



Jurjen A. Zeilstra

Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985

Living for the Unity of the Church

Amsterdam
University
Press

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AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Permission for reproduction of the photographs: the Visser 't Hooft family and the World Council Of Churches.

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For Adrienne

Le chrétien sait très bien que demain ça n'ira pas mieux.

Mais il continue à espérer.¹

– *Visser 't Hooft, 'Message paroisse Chêne-Bourg', 1973*

1 'The Christian knows very well that it won't be better tomorrow. But he continues to hope.'

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A major problem in writing a biography of Visser 't Hooft is the inconceivable amount of written sources, which can very quickly leave a researcher feeling overwhelmed. It was absolutely necessary to ask pointed questions that could be properly researched. To formulate such answers, it seemed for me extraordinarily valuable to speak to a number of people who had known Visser 't Hooft well. I am especially grateful to Frans Bouwen, Albert van den Heuvel, the late Ruud van Hoogevest, the late Hebe Kohlbrugge, Anneke Musacchio-Visser 't Hooft, Konrad Raiser, Boudewijn Sjollema and Jet Sjollema-van Sandick, Caspar Visser 't Hooft, Clan Visser 't Hooft, Pat Visser 't Hooft-Jenkins, and Marcus Visser 't Hooft.

For Visser 't Hooft's view of the painter Rembrandt and his work, I consulted the Rembrandt expert, Prof. dr. Ernst van de Wetering. The chapter on the relation between Visser 't Hooft and the World Council of Churches on the one hand and the Russian Orthodox Church on the other was submitted to an expert on the Russian Church, Prof. dr. Wil P. van den Bercken, who gave me valuable advice on various points. I had fascinating conversations with Dr. Karim Schelkens, director of the Cardinal Willebrands Research Centre in Tilburg, on the relationship between Visser 't Hooft and Willebrands.

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Van Leeuwen Rietberg Stichting
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Wichenstichting

I never met Wim Visser 't Hooft myself. But I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to become acquainted with his fascinating life in this way. I share his love for the church as the living body of Christ in the world, infinitely various, changing shape again and again, and yet one.

Jurjen Zeilstra

Hilversum, January 2020

Introduction

The Importance and Limitations of a Biography

1 Subject and Background

Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985) was one of the founders of the World Council of Churches and was the first general secretary of the organisation from 1948 to 1966. The World Council was one of the most important manifestations of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century, which aimed at and still aims at the unity of worldwide Christianity in the modern period. Someone whose active life was so interwoven with such an influential organisation had to have had wider impact – in this case not only on the institution of the World Council of Churches but also on the ecumenical movement in general. This gives us the basic idea behind this historical study, which is completely devoted to the life of Visser 't Hooft, a life that, for the most part, was dedicated to serving the cause of church unity. This is by no means an overstatement: he lived his life for the unity of the church.

This book is a biography, not a history of the World Council nor of the ecumenical movement. Before exploring the problem of an academic biography, we should be clear on the historical framework. With respect to the ecumenical movement, there have been several movements that called themselves ecumenical, but not all of them ended in the World Council of Churches. The movement that this book discusses has been described by prominent practitioners of 'ecumenicity' themselves as 'a positive but at the same time deeply concerned and critical reaction by Christian communities and individual Christians to the project of modernity.' Such a description leaves no or hardly any room for a positive assessment of secularisation.

1 Hoedemaker, Houtepen and Witvliet, *Oecumene als leerproces. Inleiding in de Oecumenica* (1993), 33. Translator's note: in Dutch 'oecumene' is a substantive based on the Greek 'oikumène' indicating both ecumenicity and ecumenical movement. The Dutch subtitle of the present biography is: 'Een leven voor de oecumene'; literally 'A Life for Oikumène'. The original meaning of the Greek New Testament word is more neutral and refers to the inhabited world, or civilisation.

