tell his children and grandchildren the old family stories, in which he liked to make connections with Dutch and world history. After his retirement in 1966, he carefully unravelled the family
history himself.  He found it quite extraordinary that his oldest known ancestor he learned something about, a certain Iman ‘t Hooft, was born in 1584, the year in which William of Orange was murdered. Iman ‘t Hooft was a rope-maker in Sint-Maartensdijk, and his descendants became well-to-do owners in the rope industry in Dordrecht. In 1886, the family business had to close because shipping began to use steel cables at that time. There were men on the Visser side of the family who were active seamen. Visser ‘t Hooft was proud that a number of his ancestors had been involved in the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie).

When Visser ‘t Hooft and his brothers were children, one of the important places for family gatherings was the beautiful house of Bellevue in a park by a pond in Dordrecht, where two unmarried aunts of his father lived. Visser ‘t Hooft would never forget how his aunt Marie, a very energetic individual, could turn the stately Bellevue into such a warm place for the family to meet. For him and his brothers, the summer vacations there formed the high point of the year in their childhood. They went on boat trips and on outings by horse and carriage to the country residences of other rich family members. He was completely at a loss when, after Aunt Marie’s death in

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3  Nederland’s Patriciatoat (1923), Vol. 13, 110-111.
4  The house was located at Singel 272 in Dordrecht. No longer standing, it was close to the railway and was surrounded by verdure and water. Cf. Caspar Visser ‘t Hooft, Een hof tot ons gerief. Zeven buitenplaatsen en hun bewoners (2019).
1913, Bellevue had to be sold and was torn down. To keep the memory of this aunt alive and to keep the Visser name from disappearing from the family, his father, Hendrik Philip ’t Hooft, decided to add it to the family name by Royal Decree. Thus, the name Visser ’t Hooft came into being.5

They were a Remonstrant family, but they had not been for very long. The choice for the Remonstrant Brotherhood was made by Wim’s paternal grandfather, the lawyer Willem Adolph ’t Hooft (1833-1922). His father and Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876), court historian and one of the leaders of the Réveil, champion of Christian education and the founder of the Anti-Revolutionary political movement, were cousins. This grandfather, after whom Wim was named, was the 14th of 15 children and the only one allowed to stay in school. His father saw a minister in him and had him study Hebrew, but he chose to study law in Utrecht. There he attended the lectures by the empiricist philosopher C.W. Opzoomer who influenced him to become a liberal. He thus began to distance himself from the orthodox milieu in which he grew up in Dordrecht. In 1858, he opened a law office in The Hague where he, helped by good family relations in high circles, quickly became successful. In 1862, he became the secretary of the court in 's-Gravendeel and in 1865 he married Jacoba Visser (1840-1901), from a rich family in Dordrecht, with whom he shared a love for music. He left the Reformed Church, probably in the 1880s, because of the conflicts that continued to flare up in that church. He was a Liberal Party member on the Haarlem city council for 15 years and also sat on the Provincial Council of North Holland. He was decorated as a knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion (Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw). His grandson Wim admired him for his practical wisdom and humorous interventions in political debates.

In 1880, Wim’s grandfather ’t Hooft built a large house in Haarlem, Florapark 10.6 This house was an important gathering place for his three children Hans, Sophie Cornelia and Henriëtte Petronella, their spouses and children, and cousins. There was always a large party on 19 December, Grandfather ’t Hooft’s birthday, with a dinner for about thirty guests. His 75th birthday was also celebrated in this way. To mark the occasion, six grandsons, including Wim, dressed up as small chefs. His grandfather loved music and had a pianola with a large repertoire of classics. In addition to his house in Haarlem, ’t Hooft also had a wooden house built high in the dunes at Overveen, called Thalatta, with a beautiful view from the roof.

5 Royal Decree, 3 September 1917. Visser ’t Hooft, Notes on the Ancestors (1976), 21-22.
6 This building was built together with no. 11 and was designed by architect A.J. van Beek. It is still standing.
Wim Visser ’t Hooft had wonderful memories of this place. The family went there in his grandfather’s carriage driven by his driver Christian. On 25 September 1914, Queen Wilhelmina stayed at Thalatta so that she could observe the exercises of the mobilised Dutch army from the roof. Wilhelmina asked: ‘This is, after all, the highest point in the area?’ Wim’s grandfather did not want to contradict her and said: ‘Indeed, Your Majesty, if we do not count the top of the dune over there.’ Wim was allowed to take pictures with his own camera of the troop movements in the dunes. 7 The whole family was proud of this royal visit.

Wim’s mother, Jacoba Clasina Lieftinck, was originally from Bergambacht, and her family owned various properties in that area. She inherited a farm with the land belonging to it. The three brothers enjoyed the visits to this farm. Every year the farmer brought a large round cheese with him when he came to pay his rent. Wim’s maternal grandfather was Franciscus Lieftink (1835-1917), who was born in Odoorn in Drenthe and went to Groningen to study theology in 1853. There he came under the influence

7 Cf. Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 4. A copper commemoration plaque of this event is in the possession of P.A. Visser ’t Hooft-Jenkins, Heiloo.
of the professor in practical theology, W. Muurling, a representative of the Groningen school, who was open to new insights and turned against Calvinistic confessionalism. He was married to his first wife, Sijtske Zijlstra (1843-1866) for only one year before she died. In 1869 he married Cornelia Nicolaine Johanna Smits van der Goes (1837-1883). For some time, he was a preacher in various villages in the northern part of the Netherlands. In 1874, the year in which his daughter Jacoba was born, he joined the Freemasons. During this period, gradually and just like W.A. ’t Hooft, Wim’s paternal grandfather, he turned away more and more from the Reformed Church. In the end, he gave up being a preacher. That happened when he was elected in 1879 to the House of Representatives as the liberal representative for Leeuwarden. He would continue to serve in the House of Representatives until his death in 1917, thus for 38 years. In 1905, he represented the Zutphen district. As a Freemason, Lieftinck very quickly became Grand Speaker of the order among the Grand Orient of the Netherlands. That is how he met Prince Frederick, son of King William I, and Prince Alexander, son of King William III, with whom he became friends. When Prince Alexander died in 1884 at the age of 33, Lieftinck gave the eulogy for him for the Freemasons. He himself moved to Haarlem with his family in 1883, where his wife died that same year. In Haarlem he became the ‘Emperor’ of the rhetorical society ‘Trou moet Blijcken’, at that time actually a gentlemen’s club. As a Member of Parliament, his areas were fishing and education, and he was an outspoken opponent of Christian school education. In 1917, he was the only Member of Parliament to vote against the Private Education Act that settled the school dispute. He was a pacifist and also regularly got into disputes with Roman Catholic representatives. Lieftinck dressed in an old-fashioned way for that time, had a huge nose, a forked beard, and was an easy target of satire. Because of his verbal skills, for instance, he was called ‘the Mouth on Legs’ (de Bek op Pooten). Wim Visser ’t Hooft and his brothers were very much in awe of him but did not see him very often. He was a busy man. It was a particularly impressive experience for the boys when, during the summer in the Haarlemmerhout, they could attend the concert in the open door pavilion of ‘Trou moet Blijcken’ and sit at the centre table with ‘the Emperor’ himself while the citizenry of Haarlem stood listening at a distance.

