

## Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr in the Multipolar Geopolitical Crisis of the Twenty-First Century

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism as a framework of political ethics for addressing the multipolar geopolitical crisis of the twenty-first century. The study emerges from the limitations of mainstream international relations theories, such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics, which have not adequately provided a normative foundation for responding to global conflicts, structural injustice, neoliberalism, and contemporary digital geopolitics. The study employs a qualitative approach based on library research and focuses on theological and hermeneutical analyses of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought. The researcher collected data through documentation studies and academic literature reviews, while the analysis employed hermeneutical interpretation, interdisciplinary dialogue, and normative synthesis. The primary sources include Niebuhr's major works, especially *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, along with various scholarly works on political theology and contemporary geopolitics. The findings demonstrate that Christian Realism offers a framework of political ethics that realistically acknowledges human sin and egoism while maintaining a normative commitment to justice and moral responsibility in global politics. Christian Realism operates at epistemological, normative, and practical levels in interpreting multipolarity, international conflict, neoliberalism, and global digital domination. The implications of this study indicate that Christian Realism can function as an alternative framework of global political ethics capable of bridging political realism and moral values within the context of contemporary systemic chaos. The originality of this study lies in its effort to reconstruct Christian Realism as a framework of geopolitical ethics that responds contextually to multipolarity and digital geopolitics in the twenty-first century.

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**ABSTRAK**

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Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis Christian Realism Reinhold Niebuhr sebagai kerangka etika politik dalam menghadapi krisis geopolitik multipolar abad ke-21. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh keterbatasan teori hubungan internasional arus utama, seperti realisme, liberalisme, konstruktivisme, dan critical geopolitics, yang dinilai belum mampu menyediakan landasan normatif memadai dalam menghadapi konflik global, ketidakadilan struktural, neoliberalisme, dan geopolitik digital kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan fokus pada analisis teologis dan hermeneutik terhadap pemikiran Reinhold Niebuhr. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui studi dokumentasi dan penelusuran literatur akademik, sedangkan analisis data dilakukan melalui interpretasi hermeneutik, dialog interdisipliner, dan sintesis normatif. Sumber utama penelitian berasal dari karya Niebuhr, terutama *Moral Man and Immoral Society* dan *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, serta berbagai literatur mengenai teologi politik dan geopolitik kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Christian Realism menawarkan kerangka etika politik yang realistis terhadap dosa dan egoisme manusia, tetapi tetap normatif dalam menegaskan pentingnya keadilan dan tanggung jawab moral dalam politik global. Christian Realism berfungsi pada level epistemologis, normatif, dan praktis dalam membaca multipolaritas, konflik internasional, neoliberalisme, dan dominasi digital global. Implikasi penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Christian Realism dapat menjadi alternatif etika politik global yang mampu menjembatani realisme politik dengan nilai-nilai moral dalam situasi systemic chaos kontemporer. Orisinalitas penelitian ini terletak pada upaya merekonstruksi Christian Realism sebagai kerangka etika geopolitik yang kontekstual terhadap multipolaritas dan geopolitik digital abad ke-21.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary world faces an increasingly complex and unstable geopolitical crisis. The Russia–Ukraine conflict that has continued since 2022, the escalation of the Palestine–Israel conflict in Gaza, the growing rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region, and global political fragmentation demonstrate that the international order has entered a phase of profound uncertainty (Belo & Rodríguez, 2023; Goyal & Soni, 2024). Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in (2025) show that the number of global refugees has exceeded 120 million people due to war, armed conflict, and political violence. At the same time, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported that global military spending surpassed 2.4 trillion U.S. dollars in 2024, marking the highest level in modern history (Hille, 2026). These conditions indicate that international politics increasingly depends on power competition, security concerns, and struggles for strategic influence among major states. This phenomenon signals the decline of post–Cold War liberal optimism, which previously assumed that globalization and international institutions could sustainably create global stability.

The contemporary geopolitical crisis no longer operates solely through conventional warfare, but also extends through economic, technological, and digital dimensions. Current global competition involves information warfare, cybersecurity, digital data control, and the domination of artificial intelligence technologies by both states and multinational corporations. Kruta (2025) explains that twenty-

first-century multipolarity depends not only on military and economic power, but also on control over global digital infrastructure. In addition, developments in communication technology have accelerated the spread of disinformation, political propaganda, and cross-border ideological polarization. These conditions demonstrate that modern geopolitics no longer focuses exclusively on territorial struggles, but also encompasses struggles over digital spaces and global knowledge production. As a result, the international community faces a condition of systemic chaos, in which the old global structure deteriorates while a new stable order has not yet emerged (Pennaforte & Luigi, 2022).

Globalization, which scholars previously viewed as a mechanism of global integration, has instead produced new paradoxes in international relations. Pierre (2024) explains that post-Cold War globalization developed within a liberal world order that emphasized economic interdependence, liberal democracy, and free trade. However, globalization has also generated resistance in the form of nationalist populism, economic protectionism, de-globalization, and identity-based political conflicts in various countries. These conditions indicate that globalization has failed to fully create global solidarity and has instead intensified economic inequality and geopolitical competition. In this context, the international community faces not only a crisis of power but also a crisis of global political ethics. Questions concerning the legitimacy of power, the moral responsibility of states, the protection of civilians, and the ethical limits of political domination have become increasingly important for both academic inquiry and practical policy.

