

The Prodigal Discipline: (Re)Connecting International Relations to Its Theological Roots

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between theological ideas and the realist school in international relations (IR), arguing that realism is indebted to theological thinking in its origins and application. Drawing on the tradition of Christian realism, it shows how core theological concepts have shaped classical realism and neorealism, though often in secularized forms. This process of secularization, however, has also led to the impoverishment of these IR theories. Using Reinhold Niebuhr's concept of irony as a case in point, the article suggests that alternative forms of secularization remain possible—ones that retain theological depth without requiring confessional commitments. The article illustrates these theoretical insights by historically examining the role of theological ideas in concrete political developments, such as the onset of the Cold War and the early postwar European security situation. It concludes by arguing for renewed theological engagement given the continued and pervasive presence of religion in global politics.

Keywords

theology – Christian realism – Reinhold Niebuhr – irony – Hans Morgenthau – Kenneth Waltz – ecumenical movement – European unification

1 Introduction

Since its inception in the first half of the twentieth century, the discipline of international relations (IR) has shown two modalities regarding the primacy of the role of *ideas* versus the role of *institutions*.¹ Periods in which scholars present arguments that IR relies on and develops mainly through international organizations, state and nonstate actors, and an engaged civil society are usually punctuated by eras in which scholars argue that developments in IR are chiefly explained by accounting for the ideological roots of political systems and their influence on the world stage. In recent decades, the pendulum has swung to the latter position in IR, creating challenges for the field. For instance, how does one connect ideology and religious ideas to theorizing about and working in IR?

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the social sciences were dominated by positivist and behaviorist approaches, as the natural sciences were seen as the model to be followed. Researchers mapped observable behavior and measurable facts in order to discover regularities. This also influenced the field of IR. These approaches clashed with those of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) and Hans Morgenthau (1904–80), which were more qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutic, drawing more on the humanities, such as (political) philosophy and theology. It could be argued that the attempt to copy the approach of the natural sciences led to the secularization of IR, because religious concepts in IR became detached from the broader field and were sometimes suppressed or replaced by new, areligious concepts (Barnett 2011, 105; Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003, 6, 12–4). The impact of behavioralism on the study of political science in the United States increased due to, among other things, the US search for the most reliable knowledge to defeat the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This fostered the development of the behavioral revolution and the application of concepts, theories, and techniques from the social sciences to international politics, thus “scientizing” the discipline (Pettman 2004, 2).

¹ This article is based on our doctoral dissertations (Van den Berg 2022; Polinder 2025) and on Van den Berg and Polinder (2022).

Niebuhr and Morgenthau were faced with the challenge of conforming to the academic climate and at the same time criticizing it. Niebuhr was initially very theological, but felt the pressure to accommodate his style when he wrote *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (Niebuhr 1959). Morgenthau was more resolute in decoupling his thinking from theology in *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau 1985), while Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013) adopted an even more radical position in *Theory of International Politics* (1979). He cut his political philosophical ideas and his inspiration from Niebuhr from his theory of international politics and focused it exclusively on the international system. By conforming to the jargon of the social sciences, he tried to retain realist ideas, such as anarchy and power (Polinder 2025, 139–54).

In the 1990s, Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington drew attention to culture and religion with their respective books *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). These books brought culture and the role of ideas back into the analysis of international politics. Indeed, it can be argued that Huntington was one of the first to herald the so-called *religious turn* in IR (Thomas 2016). In the 1990s, scholars began to pay greater attention to the role of religion in the field of IR.²

After this religious turn came a *theological turn* in IR, as scholars became more interested in the theological background and theological inspiration of IR theories (Thomas 2016). This theological turn began with the publications of Roger Epp in the 1990s regarding the Augustinian roots of Niebuhr, Herbert Butterfield, and Martin Wight (Epp 1990, 1991). A decade later, Charles Jones published the article “Christian Realism and the Foundations of the English School” (2003). He demonstrates that what we now refer to as the *English school* is deeply indebted to Christian realism and, ultimately, to Augustinian political theology. Similarly, in his book entitled *Kant’s International Relations: The Political Theology of Perpetual Peace*, Molloy (2019) argues that some of Kant’s texts, such as *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent* and *Toward Perpetual Peace*, cannot be fully understood without reference to Kant’s wider philosophical and religious beliefs. In other words, the founding theorist of cosmopolitanism and democratic peace theory is indebted to theology (Bain 2017, 2023; Gelot 2013; Paipais 2019; Troy 2014). In fact, scholars of the theological turn were picking up a thread that was already present in the works of Niebuhr and Morgenthau. Conceptually, then, the theological

2 For more details about the books, journals, and centers that emerged over time, see Polinder (2021, 23).

turn in IR is an attempt to emphasize and address the prepolitical values with which all worldviews are charged.³

In recent years, the growing attention within IR to the ideological beliefs underpinning actual political developments has also extended to related fields, including debates on human rights, globalism, and, perhaps most prominently, European integration. Over the last decade or so, scholars and historians of IR have increasingly grouped a range of the field's subdisciplines under the umbrella term *postwar great narratives*, such as world order, secularization (Reynolds 2016), and decolonization (Reynolds 2018; Greenberg 2017).