Wim’s father, Hendrik Philip ’t Hooft (1866-1930), was born in ’s-Gravendeel and was called Hans, which was a tradition in the family for those whose first name was Hendrik. He attended the Stedelijk Gymnasium (Municipal Gymnasium) in Haarlem and studied law in Leiden. He established himself as a lawyer and prosecutor in Haarlem in 1890. He served regularly as a
curator in bankruptcies and divorce cases. He was also a correspondent in Haarlem for the bank association and member of the board of the Nutspaarbank, and, in collaboration with the bank association, he rented out strongboxes. After some time, he assumed other roles as well, such as commissioner of the N.V. Hollandse Voorschotbank, deputy judge in the Haarlem district court, and member of the supervisory board of the

8 *Haarlem’s Dagblad*, classified ads between 1895 and 1920.
bar. In 1892 he took a pleasure cruise from Algiers to Athens, Istanbul, and Smyrna. In 1895 he married Jacoba Lieftinck and they moved into the house called Zonnebloem, Koninginnegeweg 107, in the stately Haarlem district of Wilhelminapark. Hans ’t Hooft was a well-known Haarlemmer and was known to be a cheerful man with a zest for life. His work led to many contacts, which in turn led to various additional jobs to which he devoted himself faithfully. For example, he was treasurer of the Haarlem Bach Society for 25 years and cofounder of the ‘Queen’s Day’ Society. He was also a member of the College of Regents of the St. Elisabeth Hospital, board member of the Remonstrant Church, treasurer of the Haarlem Art Club (Haarlemsche Kunstclub), treasurer of the Tourism Society, and president-curator of the Stedelijk Gymnasium.

Hans ’t Hooft was, just like his own father, quite musical and gifted literarily. He played the cello – music was important at home. Wim took violin lessons as a child and seems to have been a good player, but he did not continue with the lessons. His father regularly wrote occasional verse, such as a comforting poem about Wim’s dog, called Freddie, when it was hit by a truck in 1911. Hans ’t Hooft became ‘Factor’ of the same Haarlem rhetorical society ‘Trou moet Blijcken’ of which Wim’s grandfather Franciscus Lieftinck was ‘Emperor’. In the tradition of this gentlemen’s society, it was a custom for the Factor to present a long, self-composed poem annually, the so-called year-song in which current events near and far were cited. On the occasion of the British military activity against the Boers in the South African War of 1880-1881, Hans ’t Hooft, under the pseudonym ‘Antibull’ wrote a satirical poem about the English called De inval in Transvaal, of De ware grieven der Uitlanders: ’n waarachtig verhaal. (The Invasion of Transvaal, or the True Grievances of the Foreigners: A True Story). He contributed to the local history with a study on the Courthouse in Haarlem. He was also a lover of 19th century literature and published a small book on

10 This property, Koninginnegeweg 107 in Haarlem, still exists and still bears the name ‘Zonnebloem’.
11 Trou moet Blijcken, jaarboek, 1931, 16.
12 J.C. Visser ’t Hooft, ‘De Leeuwenhoek. Een familiegeschiedenis’, 2014, 7 and 9. H.P. ’t Hooft’s year-songs have been transferred to the municipal archives in Haarlem. W.A. Visser ’t Hooft would later introduce the performance of a ‘year-song’ at the Christmas party of the World Council staff. His father wrote these ‘year-songs’ for the years 1906-1921 and 1924.
13 [Visser] ’t Hooft, (under the pseudonym Antibull), De inval in Transvaal, of De ware grieven der Uitlanders: ’n waarachtig verhaal, (1896).
Jan van Walré, a poet famous in Haarlem who lived around 1800.\textsuperscript{14} Hans ’t Hooft was a great admirer of Hildebrand, a pseudonym for the Protestant minister-poet Nicolaas Beets (1814-1903). He also wrote a book on this famous Haarlemmer and worked on having a Beets monument erected.\textsuperscript{15} During the city council elections in 1919, Hans ’t Hooft ran as a candidate for the Vrij-Liberale (Free-Liberal) Party, argued for the limitation of government interference in the lives of its citizens, and said he despised ‘bureaucracy’. The party also promised to back private initiative robustly. He was not elected.

Wim’s mother, Jacoba Clasina Lieftinck (1874-1928), played an important role in the family. She herself did not have an easy youth. As a Member of Parliament, her father was almost always in The Hague. In 1883, the family moved to Haarlem, but her mother died that same year. Her father then married Hermine Marie Elisabeth Holtzman, the daughter of the liberal Member of Parliament Petrus Hendrik Holtzman. Franciscus Lieftinck’s third wife could not cope with Jacoba’s brother Jan Lieftinck, and he was told to leave the house. In 1888 Jacoba’s stepsister Francisca Hermine was born. Jacoba was sent to boarding school in Aachen in 1891, and she married Hendrik Philip ’t Hooft in 1895 when she was 21 years old. In 1897 their first son Franciscus (Frans) was born, in 1900 Willem Adolph (Wim) and in 1905 Hendrik Philip (Hans). Wim saw his mother as the linchpin of the family, an energetic woman who called the shots. He typified the atmosphere at home as a special mixture of discipline and freedom that included a great deal of mutual teasing.\textsuperscript{16} The many contacts meant that teatime in the Zonnebloem house regularly had many visitors, and Jacoba played the role of hostess with verve.

Wim Visser ’t Hooft had a twin brother who died in birth in Haarlem on 20 September 1900. Wim became the ‘sandwich child’ between the older Frans, born in 1897 and the younger Hans, born on 20 September 1905. Hans was a great comfort to his parents because that date was not only Wim’s birthdate but also the day Wim’s twin brother died. Visser ’t Hooft took various aspects of the family bonds he enjoyed in his youth and projected them onto the international ecumenical movement, which he often called ‘family’. He treated young people in a fatherly way and composed limericks and other poems on events that he presented to his co-workers at the end of the year,

\textsuperscript{14} [Visser] ’t Hooft, \textit{De dichter Jan van Walré} (1920). Van Walré was the writer of the booklet \textit{Afrekenmaal} (1819).
\textsuperscript{15} [Visser] ’t Hooft, \textit{De student Beets. Met een inleiding over humor […] uitgegeven ten bate van het Hildebrandgedenkteeken} (1914). The monument, for which the first initiative was taken in 1914, has not had a happy history. The group of statues by J. Bronner in Haarlemmerhout could not be unveiled until 1962 and has been plagued by vandalism time and again.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Notes on the Ancestors} (1976), 30.
just as his father had done in ‘Trou moet Blijcken’ in Haarlem. In his own eyes, he could experience happiness at the centre of a movement just when the crisis was the most intense. Visser ‘t Hooft was able to flourish when exciting things happened. He was often in the forefront at his tennis club, Tidas in Haarlem. When the airplane manufacturer Anton Fokker demonstrated his plane ‘de Spin’ (the Spider) in his hometown of Haarlem on 31 August 1911, Wim Visser ‘t Hooft was present, together with his friend, a neighbour boy of the Fokkers. Together, the boys helped pump up the airplane’s tyres. This was the kind of thing that typified his enterprising character.