The complexity of global geopolitics is increasing as non-state actors are now actively influencing and bringing about a new form of international politics. Global technology corporations, digital media networks, transnational organizations, and economic interest groups now possess influence equal to or even greater than that of some developing countries. This phenomenon demonstrates that nation-states no longer monopolize global power. Under these circumstances, geopolitical approaches that focus solely on material power and national interests have become insufficient. The world requires a framework of political ethics capable of explaining the reality of power in realistic terms while also considering morality, justice, and humanitarian responsibility. Therefore, studies of political ethics within the context of the contemporary geopolitical crisis have become increasingly relevant and urgent.

Scholars have conducted studies on geopolitics and international relations through several major tendencies. The first tendency focuses on realism, liberalism, and constructivism in interpreting global political dynamics. Realism positions the state as the primary actor that pursues national interests and balances power (Du, 2022; Finnemore & Wendt, 2024; Ikenberry, 2009; Kicmari, 2024). Mearsheimer (2019) reflects this perspective by explaining international conflict as a logical consequence of an anarchic international system. Meanwhile, liberalism emphasizes international cooperation, global institutions, and economic interdependence in maintaining global stability. Scholars within this perspective often examine the roles of the United Nations, international law, and multilateral organizations. In contrast, constructivism views identity, norms, and ideas as important factors shaping state behavior in global politics. However, these three approaches tend to provide insufficient foundations for political ethics. Realism excessively prioritizes power, liberalism remains overly optimistic regarding international institutions, and constructivism focuses more on identity formation than on the moral dimensions of global politics.

The second tendency emerges through the development of *critical geopolitics* and postcolonial approaches in international relations studies. Koopman et al. (2021) explain that geopolitics does not merely constitute an objective analysis of space and power, but rather represents a discourse shaped by power relations, colonialism, and ideological bias. Research within this perspective seeks to dismantle Western hegemonic narratives in the production of geopolitical knowledge. In addition, Orford (2021) argues that modern international law does not operate neutrally because colonial history and hegemonic global interests have shaped it. Studies in critical geopolitics successfully reveal how power operates through language, knowledge, and political representation. However, this approach still demonstrates limitations because it emphasizes the deconstruction of global domination more than the reconstruction of alternative ethical frameworks. In other words, critical approaches can explain the sources of global injustice, but they have not fully provided normative foundations that can guide ethical responses to contemporary geopolitical crises.

The third tendency develops through studies of political theology and the relationship between religion and global geopolitics. Moore (2020), through his interpretation of Carl Schmitt, demonstrates that modern political sovereignty possesses strong theological roots. This perspective argues that modern politics, although seemingly secular, still retains religious dimensions within concepts of legitimacy and political authority. In addition, Luciani (2020) introduces Pope Francis's concept of pastoral geopolitics, which emphasizes global solidarity, concern for the poor, and criticism of neoliberal globalization. Rivarola (2021) also demonstrates that the Catholic Church in Latin America acts as a geopolitical actor that influences regional identity formation and integration. These studies show that religion and theology contribute significantly to understanding global politics. However, previous research has primarily treated religion as a socio-political actor or a source of moral legitimacy rather than as a realistic framework of political ethics for interpreting global geopolitical crises.

Based on these tendencies, a significant research gap remains insufficiently explored. Previous studies have not specifically positioned Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism as a framework of political ethics for addressing contemporary geopolitical crises characterized by multipolarity, systemic chaos, global neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics. Most studies on Niebuhr still focus on Christian ethics, American democracy, or critiques of modern liberalism. In fact, Christian Realism possesses substantial theoretical potential for expanding international relations discourse, especially in bridging the tension between political realism and ethical normativity. Therefore, this study occupies an important position because it seeks to synthesize political theology and contemporary geopolitical studies through the framework of Christian Realism.

This study aims to analyze Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism as a framework of political ethics for addressing contemporary geopolitical crises. The study also aims to explain the theoretical contribution of Christian Realism to the development of international relations and political theology, particularly in responding to the limitations of mainstream international relations theories that fail to provide adequate normative foundations. Furthermore, this study seeks to demonstrate the relevance of Niebuhr's thought for interpreting global multipolarity, international conflict, structural injustice, and twenty-first-century digital geopolitics.

This study argues that Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism can serve as a relevant framework of political ethics for addressing contemporary geopolitical crises because it integrates political realism with ethical normativity. Christian Realism acknowledges the realities of sin, egoism, and human limitation in international politics, while simultaneously affirming the importance of justice as an ethical compromise and love as a moral horizon. In this context, the study not only reinforces the relevance of Christian Realism within international relations studies, but also expands its application to global multipolarity, neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute theoretically by developing Christian Realism as a realistic, normative, and contextual framework of geopolitical ethics capable of responding to contemporary global political challenges.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the concept of Christian Realism in Reinhold Niebuhr's major works, particularly *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1960) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1996), which the researcher examines within the context of contemporary geopolitical crises such as global multipolarity, international conflict, and digital geopolitics.