In particular, Or Rosenboim's and Quinn Slobodian's analyses on the rise of globalism reflect a wider trend of recent years in which transatlantic and global developments have become dominant themes in the scholarship on Western Christian movements from the early postwar era to at least the 1970s (Rosenboim 2017; Slobodian 2018). Thompson (2015), for example, has argued that a key driving force for American expansionism through the newly created United Nations in the wake of World War II was the "internationalism" of the mainline Protestant Christians in America at the time (i.e., ecumenists). Studying the onset and course of the Cold War, others have used this "Christian internationalism" to explain the initial public reception of the nuclear age (Gorry 2013), the advance of conservative evangelicalism (and its eventual overtaking of mainstream Protestant ecumenism) in the United States (Krabbendam 2017), and the promotion of the idea of an international civil society (Engel et al. 2018).

In all these histories, figures who coupled their ecumenical thinking with political action, such as John Foster Dulles (Eisenhower's secretary of state) or the aforementioned Reinhold Niebuhr, are usually mentioned, but their ecumenical involvement is seldom center stage. Therefore, ecumenism has been characterized by James Kennedy and others as "a poorly understood rival" to the dominant and thoroughly studied twentieth-century ideological programs of liberalism, fascism, and communism (Engel et al. 2018, 160). This article responds to that observation.

The actions and discourse of ecumenical protagonists such as Niebuhr might serve as a prism through which we can observe *how* theological and prepolitical convictions translate to the political plane at certain moments in time. In this article, we shall apply this historically to the second half of the 1940s, when Niebuhr and other ecumenists became outspoken in their efforts

3 For a more detailed discussion of the described developments, see Polinder (2021, 18–23, 54–5, 120–6, 130–3).

to secure (Western) Europe against the perceived threat of the Soviet Union. The second half of this article (Sections 5 and 6) must therefore be read as a historiographical illustration of the point we raise in the first half, namely, that IR theory would benefit from a reappraisal of theology.

This article combines IR and European integration to illustrate that diplomatic actors steered crucial political deliberations on the basis of their prepolitical convictions—and that the theological turn can thus be historiographically demonstrated through the involvement of ecumenists (Christian internationalists) in the mid-twentieth-century process of early European integration.

In this article, we focus on two key mainstream IR thinkers: the aforementioned Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. We have selected Morgenthau and Waltz because they represent a mainstream school of thought in IR: realism (classical realism and neorealism, respectively). We have chosen the realist school primarily because classical realism and neorealism are the schools most criticized for their neglect of religion. Other schools of thought are barely a topic of discussion or an object of criticism, and such criticism often mirrors that of classical realism and neorealism.⁴ Another reason for choosing the realist school of thought is that dealing with classical realism and neorealism conveniently illustrates the general development of mainstream IR during the second half of the twentieth century.

2 Realism's Indebtedness to Theology

In the past, it was quite common in the Western world to ground political and societal analyses in theology (O'Donovan and O'Donovan 1999; Rowley and Van der Tol 2024). As a result, many scholarly fields have their origins in theological ideas and concepts. Some of these concepts have secularized over time, as discussed in the introduction. That is also the case with IR, which emerged as a distinct field in the twentieth century.

After World War II, IR increasingly became an academic discipline in its own right. Hans Morgenthau, who is generally regarded as the founder of the realist school in IR, contributed significantly to this development with his seminal book *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau 1985). However, what is often overlooked, both in biographical sketches and in discussions of his work, is that Morgenthau was a Jewish immigrant from Germany. When he arrived

4 For a more extensive discussion of this criticism, including world-system theory and (neo) liberalism, see Polinder (2021, 47n106).

in the United States, he was introduced to Reinhold Niebuhr's works. Niebuhr's influence on Morgenthau's thinking was considerable, as he later admitted, and this is traceable in his academic vocabulary: Niebuhr taught Morgenthau how to connect with the predominantly Christian audience in America in his language and formulations (Polinder 2025, 118–9).

