

W. A. Visser 't Hooft's confrontation with nationalist idolatry among Christians

The Dutch ecumenist believed the church can—and must—challenge hateful ideologies.

by [Michael Kinnamon](#) in the [August 14, 2019](#) issue



W. A. Visser 't Hooft

The most influential, indispensable leader of the ecumenical movement during its formative years is a man largely forgotten today but whose example has never been more relevant. The man is Dutch theologian W. A. Visser 't Hooft (1900–1985), a dominant presence and theological influence from the 1930s through the 1960s.

In his era and in ours, parts of the church have supported oppressive, xenophobic policies, while other parts lament their weakness in opposing them. In his era and in ours, the church has been split by fissures of race, class, and political ideology. In his era and in ours, many Christians have seen their faith as a retreat from the issues and problems of the day, not a basis from which to engage them.

Visser 't Hooft's theological example is worth remembering as we seek to deal with the idolatries and moral hesitations of our own time. A study of Visser 't Hooft is also a reminder that the ecumenical movement began as a response to a political and spiritual crisis in Western culture. In his books of the 1930s and 1940s, including *None Other Gods* and *The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church*, he lamented the loss of human solidarity and the widespread longing for authoritarian leaders who promised protection in the face of insecurity, and he condemned the way "hate is made a national duty." The times, he wrote repeatedly, cry out for a bold, united counterwitness from the church. When the church is true to its calling, it is "a fellowship which transcends all frontiers of nation or race or class" and, thus, challenges head-on, by its very existence, the idolatrous claims of racist and nationalist ideology.

Visser 't Hooft's chief contribution was through the World Council of Churches (WCC), which he served as general secretary from its inception in 1948 until his retirement in 1966. He was closely associated, however, with nearly every major ecumenical initiative of his era, including the YMCA, the World Student Christian Federation, and both Life and Work and Faith and Order. It was Visser 't Hooft, more than any other figure in the movement, who sought to integrate ecumenism's disparate priorities—doctrinal reconciliation, common work for peace and justice, shared service to refugees and others in need, a cooperative approach to mission and evangelism, and renewal of the church through education and the full inclusion of laity, women, and youth.

Like many of his generation, Visser 't Hooft was strongly influenced by the theology of Karl Barth, with its emphasis on the nonnegotiable uniqueness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as testified to in scripture. Unlike most of his European contemporaries, however, Visser 't Hooft was also deeply influenced by the social gospel movement (his doctoral dissertation was "The Background of the Social Gospel in America").

From early in his career, he saw his role as theological bridge builder. "I tried to convince the Germans," he wrote in his *Memoirs*, "that faith in the kingdom of God as God's gift should not lead to a passive attitude with regard to the great issues of social justice and world peace, and I tried to convince adherents of the social gospel that the kingdom of God was something more and different from a world without war and exploitation." He admired the commitment to social transformation he saw in his American colleagues but maintained that the strongest possible motivation for

promoting social justice is the biblical witness to God's incarnation. Too often, in his view, Christians first become committed to some social or political cause and only then turn to the church for theological support. When this happens, the church loses its capacity to speak prophetically, frequently becoming a political tool. Christians must start with the agenda God gives to the church: a vision of the kingdom as set forth in scripture.

As this account suggests, Visser 't Hooft resists such labels as "liberal" and "conservative." He wrote appreciatively of interfaith dialogue and cooperation and denounced the arrogant narrow-mindedness of much Christian mission, while also insisting that Jesus Christ is "the One who is Savior of all [hu]mankind, the Lord of Lords in whom all things hold together." He championed efforts to spread the gospel, while maintaining that evangelism also involves "throwing the light of the gospel on the great human problems of our time."

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His vigorous (and early) opposition to apartheid in South Africa, for example, stemmed from his conviction that the church is called to be a harbinger of the new humanity in which all racial barriers have fallen. Opposing racism is not only a matter of Christians doing what they ought to do but of being what they ought to be. The very identity of the church as an embodied witness to the gospel is at stake, which means that there can be no compromise or foot-dragging. In his 1963 book, *No Other Name*, Visser 't Hooft spoke of those who are so preoccupied with preserving the core revelation that they forget the needs of humanity, and of those who are so focused on human need that they become uprooted from the original message. I suspect he would make the same lament if writing today.

The other decisive influence on Visser 't Hooft was the Confessing Church in Germany, the community of Christians that resisted the so-called German Christian movement, the network of state-supported churches that welcomed the leadership of Hitler and the ideology of Nazism. Of the 38 chapters in his *Memoirs*, 15 are devoted to the German church struggle of the 1930s and the response of the churches during World War II.

It is important to recall that "Guiding Principles" of the German Christian movement, which represented a majority of German Protestants, emphasized that "race, folk and nation [are] orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God." Christian

faith, according to the “Principles,” knows about love toward those who are helpless, “but we also demand that the nation be protected against the unfit and inferior.” What we want is “an evangelical [i.e., Protestant] church that is rooted in our nationhood. We repudiate the spirit of world-citizenship.” The church must be “in the forefront of the crucial battle for the existence of our people.”

One response of the Confessing Church was the famous Barmen Declaration of 1934. The delegates who gathered for a “free synod” in Barmen realized that they were not simply involved in a struggle for control of the church but over what the church believes—a point that Visser ’t Hooft took to heart. The primary threat identified by ecumenical conferences of the 1920s was secularism. But “I came to see,” he wrote in his *Memoirs*, “that secularism was too negative a concept to explain the spiritual situation of the time.” Such mass movements as Nazism and Marxism were nothing less than “false religions,” offering all-inclusive conceptions of life and demanding ultimate devotion to nation, race, party, or leader.