The question should also be raised as to whether modernity can be called a project. Is it really a strategically determined response that we are talking about here? A historical study of this nature needs a modified description of the ecumenical movement that refers explicitly to concrete relationships that have developed from the ecumenical idea into a specific organisation with a global variety of Christian ideas and forms of encounter. The definition of the ecumenical movement could then be as follows:

The ecumenical movement is a complex of challenges by and reactions to modernity involving the identity of Christianity in the whole of a developing world society, and that gives occasion for an international network of individuals, organisations, and churches that is capable of a supporting role in shaping institutions.²

The recognition of a worldwide pluriformity while speaking nevertheless of one religion plays an important role.³ When the historian James Kennedy looks at the World Council of Churches in this regard, he speaks of 'a particular kind of religious international' that originated with the globalisation of Protestantism. He sees the World Council of Churches as an 'ecclesiastical international, a formal federation of churches focused, first and foremost, on worldwide Christianity.'⁴ In the context of a joint quest for unity, goals traditionally considered important in Protestantism were again presented as matters that united them: evangelisation, social justice, education, and humanitarian aid. What was needed was to act in union and energetically in the public domain in a way in which the institutional shape was not the only goal but certainly an important aspect. Those who worked on this were convinced that churches had unique, partly neglected, capacities for tackling world problems.

The task of Visser 't Hooft's biographer is to present his life in the context of this global development. The interaction between the microlevel of family contacts and friends and the macrolevel of global church and political events will be cited and analysed. Many around the world saw Visser 't Hooft as a custodian of church unity. He was a man with insight and growing experience, through which he was viewed – right up until he was quite advanced in years – not incorrectly as a wise expert in the area of the

2 This definition builds on an earlier attempt; see Zeilstra, 'Oecumenische beweging', 2005.

3 Koschorke, 'Transcontinental Links, Enlarged Maps, and Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity', 2016.

4 Kennedy, 'Protestant Ecclesiastical Internationals', 2012, quote on page 295.

relations between churches. As early as 1928, Visser 't Hooft saw himself as a bridge-builder with respect to the transatlantic relationships in the world church. He viewed the basic contrast between America and Europe, or between practical Christianity and dogmatic-pietistic ways of belief, as the contrast between – to use the language current around 1970 – ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical.’ As far as he was concerned, neither could do without the other. Any biography of Visser 't Hooft is thus not only a description of an individual but also a description of the response of Christians, Christianity, and the church in the modernity of the twentieth century.⁵

Striving for mutual recognition and unity had to serve the well-being of ‘civil society’ expressly in the broad sense of the term as a society of self-aware citizens able to organise themselves in the interest of specific values. An inspired and well-informed elite, primarily emerging from the international Christian student movement of the nineteenth century, saw this as a divine commission. From the perspective of the participating churches, national and cultural boundaries were fundamentally relativised if people believed in one God, one Jesus Christ, and thus also one world church, often referred to in ecumenical literature as the *Una Sancta*. Even more than in practical collaboration and institutional organisational forms, most pioneers of the ecumenical movement saw surplus value in the deepening of what Kennedy calls ‘a global spiritual fellowship’. Although the intellectual frameworks were initially strongly Protestant in nature, the ecumenical movement, of which the World Council of Churches was the most important exponent, was open to all churches, including the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

The ecumenical movement, as considered in this study, found its most elaborate, internationally oriented form in the World Council of Churches, founded in 1948. Visser 't Hooft was an exponent of this council. He was a religious man who saw himself as being led by a commission from on high. He and many around him felt privileged by their descent, upbringing, education, and intellect. Thus, aside from being a portrait of an individual, this biography is also a group portrait, even though it focuses on only one person.⁶ The members of this group saw themselves as a vanguard, called to turn back the coarsening of society that had occurred as a result of materialism, fascism, and state communism and to help churches rediscover their task in response to that coarsening. One of the major questions here is what factors made it possible for Visser 't Hooft to mobilise so many people and

5 Cf. Peltonen, ‘What is Micro in Microhistory?’ 2013.

6 Cf. Levi, ‘The Uses of Biography’, 2013, 89–112.

churches in the ecumenical movement in the midst of the secularisation of the twentieth century.