Although Morgenthau seems to have said that not all of Niebuhr's metaphysics was strictly necessary, it is nonetheless clear that much of Niebuhr's theology underpins Morgenthau's political realism (Polinder 2025, 84–8, 118–9). As an illustration, we cite the fifth principle of his political realism, in which Morgenthau opens with the following statement: "There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wants oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also" (Morgenthau 1985, 13). It is clear that Morgenthau needed an outright theological and metaphysical statement to ground his political realism. States cannot equate themselves in their political affairs with God's will, but neither can they afford to stand idly by, expecting God to sort out international tensions for them.

Still, Niebuhr is seen by many scholars as a vague, religious precursor of the "real" thinkers in IR. Theorists such as Morgenthau and neorealist Kenneth Waltz went to great lengths to depict Niebuhr in this manner. In Waltz's case, this meant drawing a sharp distinction between his theological indebtedness and his theory. Waltz builds on the work of Morgenthau, but used notions of science derived from the natural sciences.

One way of understanding what has happened in the theories of Morgenthau and Waltz is that originally theological notions have become secularized. In accordance with Terpstra (2011, 11), *secularization* is defined here as the continuation of theology by other means.⁵ Morgenthau and Waltz did not oppose the theological foundations of their thinking but tried to express them in new terms in the context of relations among nations and the scientific discourse of their time. In any case, it was not a deliberate attempt to eliminate Christian or theological discourse altogether. The secularization has partly resulted in the preservation of certain core assumptions of realism. At the same time, however, it has also led to the loss of valuable (normative) elements.⁶ We therefore propose an alternative form of secularization,

5 Terpstra partly bases this definition on Carl Schmitt's idea that all modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts.

6 A more extensive evaluation of the "success" of Waltz's secularization can be found in Polinder (2025, 148–9).

drawing on how Reinhold Niebuhr employed the concept of irony in place of original sin.

3 From Sin to Tragedy to Anarchy of the System

Niebuhr is known for, among other things, his anthropology. An important part of this is that he draws on the ancient concept of original sin in Christian theology. Niebuhr applied the theological meaning of this concept to social and political issues. There is a debate about Niebuhr's theological interpretation of the concept, because original sin is primarily a spiritual and theological concept about human rebellion against God. Many admirers of Niebuhr found the concept of original sin useful but did not accept all of its theological presuppositions (Sabella 2013, 4, 55). For Niebuhr, original sin was not a matter of unjust structures but part of human nature itself—original sin means that all human beings are tainted by hubris, which distorts their view of the world and their actions (Sabella 2013, 8). Thus, all humans are fallible in thought or action, because they are only human. Translated to the political sphere, the concept of original sin is a guardrail against both arrogance and complacency. More than once, Niebuhr (1965, 24) approvingly quoted from the *Times Literary Supplement*: “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”

While Niebuhr was initially quite optimistic about the nature and extent of moral possibilities of humans in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), he later reread Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, partly at the urging of his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr. Richard had suggested that Reinhold should also apply his radical analysis of the moral possibilities of groups of people to individuals (Sabella 2022, 62, 73–4). As a result, Niebuhr came to adopt a view of humankind that he would later describe as “realistic”: not pessimistic, as if humans were only capable of doing evil, and not too utopian, as if humans, if they are of good will, can achieve a perfectly just society. In short, his vision of humanity took into account the subtlety and all-pervasive effect of original sin. This view allowed Niebuhr to write sharply and diagnostically about the (im)possibilities of human endeavors. His thinking could therefore be readily applied to analyses of social issues, including relations between political bodies, such as nation-states.

Thus, the classical theological notion of original sin is fully present in Niebuhr's work. Morgenthau, in contrast, recognizes Niebuhr's analysis and assessment of human capabilities, but he does not adopt the associated theology, let alone invoke it. In his language, he purposely avoids explicitly

theological terms. For example, where Niebuhr speaks of sin and grace, Morgenthau speaks of “the tragic.” In his book *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr explains why these concepts differ from each other (Niebuhr 1937, x–xi): “Christianity’s view of history is tragic insofar as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy insofar as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself but as finally under the dominion of a good God.”

Still, Morgenthau and Niebuhr are very close in their views on international politics. As Morgenthau put it: “Reinie and I come out about the same on politics” (Frei 2001, 110). In the end, however, they also differ in this respect due to their Christian (Niebuhr) and tragic (Morgenthau) understandings of human nature. Ultimately, Niebuhr is more optimistic than Morgenthau about the residual human capacity for seeking justice. How this makes a difference becomes apparent when we look at their views on the national interest of the state. Niebuhr is critical of realists such as Morgenthau, who see the national interest as a moral end in itself. For Niebuhr, there must be norms structuring political action—such as love—that transcend pure interests (1953, 146):

Modern “realists” know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understood the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love must take the place as the final norm of these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure power and persistence of self-love.