1.3 Gymnasium: A Little Philosopher

The summer vacations of his childhood were usually spent in Dordrecht, but in the years preceding the war, the family was also able to take trips abroad. Wim thus made his first trip abroad along the Rhine to the Siebengebirge in 1912. He spent his summer vacation in 1913 in the Jugendheim Bergstrasse in Frankfurt. In 1914 he went hiking with his father first in the Netherlands with the ANWB (Algemene Nederlandse Wielrijdersbond, Royal Dutch Touring Club), but the summer vacation with the family in Sauerland was cut short prematurely by the outbreak of war on 1 August. Wim and his brothers watched the German army mobilising in Düsseldorf. There were no trains from Germany to the Netherlands, so the brothers and their parents had to cross the border on foot.

At this time, Wim became an enthusiastic participant in the youth summer camps organised by the Nederlandse Christen Studenten Vereniging (NCSV), the Dutch chapter of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). His parents had possibly stimulated him after Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Hendrik had visited the NCSV summer camp in the summer of 1913, which resulted in a great deal of publicity for these camps. Students volunteered as camp counsellors not only to have teenage boys enjoy camaraderie, sports, and games in a natural setting but also to share their faith with them. The mood was characterised by social involvement, and there were lots of sports and a great deal of attention paid to personal development. Since trips abroad had become impossible because of the war, from that time on Wim went camping annually with the NCSV somewhere in the Netherlands, usually at De Waskolk near Nunspeet. What he experienced at the NCSV youth summer camps was very different from what he was used to at home. The students who

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volunteered as camp counsellors often had a pietistic bent and challenged the boys to read the Bible themselves, as if it had been written for them personally. The Bible was not seen here as a book of cultural and historical interest that contained contextually determined and dated texts. At the NCSV camps, the Bible was the Word of God with a contemporary message for young people, and the message was presented in a direct, modern way. Faith in Jesus Christ was central here. The counsellors worked hard to appeal to the boys to come to a personal commitment. Individual and communal prayer with concrete questions about life in mind was stimulated. Visser ’t Hooft experienced his faith here as a power to unite, and he never forgot that.

The NCSV led me to faith in Jesus. The message about Him was not passed on by august ministers but by students a few years older than we were, who used the simplest language and often had a very primitive faith. When, at the end of a raucous meal in the main tent of De Waskolk camp, it suddenly became quiet, and a student we knew as an athlete or as a joker tried, by the light of a kerosene lamp, to say what prayer actually meant or why you had to live with the Bible, then we listened like we never listened before.19

19 F. Groeneveld, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, 1980. De Waskolk is a nature area near Nunspeet: ‘De NCSV heeft mij tot het geloof in Jezus gebracht. De boodschap over Hem werd niet door
In 1912 Wim was admitted to the Stedelijk Gymnasium in Haarlem, where, he himself states, he was not a brilliant student. But already at a young age, he read everything he could get his hands on, mature or not, usually from his father’s large library. In comparison to most children, he came to the school very well read and describes himself in his memoirs as a smart aleck who was teased a bit by girlfriends about his philosophising. His family also saw him as a little philosopher in this period. Whatever

plechtige predikers doorgegeven, maar door studenten die ee paar jaar ouder waren dan wij, die de meest eenvoudige taal gebruikten en vaak een oer-primitief geloof hadden. Als het aan het eind van een luidruchtige maaltijd in de grote tent van het Waskolkamp plosteling heel stil werd en een student die wij als sportsman of als moppentraper kenden, bij het licht van een petroleumlamp probeerde te zeggen wat bidden eigenlijk betekende of waarom je met de Bijbel moest leven, dan luisterden we zoals we nog nooit geluisterd hadden.’

20 H. van Run, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, ’Markant: Visser ’t Hooft’, NOS Television, 8 December 1977, Sound and Vision Archives.
he could not find among his father’s books he attempted to buy second hand. He himself states in his memoirs that there was no one line in his reading. He read writers like Heinrich Heine, Oscar Wilde, Romain Rolland, Leo Tolstoy, and especially Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He also tried to read philosophers like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Schleiermacher, but they were too much for him. When the worldly-wise Wim once tried to discuss Schleiermacher with his grandfather Lieftinck, the latter responded scornfully: ‘Soon ripe, soon rotten’. Wim did not pay much heed. With respect to poetry, he was mostly interested in the Tachtigers (the Eighties Movement). He himself wrote poems, and together with a friend he composed a musical comedy called ‘Andromeda’, which was performed during a party in Leeuwarden. In 1917, he sent some of his poems to Willem Kloos, but this was a disappointment: the famous poet responded with nothing more than a standard rejection letter. He had more success in the Rostra Gymnasiorum, the journal of the Dutch gymnasium students, which published three of his poems.\footnote{Visser’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 4. The poems cannot be found; they were possibly published under a pseudonym.}

\subsection*{1.4 A Student in Leiden: Questions and Answers}

In the last phase of his life, probably without being aware of it, his grandfather Lieftinck played an important role in Visser’t Hooft’s life. Wim had a great deal of respect for him, but seldom had the chance to speak to him privately. Lieftinck defended the Freemasons enthusiastically, which he presented as a big-hearted, undogmatic form of religion. But Visser’t Hooft was shocked when he discovered that his grandfather rejected any possibility of a personal encounter with God. The fact that Lieftinck, who had once been a minister himself, had left the office of minister and the church behind him gave Wim a lot of food for thought.

