



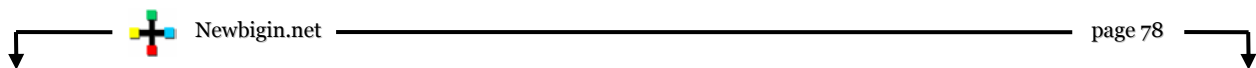
The Legacy of W. A. Visser 't Hooft

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Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft (Wim to all his friends and colleagues) is widely remembered and honored as the first general secretary and (in large measure) the architect of the World Council of Churches. It is less often remembered that his central passion from beginning to end of his active life was for the missionary faithfulness of the church.

Visser 't Hooft was born in 1900 in Harlem in the Netherlands into a distinguished family. His grandfather was a judge, and his father a lawyer. In the "Declaration" made at his ordination he said: "The home in which I was brought up was one in which there were firm moral beliefs but where Christianity was something very undefined." As a schoolboy he read voraciously and was soon a master of Latin, Greek, English, French, and German. The minister who prepared him for confirmation was a Hegelian much given to religious speculation, and (according to his own testimony) Wim "was on the verge of becoming a syncretist." But other influences, three in particular, were to turn him in another direction.

The first was the Dutch Student Christian Movement, which introduced him to Christianity not as a matter of speculation but as a personal call from the Lord Jesus Christ with the challenge to give his life to him. The second was his meeting, as a student, with John R. Mott. As a young YMCA secretary, he recalled how Mott "captivated me by his massive faith and the breadth of his vision." Forty years later Visser 't Hooft was still reminding students of "the common obligation of all churches to finish the unfinished task of the evangelisation of the world." The third event that shaped the whole of the rest of his career was his encounter with Karl Barth in the Epistle to the Romans. His theological training had introduced him to a range of critical, historical, sociological, and philosophical questions about religion but had not helped him to find a clear standpoint, a criterion of truth. Barth did that for him. "This was a man who proclaimed the death of all the little comfortable gods and spoke again of the living God of the Bible.... This was the message for which I had been waiting."¹

¹ *Memoirs* (1973), pp. 15-16.

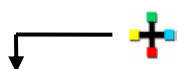
In 1924 Visser 't Hooft completed his theological studies, married Henrietta Boddaert, and moved to Geneva to work for the YMCA in its newly established department for boys' work. From this point onward, Geneva was to be his home as he was called in succession to the leadership of the World's Student Christian Federation and the World Council of Churches. Their family – a daughter and two sons – were to be born and grow up in Geneva, and it was there that Wim lived in very active retirement till his death in 1985.

From Mott, Visser 't Hooft had caught the vision and the passion of a world mission, to bring the Gospel to every nation. From Barth he had learned to distinguish that Gospel as the very word of the living God from the mish-mash of religious and philosophical ideas that formed so much of the "Christianity" of Europe. In his early years in Geneva he came under the influence of J. H. Oldham – the creative mind behind the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 and the International Missionary Council. Oldham had become convinced that the most formidable adversary confronting the Gospel was no longer to be found among the world religions, which had occupied the attention of the Edinburgh Conference, but in the secularism that had overwhelmed the old Christendom and was beginning to take over the rest of the world; the Jerusalem conference of 1928 had this in the center of its attention but gave the suggestion that the world religions might be regarded as in some sense allies in confronting this new adversary.

For Visser 't Hooft, intellectually fired by Barth, this was no way forward. Oldham did not find in the missionary agencies the vision to recognize and deal with this new situation. He sought support in the Life and Work movement, which had flowed from the Stockholm Conference of 1925. Visser 't Hooft became one of Oldham's allies. He never ceased to demonstrate his commitment to the enterprise of "foreign missions," as many of his writings and speeches show, but he also saw that this enterprise had been corrupted by the fact that Western churches were hopelessly compromised by syncretism. They had allowed the Gospel to be confused with European culture, with all kinds of philosophy and with ideologies such as democracy in the Anglo-Saxon world and nationalism in Europe. To use one of his favorite images, the voice of the one Good Shepherd was either drowned out or confused by other voices.

