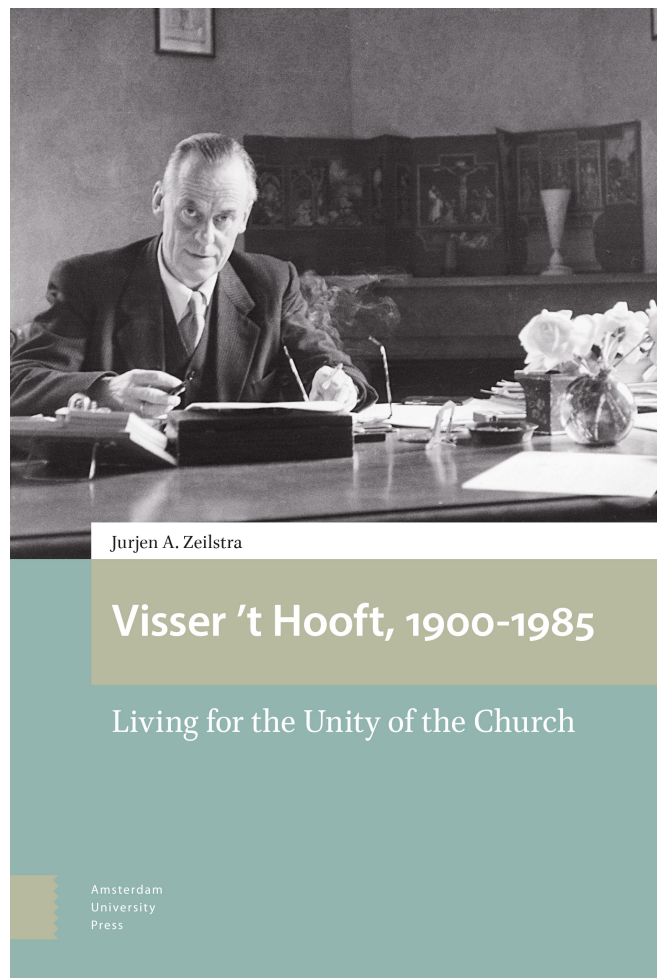


**Review**  
**Jurjen A. Zeilstra:**  
***Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985:***  
***Living for the unity of the Church***  
Henry Jansen (trans.)  
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*Reviewed by John A. Vissers*



Jurjen Zeilstra's comprehensive biography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch church leader Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985) documents in detail the life and contribution of a man often described by journalists as the pope of the ecumenical movement and one of the best-known Dutch theologians outside the Netherlands. He was also known as an acerbic theologian, and a difficult person. Originally produced in Dutch as a doctoral dissertation for the Free University of Amsterdam in 2018—*Visser 't Hooft: Een leven voor de oecumene – Biografie 1900-1985* ('Visser 't Hooft: A life for ecumenism — biography 1900-1985')—Zeilstra's biography is the first critical academic study of Visser 't Hooft's complete life. Zeilstra makes use of broad historical perspectives and detailed biographical research to tell Visser 't Hooft's story in relation to the ecumenical movement from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Who exactly was Willem A. Visser 't Hooft? He was one of the founders of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its first general secretary from 1948 to 1966 (Zeilstra, 19). Zeilstra describes Visser 't Hooft's personal and public life in a clear and straight-forward narrative. Born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Haarlem in the Netherlands, Visser 't Hooft came from a patrician and Remonstrant background which taught him to think and act independently, especially as he studied theology at Leiden. Early in his life, through his involvement in the Dutch Christian Student Society (NCSV), he came to believe that the Christian church could be much more than it was—namely, that the church could be one, united in faith and work, and that a fragmented Christendom in Europe militated against the flourishing of the churches and the whole inhabited world (that is, the oikumene). This ecumenical vision was his life-long passion and vocation (Zeilstra, 31).

Following his graduation, Visser 't Hooft married Henriëtte Philippine Jacoba (Jetty) Boddaert in 1924. Visser 't Hooft was employed for fifteen years in student work, first as the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) international secretary for youth, and later by the WSCF (World Student Christian Federation). He was a brilliant and energetic organizer with an international vision. However, "It was not the ideal of internationalism" that drove him, "but how he could live out the Christian faith with young people from various countries" (Zeilstra, 63).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Visser 't Hooft was deeply influenced by both the theology of the Social Gospel in America and the theology of the Swiss Reformed Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), especially Barth's sharp critique of the German Christian churches under Hitler. Visser 't Hooft's involvement with the YMCA and the WSCF also placed him at the center of the rising ecumenical movement where he had an increasingly influential voice. Zeilstra mentions that "Given his vision and character" the developments in this period made him the

logical choice “for the position of general secretary of the planned World Council of Churches” (Zeilstra, 67).