It is not my task as his biographer to describe the history of the ecumenical movement, but we will have to look at that regularly if we are to understand the life of the individual we are writing about here. This study has a descriptive, arranging, and clarifying objective in which Visser 't Hooft's life is central, but this book nevertheless goes beyond that life. After all, because he was such an iconic figure for the ecumenical movement, the story of his life gives access to the history of this movement.⁷ I am well aware that there are many participant perspectives and that the experience of an iconic figure cannot be taken without further ado as representative for all others involved in this movement. In fact, precisely in the years after Visser 't Hooft retired in 1966, a variety in opinions and views emerged that confronted the whole striving of the ecumenical movement with a new challenge.

This study is not intended to confirm or illustrate what we already know about the World Council of Churches. Nor is it a question of confirming or denying the value of an institution like the World Council. It is not our intention either in this study to give a definition or assessment of the most important building block of the organisation, namely, 'the church'. At most, Visser 't Hooft's view of the church will be illustrated and assessed, whereby it is also of interest to chart the emerging challenges and possibilities in continually changing circumstances in a candid way. The fundamental contingency of continually new moments in which choices had to be made, should not be underestimated. There is the aspect of coincidence. The life of the one whose story is being told could have taken a different course. Visser 't Hooft almost became a teacher in Indonesia, and then later the director of the missionary centre in Oegstgeest and director of Radio Oranje. He was given various opportunities to be a university professor. For me, as a biographer who wants to look candidly at these defining moments, it is often more a disadvantage than an advantage to know the result of a process or the results of years of intense effort.

2 Existing Biographies

There are many other biographies, both longer and shorter, of W.A. Visser 't Hooft. Most of these are not academic studies but so-called 'commemorative

7 De Haan, *Van kroon tot bastaard. Biografie en het individuele perspectief in de geschiedschrijving* (2015), 298-302.

writings'.⁸ They were often written in connection with an anniversary or birthday. There are many interviews, of quite differing character and quality.⁹ There are also various unabashed admiring works, 'hagiographies', usually by friends and (former) colleagues who wanted to pay tribute to Visser 't Hooft at a memorable moment. The extent to which these accounts show a critical-academic tone varies.¹⁰ The media devoted a great deal of attention to his life on the occasion of his death on 4 July 1985. At that time, English, German, French, and Dutch newspapers and magazines and journals especially contained longer and shorter articles about him.¹¹ Most obituarists kept it to a tribute, often illustrated by personal anecdotes. Usually, the writers also wanted to turn their view of Visser 't Hooft into an opportunity to justify the right of the ecumenical movement or the World Council of Churches to exist. A remarkable tribute came from the journalist Gerhard Rein, a youth delegate during the World Council Assembly in New Delhi. He calls Visser 't Hooft 'the most significant unknown person in Germany', who changed him from a naïve young man into a critical citizen and a critical Christian who discovered the world.¹²

A few authors who gave an academic treatment to Visser 't Hooft's life are the theologians H. Berkhof and the church historians A.J. Bronkhorst, A.J. van der Bent, and P.N. Holtrop, and myself.¹³ They usually provide more or less the same data. There are hardly any critical interpretations that make

8 For example, Golterman and Hoekendijk, *Oecumene in 't vizier* (1960). For a theoretical analysis of the genre 'Life Writing': De Haan, 'The Eclipse of Biography in Life Writing', 2013.

9 For example, the interview by Puchinger of Visser 't Hooft in Geneva on 6 April 1966, in: Puchinger, *Is de Gereformeerde wereld veranderd?* (1966), and Murray 'The Head Fisherman', 1961. See also 'The Chief Fisherman' in: *Time*, 8 December 1961, 58-61.