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research and focuses on theological and hermeneutical analyses of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought. The researcher selected a qualitative research design because the study seeks to understand, interpret, and reconstruct the meaning of political ethics in Niebuhr's thought within its contemporary context. The study applies a hermeneutical approach to examine the relationship between text, historical context, and the contemporary relevance of Niebuhr's ideas. This approach follows Niebuhr's pendulum framework, as explained by Paipais (2021), which oscillates between moral idealism and political realism in responding to complex global situations.

The research data consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary data derive from Niebuhr's major works, especially *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Meanwhile, the secondary data come from literature on political theology, international relations, critical geopolitics, international law, and scholarly articles related to Christian Realism and contemporary geopolitics.

The researcher collected data through documentation studies and academic literature reviews. The researcher identified, classified, and selected relevant sources based on the research themes. The researcher then critically compared the collected literature to identify the relationship between Niebuhr's thought and twenty-first-century global geopolitical issues. The study also applies an interdisciplinary approach by connecting perspectives from political theology and international relations studies.

The researcher conducted the data analysis through four stages: (1) collecting and classifying primary and secondary literature; (2) conducting hermeneutical analyses of Niebuhr's texts; (3) engaging in critical dialogue with geopolitical and international relations theories; and (4) developing a normative synthesis to formulate Christian Realism as a framework of contemporary political ethics. This analysis refers to Cornell et al. (2022), who argue that qualitative theology must remain contextual and capable of responding to empirical realities such as conflict, injustice, and global crises.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Contemporary Geopolitical Crisis and the Limitations of Global Political Ethics

The contemporary geopolitical crisis demonstrates a fundamental transformation in the global political structure that has become increasingly complex, competitive, and unstable. The post-Cold War world order, which the United States previously dominated as a unipolar power, has shifted toward a multipolar system marked by the emergence of new powers such as China, Russia, India, and the BRICS bloc (Belo & Rodríguez, 2023). This transition has intensified global fragmentation because each state seeks to strengthen its own strategic interests in economic, military, energy, and digital technological sectors. Hoang et al. (2024) explain that the Russia-Ukraine conflict symbolizes the acceleration of the transition toward global multipolarity while also revealing the growing rivalry among major powers in international politics. This situation has produced systemic chaos, a condition in which the old global structure declines while a new stable order has not yet emerged. As a result, the international community faces increasing political uncertainty and growing vulnerability to prolonged conflicts.

The Russia-Ukraine and Palestine-Israel conflicts clearly reveal a crisis of global political ethics within contemporary international relations. The Russia-Ukraine war not only reflects geopolitical competition between Russia and the Western bloc, but also demonstrates the failure of international diplomacy to prevent the escalation of violence (Belo & Rodríguez, 2023). NATO expansion, the intensification of European militarization, and the global arms race indicate that major powers prioritize security logic and strategic interests over just and peaceful resolutions (Hoang et al., 2024). A similar condition appears in the Palestine-Israel conflict, where geopolitical interests and international alliances frequently ignore civilian suffering, humanitarian crises, and the principles of international humanitarian law (Goyal & Soni, 2024). These phenomena demonstrate that *realpolitik* still dominates global political practices, while international political ethics has lost its normative authority.

The global geopolitical crisis has become more complex with the emergence of digital geopolitics and the development of artificial intelligence (AI). Polović (2023) explains that information technology, digital media, and cybersecurity have become strategic instruments in the struggle for global influence. Major powers use disinformation, digital propaganda, and cyber surveillance to expand their political domination in the global sphere. In this context, states no longer exclusively possess power because multinational technology corporations now control data, algorithms, and global communication infrastructures. Digital technology companies have developed into non-state actors with substantial geopolitical capacity to influence public opinion, political stability, and international security. These conditions indicate that twenty-first-century geopolitics no longer centers solely on territorial competition, but also includes struggles over digital space and global information control.

Amid these transformations, the liberal international order has experienced a serious crisis of legitimacy. Global liberalism previously promised international cooperation, the supremacy of law, and economic interdependence, yet it has failed to prevent armed conflict, global inequality, and major power rivalries (Peoples, 2024; Reus-Smit, 2007). International institutions such as the United Nations frequently fail to stop wars or enforce compliance with international humanitarian law. International law has also lost effectiveness when the political interests of major powers outweigh the principles of universal justice. These conditions demonstrate that international norms remain weak when confronted with national interests and global power struggles. Consequently, the international community faces a crisis of political morality characterized by increasing state egoism, weakening global solidarity, and the marginalization of humanitarian values.