It was not that he had lost all faith in God. But he had come to the conclusion that God was so great and so unknowable that poor human beings had no right to talk about him. Intercessory prayer, asking God to intervene in human affairs, was wrong. All we could do was listen to the voice of our conscience.\footnote{Ibid., 5.}
Lieftinck died in Haarlem in 1917. With his beliefs, he left a spiritual legacy for his grandson Wim that was viewed by the latter as both a challenge and a directive. Curiosity was combined in this phase with the rise of all kinds of personal life issues. During the 1917/1918 school year, he studied Hebrew with the Haarlem rabbi and took confirmation classes with Rev. Dr. A.H. Haentjens (1876-1968). The minister was unable, Visser ’t Hooft felt, to give him real answers, but that did not prevent Wim from being fascinated by the material. Haentjens followed Hegelian philosophy of religion in his understanding of faith and was an original thinker. Wim’s father liked him and once wrote a long occasional poem for him. 23 But this minister, whom some found difficult to understand, was accused of being secretly orthodox. On Easter morning 1905, he summarised the Easter message in the words: ‘The Lord is truly risen!’ 24 This led to a conflict with the board, which accused him of abandoning the modernist standpoint of the Remonstrants and of secretly being orthodox rather than liberal. Haentjens resigned but was called again by the congregation and remained in Haarlem until his retirement in 1939. He attached objective value to baptism as a moment of sanctification by God and held that the kingdom of God also took form in the church. Not everyone in his congregation shared this view. He was a fascinating man with his own views, and he influenced Visser ’t Hooft’s personal development at a crucial time. On an intellectual level, the latter felt truly challenged by Haentjens but did not subscribe to his views. 25

Later on, when, as an old man in 1980, he looked back at this time, he found that he had been on the way to becoming what he called a ‘syncretist’. For Visser ’t Hooft, this was a negatively charged term: it referred to someone who pasted together all kinds of insights from various philosophical and religious traditions without accounting for their mutual contradictions and was no longer able to distinguish between the degrees of truthfulness of the various religions.

[T]he most dangerous part ... was that this could easily lead to quite abstract views of religion in general, instead of connecting me with the Jesus of the New Testament. I randomly read all kinds of religious books,

23 [Visser ’t Hooft, H.P., ’Feestgedicht voor A.H. Haentjens, 29 June 1903, Visser ’t Hooft Family Archives.
including those by pantheists, mystics, and agnostics. Because of that, I was on the way to becoming a syncretist who viewed all varieties of religious experiences to be both true and untrue.26

Visser ’t Hooft described his internal restlessness in the diary that he kept in 1917.27 It was usual in the Remonstrant Brotherhood for catechists to confess their faith in words they chose themselves. Unfortunately, Visser ’t Hooft’s text has been lost. We know only that he was not at all happy later with the text he used at his confirmation. According to how he felt later, he had tried frenetically to combine all kinds of ideas about God and human beings. He attempted, he recalled, to find room for both the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, just as the philosopher Pascal had done. Later on, he felt that he had thus reduced Christ to an idea and denied him the honour he was due in his concrete incarnation as the Son of God, ‘as God entering into human history.’28 But although he thought differently about this during his student years and had his membership transferred to the Dutch Reformed Church in 1923, Visser ’t Hooft could still, after many years, look back gratefully at his contact with the Remonstrant Haentjens. Most of all, he appreciated the fact that the minister had given him food for thought.29 It is a shame that neither the diary nor his self-composed confession can be found, for they could have perhaps shed light on Visser ’t Hooft’s personal development in this period of his life.

When he had to choose in 1918 which subject he would like to study, theology seemed to Wim to be an attractive possibility for going further on his personal quest. He did not have much to do with the church at this

26 F. Groeneveld, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, 1980: ‘[D]e gevaarlijkste kant […] was dat dit makkelijk kon leiden tot nogal abstracte beschouwingen over godsdienst in het algemeen., in plaats van mij te binden aan de Jezus van het Nieuwe Testament. Ik las in het wilde weg allerlei godsdienstige boeken, ook van de hand van pantheïsten, mystici en agnostici. Daardoor was ik op weg een syncretist te worden, die allerlei variëteiten van godsdienstige ervaringen als even waar en onwaar beschouwde.’
27 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 5. I did not have access to this diary.
29 Visser ’t Hooft to A.H. Haentjens, 26 January, 1944. YDS-12, 61: Vooral nu mijn dochter enkele maanden voor haar bevestiging is, komen de herinneringen aan catechisatie en bevestiging in Haarlem bij mij op en denk ik met dankbaarheid aan wat U mij in die jaren gegeven hebt. Ook al vloog de vogel eenigszins ver van huis, zoo blijft dat verband met het verleden toch levend.’ (‘Especially now that my daughter will be confirmed in a few months, the memories of catechism and confirmation in Haarlem are returning to me, and I look back with gratitude on what you gave me in those years. Even though the bird has flown somewhat far from home, that connection with the past is still alive.’)
time and did not at all intend to become a minister. He was primarily interested in finding answers to his own questions and saw theology as ‘a wonderful subject of study’.\(^\text{30}\) He did not feel called in any way. His goal in studying theology was first of all to gain more ‘clarity’ in spiritual matters. His parents had always stimulated him to participate in the Christian youth camps, but his desire to study theology led to surprise and hesitation on their part. One grandfather had left the ministry. What was a gifted young man, who did not want to become a minister, to do with an education in theology in the 1920s? That was not a field that offered many careers. Did Wim understand that this choice could cost him a bright future? His father warned him, but in the end he approved of Wim’s studying theology if he added law. Perhaps the choice for theology would turn out to be nothing more than a passing fancy.

In the summer of 1918, he graduated from the Stedelijk Gymnasium in Haarlem, and, at 17 years of age, he was quite young for that time to go to university. The war was in its last months: the Allies had repelled the German and Austrian troops with the Hundred Days Offensive. The Spanish flu that ravaged the world and did not spare the Netherlands led to the cancellation of the NCSV summer camp. On 20 September 1918, Wim Visser ‘t Hooft turned 18. He followed his father’s wishes and began to study both law and theology, in turns, in the autumn of 1918 at Leiden University. But, although law did not capture his imagination at all right from the start and he continued with it only out of duty, theology began to fascinate him more and more. Much more than he himself had expected, the problem of the church also quickly played a major role in this. During his time at secondary school, he had been influenced by Tolstoy’s objections to the church as institution:\(^\text{31}\) the New Testament condemned violence, while the church had supported violent states throughout the centuries, just as it also had in the war that tore Europe apart. Because of that, churches – to their shame – had essentially become anti-Christian institutions.\(^\text{32}\) Visser ‘t Hooft now began to modify his view.

In Leiden he underwent the usual freshman initiation and hazing so that he could become a member of the Leids Studenten Corps. The address of the student house he moved into was 129 Rapenburg. It was customary for them to give each other nicknames, and Wim’s stayed with him throughout

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\(^{31}\) Tolstoy, The Kingdom of God is Within You (1893).

Visser ‘t Hooft, 1900-1985

his life. Because of his somewhat pointed face, his brothers and parents had called him ‘Muis’ (Mouse) when he was a child. He did not mind. His student friends and his wife Jetty continued to call him that.33 Some friends, like Frederik M. van Asbeck, Herman Rutgers, Nico Stufkens, and Conny Patijn, continued to call him that for the rest of his life.