While Morgenthau still spoke about tragedy as a substitute of sin, Waltz dropped references to the theological vocabulary altogether. The debt to Augustine and Niebuhr, or to theology more broadly, became invisible, because Waltz did not want to base his theory on a theological explanation. In his writings, he discusses Niebuhr as well as Benedict de Spinoza. Waltz says that in the first chapter of his (1959) book *Man, the State and War*, “There was a lot of Spinoza in the original, which doesn’t appeal much to students of international relations” (Halliday and Rosenberg 2000, 372). At the same time, he states that Niebuhr (and Morgenthau) had a “tremendous influence” on him, and that he “developed a special fondness for Niebuhr” (Waltz 2008). According to Waltz (1959, 20), “Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian who in the last twenty-five years has written as many words of wisdom on problems of international politics as have any of the academic specialists in that subject, has

criticized utopians, Liberal and Marxist alike, with frequency and telling effect.”

Immediately after these positive words about Niebuhr, Waltz (1959, 23–6) uses four pages to explain the difference between Niebuhr’s religious and Spinoza’s secular explanations of human behavior. He wants to demonstrate how Spinoza’s secular explanation can replace a theological or a religious one. Therefore, he argues that in Spinoza’s philosophy, the religious explanation becomes a proposition in logic and psychology: “That men are defective then becomes an empirical datum requiring no explanation from outside; indeed there can be no explanation from outside, for God has become nature” (Waltz 1959, 23–4).

Even though Waltz acknowledges his indebtedness to Niebuhr’s thinking, he replaces Niebuhr’s theological explanations of original sin and love as a structuring norm with language derived from empirical research and psychology. With this move, Waltz can further develop his theory of international politics. He keeps the idea that human beings are defective, but he does not need the theological concept of original sin to account for that. Later, he will also claim that his theory is empirical and not normative (Polinder 2025, 137). By doing so, Waltz is able, in the words of Craig (2003, 136), to maintain “realism as a more rigorous, descriptive, and potentially theoretical field of inquiry.”⁷ Waltz here confesses to methodological agnosticism or naturalism. He wants a scientific explanation of human nature and, by extension, all social and political relations, without having to draw on religious or theological concepts.

Ultimately, Waltz goes one step further still when he concludes that, for a theory of international politics to have explanatory power, it must be conceived not in terms of human nature and individual people but in terms of states that will strive for survival through a certain structure within the system (Waltz 1979, 112, 120). Thus, Waltz leaves any explanation of international politics that includes the behavior of individuals or domestic politics out of his theory. For him, it is only about states interacting with each other based on their relative power positions. The consequence is that theorizing about the balance of power becomes more important: Due to the lack of an overarching authority, states will tend to subordinate ideals such as justice to the pursuit of power or survival. In addition, because Waltz also strives for a theory that has great explanatory power, by analogy with the natural sciences, numerous factors are left out. Ideals, religion, hope, and emotion are not taken into

7 *Descriptive* should here be understood as over against normative.

account in his theory.⁸ With this move, Waltz clearly leaves behind Christian realist (Niebuhr) and classical realist (Morgenthau) thinking, which would always try to incorporate the domestic factors of states and the role of individual state leaders.

It is very easy to depict Waltz as a secular thinker who dismisses theological thought. However, that would be too simplistic. It is also possible to argue that Waltz tries to preserve as much of the political realist ideas as possible within the scientific framework of his time. To achieve this, he must indeed secularize his thought, but he does it in such a way that the most fundamental building blocks of political realism (e.g., the belief that states fail to achieve supreme values because they are preoccupied with power consolidation) are preserved. He continues theology, but by different means. It is no longer original sin but the system in which states exist that causes states to operate selfishly and pursue their self-interest. The structure of this system is characterized by competing states that cannot be compelled to comply with certain norms: It is an anarchic situation in which each state pursues its own self-interest and aims for survival. Waltz thus transposes Niebuhr's notion of original sin from the level of the individual human being to the behavior of states (Kamminga 2012).

Waltz has been very influential, and every theorist of international politics must engage with his view of the anarchic condition of the system of states and the corresponding behavior of states. As a result of Waltz's achievement, important elements of realism have been preserved in thinking about international politics. But something has also been lost. In Waltz's approach, even more than in Morgenthau's, a normative reference is entirely absent; what remains is an explanatory theory that says little about much. Thus, his approach leads to a theory that has great explanatory power but is empirically poor in the sense that it is barely able to account for specific events in international politics. Furthermore, it does not provide politicians and state leaders with any tools for action.⁹

8 This and the following paragraphs are discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9 of Polinder (2025).

9 For an extensive discussion and evaluation of the descriptive nature of Waltz's neorealism, see Chapter 8 of Polinder (2025).