10 For example, Freudenberg and Harms, 'Willem A. Visser 't Hooft "Unter dem einen Ruf"', 1963. Cf. Brennecke, 'Der Generalsekretär Dr. Willem A. Visser 't Hooft', 1963; *Istina* vol. 48 no. 1, *Deux pionniers de l'unité: Yves Congar et Willem Visser 't Hooft* (2003); Thomas et al., 'Tribute to Willem A. Visser 't Hooft', 1966; Fries, 'Ein Friedenspreis für ökumenischen Arbeit', 1966; Hampe, 'Augustin Kardinal Bea und Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, Friedenpreisträger 1966', 1966; Blake, 'Visser 't Hooft: A Tribute', 1966; Van den Heuvel, 'Eerbewijs aan een tachtigjarige', 1980; Newbigin, 'The Legacy of W.A. Visser 't Hooft', 1992; Garrett, 'Remembering Wim', 2000; Sjollemma, 'Portrait of the WCC's first General Secretary', 2015. Non-critical: Von der Kloeden, 'Visser 't Hooft, Willem Adolf', 1997.

11 See file in Visser 't Hooft Family Archives.

12 Rein, 'Willem A. Visser 't Hooft. The Future of Peace', 2018, 99.

13 Berkhof, 'Visser 't Hooft as Ecumenical Theologian', 1986; idem, 'Herdenking van Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft', 1986; Bronkhorst, *Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft vertelt over Evanston* (1954); Van der Bent, 'Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985) Une présentation biographique', 2001; idem, 'Visser 't Hooft, Willem Adolf', 1991; idem, *W.A. Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985* (2000); Holtrop, 'Hooft, Willem Adolph 't', 1994; idem, 'De Kerk, de kerken en de Wereldraad van Kerken', 1987; Zeilstra, 'Visser 't Hooft, Willem Adolph', 2001.

use of broad historical perspectives. A recent exception is the study by Jan Schubert, *Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985). Ökumene und Europa*,¹⁴ which was published in 2017. Schubert opts for the biographical perspective for discussing Visser 't Hooft's ideas about Europe and portrays him as an independently acting professional representative of various international ecumenical organisations. What Schubert does not offer, however, is a fundamental critical analysis of the development of Visser 't Hooft's thinking about Europe, including the great expectations of federalism in interaction with the expected renewal of the church. Because Schubert's research does not go beyond 1966, it cannot claim to be a biography and does not pay enough attention to break points and disappointments.¹⁵ This biography deals with the final phase of Visser 't Hooft's life as well. I do not deal with the question of Europe in this study in any special way, however, because I looked at that precisely in my theological study published in 1995.¹⁶ The survey of Visser 't Hooft's theological thinking by Michael Kinnamon was not available to the present author at the time the Dutch manuscript of the biography was completed. Kinnamon's appraisal is thorough and concentrated on both Visser 't Hooft's memoirs and other sources, but not very critical.¹⁷ As a former World Council staff member and theologian he is unable to distance himself enough in order to take the more objective view of the historian.

A cardinal problem in the existing biographical publications on Visser 't Hooft – aside from the fact that they often copy one another – is that they are often strongly based on the memoirs of the main character himself. There are different autobiographical documents, thus written by Visser 't Hooft himself, whether or not he had the assistance of others, especially his assistant Aat Guittart. While he was still alive, she compiled, in collaboration with him, an overview of the facts of his life.¹⁸ The memoirs occupy a central place among the autobiographical documents. For Visser 't Hooft, an earlier finger exercise in that respect was *Leren leven met de Oecumene*, a book based on twenty radio talks in 1968 for the NCRV (Dutch Christian Broadcasting Corporation).¹⁹ His 1982 book *The Fatherhood of*

14 Schubert, *Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985). Ökumene und Europa* (2017).

15 Zeilstra, review of Schubert, *Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985)*, in: *Church History and Religious Culture* (2018), vol. 98, no. 2, 310-312.