At the time of his appointment in 1938, Visser ‘t Hooft was only 38 years old. The WCC was not formally constituted until after World War II in 1948, but the young theologian was actively engaged in promoting church unity in wartime. Visser ‘t Hooft tried to keep ecumenical networks alive, especially for the members of the German Church Resistance against the Third Reich; however, this was not an easy task. He was often placed in the difficult position of having to account “for both the church’s silence and its speaking out” within Germany and across Europe (Zeilstra, 148). Visser ‘t Hooft took the position that the WCC provisional committee “could, indeed, not speak *on behalf of* the churches, but it could speak *to* the churches” (Zeilstra, 158). Not everyone agreed, especially Karl Barth, who wanted the churches to speak out forcefully against the German Christians. Nevertheless, Visser ‘t Hooft was relentless in promoting the unity of the church “as a counter to a world ripped assunder by violence” (Zeilstra, 147). Based in his apartment in Geneva, he worked with churches, parachurch agencies, NGOs, and governments, including his own Dutch government in exile. His public statements and articles inspired some and offended others. But through it all, he was seen as a reliable representative of the ecumenical movement and his influence grew (Zeilstra, 147).

The years of the Second World War between 1942-1944 were particularly challenging for Visser ‘t Hooft and the churches, and Zeilstra devotes an entire chapter to them (Zeilstra, 201-250). During this period, Visser ‘t Hooft’s involvement moved beyond ecumenical activism to political involvement. He was instrumental in setting up the Swiss Road for the movement of people and communications back and forth between the civilian and military resistance in the Third Reich and the allied nations of Europe. He tried to advance his own vision of “how the war could bring revival for reconstruction,” which he continued to believe would be rooted in a spiritual revival of united Christian churches across Europe (Zeilstra, 201). This vision was never realized, mostly because many of the churches with which Visser ‘t Hooft worked were themselves deeply implicated in supporting the war and its evils, in many cases having helped create the very conditions for the war itself. It was during this time that he worked as an advisor to the Dutch government in exile in London and experienced disappointment in what he considered to be his own government’s unwillingness to act more decisively.

Immediately after the war, Visser ‘t Hooft poured his energies into reconciliation and reconstruction, primarily through the founding of the World Council of Churches, which had been delayed by the war. In his role as general secretary, he exercised a unique style of diplomatic leadership as he coordinated

the efforts of the churches in responding to the post-war efforts to rebuild a responsible society. He was an activist—and a pragmatist—as he sought to implement the World Council's programs. But he was no longer acting provisionally in the service of a movement; the WCC rapidly became an institution with an international reach (Zeilstra, 291). Nevertheless, Visser 't Hooft continued to be driven by his vision of ecumenism in which "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" (Zeilstra, 251).

The founding assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 was the apex of Visser 't Hooft's career. It was the culmination of what he had worked toward from his earliest days as a student Christian worker, and it solidified the basis of his influence for the next two decades. From 1948 to his retirement in 1966, Visser 't Hooft played a central role in every aspect of the WCC's work. His theological vision, accompanied by his strong-minded style of leadership, shaped the WCC's approach to issues like interreligious dialogue, the Cold War, and international crises in South Africa, Cuba, and Cyprus. On December 8, 1961, he appeared on the cover of the weekly news magazine *Time* as a "World Churchman" leading "The Second Reformation" (Zeilstra, 349-350).

Notwithstanding this international acclaim, Visser 't Hooft's vision for a united church that would signal a revived Christianity in the service of a suffering world never materialized. Instead, after 1960, secularization accelerated, especially in his native Holland. Many places that had been colonized by Christian missionaries became independent. The theological influence of Barth waned, and a younger generation of church leaders began to emphasize liberation and social justice as core elements of the Christian message. By the time he retired in 1966, Visser 't Hooft's influence was in serious decline.

In Chapter 7, Zeilstra describes one area where Visser 't Hooft found success: he persuaded the Eastern Orthodox to become members of the World Council of Churches. Already in his 1933 book, *Le catholicisme non-romain* ('non-roman catholicism'), he had concluded that the inclusion of Eastern Orthodoxy was indispensable to the success of the WCC (Zeilstra, 361). Their entry into the WCC was complicated, and initially delayed by the Cold War. But in 1961, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox churches of Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland, together with 19 other churches primarily from Africa, were accepted into the WCC (Zeilstra, 384-385). This changed the character of the WCC which until then was primarily a European and North American Protestant movement. Once again, this was the realization of Visser 't Hooft's strategic vision for ecumenism that had been adopted at the meeting of the WCC's Central Committee in Toronto, Canada in 1950:

The member churches of the World Council consider the relationship of the other churches to the Holy Catholic Church which the creeds profess as a subject for mutual consideration. Nevertheless, membership does not imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word (Zeilstra, 375-376).