Initially, Visser ‘t Hooft had difficulty concentrating on his studies at this intense time. On 11 November, the Germans capitulated and the armistice was announced. Together with three friends of the Leids Studenten Corps, he decided ‘at the bar in Leiden’ to go to Brussels to see the entry of the Belgian king, Albert. To gain access to the ceremonies, the boys applied for press cards from local papers in the cities they came from. They travelled to Breda by train and from there they could easily bike to Brussels. They went through an area that the German army had just left, and the Belgian army had not yet arrived. Visser ‘t Hooft’s first report on the entry of the Belgian royal couple into Brussels was published in the foreign news section of the city edition of the *Haarlem’s Dagblad*.

On Friday, amid the indescribable jubilation of the Belgian people, King Albert, the much-loved ruler of the Belgians, made his entrance into the Belgian capital. It was beautiful weather. It was very busy in the vicinity the Parliament buildings. A great many Belgian and Allied troops were there, drawn up for a parade. The guilds had gathered in front of the Parliament buildings with their banners. Many people watched the spectacle and the military activity from their windows and balconies. There were many foreign soldiers and Red Cross nurses. In the meantime, the cars of ministers and other dignitaries rolled in, as well as those of the diplomatic corps. A whole squadron of Belgian planes came flying in in V-formation and circled over the park, the Parliament buildings, and the palace. The public is ecstatic. The people feel they are free again, redeemed from the oppressive times of foreign domination and foreign violence. The people are enjoying their freedom.34

Wim was inspired, and in 1919 he made a trip to northern France and Paris. He was deeply impressed by the trenches near Reims, which looked as though the soldiers had just left the day before. The heavily damaged cathedral in the city formed the background in a landscape full of destruction. He wrote: ‘If you have any spark of militarism left in your mind, you will notice in this place that you have got rid of it.’35 Despite all distractions, Wim obtained his propaedeutic certificate in theology in 1919, with a research paper on Satan for the professor of Semitic Languages, A.J. Wensinck. He also took his first year foundation course in law in 1920, but that was the end of his law studies. He had proved that he could do it, but the subject did not interest him.36

36 He would later often state that he knew nothing at all any more about law.
The student he was now was still fascinated by the NCSV camps, which he had attended since 1915. Wim spent every summer until 1924 camping somewhere in the Netherlands; he graduated quickly from participant to adjutant, then to tent officer and one of the youngest ‘camp commanders’, in charge of a camp of a hundred secondary school boys. There were no boys from the lower classes at these camps, but the elitist atmosphere in which he grew up that was directed so much at individual development was broken open to a certain degree. The boys had to work together, and they had adventures in the world of nature. At these camps, he enjoyed an entirely different atmosphere than what he experienced in Leiden during his classes, at the Leids Studenten Corps, or at home in Haarlem.

Visser ‘t Hooft later looked back on his two years in Leiden as a student as a period of superficial student life. In the evenings, he spent a considerable amount of time at the Minerva society. It was pleasant, but he wanted something more. The great change came in 1920 when he and his friend Herman Hoogendijk decided to spend three months at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Selly Oak in Birmingham. Leiden University had had connections with this institute since 1903 when the New Testament scholar J.R. Harris declined a chair in Leiden but indicated that Leiden theology students were welcome at Woodbrooke. For Wim Visser ‘t Hooft, these were very enriching months spiritually. There was an ecumenical spirit in Woodbrooke, and open discussions on belief were stimulated. The Quakers also included many adherents of the social gospel movement, which laid a great deal of emphasis on putting faith into practice in everyday life. Here Visser ‘t Hooft had the opportunity to hear well-known speakers such as the New Testament scholar H.G. Wood. He later referred to this time at Woodbrooke as an important time of reflection in which he found direction for his life.

Visser ‘t Hooft and Hoogendijk also visited other British cities. In Cambridge they heard the writer George Bernard Shaw and the economist John Maynard Keynes. Shaw was a sensation. In an article in the newsletter of the Leids Studenten Corps, Visser ‘t Hooft wrote of his admiration for the famous writer, who effortlessly captivated everyone in his audience as a speaker, whether they were capitalists or socialists.

The grey-haired teacher of pure reason at Leiden College would dubiously shake his thought-infused head. What will come of the polarised nature of reality if someone in the world is right? And nonetheless: perhaps he has

never yet discovered a kindred spirit as Shaw appeared to be. Only Shaw does it in a more psychological way. That is the unsolvable secret of this popular reasoner, which we can label by the nice term ‘mass psychology’ but cannot explain it.\(^39\)

This was the engagement that he missed in Leiden.

In January 1921, as part of the NCSV delegation, he attended a conference in Glasgow of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), the British-Irish chapter of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and thus a sister organisation of the NCSV. This was his first major international meeting, and it made a deep impression on him. Around two thousand students from 38 countries gathered and were addressed by celebrities like Edward Grey, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs when the First World War broke out. He told the young people that the decline of civilisation could be prevented only by the restoration of the spiritual values of Christianity. Visser ‘t Hooft’s eyes were opened in Glasgow to the opportunities international encounters offered to do something about the problems of the world. Here the relational character of the language of faith became concrete for Visser ‘t Hooft. He heard speakers like William Temple (1881-1944), at that time the Anglican bishop of Manchester, and the Scot Joseph H. Oldham (1874-1969), missionary in India and member of the United Free Church, who spoke about God as the highest reality. It struck him that these people did not speak of God as an idea or an impersonal power, but as the living God who takes the initiative and speaks to people personally. Visser ‘t Hooft would later be closely associated with both Temple and Oldham. In 1938 they were the ones who nominated him to be the general secretary of the World Council of Churches when it was still in the process of formation.

Soon after, it was the Calvinist Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) who started him thinking. It was his friend Nico Stufkens (1892-1964), study secretary of the NCSV, who introduced him to Barth, specifically the second edition of his study of Paul’s epistle to the Romans that was published in 1922.\(^40\) Visser ‘t Hooft was not immediately convinced and found it a difficult book. What appealed to him was that Barth took the struggle with the


\(^{40}\) Barth, K., Der Römerbrief. Neue Bearbeitung (1922).
historical-critical method and the questions of modern philosophy seriously. Barth had read Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky and wrestled with the penetrating questions that they posed. At the same time, Barth continued to respect the Bible as the Word of God, which made Visser ’t Hooft respect him. According to Barth, the voice of God can be heard both on a personal level and on the level of society as a whole and it was possible to proclaim salvation to the world, based on the message of the Bible. Visser ’t Hooft suspected that Barth’s approach contained the heart of the answer he was seeking, a reasonable counterweight to the scepticism of his grandfather Lieftinck. Nevertheless, it was some years before he felt he truly understood Barth’s intentions.41

In 1921, Wim Visser ’t Hooft became president of the NCSV student aid committee that sought funds to give assistance to students, especially food and clothing, in countries which had been hit by the First World War and the Spanish flu. He was very quickly asked to be president of the relief committee of the Nationale Studenten Organisatie (NSO; National Students’ Association), which included not only Protestant Christian student organisations but all Dutch student organisations. Visser ’t Hooft saw his chance and quickly understood that he had been given a complex combination of positions. The NCSV work fell under European Student Relief, the greatest project of the WSCF, which was led by Americans and was supported by the multi-millionaire John D. Rockefeller. Visser ’t Hooft thus wore two different hats and, in addition to his studies, spent considerable time raising funds and in mutual co-ordination of his two roles.