From his position as general secretary of the World's Student Christian Federation, Wim was in touch with the ablest young people in all parts of the world, and he used his position to issue an unrelenting challenge to the coming generation to give their absolute allegiance to Christ and to him alone. His first major work of Christian apologetic was entitled *None Other Gods*. The West, he argued, owes its spiritual substance to Christianity, but there is no longer a "Christian West." There is a syncretistic mix of Christianity and pagan beliefs. The churches are deeply compromised. Now, he wrote, "Everything depends on the existence among Christians of a deep consciousness of the peculiar mission of Christianity. And it is precisely in such times that the Christian Church should re-affirm the sovereignty of its Lord over all life."²

When he first visited the United States he found the same syncretism but with a different form of paganism, in which "democracy was identified with the kingdom of God" because



(as Americans seemed to think) "God is found as individuals find themselves in the great cooperative enterprise of human progress."³ He found the same syncretism in the famous "Laymen's Report on Foreign Missions," which he discussed in a scathing article in *The Student World* under the title "Spineless Mission."

As the clamor of the pagan ideologies became louder, Visser 't Hooft saw the calling of Christian students more clearly. "There are two decisive questions for us Christians to face today: are we witnesses, and thus forcing men to make their own choices for or against the call of God?"

² *None Other Gods*, p. 110. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

And, is our witness to Jesus Christ so clear that no one can mistake it for the voice of one or other of the new deities?"⁴ It must now be clear that "the normal task of a Christian is to share in the evangelistic task of the Church."⁵

The corollary of this passionate concern that the word of the Gospel should be set free from its entanglement with the many words of men was an equally passionate concern for the unity of Christians. How can the world hear the voice of the Good Shepherd if the church consistently ignores it and insists on dividing into separate flocks whose respective identities are defined by nationalist or by some other human and cultural commitment? How can churches which find their identity more in their nationhood than in the Gospel possibly be faithful witnesses to the Gospel?

In a powerful address delivered in the early years of the war to the Basel Mission, entitled "Mission als Oekumenische Tat," he affirmed that the freedom of the Gospel is only truly acknowledged when the church is free to be truly the *Una Sancta*, free from its compromising alliances with national cultures. Its unity must be a tension-filled unity that can include great cultural diversity in an overriding allegiance to the one Lord.⁶ Speaking to a Western-based missionary society, he reminded his hearers that missionaries in non-Western societies will have a true discernment of the dangers of syncretism only if they have first been liberated from the syncretism endemic in the national churches of Europe. Only as the church is one across national frontiers can it witness to the royal freedom of the Gospel. At that moment, Visser 't Hooft could point to a fine illustration of his theme. The "Orphaned Missions" program of the International Missionary Council was enabling Christians to support the missionary work of those with whom they were at war.

But the link between world mission and Christian unity was, for Visser 't Hooft, something that worked in both directions. If authentic missionary witness required unity, it was also true that unity required active missionary commitment. The unique and universal lordship of Christ is obscured when a church is content to live within the frontiers of its own society. Foreign missions have therefore a permanent role in the life of any church that wishes to give faithful witness to the universal lordship of Christ. They are a necessary safeguard against the perennial temptation of the church to allow the Gospel to be domesticated within the life of a nation. And so, to a decidedly skeptical audience at the WSCF Conference in Strasbourg (1960), Visser 't Hooft affirmed his belief that "foreign missions reflect the truly cosmic character of the lordship of Christ. Every church which is able to do so must, therefore, take part in this form of specific witness to the universality of the Gospel."⁷ The mission is indeed the mission of the entire *Una Sancta*, but this does not mean the end of "foreign missions," and neither "world development" or "interchurch aid" can replace them.

This conviction was brought out most sharply at a WSCF meeting in 1949, when Visser 't Hooft was challenged by the young K. H. Ting, who asked: "Why go to faraway places? Is the task of evangelism not the task of the local church?" Visser 't Hooft replied: "Why not?" and he did not hesitate to draw a tough conclusion.

If there is a country where a Christian church has been planted, a relatively new church, and that church says "We want to do the job ourselves" (it is clear that it cannot do so) – what happens? I do not think that any church has the right to close the door to any part of the world. The rest of the Christian world will have to talk with that church and force the door. That is true for all churches in all parts of the world. Missions is a responsibility, a world-wide responsibility for the total Christian evangelisation of the world, which goes beyond inter-church aid.⁸

⁴ *The Student World* 26, no. 4 (1933): 361.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27, no. 4 (1934): 191.