16 Zeilstra, *European Unity in Ecumenical Thinking* (1995).

17 Kinnamon, M., *Unity as Prophetic Witness. W.A. Visser 't Hooft and the Shaping of Ecumenical Theology* (2018).

18 Guittart, 'Biographical documents on Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft', no date. WCC 994.1.31.

19 Visser 't Hooft, *Leren leven met de oecumene* (1968).

God in an Age of Emancipation is strongly autobiographical in nature.²⁰ The minister C. Michael de Vries, who was in charge of broadcasting at the communications department of the World Council since 1963, played a major role in the writing of the memoirs and was also responsible for the authorised Dutch translation of the manuscript. The Dutch version was published in 1971 and the English in 1973.²¹ Translations in German and Swedish were published in 1972, and in French in 1975. Visser 't Hooft did most of the research for the memoirs himself and reports in the foreword that he did not want to write an 'I-book'; rather, his main purpose was to repay part of his debt to the ecumenical movement. His goal here was to give the ecumenical movement, and the World Council of Churches in particular, greater publicity. After his retirement, Visser 't Hooft wanted to show a wide audience that he fundamentally believed that it was more than conferences and resolutions. He found the example he wanted to follow in the memoirs of his friend, Marc Boegner, president of the Eglise Réformée de France, for which he himself wrote the preface.²² As an individual with a great deal of experience, he felt called to offer information and inspiration to those both in and outside the church who were interested in ecumenicity.²³ A number of handwritten notes were found stuck between the files in the archives of the World Council. They were written by Visser 't Hooft himself, usually in his regular handwriting on the beloved square sheets of his scribbling pad, A5 format. These notes give years and details that are missing in the files themselves and make connections between the files. They are what is left of the notes Visser 't Hooft made after his retirement in 1966.

Visser 't Hooft's memoirs are a typical example of those of someone who played an important role in a public position and who wants to justify his actions after having retired. Usually, the various existing studies that claim to be academic too easily use the memoirs as a 'primary source' for a development that Visser 't Hooft himself describes.²⁴ The memoirs were a period document from around 1970, and, while the reviews were primarily

20 Visser 't Hooft, *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation* (1982); Dutch version: *Gods vaderschap in een eeuw van emancipatie* (1983).

21 Page references in this study refer to the original English version of the memoirs: Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs* (1973). In giving quotes in Dutch, use is made of the translation by C. Michael de Vries. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoires. Een leven in de oecumene* (1971).

22 Boegner, *L'exigence oecuménique des Eglises. Souvenirs et perspectives* (1968).

23 Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs*, ix.

24 Cf. Giordano, and Dell'Aqua (eds.), *'Die Welt war meine Gemeinde' Willem A. Visser 't Hooft. A Theologian for Europe between Ecumenism and Federalism* (2014).

positive, it should be kept in mind that almost all were written by Visser 't Hooft's friends.²⁵

Various colleagues with whom he had worked a great deal were critical, even though they did not express that openly.²⁶ In his memoirs, Visser 't Hooft analyses his own actions, while still in contact with many of those people described in the book who were still alive at that time. Albert van den Heuvel and Konrad Raiser related that they were part of a group of young employees who were expected to attend a monthly private tutorial given by Visser 't Hooft in his closed porch at home on the 'history of ecumenicity'. There Visser 't Hooft shared his own research results with them and appreciated it when he was critically interrogated by well-prepared young people. At the same time, Van den Heuvel remembers having once called out: 'But it wasn't like that at all!' Visser 't Hooft reply was simply: 'It should have been that way!' We will look more critically at the memoirs in section 9.4.

It is obvious that information from the autobiographically coloured sources should be used carefully and critically in an academic biography. The questions of how these autobiographical texts fit into Visser 't Hooft's life and what we can deduce from them about his self-image at the time of writing and how they were received by his readers play a major role in the attention we will pay to them in this biography.

3 Method

Some biographies struggle with a scarcity of sources. That is not the case here: Visser 't Hooft wrote more than 50,000 letters.²⁷ Dealing with a plurality of written and printed sources is a problem in itself. Many of the archives of the World Council of Churches were available on microfiche for this work. In addition, there are many other documents apart from the letters – analyses, policy notes, as well as reflections, sermons, and lectures, many of the latter of which ended up being published.²⁸ These publications resulted in five large and ten smaller books and many articles, of which a number have been collected into volumes.²⁹

25 For example, Mertens, 'Portrait de W.A. Visser 't Hooft', and Courvoisier, 'Le temps du rassemblement. Mémoires', 1976.