4 An Alternative Secularizing Move: From Original Sin to Irony

Yet, Waltz's neorealism is not the only way to relate theology to IR. An alternative is to conceptualize original sin as irony, which is precisely what Niebuhr did. Niebuhr stayed loyal to his theological basis while using a concept accessible to a wider audience. He was deeply concerned about whether his use of theological ideas resonated with his audiences. In *Man's Nature and His Communities*, he looks back and writes (Niebuhr 1965, 23–4):

I made a rather unpardonable pedagogical error in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which I hope I have corrected in the present volume. My theological preoccupation prompted me to define the persistence and universality of man's self-regard as "original sin." This was historically and symbolically correct. But my pedagogical error consisted in seeking to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture. . . . But these labors of modern interpretation of traditional religious symbol proved vain. The reaction to my "realism" taught me much about the use of traditional symbols. The remnants of social optimism pictured me as a regressive religious authoritarian, caught in the toils of an ancient legend. But it was even more important that the "realists," including many, if not most, political philosophers who were in substantial agreement with positions taken in my Gifford Lectures, were careful to state that their agreement did not extend to my "theological presuppositions." This present volume, dealing with the same human nature, will understandably use more sober symbols of describing well-known facts.

In addition, in *The Irony of American History*, one of his most influential books, Niebuhr (2008, 17) states:

Practically all schools of modern culture, whatever their differences, are united in their rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin. This doctrine asserts the obvious fact that all men are persistently inclined to regard themselves more highly and are more assiduously concerned with their own interests than any "objective" view of their importance would warrant.

With the concept of *irony*, Niebuhr is able to reach broader audiences who otherwise would not engage with his theological assumptions. He introduces the relationship between irony and international politics in *The Irony of*

American History. Using the concept of irony helps him to integrate the various elements of his thinking: the political realm of human interaction, the spiritual realm of the individual's relationship with God, and the God's-eye view of human events (Sabella 2017, 91).

Irony differs from tragedy. Conflicts are tragic when some compromise of goodness is intentionally accepted in order to achieve some other real good. Niebuhr claims that Christians must prefer an ironic interpretation of situations in which a fully good life is impossible. In an ironic situation, the conflict in which the agent's good must be sacrificed is created in part by the agent's failing, usually a failing unrecognized by them. Niebuhr (2008, xxiv) describes ironic situations as follows (Sabella 2017, 93):

If virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits—in all such cases the situation is ironic.

So, irony means not that one lacks virtues or principles but rather that one fails to recognize the vices that can accompany the pursuit of certain principles. Irony does not intentionally conceal vices, but it admits that striving for certain principles or virtues always comes with a hidden vice. The point is that irony reminds us that our striving may harbor hidden vice. In an ironic situation, we do not know what that hidden vice is, because if we knew, the situation would be tragic. Yet, the fact that we are conscious of it makes us cautious and open to self-critique, and when this hidden vice is revealed, we are not surprised. It also prevents us from talking moralistically, because we are aware of our own complicity in the possibility of evil.

Furthermore, we can resolve ironic situations as soon as we become aware of them. Irony can turn either into repentance or into evil. Confronted with our pretensions, we can acknowledge them and seek forgiveness, or we can persevere and assert ourselves even more vociferously. An attitude of regret involves looking at our own absurd pretensions with humor. Repentance often begins with laughter; evil, with self-righteous indignation. We need to be able to acknowledge our own ridiculousness and overcome our wounded vanity. This helps us to avoid evil (Sabella 2017, 92–3).

A sense of irony can make countries and their leaders more cautious in their foreign affairs and provide them with an attitude of self-critique. Irony makes it possible to laugh at oneself and accept the limits of being human. It is

a good remedy against self-righteousness (Sabella 2017, 97). Instead of seeing themselves as absolutely good and right entities, nations should see themselves as Don Quixote. Irony not only accepts the incongruity of life but also leads to a certain serenity within and above the incongruity (Niebuhr 2008, 63).

The concept of irony reveals the consequences of a theological notion such as original sin in our striving and actions. It demonstrates that there is always an incompleteness, a hidden vice, something potentially evil in our human endeavors. Niebuhr wanted to introduce this notion into the analysis of social and political life. It is a more successful secularization than Waltz's argument about the international system. Waltz must relinquish his theological inspiration, his normative point of departure, the perspective of state leaders, and the factors shaping states' foreign policies.

For the purpose of this article, it is important that we have been able to show how theology has inspired a scholarly field and how it has influenced the development of theorists' thinking. However, realism did not stop at theory development alone: Solutions to current political issues surrounding the future of Europe were defended from this conceptual framework. The next part of this article shows when and how this happened.