The contemporary geopolitical crisis has also directly affected developing countries, including Indonesia. Indonesia's strategic position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as its proximity to the Strait of Malacca, has made the country vulnerable to disruptions in global supply chains, energy instability, and Indo-Pacific geopolitical rivalries (Amin et al., 2024). Under these circumstances, developing countries often take a reactive position because they have to get used to global economic and security pressures coming from major powers. In addition, states frequently prioritize economic stability and defense while neglecting issues of social justice, environmental crises, and human rights protection. These phenomena demonstrate that the contemporary geopolitical crisis involves not merely struggles for global power, but also reflects the failure of international political ethics to place humanity at the center of interstate relations.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Contemporary Geopolitical Crisis and Their Impact on Global Political Ethics**

Geopolitical Phenomenon	Main Characteristics	Global Impact	Implications for Political Ethics
Global Multipolarity	Transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar system marked by the rise of China, Russia, India, and BRICS	International political fragmentation and increasing rivalry among major powers	Weakening global solidarity and increasing state egoism
Russia-Ukraine Conflict	Competition for geopolitical influence and security expansion	European militarization, arms races, and humanitarian crises	Failure of international diplomacy and humanitarian law
Palestine-Israel Conflict	Territorial conflict and prolonged violence	Refugee crises, civilian casualties, and global polarization	Marginalization of humanitarian values and justice
Digital Geopolitics	Use of AI, cybersecurity, digital propaganda, and data control	Global information domination by states and technology corporations	Abuse of digital power and privacy crises
Global Neoliberalism	Global economic dependency and market interdependence	Economic inequality and vulnerable global supply chains	Economic priorities undermine social justice
Weakness of International Law	Failure of international institutions to enforce global law	Declining legitimacy of international institutions	International norms succumb to the political interests of major powers
Vulnerability of Developing Countries	Geopolitical pressures on energy, trade, and security	Developing countries respond reactively to global crises	Difficulty maintaining balance between stability and social justice

**Source: Adapted from Hoang et al. (2024), Polović (2023), Amin et al. (2024), Reus-Smit (2007), Peoples (2024), and Goyal and Soni (2024).**

These developments demonstrate that mainstream international relations theories have failed to provide an adequate framework of political ethics for addressing contemporary global geopolitical crises. Realism tends to prioritize power and national interests, liberalism remains overly optimistic regarding the effectiveness of international institutions, and critical approaches primarily focus on deconstruction without offering strong normative foundations. Consequently, the international community experiences a vacuum of political ethics amid the rise of multipolarity, digital geopolitics, and global systemic chaos. These conditions demonstrate the urgent need for a new framework of political ethics capable of interpreting the reality of power realistically while simultaneously maintaining moral responsibility and justice in global politics.

### **The Foundations of Political Ethics in Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism**

Reinhold Niebuhr occupies an important position in the development of modern political theology through his concept of Christian Realism. This perspective emerged from the historical struggles of the twentieth century, which were marked by world wars, economic depression, totalitarianism, and crises in modern political morality. Within this context, Niebuhr rejected two extreme tendencies in political theory: liberal optimism, which excessively trusted human rationality, and classical realist cynicism, which treated power as the sole principle of politics. Christian Realism emerged as a synthesis between political realism and ethical normativity by viewing human beings as rational yet sinful creatures. Niebuhr argued that human beings possess the moral capacity to pursue justice, but they simultaneously exhibit egoistic tendencies that encourage the abuse of power. Therefore, politics cannot be understood merely as an arena of ideal morality or solely as a struggle for power, but rather as a dialectical space involving sin, power, and ethical responsibility.

The primary foundation of Christian Realism lies in its theological analysis of human sin and egoism. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explains that human beings live within a tension between freedom and limitation. Human beings possess the capacity to transcend themselves through reason and moral imagination, yet these very capacities often generate pride and illusions of power. Niebuhr does not interpret sin merely as an individual weakness, but rather as an existential structure that shapes social and political relations. Political pride emerges when states or social groups assume that they possess absolute legitimacy to dominate others. In geopolitical contexts, this collective sin appears through extreme nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and the hegemonic ambitions of major powers. Therefore, Christian Realism regards conflict and injustice as inherent dimensions of the human condition that rational progress or political institutions alone cannot completely eliminate (Niebuhr, 1996).

Niebuhr's analysis of human sin subsequently led him to distinguish between individual morality and collective morality. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he explains that individuals can demonstrate altruism, empathy, and commitment to justice. However, when individuals become part of social groups, nations, or states, collective egoism tends to dominate political behavior. Social groups tend to defend their interests through power, even at the expense of universal moral principles. This collective egoism produces political structures that are competitive and often repressive. Within international relations, this condition explains why modern states more easily prioritize national interests over global humanitarian solidarity. Consequently, Christian Realism rejects the liberal assumption that developments in education, democracy, and international institutions can automatically eliminate political conflict and social injustice (Niebuhr, 1960).