26 Zeilstra, interviews with A.H. van den Heuvel, 13 April 2013 and B.C. Sjollema, 20 August 2013.

27 Van der Bent, 'Visser 't Hooft, Willem Adolf', 1991.

28 For example, see also Visser 't Hooft, *Heel de kerk voor heel de wereld* (1968).

29 Nelson, *No Man is Alien. Essays on the Unity of Mankind* (1971), 264-330, offers a quite complete overview of the writings of Visser 't Hooft's writings up to and including 1970.

A prior critical question concerns the origin and history of these sources. Who collected them and to what end? The answer may be simple with respect to the sources in the archives of the World Council of Churches: Visser 't Hooft himself as the general secretary, together with his secretaries, was behind the archives.³⁰ This raises the impression that almost everything that seemed to be of any importance was saved. In addition to a comprehensive correspondence archive of the general secretary himself, in which business correspondence is difficult to separate from personal, there are a number of partial archives concerning sub-departments of the World Council and archives of projects. Some have been recently rearranged and opened. Much has been saved, but, despite the many sources, Visser 't Hooft's life is accessible only in fragments, impressions, and partial aspects. The guiding hand of Visser 't Hooft himself played a great role in what was saved, and I will have to be reserved with respect to filling in the gaps. In consulting the sources, I have made choices that are connected to the purpose of this study as well as to special attention for Visser 't Hooft's Dutch contacts.

In addition to the written and printed sources, I also relied on a number of conversations that Visser 't Hooft had with people he knew personally – as father, father-in-law, grandfather, uncle, supervisor, or friend. It is not difficult to get people to talk about Visser 't Hooft, and a number of living impressions often emerge. That is certainly true for his daughter Anneke Musacchio-Visser 't Hooft, his daughter-in-law Patricia Adams Visser 't Hooft-Jenkins, his niece Clan Visser 't Hooft, and grandson Caspar Visser 't Hooft. Albert van den Heuvel, Konrad Raiser, and Boudewijn Sjollema were young colleagues in the 1960s. Ruud van Hoogevest, a staff member for refugee work, and intern Frans Bouwen cooked for the very old and vulnerable Visser 't Hooft at his home and ate with him. Hebe Kohlbrugge met him as a courier during the war. The questions I asked of those I interviewed were primarily concerned with their own interaction with Visser 't Hooft. As stated above, the goal here is not to write a 'commemorative' work, even though the standard anecdote is not out of place in a biography like this one. The basic approach was one in which primarily open questions were asked and the interviewee was given room to tell his or her own specific story. Certain statements were investigated further by comparison. In addition to the sources mentioned and the interviews, audiovisual material is digitally available.³¹

30 See especially the deposited archives of Visser 't Hooft, WCC 994.1 and 994.2.

31 Sound and Vision, Hilversum, digital productions of radio and television recordings since 1939.

This study is intended to be a critical and interpretative biography,³² and we will pursue depth here by giving a great deal of room for a study of the sources for the theological content and religious experience. Religion is treated in this sense as an authentic guiding element, important for a person's direction in life, for what they consider to be a 'good life', and an important motivation for devoting themselves to a certain task.³³ Thus, important encounters that had a great influence on Visser 't Hooft are discussed in their historical context. The works he read and wrote are also discussed in connection with concerns current to the period in question. I will apply them as needed in this work; doing this will provide a certain depth to his development, and the expressiveness of his thoughts and the effectiveness of his deeds can be weighed by the reader him- or herself.³⁴