5 Christian Realism Illustrated in Practice

In the first part of this article, we discussed how Christian theological concepts provided important building blocks for the theoretical foundations of realism as a new analytical perspective on IR in the wake of World War II. One of the most important processes in which this realism found a place—and how it can also be substantiated historically and empirically—is European integration. Historians and political scientists use this term to denote the development among European nation-states toward intergovernmental restructuring and eventual unification of the economic and political domains.¹⁰

Historians, political scientists, economists, and legal scholars have long focused on the interstate and institutional aspects of the European integration process. The current European Union usually wishes to portray its history and its present as a linear representation of the formal and treaty-driven powers of a market-oriented partnership, embedded in an increasingly democratized

¹⁰ This and subsequent paragraphs are based on the archival sources that I (Van den Berg) discuss in detail in my dissertation; see Van den Berg (2022, 151–87).

structure over time. However, this picture is untenable if we look at the underlying layer of informal networks, which have received more attention in scholarly circles over the last fifteen years (Kaiser 2009; Van Heumen and Roos 2019). These informal networks comprised not only intellectuals, diplomats, trade unionists, and economists but also, to a significant extent, theologians and church leaders. This article focuses on the latter group.

These theologians were active internationally in the so-called ecumenical movement within Western Christianity, as well as in their national parliaments. Studying these networks of ecumenists therefore provides insight into how Christian realism left its mark on the battle of ideas about the reconstitution of European order in the aftermath of World War II. We will use Niebuhr as one of the key actors to survey this process. Niebuhr must thus be regarded as a significant representative of a broader group of ecumenical politicians, who often belonged to social democratic or socialist parties.

Cambridge 1946, where the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) was constituted as the permanent foreign affairs branch of the World Council of Churches (WCC), is where the theological vocabulary discussed in the first half of this article becomes empirically evident in diplomatic deliberation. Roughly sixty church leaders, laypeople, and ecumenical staff convened at Girton College from 4 to 7 August. The conference followed a pattern set in prewar ecumenical gatherings, such as the one in 1937 at Oxford: They catalyzed political thought *because* theological ideas were contested (Van den Berg 2022, Chapter 2).

The Europe of the summer of 1946 is difficult to imagine today: Its cities were still in ruins, there were major food shortages, industrial production had only partially resumed, Germany was divided into four military zones of occupation, and tensions with the Soviet Union were rising rapidly. It is mainly against the background of these last two developments that we must interpret the positions various ecumenists took at the Cambridge conference. After all, the essential international character of the ecumenical movement was in danger of being undermined once again by the descent of an iron curtain on Europe.

What matters for our purpose, and why this meeting is so illuminating for this article's argument, is that Cambridge was not in unison. Three theological positions, each rooted in a distinct anthropology, competed openly over the question how Christians should understand the Soviet Union and the future security of Europe. In these competing positions, we can read the practical stakes of the conceptual argument advanced earlier in this article, namely, that theologically charged ideas shape approaches to IR.

The first position, held by John Foster Dulles, struck a conciliatory chord in the private rooms of the conference, even as his public profile by the summer of 1946 was already hardening into the staunch anti-communism he would later become known for as Eisenhower's secretary of state in the early 1950s (Dulles 1946; Peiponen 2012). In an off-the-record opening address, the wording of which can be reconstructed only from the responses it received, Dulles appears to have suggested that there was no fundamental incompatibility between the Christian faith and communism as such, and that responsibility for the deteriorating East–West relationship lay with the rigid Soviet leadership rather than with the ideology of communism itself.¹¹ His position rested on a relatively optimistic theological anthropology in which a federal international juridical order, undergirded by a shared “moral law,” could in principle restrain even a totalitarian state's worst tendencies.

The second position, advanced by the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, took the opposite anthropological view: Any totalitarian system in which “the whole of life is under the state” was the opposite of Christianity, and the difference between Stalinism and Nazism was, on this register, immaterial (CCIA 1946). For Brunner, the question that Cambridge needed to settle was which systems were incompatible with Christianity. This was a confessional and exclusionary framing that Dulles had explicitly renounced.

The third and pivotal position, Niebuhr's intervention, must be read against the other two. Niebuhr jettisoned Brunner's flattening of Stalinism and Nazism on historical and economic grounds: The Nazis had built their empire under conditions of military parity or even superiority to the Allied nations, whereas the Soviets in 1946 were technologically vastly inferior to the Western powers. Yet, he also rejected Dulles's relative optimism about the possibility of juridical containment of totalitarian power. His theological resources were, as we have argued earlier in this article, the doctrine of original sin and the realist anthropology that flows from it: States—the West included—act in their own interest first, and any postwar settlement that imagines otherwise is courting either disillusionment or war. What gave Niebuhr's position its particular force at Cambridge was that, unlike Brunner, he did not speak from a confessional anthropology of opposition between Christianity and totalitarianism, and unlike Dulles, he did not speak from a juridical anthropology of containment by moral and international law. Instead, Niebuhr spoke from a theological anthropology of containment by patience. It is exactly through

11 Our paraphrases of Niebuhr's argument in this and following paragraphs are directly taken from their original archival source (CCIA 1946).

this position that we can grasp the secularized theological core of what would become the *Cold War containment doctrine*, as we shall now explain.