Based on these views, Niebuhr strongly criticized liberal utopianism that developed within the Enlightenment tradition and the *Social Gospel* movement. According to Niebuhr, optimism regarding human moral progress fails to understand the reality of sin and humanity's tendency to misuse power. He regarded the belief that international law, liberal democracy, or global cooperation could create permanent peace as a form of ahistorical idealism. Niebuhr argued that politics always exists within an ambiguous condition because every social structure remains influenced by human interests and egoism. However, Niebuhr's criticism of liberalism did not lead him into the pessimism of classical realism. He also rejected realist views that considered morality irrelevant within international relations. Christian

Realism instead insists that politics requires ethics to restrain the destructive tendencies of power. In other words, Niebuhr sought to preserve moral space within harsh and competitive political realities.

Within the framework of Christian Realism, the relationship between power and justice becomes a central element of political ethics. Niebuhr acknowledged that power constitutes an unavoidable aspect of political life because societies cannot survive without structures of authority. However, power always contains the potential for abuse when moral consciousness fails to restrain it. Therefore, ethical politics does not mean politics without power, but rather politics that can limit domination and create balance for the sake of social justice. In this context, justice functions as a realistic ethical compromise rather than an absolute moral perfection. Justice becomes an instrument for restraining collective egoism and reducing structural injustice within society and international relations. This perspective demonstrates that Christian Realism possesses a strong practical dimension because it does not stop at moral ideals, but also considers the concrete realities of political power.

Nevertheless, Christian Realism continues to position Christian love, especially *agape*, as the highest ethical horizon. Niebuhr argued that perfect love cannot be fully realized within political structures because politics always involves compromises of interest and the use of power. However, love still functions as a moral orientation that directs human struggle toward justice. In this sense, love does not operate as a practical political program, but rather as a transcendent principle that prevents politics from descending into moral nihilism. Politics that completely loses the orientation of love will ultimately fall into domination, violence, and the worship of power. Therefore, Christian Realism views justice as the most concrete possible expression of love within social and political life (O'Sullivan, 2017).

Ultimately, Christian Realism occupies a middle position between liberal utopianism and the cynicism of classical realism. Niebuhr rejected the belief that human beings could create a perfect society through rationality and political institutions, but he also rejected the assumption that politics merely constitutes a struggle for power without moral responsibility. Within the context of contemporary geopolitics characterized by multipolarity, war, global neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics, Christian Realism offers a framework of political ethics that is simultaneously realistic and normative (Alexander, 2021). This framework explains that international conflict cannot be separated from human and state egoism, while global politics still requires moral orientation to limit domination and pursue justice. Therefore, the theoretical contribution of Christian Realism lies in its ability to bridge the tension between political realism and normative ethics within contemporary international relations studies.

**Table 2. The Foundations of Political Ethics in Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism**

Main Aspect	Christian Realism Perspective	Political Implication
Human Nature	Human beings are rational yet sinful	Politics remains vulnerable to egoism and the abuse of power
Individual Morality	Individuals possess altruistic capacity and moral responsibility	Moral values can still manifest in social actions
Collective Morality	Groups and states tend to behave egoistically	States more easily prioritize national interests
Sin and Pride	Sin produces domination, nationalism, and hegemonic ambition	Conflict and injustice become inherent parts of global politics
Power	Power is necessary within political life	Justice must restrain power
Justice	Justice functions as a realistic ethical compromise	Politics must reduce domination and structural injustice
Love ( <i>Agape</i> )	Love serves as the highest ethical horizon	Politics must not lose its moral orientation
Critique of Liberalism	Liberalism remains overly optimistic regarding human rationality	International institutions alone cannot guarantee peace
Critique of Classical Realism	Classical realism ignores moral dimensions	Politics still requires ethical responsibility

**Source: Adapted from Niebuhr (1960), Niebuhr (1996), O'Sullivan (2017), and Alexander (2021).**

Table 2 demonstrates that Christian Realism rests upon a dialectical understanding of humanity, power, and political morality. Niebuhr viewed human beings as creatures who possess moral capacity while simultaneously remaining bound by sin and collective egoism. This perspective leads Christian Realism to reject two extremes at once: liberal optimism, which excessively trusts human rational progress, and classical realist cynicism, which reduces politics to a mere struggle for power. Within this framework, power functions as an unavoidable element of political life, yet justice must limit it through realistic ethical compromise. Meanwhile, *agape* continues to function as a moral horizon that prevents politics from descending into domination and ethical nihilism. Therefore, Christian Realism provides a framework of political ethics that realistically confronts conflict and human limitation while still preserving normative orientation within contemporary international relations.

### **The Relevance of Christian Realism in the Twenty-First-Century Geopolitical Crisis**

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism possesses strong relevance for interpreting twenty-first-century geopolitical crises because the contemporary world operates within a multipolar, conflictual, and morally complex situation. The Russia–Ukraine crisis, the Palestine–Israel conflict, the rivalry between the United States and China, global economic inequality, and digital geopolitics demonstrate that international politics operates not only through calculations of interest, but also through collective egoism institutionalized within states, military alliances, global markets, and technology corporations. In this context, Christian Realism provides a more honest interpretation of global politics because it recognizes that human beings, states, and institutions can never become fully free from sin, ambition, and the desire for domination. Therefore, geopolitical crises cannot merely be understood as technical failures of diplomacy, but must also be interpreted as moral crises in the use of power.

