This chapter has a dual purpose. Firstly, it evaluates the concept of Ethical and Christian Realism facing international conflicts. Secondly, it evaluates Realism’s religious, meaning also normative, roots. Since we are facing a ‘religious resurgence’ in global politics, it is essential to have a closer look at religious ethics, which are steadily replacing classical secular ethics in some cases. On the other hand, an examination of the Judeo-Christian tradition of Realism is vital for political research which wants to be relevant to policy making. This chapter illustrates the continuing importance of Realism and its ‘hidden history’ as an optimistic and progressive political strategy by taking a closer look at its particular virtues, such as the emphasis on the lesser evil. Special attention is paid to the Christian theological figure of the katēchon, a theological meta-source of (Christian) Realism. Despite this rather particular issue, the chapter aims to put the Realist ‘canon’, especially Hans Morgenthau, into the right light and do away with the conventional and misleading positivist interpretation of it.

The overly simplistic positivist interpretation of Morgenthau continues to this day in mainstream academia. Ignoring Realist assessments did not lead to the US foreign policy disasters of the war in Vietnam and the Revolution in Iran. However, listening to them would have reminded some of a more prudent and sober assessment of political developments and aided a better understanding of the issues at stake (i.e. national interest in the former and the secularism
thesis in the latter). Realist assessments were also ignored because of the underestimation of religion in the context of politics. To reiterate the anecdotal, but telling, observation:

Circa 1960, perhaps the only thing the United States State Department, the faculty of the Harvard Government Department, the Communist International, and the leaders of the Bandung Conference agreed on is that a society can be successful only insofar as its governments and its citizenry keep religion from exercising a substantive influence on its politics.²

Due to their personal background, as well as their specific theoretical approaches, scholars of Realism are particularly prone to the concept of Ethical Realism and that is, quite often, a theme of Christian Realism. Moreover, Realism, from Morgenthau to scholars of the English School, offers serious potential for a comprehensive understanding of religion in international relations theory and politics alike. The chapter focuses on, and argues in favour of, a Realism that is not solely based on the assumption of the primacy of (nation) states but rather on one of classical religious insights. That is not to say that those are the most important issues in Realist development.³ Rather, the religious issue is simply underestimated or, at least, not that well-known.

The roots of Ethical and Christian Realism are based in Christian political thought, for the most part in the tradition of St Augustine. The main assumptions of Realism, such as prudence, responsibility or humility, can help to bring down morality from its heights of rhetorical political use to a real tool of statecraft. On the other hand, Realism can help deal with growing religious conflicts and extremism. There are at least two points that legitimate the account of Ethical Realism in the context of this study. In the first place, the roots of Realism in the classical school of 20th century Realism, as developed by Hans Morgenthau, have to be mentioned. Realism, as this study argues throughout, is not a theoretical underpinning of Realpolitik. Rather, Realism was and still is closely engaged with ethical questions of politics and thus also with peace.⁴ In the second place, the relationship between 20th century Realism and its religious roots have to be acknowledged.