Visser ’t Hooft also knew, however, that the church in his era, divided and compromised by the very powers it was called to expose, was incapable of offering this needed witness. Christians have been content, he wrote, to view the church as separated institutions whose purpose is “the maintenance of religious culture,” as congregations of “unrelated individuals who attend church services for private reasons.” In their weakness, the churches have failed to fill “the great spiritual void of the masses” and, in this way, are partially responsible for the rise of false religions.

“America First” is not just a disturbing slogan; it is a theological heresy.

Many Christians tried to live with a “double loyalty”—to Christ and nation, or to Christ and party. Visser ’t Hooft’s judgment was unambiguous: such waffling mutes the church’s prophetic voice, making it irrelevant. Others, including some early ecumenical leaders, favored a strategic neutrality with regard to political conflict, hoping to promote eventual reconciliation by staying above the fray. Visser ’t Hooft was not among them. The church, he argued, must be willing to enter the historical combat, willing to take sides when convinced that the gospel is at stake (as he was in the struggle against Nazism)—even when doing so risks division. Barth condemned the church for its “habit of coming to the scene too late, of entering the fray only when its opinions no longer involve any risk and can no longer exert any particular influence.” Visser ’t Hooft joined in such condemnation.

All of this helps explain why ecumenism, as Visser 't Hooft conceived of it, is first and foremost a renewal movement, a Spirit-led effort to strengthen the church *to be the church*. Unity, he argued, is essential for renewal because it enables the sharing of gifts; and renewal includes being a community in which old animosities and barriers have given way to a new, shared identity in Christ. The world desperately needs a church that can model such a unity and speak, when occasion requires, with a single voice.

I knew Visser 't Hooft when I served on the staff of the WCC in the early 1980s, often sitting at his table during afternoon tea and taking part in monthly theological salons in his home. He helped me understand how the ecumenical movement can be both a forum where conflicting perspectives meet in dialogue and a renewal effort that boldly declares the gospel's partisanship on behalf of the excluded and oppressed. My tenure as general secretary of the National Council of Churches was deeply influenced by his conviction that a council dare not become a service organization whose aim is its own continuation. When this happens, a council of churches can actually hinder the work of ecumenism—becoming, in his words, “a narcotic rather than a stimulant.”

I find parts of Visser 't Hooft's written legacy dated or theologically problematic. For example, he continued to trust in a model of the church speaking truth to power at a time when the church needed, rather, to stand in solidarity with the powerless. He had too little appreciation for the abiding, perhaps enriching, differences of various parts of the church, or the way other religions may also bring healing and wholeness to human society. But his legacy also provides important challenges for our era.

For one thing, Visser 't Hooft's work is a challenge to those who reduce Christianity to private piety or minimize the role of the church in God's mission. The Christian faith, he asserted throughout his writings, is not about “using” Christ for our own salvation but about allowing ourselves to be used by Christ, through the church, for the salvation of the world. Reading Visser 't Hooft is most certainly a challenge to those who practice what Albert Outler called “ecumenism within the status quo,” including those leaders who confuse ecumenism with occasional cooperation and those churches that use conciliar membership as a smokescreen behind which they remain as unecumenical as ever. Cooperation, he insisted, is by no means the same as genuine unity because churches can cooperate without being changed. And ecumenism, as he understood and practiced it, is always a threat to the churches as they are.

Visser 't Hooft also challenges us to view a passion for evangelism and a commitment to action for justice and peace as complementary responses to the one gospel, grounded in the same authoritative scripture. If Visser 't Hooft were writing today, I am confident he would argue that the real battle is not between liberals and conservatives, but between Christians—whether liberal or conservative, traditional or progressive—and those who have confused Christian faith with the xenophobic, often racist, nationalism of the current president and administration.

“America First” is not just a disturbing political slogan—a code for division of the human community along lines of nation, ethnicity, and race. When embraced by parts of the church, it becomes a theological heresy—denying, among other things, the global connectedness of the body of Christ.

The church in this country has long been in danger of confusing the gospel with the “American way of life.” A study of the German church struggle, however, reminds us that there comes a point at which this tendency hardens into a false religion. When, in the name of Christ, policies are embraced that favor the rich over the poor, advocate exclusion over welcome, and invoke the word *security* to justify fear-based bigotry, then Christians of whatever political party and confessional heritage need to say “No!”—and say it together.

We hear often that more than 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump and that a high percentage continue to support his policies. Visser 't Hooft's confrontation with the German Christian movement is a reminder that we should not confuse the great tradition of evangelical Christianity with those, of whatever label, who use the name of Christ to bolster ideological interests at odds with the gospel, who co-opt Christianity to provide cover for attempts to wall off this country, literally and figuratively, from other parts of the human family.

Of course, it is spiritually risky for the church to speak out against persons who identify themselves as Christians. Such speaking must be accompanied by an awareness of our own need for renewal and repentance. But, Visser 't Hooft repeatedly argued, it is a risk that the church dare not refuse. “We must,” as he put it, “accept the full spiritual tension in which God has placed us.”

There is also a risk of overstating the parallels between Visser 't Hooft's struggle against Nazism and our contemporary situation, but that risk should not keep us from noting the similarities. Under Visser 't Hooft's leadership, the ecumenical

movement was an attempt to call the churches to active faithfulness in the face of idolatry. I believe we need to hear such a call again today.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What is church unity for?"