Within international conflicts, Christian Realism offers an ethical framework distinct from classical realism. Realism can explain why states pursue national interests, security, and balances of power, yet realism often fails to answer normative questions concerning justice and moral responsibility (Darabos, 2023). Christian Realism accepts the reality that states indeed operate within conditions of anarchy and competition. However, Christian Realism does not justify every state action in the name of survival. Niebuhr argues that moral consciousness must correct power because states themselves can also fall into collective sin. Therefore, scholars and policymakers should not interpret modern warfare merely as a clash of strategic interests, but also as an arena of ethical accountability toward civilian victims, social destruction, and the future of peace.

Christian Realism also demonstrates relevance through its critique of liberalism and international law. Liberalism assumes that global institutions, democratization, and economic interdependence can reduce conflict. However, contemporary geopolitical experience shows that global institutions often become powerless when faced with the influence of the interests of major powers. Lovin (2020) argues that hegemonic powers frequently control international institutions, while Orford (2021) demonstrates that international law can reproduce imperial logic through concepts of regional order. Within this context, Christian Realism corrects liberal optimism by emphasizing that law and institutions remain necessary, yet people should not regard them as neutral or perfect. Global institutions must remain subject to criticism because they can become instruments of domination when they lose orientation toward justice.

Christian Realism also remains relevant for interpreting global injustice and neoliberalism. Global neoliberalism often presents free markets, economic growth, and trade interdependence as pathways toward shared progress. However, in practice, the global economic system frequently intensifies inequality between powerful and vulnerable states. Christian Realism strengthens this analysis by demonstrating that economic interests never operate free from values. Global economic actors can employ the language of efficiency, innovation, and development to conceal practices of domination. Within Niebuhr's framework, economic injustice constitutes a form of collective egoism institutionalized through market structures, debt policies, resource exploitation, and supply-chain dependency. Therefore, global political ethics must demand distributive justice rather than merely market stability.

At the same time, digital geopolitics expands the relevance of Christian Realism into areas that Niebuhr himself did not directly encounter during his own era. Developments in technology, artificial

intelligence, cybersecurity, and data infrastructure have created new forms of power that transcend the state. Polinder (2024) argue that non-state actors, particularly multinational technology corporations, now possess influence capable of rivaling state power. Within this context, Christian Realism can interpret digital corporations as moral-political actors vulnerable to structural sin. Control over data, algorithms, communication platforms, and digital infrastructures can transform into new forms of domination when principles of justice fail to regulate them. Consequently, scholars and policymakers must understand digital power as an issue of political ethics rather than merely a technical issue of technology.

The strength of Christian Realism lies in its ability to avoid two extremes when interpreting twenty-first-century crises. On the one hand, Christian Realism rejects liberal utopianism, which excessively trusts that technological progress, international law, and global cooperation will automatically produce peace. On the other hand, Christian Realism also rejects the cynicism of classical realism, which views global politics merely as an arena of interests without moral responsibility. This middle position becomes important because the twenty-first century requires a framework that realistically confronts violence, state egoism, and corporate domination while still maintaining normative commitments to justice. Therefore, Christian Realism does not eliminate the reality of conflict, but instead directs conflict to remain within the boundaries of moral responsibility.

Accordingly, this article contributes to expanding Christian Realism from the political context of the twentieth century into the multipolar and digital geopolitics of the twenty-first century. If Niebuhr used Christian Realism to interpret world wars, totalitarianism, and the Cold War, this study positions Christian Realism as a framework for interpreting modern warfare, global neoliberalism, crises in international law, and the domination of technology corporations. Consequently, Christian Realism functions not only as a legacy of classical political theology, but also as a framework of contemporary geopolitical ethics. This framework can fill the normative vacuum left by mainstream international relations theories: realism remains excessively cynical, liberalism remains overly optimistic, constructivism remains overly descriptive, international law remains excessively biased, and critical geopolitics remains overly deconstructive.

### **Christian Realism as a Framework of Global Political Ethics**

The contemporary geopolitical crisis demonstrates that mainstream international political theories increasingly experience a serious normative vacuum. Realism excessively emphasizes power and national interests, liberalism remains overly optimistic regarding global institutions, constructivism tends to remain descriptive, international law frequently reflects hegemonic interests, while critical geopolitics often stops at deconstruction without offering clear ethical direction. These conditions indicate the need for a new framework of political ethics capable of bridging the harsh realities of geopolitics with the demands of global morality. Within this context, Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism gains significant relevance. Christian Realism not only interprets international politics realistically, but also preserves its normative dimension through the concepts of justice, moral responsibility, and love as the ethical horizon of global politics.