⁶ "Mission als Oekumenische Tat," *Evang. Missions-Magazin*, September 1941, p. 138

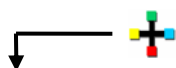
⁷ *The Student World*, 54, nos. 1-2 (1961), p. 34.

⁸ WSCF Missionary Consultation, Rolle, 1949, typescript in WCC archives, pp. 7-8

This very tough stance had to be considered in a different context when Visser 't Hooft, as secretary of the WCC, had to deal with the bitter complaints of the Orthodox churches of the Middle East against the activities of Protestant missions from the Anglo-Saxon world who were recruiting members from the Orthodox fold. And, in another context, he was deeply concerned with the problem of religious liberty as it affected the minority Protestant churches in Roman Catholic countries.

While adamant about the permanent necessity of foreign missions, Visser 't Hooft was well aware of the factors that have made foreign missionaries the object of severe and justified criticism. He saw the root of the trouble in the syncretism of Western Christianity, which led missionaries into being the agents of cultural colonialism rather than simply witnesses of the Gospel. While unrelenting in his attack on the relativism that invaded a syncretistic European Christianity, he was compelled to wrestle with the question of religious liberty, especially during the years of the Second Vatican Council. Evangelism needs a measure of religious freedom and therefore religious pluralism, or at least religious plurality, while the Christian missionary must proclaim the total lordship of Jesus over all life. Its *raison d'être* is to bring all men and women to Christ.⁹ Nevertheless Visser 't Hooft was able to see positive possibilities in pluralism. "Pluralism, rightly understood, creates for the Church a situation in which it is less in danger of falsifying its own nature, and in which it is better able to manifest its true calling. Pluralism provides the Church with a God-given opportunity to live according to its own inherent spiritual law.... The Church is in the right place, the normal position when, according to Pascal, it is supported only by God."¹⁰ True evangelism will be distinguished from proselytism by the fact that when the authentic voice of the Good Shepherd is heard, those who hear it will seek to be one flock.

Visser 't Hooft's intellectual and spiritual formation was obviously in the European context. His book *The Kingship of Christ*, published in 1948, was primarily concerned with issues in the life of the Western and particularly European churches. It was a powerful affirmation of the sovereignty of Christ over the worlds of politics and economics and the whole of public life. The same



year saw the inauguration of the World Council of Churches (in process of formation since 1939), and from that time onward he was necessarily drawn much more deeply into the problems of the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He recognized their need to develop their thought and life in contexts very different from that of Europe. His acute awareness of the syncretism that infected the European churches made him cautious in welcoming moves toward "indigenous" theologies in Asia. He took as a model for the proper relation of the missionary to the indigenous culture his friend Hendrik Kraemer's work in Indonesia. "He [Kraemer] considers that the real missionary is one who is completely bound to the Gospel, but who, precisely for the sake of the Gospel, seeks to enter as fully as possible into the spiritual life of the people to whom he is sent."¹¹ He wanted the churches of Asia and those of the West to enter into a life of mutual correction, a life in which there would be tension between different cultural expressions of the Gospel but in which all would profit by the correction offered by others. All this presupposes, of course, the absolute supremacy of the one Good Shepherd.

He is clear that the Christian message is not to be formulated as an answer to the questions that people (in any society) ask.

The foundation of Christianity is a question asked by God. On the first page of the Bible God calls Adam: Adam, where art thou? And the story of God's

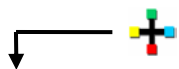
⁹ *Ecumenical Review*, 18 (April 1966), p. 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹¹ Introductory note in *From Mission Field to Independent Church*, by Hendrik Kraemer (1958), p. 8.

dealing with men is, as it were, a constant echo of this first call. In Christ's life we find again and again that he overrules the questions put to him by a new, a more decisive question, namely that of their relationship to God and to himself. The turning points of his dealings with his disciples are questions: "But who do you say that I am?" "Simon, Iovest thou me?" To be a Christian is to take those questions more seriously than any other, to see one's whole life as an attempt to answer the call which is implied.¹²