An international discussion on the work of the European Student Relief organisation in Turnov, Czechoslovakia in 1922, with eighty students from 29 countries was organised by Conrad Hoffman (1884-1958), the American secretary of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Hoffman did pastoral work among prisoners of war, refugees, and students in Europe. He asked Visser ’t Hooft to serve as secretary of the conference, which took place under great tension and threatened to fail because of mutual disagreements. But it went well.

Mr. Visser ’t Hooft declared that he could not conceive that anyone who had taken part in the conference during the past few days could fail to understand the conference spirit. For him personally it had been a deep experience, and he knew it was so for many others.42

41 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 16.
42 ‘Minutes of the Turnov Conference. Held under the auspices of the European Student Relief. April 8th-16th 1922’. HDC-PE, NCSV 524-826.
Visser ‘t Hooft was starting to be noticed. His approach and personal style were experienced as energetic and polite. He went to work enthusiastically and managed to raise good sums of money for student aid, begging people and organisations to contribute. The Dutch committee contributed the most, relatively speaking.\textsuperscript{43} The general secretary of the NCSV, Herman Rutgers, took Visser ‘t Hooft with him later that year on a major trip for the student society to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. Galloping inflation made life especially difficult for students in Central Europe in 1922 and 1923. One of the hotels where Rutgers and Visser ‘t Hooft stayed was plundered during their stay. But Visser ‘t Hooft again appeared to be extraordinarily well-suited for this work. He enjoyed the contacts and developed an understanding of the youth in Germany and the countries that had emerged from the former Danube Monarchy. He was annoyed by – in his eyes – the all too easy caricatures and judgmental attitude about the losers of the First World War that he sometimes encountered in other countries. His interest in Germany and Central Europe obviously increased considerably at this time. He opposed prejudices, and his empathic attitude was again noticeable in his responses, an attitude that can be called \textit{deutschfreundlich} (Germanophilic), whereas his critical view with respect to England had already possibly been nurtured by conversations with his father. The latter had, after all, strongly opposed the actions of the English against the Boers in South Africa.

In 1923, during a meeting of the European Student Relief organisation in Parád in Hungary, he was asked to be chairman of the programme committee. Despite a great deal of political tension internationally, such as the French occupation of the Ruhr and increasing anti-Semitism, the mood remained good during the conference. In Visser ‘t Hooft’s eyes, this was due to the Christian faith to which every participant felt accountable. It is very telling that he also became chairman of the Dutch aid committee ‘Duitse Universiteiten’ in 1923, which organised special aid to German universities. In 1924, it was concluded that the worst needs had been alleviated, and the aid committee of the NSO was disbanded. In the following year, European Student Relief became the International Student Service (ISS) and concerned itself with student conferences and study trips. In the second half of the 1930s, however, it also offered help to refugees. In 1950, this organisation shed its Christian identity and became the World University Service.

The headquarters of the NCSV was the beautifully situated Hardenbroek Castle, close to Driebergen-Rijsenburg. When Herman Rutgers, the general secretary, travelled to Peking in 1922 to attend an international meeting of the WSCF, Visser ‘t Hooft was asked to replace him temporarily as acting secretary. He was the host of the castle for four months in the first half of 1922. This was quite something for him. During the week it was dead quiet and he had any amount of time to simply enjoy nature. But at weekends Hardenbroek became the centre of bustling activity. Large groups of students, who could have intense discussions, were present in the building and the gardens. There were special speakers on a regular basis. For example, Visser ‘t Hooft played host to Dr. Georg Michaelis, Chancellor of Germany for a short time in 1917 and now chairman of the German chapter of the WSCF. Michaelis had a pietistic outlook on faith and touched a sensitive chord in Visser ‘t Hooft. At the same time, this encounter led him to understand that, to unite people on the basis of their Christian faith into a movement that could influence the world, more than an intense personal faith was necessary. It was not only Christians but the churches themselves that needed to be organised. They were standing with their backs to the world, and that had to change.

In post-war Europe, Christian youth work was held by many to be important, and American and British leaders especially in the World Alliance of Young Men’s Christian Associations (YMCA, founded in London in 1844 by George Williams) saw new opportunities. The intention was to prevent young men who were now growing up in countries that had suffered from the violence of war or revolution or had disintegrated from falling prey to cynicism. The pleasure with which Visser ‘t Hooft attended the NSCV summer camps, first as participant and later as student and leader, shifted smoothly and seamlessly into this enthusiasm for international conferences. In the summer of 1923, he and his fiancée Jetty were part of the Dutch delegation at a YMCA conference in Pörtschach in Austria to promote the new initiatives of the YMCA. He hoped to get new ideas there that he could apply to the work of the NSCV.44 There he heard John R. Mott (1865-1955) speak, the famous American missionary and leader of the YMCA and the WSCF, whom he had also heard speak in England and had once met in the Netherlands.45 Visser ‘t Hooft was critical of what he saw as the naively

44 Visser ‘t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 14.
45 J.R. Mott held a number of positions in these organisations. From 1895 until 1920 he was general secretary of the WSCF, and president from 1920 to 1928. From 1926 to 1937, he was the president of the YMCA World Alliance.
optimistic approach of Americans who wanted to convert European youth with an emotionally charged call. But in John Mott, who spoke about ‘Boyhood – the Greatest Asset of Any Nation’, he saw a man of deep faith with a broad vision that touched him.46

Herman Rutgers of the NSCV saw special qualities in Visser ’t Hooft and wanted him to set up a Christian publishing company connected with the NCSV, similar to the British SCM Press. What Rutgers did not know was that Conrad Hoffmann, who had chaired the conference in Turnov in 1922, had not forgotten about Visser ’t Hooft and wanted him for a position with the social department of the WSCF that was to be set up.47 Following a management crisis in 1923, which led to the resignation of a number of secretaries, they were seeking young people in this organisation to give leadership to a new structure for European work. Visser ’t Hooft initially saw more in Rutger’s idea of setting up a publishing company. But love had now entered his life in the person of Jetty, and this weighed very heavily in his decision. In a letter to Rutgers he clearly indicated his motives:

The reason why I chose to continue to study theology and did not, as people thought I would, switch to law is simply this: that I believe only in doing work in which I feel that I am doing what God asks me to do. You don’t need to be afraid that I will end up being a civil servant in disguise – I think I need to watch out that I do not go in an entirely different direction. That is, I run the risk of putting the content of my work so far above my social status that I would be a danger to myself socially. Before I became engaged, that didn’t matter, but now that I am engaged and want nothing more than to get married as soon as possible, I have to watch out for that. And if I therefore talk about that aspect in our further collaboration, I ask you then to remember that [this] is happening despite myself. Jetty is prepared to support this work; I will therefore never ask for anything else than that we can live in such a way, financially speaking, that Jetty will never have to suffer. As you will have noticed, Jetty’s strength is not unlimited – and this is the only point that I have questions about. But I want to accept, without restriction, all work that I am able to do and is actually useful in the larger whole of the work that serves God’s kingdom indirectly or directly.48

46 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 15.
47 Visser ’t Hooft to H.C. Rutgers, 28 November 1923, HDC-PE, NCSV 524, 711.
48 Visser ’t Hooft to H.C. Rutgers, no date, December 1923, HDC-PE, NCSV 524, 711: ‘De reden, waarom ik theologie ben blijven studeren en niet zooals de mensen dachten, dat ik zou doen,
Visser ’t Hooft soon encountered a host of difficulties, however. The greatest one here was that the publisher’s association refused to admit the new publishing company to be set up by Visser ’t Hooft as a member because the association was exclusively interested in purely commercial enterprises. It was a difficult time economically, and he also found it hard to raise funds for the NCSV in this period. At times, however, he had a major success, as in June 1924, when he managed to get a pledge for 1000 guilders from the Van Schaardenburg company in Rotterdam: ‘You realise of course that I danced in public on the Maasbrug.’

In the meantime, in 1924 Hoffmann had passed Visser ’t Hooft’s name onto the Canadian Edgar M. Robinson, organiser of the Pörtschach conference and the secretary in Geneva for the youth work of the YMCA International Committee for the United States and Canada. He was the one who asked Visser ’t Hooft in the spring of 1924 to come to Geneva for a few years as the international secretary for the new European youth work of the World Alliance of Young Men’s Christian Associations. Rutgers, who had told Robinson about Visser ’t Hooft, advised against it. Not only was Visser ’t Hooft not available because of the publishing plans, but, at 23, he was too young. But Robinson was not to be put off. He felt that experience working in a position in the Netherlands would make Visser ’t Hooft less suited for international work. With mottos like ‘catch them young, and train them in the type of work they are expected to do’ and ‘youth is an asset’, he invited Visser ’t Hooft to come to Geneva from 25 to 28 April 1924 for some interviews. He accepted his first paid job. During a meeting in

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49 The bridge on the river Maas. Visser ’t Hooft to H.C. Rutgers, 13 June 1924, HDC-PE, NCSV 524, 711.
50 H.C. Rutgers to E.M. Robinson, 5 March 1924, HDC-PE, NCSV 524, 711.
51 E.M. Robinson to H.C. Rutgers, 21 March 1924, HDC-PE, NCSV 524, 711.
1923 in the Netherlands with John R. Mott, then head of the YMCA, Visser 't Hooft's mother said these prophetic words to Mott: 'You're just like a big spider: first you catch him in your web, and now you're going to swallow him.' Mott is said to have answered: ‘But, madam, you underestimate the great gift that God has made to us in your son.’

1.5 The Marriage of Two ‘Children of the Sun’

When Visser ’t Hooft visited Woodbrooke again in the summer of 1922 for a reunion, he met a young woman from The Hague there and fell in love with her immediately. He had probably heard of her before – she was, after all, a cousin of his friend Steven van Randwijk. After their stay in Woodbrooke, he was able to meet her that summer in Oxford and London. Her name was Henriette Philippine Jacoba Boddaert, Jetty for short. She was a beauty. She had not attended university but immediately made an impression on him through her independent spirit. He found her a fascinating woman with a rich spiritual life. In that same summer, shortly after their return to the Netherlands, Wim and Jetty were engaged. After he graduated in 1923 as a theologian and opportunities for paid work came along, they made plans to marry. Jetty was the daughter of Jacob Eduard Boddaert, secretary of the Board of Trustees of Leiden University, and Anna Johanna Boddaert, née Lady de Jonge. Jetty had grown up in a quite formal Hague environment. Her parents did not think it important to send Jetty to university, but that did not bother Visser ’t Hooft at that time – he was in love.

Wim and Jetty were married on 16 September 1924 in The Hague. The church ceremony took place in the Duinoordkerk. The study secretary of the NSCV, Rev. Maarten van Rhijn, a Reformed minister in Groesbeek, led the service. The marriage was at the same time a farewell, for after their honeymoon, the bridal couple moved immediately to Geneva, the home of the new international secretary for the youth work of the YMCA. It was a big
Figure 9  Henriëtte Philippine Jacoba (Jetty) Boddaert, 1899-1968, ca. 1922
Figure 10  Wim and Jetty ‘reading’ after they were engaged. Wim is holding a book called *De moderne staatsidee* of H. Krabbe (1915), but is looking at her.
party. The festivities began already on 26 August with a dinner for 22 family members in the Zonnebloem house on the Koninginneweg in Haarlem, adorned with green and flowers. Those who were present sang a welcome song:

Welcome, Welcome, radiant bride and groom  
In the old Zonnebloem!  
Every heart beats warm for you  
Oh children of the sun\footnote{Translator's note. The Dutch term for 'sun' is Zon'. The translation of 'zonnebloem' is 'sunflower'. The song, in calling the bridal couple 'Zonnekinderen' (children of the sun) is playing on the name of the house.}  
Together you will live your lives,  
Together you will travel far,  
May your path in those far lands  
Be filled with sun beyond compare!