He himself saw primarily continuity in his life's work, but there is a great difference between the effectiveness of his work in the different periods, a fact that he himself readily recognised for that matter. Objectively demonstrable moments in which, figuratively speaking, a new chapter began are the following: 1924, graduation, marriage, a new job, moving to Geneva; 1939, new job, moving; 1948, foundation of the World Council of Churches; and 1966, retirement. It speaks for itself that those years also largely determine the chapter divisions in this book: respectively chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9. But other gaps in content emerge from the sources. In 1918 Visser 't Hooft embarked on a period of exploration in which he found his style and beliefs; in 1933 he saw his peace idealism fail; in 1938, he assumed a prominent role as general secretary of the World Council of Churches that was forming; in 1942, he had to accept the Allied rejection of the overture sought by the German resistance; in 1968, his wife died and in the same year, during the assembly in Uppsala, he noticed how problematic his message had become. These final breaking moments brought more change in content than we will explore in specific chapters. The second criterion for the chapter division is thus thematic, and chapters 4, 7, and 8 are to be read as special 'excursuses' on three major themes: the 'Swiss road'; ecumenicity and Eastern Orthodoxy; the Roman Catholic contacts. These three chapters overlap temporally with the other chapters we listed above. In chapter 10, finally, we will provide an evaluative picture focused on his love for Rembrandt in which his own reflections on his life and others are juxtaposed.

32 Renders, *De zeven hoofdzonden van de biografie* (2008), 6. Cf. Teunissen, *Voor 't gewone leven ongeschikt* (2017), 10-11.

33 Borgman, 'Biografie, publieke inzet & religie', 2011, 264.

34 Cf. Renders, *De zeven hoofdzonden van de biografie* (2008), 45.

The existence of a comprehensive amount of material that little or no use has been made of for critical research into Visser 't Hooft's life gives legitimacy to a primarily inductive approach, as opposed to a more deductive approach that connects the assessment of a career to some fundamental ideas formulated by the biographer that are not primarily derived from the career in question. This approach implies that cultural-historical, cultural-sociological, and cultural-philosophical aspects are discussed, but this discussion is deliberately restricted.

Against the background of both World Wars and the rise of totalitarian movements and of the Cold War, the sources show how Visser 't Hooft continually found his point of orientation in 'the church', how Visser 't Hooft chose the church and accepted the Bible as the Word of God and Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God's love for people. Though he started in the ecumenical youth movement, in the 1930s he made a principled choice for the institution of church as a central building block for unity. In this study we will explore what form of church unity he sought and how his high expectations of – often quiet – diplomacy were connected with that. As stated, we will not go extensively into these questions of cultural history, cultural sociology, and cultural philosophy, given that they require a separate study. But they do of course figure in the background and are explicitly discussed at the appropriate moments. The cultural-*historical* question is: What role did the background of two World Wars, the Cold War, decolonisation and secularisation play? The cultural-*sociological* question is: How far did his expectation of a consensus between institutions such as institutional churches go? How did he see the relationship between a 'movement' and an 'institution'? And the cultural-*philosophical* question is: What universal norms did he think he could build on? Were those norms derived directly from the Gospel?

A readable biography cannot simply be a detailed, chronological summary of the most important facts about someone's life. No biographer would want to avoid arranging, weighing, interpreting and thus thematising certain elements. What is truly important? What has explanatory value? What are secondary matters or unimportant issues in light of the questions posed? Things that contemporaries found very important do not have to remain as such for a biographer writing several decades later. And the converse is true as well. Things that were then thought to be obvious and perhaps not worth the trouble arguing for then could today be viewed as very remarkable. In this biography, the themes that determine the chapter division have been chosen in accordance with the interpretation I give to Visser 't Hooft's life, to the material at hand, and to the gaps in Visser 't Hooft's life. The themes

are thus derived directly from the sources that cohere with Visser 't Hooft's life and not from the description of that life on which I have superimposed my preconceived ideas.

No one can write a biography without a certain affinity for and fascination by his or her subject. The best place to write a readable, stimulating, and academic text on a human life is between distance and nearness. Visser 't Hooft is fascinating because of his striving to act in a deliberate and well-informed way in the border area between church and society. I never met him personally. That is a disadvantage and calls for modesty because something happens in a personal encounter with someone that cannot be simulated anywhere else. It is also an advantage. There is a natural distance, and the author feels free and not bound by any pious approach. I am working primarily as a historian, but I also have to employ my background as a theologian in a bi-disciplinary approach in order to understand the heart of Visser 't Hooft's life. But this book is written as a critical and historical, academic study. Theology is an important part of this story and is therefore also an object of detailed and critical reflection from the historical perspective.