At Girton, Niebuhr warned that American promises to Western European countries should instigate hope, but they could never be made with too much firmness. After all, in Niebuhr's view, guarantees about peace and security could never be given, because they do not take into account the fallibility of people and states (*original sin*). On the one hand, a realist approach has to be a hopeful one; on the other hand, hope must be materialized in practice, or else it leads to cynicism and despair.

In addition to *hope*, Niebuhr proposed the other typical feature of his theological anthropology: *patience*. Even if the political order he observed was unjust for large parts of Eastern European populations, that order would still be preferable to the immediate alternative—nuclear war—for which the technology had been operational for just over a year. In this regard, Niebuhr proposed in Cambridge to “sacrifice” Eastern Europe for a time until the new communist Soviet empire fell. In this way, at least the Western European countries could be saved for justice and democracy.

Niebuhr's political vision for a recalibration of postwar order in Europe can thus be summarized as follows: The Soviet Union should not be provoked without reason (*patience*), but neither should America neglect its moral duty to alleviate the distress of European countries in general and Germany in particular (thereby offering *hope*). The longer poverty and hunger plagued the German population, the more susceptible they might become to communist propaganda. That is why America had to show itself prepared to provide immense financial and material support packages and make Western European industry viable as quickly as possible. Only this could limit the Soviet Union's sphere of influence to the east of the continent and thus give the Americans time to finance the reconstruction of Europe and secure their own sphere of influence.

Preston (2012, 476, emphasis added) has identified Niebuhr's mid-1946 position as an archetypal version of what would later become known in the Cold War as the American policy instrument of *containment*:

A year before the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, . . . Niebuhr had already outlined his own plan for political and economic containment. But Niebuhr also sought to strike a balance between sounding the alarm and sounding alarmist. In this, he was very much a *realist*, like Kennan, warning of the Soviet menace but also warning of the dangers of an American overreaction. And like Kennan, who later lamented that his refined theory of containment had been militarized,

bluntly and brutally, in its implementation, Niebuhr had trouble convincing his fellow Cold Warriors of the need for balance in US foreign policy.

Niebuhr's intervention at Cambridge did not, of course, exhaust the theological repertoire available to ecumenists thinking about postwar Europe, and a fuller account would have to register at least two further voices that complicated Niebuhr's realist approach on its own terrain. The first is the Czech theologian Josef L. Hromádka, who, from 1946 onward, pressed the argument that Western anti-communism mistook the symptom for the disease: It was the moral failures of Western capitalism, not the appeal of Marxism, that had created the conditions in which communism flourished (Hromádka 1948, 149; Bock 1991). Hromádka's anthropology was no less serious about human fallibility than Niebuhr's, but it located the *primary* site of failure differently, and consequently produced a politics neither of confrontation nor of containment through patience; rather, it produced a politics of repentance and structural reform of Western capitalist societies. The second voice we must mention in this regard is Willem Visser 't Hooft, the WCC general secretary, whose insistence that the WCC should not be identified with either the Soviet or the American sphere kept open a theological space in which unity and solidarity could be developed independently of Cold War alignment.¹²

Both voices serve as a reminder that Christian realism in the Niebuhrian sense was only one dialect—albeit the most well-known one—of the postwar ecumenical theological vocabulary; it was not its grammar. However, the Niebuhrian position prevailed at Cambridge in part *because* the rival theological positions of Brunner (confrontation), Dulles (juridical containment), Hromádka (structural economic critique), and Visser 't Hooft (neutrality and nonalignment) were either too confessionally specific or too politically controversial to find a translation into American foreign policy doctrines. Thus, in the reception history of Niebuhr's 1946 position, we can observe the same pattern we saw earlier with Morgenthau and Waltz: A particular theological idiom (in this case, *original sin/fallibility* and *patience*) survives rival idioms and is then itself secularized and co-opted into the political vocabulary of the era (in this case, the vocabulary of *containment*).