Welcome, welcome, children of the sun,  
In the old Zonnebloem!  
Go with great cheer to Geneva  
Which I call a place of peace!  
But don't forget your friends here  
Who bind you to this land,  
Come back sometime to all these friends  
In this old Fatherland\footnote{Welkomstlied 26 augustus 1924. Feestbundel 26 augustus – 16 september 1924, Visser 't Hooft Family Archives. 'Welkom, welcome, stralend Bruidspaar / In de oude Zonnebloem / Ieder hart klopt warm U tegen / Als 'k U Zonnekindereren noem! Samen gaat g'uw leven leven, / Samen trekt ge verre heen, / Moge in die verre streken / Zonnig zijn uw pad als geen! / Welkom, welkom, Zonnekinderen, / In de oude Zonnebloem! / Trek straks fleurig naar Genève / Dat 'k een oord vol vrede noem! / Maar vergeet niet d'oude banden / Die U binden aan dit land, / Keer soms weer tot alle vrienden / In het oude Vaderland.}

Wim and Jetty could both point to a distant relationship with the legendary Groen van Prinsterer, who was a great-uncle of the father of Wim's grandfather Willem Adolph 't Hooft and of Elisabeth de Jonge-Philipse, Jetty's grandmother. This fact led to jokes and allusions about her fate. Everything was set down in a commemorative book, and the table was wonderfully decorated with the symbol of this hospitable home, Zonnebloem, that had a beautiful effect in between the old blue of the dinner service. There were many warm speeches. First, the bridegroom's brother who spoke on behalf of his father welcomed everyone warmly. Then the father of the bride spoke,
Figure 11  Wedding photo of Wim and Jetty, The Hague 16 September 1924
commenting on the relationship of the bridal couple in great detail. Then Wim’s father spoke as if he were the ghost of Groen van Prinsterer:

The ghost of Mr. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer speaks:
Though unbelief and revolution still celebrate their heyday in the world, It’s time again in the Netherlands that soundness and piety be unfurled. Because those virtues already adorned of yore our old Netherlandic race So I have brought together two scions of Groen van Prinsterer’s race. In Joy and Peace both bride and groom came and there together met They quickly sensed that it was good and thus their course was set. Grandchild of my cousin Philipse, and grandson of my cousin ’t Hooft These young people, one in mind, have pledged each other troth. Like old wine in new bottles, may this young loving couple never cease To be filled with that old spirit – that is my wish at this their wedding feast!57

Two cousins later performed a special sketch in which they came in as the professors Karl Barth and Ernst Troeltsch to congratulate the couple. But they ended up arguing fiercely in half articulate but incomprehensible theological German in an attempt to stump each other. Brother Frans stole the show with a very apt song and dared to mock his brother Wim’s international enthusiasm.

Internationalism on the brain,
Every new flag drives me near insane.
When I go to bed,
The map turns round my head.
England, France and China
Are old friends of mine,
And the people living along the Rhine.
But the only people that are real OK,
That’s the crowd that lives in dear old USA.
My own country makes me weep,
When I’m in Holland I’m asleep.
Sure, I’ve internationalism on the brain.58

57 Nu ongeloof en revolutie nog in de wereld hoogtij viert / Wordt het tijd dat degelijkheid en vroomheid de Nederlanders weder siert / Die deugden sierden reeds van oudsher ons oud en Nederlandsch geslacht / Op Vreugd en Rust daar kwamen beiden de Bruid en Bruigom toen bijeen / En spoedig was de zaak beklonken en liepen zij gelukkig heen / Zij kleinkind van mijn nicht Philipse, hij, kleinzoon van my neef ’t Hooft / De jongelieden, één van denken, zij hebben trouw elkaar beloofd / Moog ’t jonge paar in liefde samen steeds zijn vervuld van d’ouden geest / Als oude wijn in nieuwe vaten, dat is mijn wensch op ’t Huwelijksfeest!
58 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 16.
It was a fun song, but Frans was mistaken. It was not the ideal of internationalism itself that drove Wim but how he could live out the Christian faith with young people from various countries.

In the week that followed there were various dinners in honour of the bridal couple, at, among other places, the Patijn family. There were outings – to Marken on 28 August and on 7 September to his grandfather’s house Thalatta in the dunes near Bloemendaal. Wim and Jetty spent their honeymoon in Lugano and Venice, after which they moved to Geneva in October 1924.

1.6 An Enthusiastic Youth Worker is Formed

This chapter relates how Wim Visser ‘t Hooft, who was born on the threshold of the twentieth century, grew up with his two brothers in Haarlem in an elitist environment. His father and mother were members of the upper class of the population. The family belonged to the Remonstrant Brotherhood, and his parents saw an important element of and guarantee of a civilised life and society in the Christian faith. Visser ‘t Hooft grew up with a good dose of rivalry with his brothers, but when he wanted to start something, there was little that stood in his way.59 He heard all kinds of opinions proclaimed in his immediate circles, but these differences did not lead to serious conflict.

Already at a young age, he could think and work independently. He grew up in times of crises, and when certain paths were blocked, he turned out to be very resourceful.

The young Visser ’t Hooft was curious and eager to learn. He read a great deal and got through secondary school without incident and had a preference for languages, literature, and philosophy. He spoke reasonable French, German, and English at a young age already, albeit with a heavy Dutch accent that he never lost. There were no foreign trips, which the family could easily afford, during the war. That was precisely why he had so much time to attend the NCSV youth camps that he went to every summer. There he learned the values of camaraderie and adventure, which he experienced as an important supplement to his somewhat protected life at home. At these camps he also became acquainted with a personal way of reading the Bible and of believing that appealed to him.

The discrepancy between the way in which faith was dealt with at home and in the Remonstrant Brotherhood and the way in which it was treated at the youth camps raised many questions for Visser ’t Hooft. All in all, it was a formational and stimulating background. He hoped to find answers to his questions by studying theology. His father was astounded by this choice and laid down the condition that he could study theology only if he also studied law at the same time. But although law did not interest him and he gave it up rather quickly, theology became his passion. That was reinforced when he discovered a more committed form of faith during an ecumenical students’ conference in the Quaker centre of Woodbrooke that allowed him to connect both the experiences he had at the NCSV camps and his intellectual interests. The international context of the encounter between young people from various backgrounds played a major role in this. At Woodbrooke, the atmosphere was one of a personal faith combined with attention for the great questions that were being raised in society. In the Swiss Karl Barth he found a theologian with a similar concern. Barth not only asked questions but also gave answers that Visser ’t Hooft valued. This seemed to him to be a theology that, if simplified, could appeal to people in church and society. With his work for the financial support of students in countries that had been affected by the war, Visser ’t Hooft also showed that he did not back down from difficult tasks and could relate easily to people, including those of other languages and cultures. He sought solutions. At the international conferences he attended for student aid work, it appeared that he could deal with disagreements well and could connect and motivate people from very different backgrounds. He appealed candidly in his contacts with people to – precisely as Christians – relativise
national disagreements and truly listen to each other. These qualities led to his being noticed by leaders who saw potential in him as a youth worker. In 1924 he was asked to be the international secretary of the youth work of the YMCA, located in Geneva. That is how Visser ’t Hooft ended up in one of the great international Christian organisations that was connected – via all kinds of personal contacts – with the ecumenical movement that was slowly developing but had not yet taken shape completely.

He immediately felt a strong spiritual affinity with Jetty Boddaert from The Hague, whom he met in 1922 at a reunion at Woodbrooke, because of her independent attitude. This led in a short time to their engagement, and they were married in 1924 and moved to Geneva.