At the epistemological level, Christian Realism offers a dialectical approach to interpreting global politics. Niebuhr views human beings as paradoxical creatures who possess moral capacities while simultaneously exhibiting egoistic tendencies. Human beings can construct just social structures through rationality and moral imagination, yet they also remain vulnerable to pride, domination, and the abuse of power (Niebuhr, 1960). This perspective leads Christian Realism to reject two forms of determinism at once: liberal optimism, which excessively trusts human moral progress, and classical realist pessimism, which interprets politics merely as an arena of power. Paipais (2021) explains that Niebuhr's thought moves within a "*pendulum*" between the reality of sin and the moral calling. Therefore, the epistemology of Christian Realism remains dialectical because it does not stop at describing global politics, but also creates space for ethical reflection regarding the use of power. Within the context of contemporary geopolitics, this approach enables a more balanced analysis of international conflict, global injustice, and rivalry among major powers without falling into either utopianism or moral nihilism.

At the normative level, Christian Realism positions justice as an ethical compromise intended to limit the abuse of power. Niebuhr argues that human beings possess the capacity for justice, yet humanity's inclination toward injustice makes mechanisms for limiting power critically necessary. Niebuhr's well-known principle, "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary," demonstrates that democracy should not be understood as a perfect system, but rather as a realistic mechanism for preventing political domination (Niebuhr, 1996). Within this context, Christian Realism provides an ethical foundation for limiting the power of states, markets, and non-state actors. Christian Realism does not interpret justice as a perfect ideal condition, but rather as a concrete effort to reduce domination, violence, and inequality within socio-political relations. Christian Realism also introduces an eschatological horizon through the concept of *agape* love and the Kingdom of God as an "already and not yet" reality. This perspective protects global politics from naïve progressive optimism as well as from total pessimism regarding the possibility of moral transformation in human history.

At the practical level, Christian Realism demonstrates strong relevance for addressing twenty-first-century geopolitical challenges. Within the context of global multipolarity, Christian Realism reminds the international community that every major power, including the United States, China, Russia, and the BRICS bloc, possesses the potential to fall into collective pride and hegemonic domination. Therefore, global politics requires ethical mechanisms capable of limiting the use of power. Edwards (2015) demonstrates that Niebuhr and the World Council of Churches during the Cold War attempted to transcend the logic of bipolarity by emphasizing the importance of transnational ethics that did not submit either to capitalism or communism. This perspective remains relevant within today's multipolar situation, where the world faces global fragmentation and increasing geopolitical rivalry.

Christian Realism also remains relevant in criticizing global neoliberalism and international economic injustice. The domination of global markets, capital concentration, and unequal resource distribution demonstrate how economic power can become a new form of collective sin. Gillin (2024) argues that Christian Realism can integrate with Christian social ethics to encourage the decentralization of economic power and prevent structural corruption. Therefore, Christian Realism functions not only as a theory of international politics, but also as a framework of global socio-economic ethics that emphasizes moral responsibility toward vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The relevance of Christian Realism becomes even more apparent in digital geopolitics and the domination of global technology corporations. Multinational technology companies now possess enormous influence in controlling data, algorithms, global communication, and social behavior. This phenomenon has produced new forms of power that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. Christian Realism interprets this digital domination as a new form of modern human pride, namely the belief that technology can completely control life without requiring moral reflection. Within Niebuhr's perspective, technology never remains neutral because it always operates within power relations that remain vulnerable to abuse. Therefore, global digital governance requires ethical limitations so that technology does not transform into an instrument of domination and dehumanization. Christian Realism helps expand the discourse of political ethics into the sphere of digital geopolitics, which has become a strategic arena of the twenty-first century.

In addition, Christian Realism can engage productively with other traditions of political theology. Luciani (2020), through the concept of pastoral geopolitics, emphasizes solidarity with the poor and peripheral cultures, while Puntigliano (2021) demonstrates how religion functions as a geopolitical actor within the Latin American context. Christian Realism complements these approaches by introducing a corrective dimension toward all forms of power, including the power of states and religious institutions. Simmons and Carnahan (2019) even demonstrate that Niebuhr understood love as an "impossible ideal" that nevertheless remains practically important within political life. This perspective demonstrates that Christian Realism possesses dialogical flexibility without losing its identity as a realistic and normative political ethic.

**Table 3. Christian Realism as a Framework of Global Political Ethics**

Level of Analysis	Principle of Christian Realism	Contemporary Geopolitical Relevance	Implications for Political Ethics
Epistemological	Human beings possess moral capacities as well as egoistic tendencies	Interprets global conflicts dialectically without utopianism or nihilism	Global politics must be understood realistically and reflectively
Normative	Justice functions as an ethical compromise to limit power	Critiques the domination of states, markets, and global institutions	Limiting power becomes necessary to prevent injustice
Practical	Politics requires moral responsibility in the use of power	Relevant for diplomacy, international conflict, and global governance	Politics must not separate itself from moral considerations
Global Multipolarity	All major powers remain vulnerable to collective pride	Rivalry among the United States, China, Russia, and BRICS	Transnational ethics are necessary to limit hegemony
Global Neoliberalism	Economic power can generate structural sin	Economic inequality and global market domination	Distributive justice and social responsibility must be strengthened
Digital Geopolitics	Technology remains non-neutral and vulnerable to abuse	Domination by Big Tech, AI, and global data control	Digital governance requires ethical limitations
Ethical Horizon	<i>Agape</i> love functions as the moral orientation of politics	Protects politics from domination and dehumanization	Global politics must remain oriented toward humanity