This is the precise sense in which Cambridge 1946 has served as a historiographical illustration for the broader argument we advance here. Niebuhr's case for extending material and financial support to the European nations not

12 For Visser 't Hooft's mediating position, see Visser 't Hooft (1987) and his biography by Zeilstra (2020).

yet under Moscow's grip as an instrument of sustaining hope rested on his theological anthropology of fallibility and patience. By the summer of 1946, even American policymakers, who were unfamiliar with these theological origins of the containment idea, could still recognize its validity and applicability in actual foreign policy. The asymmetry between theology and IR that we diagnosed earlier is therefore also a story about which theological idioms are available for secularization at the right historical moment. In other words, reconnecting IR and theology as disciplines requires a double loop: Historical context is necessary to understand why certain theological ideas translate to the political sphere, but in turn, the political and international context helps us understand why these ideas survived instead of their competitors.

6 Reconnecting Theological Ideas and IR

As we have demonstrated, theology has shaped both political realism in IR and practical politics through European unification. There are valid reasons why theology and IR should reconnect. The first is that attempts to connect the two fields have not yet been successful. The second is that one needs theology to understand history. Finally, without theology, it is difficult to understand and navigate present-day world politics, in which religion is ubiquitous.

As said, there have been attempts to connect theology to IR. Vendulka Kubálková (2000), one of the first IR scholars, advocated the radically alternative approach of international political theology, in which the role of religion in IR would be studied. IR scholars have also made attempts to introduce theological concepts to take religion into account (see, for example, Joustra 2026; Polinder and Buijs 2020; Troy 2014; Luoma-aho 2012; Rengger 2013; Thomas 2010; Sheikh 2015). A theological contribution may go further, but that might depend on one's understanding of theology. We understand theology in the way it was seen for centuries, as faith seeking understanding—*fides quaerens intellectum*. As Stefan Paas (2019, 14) argues, theology is the intellectual self-analysis, self-justification, and self-clarification of religious faith. It is a way in which a religious tradition critically examines and justifies itself in order to constantly renew the tradition. In other words, theology is thinking about faith in God (Van der Kooi and Van den Brink 2017, 2). It is the academic discipline that helps us understand certain (religious) practices and the way people speak about God, but it also seeks to argue how a religious perspective—that is, understanding reality “from the perspective of God”—makes a

difference. It clarifies certain practices as religious practices in light of what we know about the world (Paas 2019, 16–7).

The second reason to involve theology is that one needs it to fully understand history. Without theology, it would be difficult to truly understand Morgenthau when he writes (1974, 167):

Religiously founded justice will fully reveal itself only in the other world when, according to Christian dogma, at the Last Judgment God will separate the just from the unjust. Justice will then be done, it must be noted, not only because God is Love, but also because He is omniscient, knowing all the hidden facts that bear upon the decision, and because He is all-powerful, being able to make justice prevail in fact.

We also cannot understand the European unification process without incorporating the theological convictions and perspectives that moved people (Harryvan and Polinder 2022).

Finally, the current world of international politics is full of religious expressions and incidents in which religion is instrumentalized and weaponized (Polinder 2026). To understand such a world, one needs to know about the religious and theological drives and motivations of people, as we have argued above. For instance, one cannot understand the fact that President Putin of Russia sees himself as a *katechon* without knowing what that means (see De Graaf and Drost 2026, 128–34).¹³

7 Conclusion

Although theology in the past informed political and social analyses, this relationship has largely disappeared over time. Scholarly attention to tracing *ideological* roots in IR and related disciplines has been increasing; however, tracing *theological* influences is still sidelined in most academic works in the field. To address this lacuna, we have demonstrated in this article that political realism is indeed strongly indebted to theology. This influence has been secularized over time, which has led to impoverished theories. Therefore, we

¹³ The word *katechon* refers to the second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, wherein Paul seeks to curb the eschatological enthusiasm of the local Christians, which threatens to disrupt public order. *Katechon* is often translated as “restrainer,” “delayer,” or “withholder” and functions as the mundane force that delays the arrival of the Antichrist, the lawless one that would precede the return of Christ (Guilhot 2010, 234).

have argued that another secularization is possible, similar to what Niebuhr did with the concept of irony, which resonated much better with his secular audience than the notion of original sin.

Theology played a role not only in academia but also in the process of European unification. Ecumenical networks in postwar Europe influenced the establishment of institutions at that time and were also instrumental in bolstering concrete policies for re-establishing international security after global conflict. In our view, there is therefore no valid reason to disregard theological ideas as the foundation for discussing and evaluating IR claims. Moreover, the fact that theology has been sidelined in academia and practical politics could be seen as an invitation to actively renew, criticize, or redesign political and social practices from the sources of the Christian tradition. Theology has an irreplaceable responsibility to keep those sources alive and accessible so that other disciplines can benefit from them.

Tracing the influence of the Christian origins of the realist view on IR remains a dynamic exercise both for political scientists, who often ignore the theological dimension of classical realism, and for historians of Christianity, for whom the political and diplomatic dimension usually falls outside the scope of their research.

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