In theory, this meant that any church—Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, or Roman Catholic—could join the WCC without compromising its own ecclesiological convictions concerning the others. The inclusion of the Eastern Orthodox was a significant development which has had a continuing significance to the present day. Russia's war with Ukraine in 2022 created serious divisions between the Orthodox churches in Russia and Ukraine which the WCC has tried to mediate, unsuccessfully.

At the same time as the Orthodox churches were accepted into the WCC, the "Toronto strategy" created the opportunity—from the side of the WCC—for the Roman Catholic Church to join. Visser 't Hooft campaigned extensively for this and he leveraged his friendships with fellow Dutch Roman Catholic leaders Jo Willibrands and Frans Thijssen to make it happen, especially during Vatican II (1962-1965) (Zeilstra, 401). Under the papacy of John XXIII, it looked as if this might be possible, but successive popes beginning with Paul VI through to Benedict XVI led the Roman Catholic Church away from membership in the WCC. Today, Pope Francis has cultivated a more ecumenically friendly spirit on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, but the Church's deeply held conviction that it is the one true church and that others are, at best, separated siblings, together with Rome's organizational, bureaucratic, and institutional inertia, make it highly unlikely that the Roman Catholic Church will ever join. The waning influence of the WCC in the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes it even more unlikely.

The work of the World Council was Visser 't Hooft's life, which made it difficult for him to retire. He did so officially in 1966 but he continued his involvement to varying degrees right up until his death in 1985. It made Visser 't Hooft angry to see theological themes such as the centrality of Jesus Christ and the radical rejection of syncretism, which were of critical importance to him, set aside by the next generation of ecumenical leaders. The General Assemblies of Uppsala (1968), Nairobi (1975), and Vancouver (1983), did not go as he wished. Some began to see him as a bitter old man, in declining health, suffering from the loneliness caused by his wife Jetty's death.

Zeilstra's account of Visser 't Hooft's life and work is compelling. Its 597 pages contains more details about Visser 't Hooft's public life than might interest the average reader, and less about his personal life than one might expect. It is an academic study, to be sure, in the realm of ecclesiastical history and theology, but

it is accessible in this translation to the English reader, and it tells the story of an important Netherlandic leader whose life and work had global significance. It builds on existing full-length biographies, including Visser 't Hooft's autobiography *W.A. Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985* (2000), Jan Schubert's *Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985): Oikumene und Europa* ('Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985): Ecumenism and Europe') (2017), and Michael Kinnamon's recent theological study, *Unity as prophetic witness: W.A. Visser 't Hooft and the shaping of ecumenical theology* (2018). The recent studies advance Visser 't Hooft research beyond the earlier commemorative writings and scholarly articles which focus on specific aspects of Visser 't Hooft's life and legacy as an ecumenical leader.

In common with these studies, Zeilstra's book focuses on Visser 't Hooft as the pre-eminent ecumenical leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is written from the perspective of appreciative criticism. It tackles difficult issues carefully, but at many points it begs further questions. For example, did Visser 't Hooft and the emerging WCC networks of the 1930s and 1940s do enough to defend the rights of the Jewish people, or was Visser 't Hooft too concerned with losing the support of the German churches? Was Visser 't Hooft self-aware of the extent to which his authority was grounded in his elite status in Dutch society and his role as a leader in a Eurocentric white male Christian civilization? By the 1960s the center of gravity for the Christian movement shifted south and it seems clear that Visser 't Hooft was never comfortable with post-colonial Christianity. Now, almost forty years after his death, most Christians live in the majority world, outside Europe and America. Visser 't Hooft also resisted, especially later in his life, attempts to accept feminism and its implications for the Christian tradition.

Finally, like most effective leaders Visser 't Hooft knew his own mind, he had confidence in his own opinions, and he was brilliant at making ideas live in the plans and programs he developed with a cohort of like-minded church leaders. As General Secretary he listened, he cultivated collaboration, but he also often imposed his own will on the WCC. In this way, Zeilstra's biography shows how Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft often truly acted as the pope of the ecumenical movement. This was a Dutchman who left his mark on the world church. Visser 't Hooft's legacy will continue to be studied by historians and theologians because his life and work are integral to the ecumenical movement, and the ecumenical movement is inextricably bound up with the international politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **About the reviewer**

John Vissers is professor of historical theology at Knox College, University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada). Until recently he was Principal of Knox College (2017-

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