Visser 't Hooft gave reasons for rejecting the term "indigenization." "Contextualization" is a word coined only in 1972 after the period of his active involvement. He preferred the term "accommodation." How, he asked, and by what criteria are we to test proposals for "accommodation"? He listed four. First, does this new presentation interpret the Gospel in the light of the Bible as a whole, or does it take only those bits of the whole canon that can be fitted easily into the new frame? Does it recognize that the New Testament is radically misunderstood if it is taken apart from the Old? Second, does the new presentation tell the great deeds of God? The Bible is not a book of religion but the history of God's mighty acts. In every culture this history must be told. Third, does the message in its new form make clear that the Gospel is concerned with the personal encounter with the living God and with the formation of a community based on this encounter? If this does not happen, if there is a compromise with impersonal ideas of God, then the church becomes the sugar, not the salt of the world.¹³ Fourth, does the message in its new form fill the local cultural or religious concepts (which have to be used) with biblical substance and so revolutionize them? Is the accommodation, in Kraemer's phrase, "subversive fulfilment" that fills old words and concepts with new biblical meaning?¹⁴ He quotes as supreme examples the ways in which Paul and John, in bringing the Gospel from its Hebrew origins into the world of Greek thought, use Greek words but fill them with a new meaning that is determined by the history of God's doings in and for Israel.



If this "subversive fulfilment" does not take place, the result can only be confusion.

Alert as he always was to the danger of syncretism, Visser 't Hooft had no doubt about the necessity of expressing the Gospel in terms of the local culture. He was horrified to find the East Asia Christian Conference singing the hymns of Moody and Sankey (and D. T. Niles's EACC hymnal was the result of his wrathful explosion), but he was always most aware of the syncretism of Western Christianity and insisted that the Western churches needed the correction that could come from other local theologies. But he insisted that this mutual correction would take place only if the dialogue between the churches was conducted on the basis of the absolute supremacy of the Bible as the norm by which all theologies were to be tested.

Visser 't Hooft saw that this potentially fruitful dialogue between Eastern and Western churches was complicated by the fact that all societies were being increasingly dominated by the science, technology, and political ideas originating in the West. So there is a special burden of responsibility resting on the Western churches. They have not themselves learned to face the problems created by the kind of civilization that they have helped to export to the rest of the world. Christians in Europe are therefore on a missionary frontier.

European culture has become a debate between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism. For a long time it had seemed that scientific rationalism would take the lead. But recently the picture has changed. The atomic threat, the terrible pollution, the lack of meaningful

¹² *None Other Gods*, p. 126.

¹³ "Accommodation, True or False," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 8, no. 3 (January 1967): 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

perspectives which the technocratic civilization has brought, have led to the growth of a new irrationalism.... The lay-preachers of paganism in the period between the two world-wars, D. H. Lawrence and Hermann Hesse, are more widely read than ever before."¹⁵

Visser 't Hooft was going against the stream, and he knew it. He comments sarcastically on Bishop John Robinson's attempt to enlist D. H. Lawrence as an ally of Christianity and asks what Lawrence would have had to write to convince the bishop that he was not. He saw Europe sinking still deeper into the mire of relativism. His book *No Other Name*, published in 1963, was one more powerful statement of the uniqueness, the decisiveness, and the finality of Jesus Christ. In the same year he addressed the Mexico Conference of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism under the title "Mission as the Test of Faith." "Faith is tested in various ways," he said, "but there is no more decisive test than the one concerning the translation of faith into missionary witness. A central question in the great examination is: Are you ready in all circumstances to proclaim that Christ is the Lord?"¹⁶ The test of the real faith of a church is its obedience to the call for missionary obedience among all the nations. He quotes a range of the most influential thinkers of our time to show their total rejection of the Christian faith. The world, he says, is simply doing its job; we have no reason to be surprised. So let the church do its job with a single attention to its one sovereign Lord.

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¹⁵ *International Review of Mission*, 66 (October 1977), p. 355.

¹⁶ *Witness in Six Continents*, Ronald Kenneth Orchard, ed. (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), pp. 21-22.

Visser 't Hooft's papers are in the archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, where there is also a full list of his books and articles, numbering about 1,275 items.

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