**Source: Adapted from Niebuhr (1960), Niebuhr (1996), Paipais (2021), Edwards (2015), Gillin (2024), Luciani (2020), and Simmons and Carnahan (2019).**

Through all of these dimensions, Christian Realism can be understood as a framework of global political ethics that operates simultaneously at epistemological, normative, and practical levels. At the epistemological level, Christian Realism helps interpret political reality dialectically through awareness of sin and human moral capacity. At the normative level, Christian Realism emphasizes the importance of relative justice to limit the abuse of power and preserve love as the ethical horizon. Meanwhile, at the practical level, Christian Realism remains relevant for diplomatic ethics, international conflict, global neoliberalism, and contemporary digital governance. Therefore, this study confirms that Christian Realism constitutes not merely a religious ethic, but also a realistic, normative, and contextual framework of geopolitical ethics for addressing twenty-first-century global crises.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates that contemporary geopolitical crises can no longer be understood solely through approaches focused on power, security, or national interests. Global multipolarity, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Palestine–Israel conflict, global neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics reveal an increasingly profound crisis of international political ethics. The findings show that mainstream international relations theories experience normative limitations when confronting the conditions of twenty-first-century systemic chaos. Within this context, Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism offers an alternative framework capable of bridging political realism and the demands of global morality. Christian Realism operates simultaneously at epistemological, normative, and practical levels. At the epistemological level, Christian Realism interprets global politics dialectically through awareness of human sin and egoism. At the normative level, Christian Realism emphasizes justice as an ethical compromise to limit the domination of power. Meanwhile, at the practical level, Christian Realism remains relevant for interpreting international conflict, neoliberalism, and contemporary digital geopolitics.

These findings indicate that global geopolitical crises fundamentally originate from anthropological and moral problems. Christian Realism views human beings as paradoxical creatures who possess moral

capacities while simultaneously exhibiting egoistic tendencies. Therefore, states, markets, and global institutions always possess the potential to abuse power when ethical consciousness fails to restrain them (Niebuhr, 1960). This explanation becomes important because many modern international relations approaches tend to separate politics from the problem of human morality. Modern international conflicts emerge not only because of unequal distributions of power, but also because of collective pride that encourages states and global actors to pursue domination. Within this context, Christian Realism explains why international law, diplomacy, and global technology frequently fail to establish just peace. Human beings and institutions that remain vulnerable to egoism, hegemonic ambition, and the abuse of power continue to operate all of these structures (Niebuhr, 1996).

The findings of this study both correspond with and differ from previous research in international relations and geopolitical studies. Classical realist studies developed by Mearsheimer (2019), Ikenberry (2009), Duguri et al. (2022), and Kığmari (2024) successfully explain international conflict as a logical consequence of global systemic anarchy. However, this study demonstrates that realism possesses limitations because it fails to provide a normative foundation concerning justice and moral responsibility in international politics. Meanwhile, liberalism and constructivism indeed emphasize international cooperation, norms, and global identity, yet both approaches remain overly optimistic regarding the ability of institutions and human rationality to resolve global conflicts. Therefore, this study strengthens critiques of mainstream international relations theories while simultaneously expanding the discussion through the integration of theological ethics into the interpretation of contemporary geopolitics.

The findings of this study also relate to critical geopolitics and postcolonial approaches. Koopman et al. (2021) and Orford (2021) demonstrate that geopolitics and international law never operate completely neutrally because power relations, colonialism, and hegemonic global interests shape them. This study aligns with these approaches by recognizing the existence of domination bias within modern international politics. However, this study differs because it does not stop at the deconstruction of global power. Instead, Christian Realism offers normative reconstruction through the concepts of relative justice and moral-political responsibility. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its effort to position Christian Realism as a framework of geopolitical ethics that not only criticizes global domination, but also provides moral orientation for international political practice.

Within the context of political theology, the findings of this study expand the works of Moore (2020), Luciani (2020), and Rivarola (2021) concerning the relationship between religion and global geopolitics. Previous studies generally positioned religion as a source of political legitimacy, social identity, or global solidarity. However, this study demonstrates that Christian Realism possesses a broader function, namely as a realistic framework of political ethics for confronting international conflict and contemporary geopolitics. Therefore, Christian Realism functions not only as a form of theological moral reflection, but also as a geopolitical paradigm capable of critically and normatively interpreting global power relations at the same time. Here lies the primary theoretical contribution of this study, namely the expansion of Christian Realism from the context of the Cold War toward twenty-first-century multipolarity and digital geopolitics.

Historically, the findings of this study demonstrate that Christian Realism emerged from the traumatic experiences of the twentieth century, such as world wars, totalitarianism, and global economic depression. However, its relevance becomes even more apparent within twenty-first-century crises characterized by global fragmentation, geopolitical rivalry, and the domination of digital technology (R. W. Lovin, 2009). Socially, Christian Realism helps explain why the global community experiences a crisis of solidarity amid increasing nationalism, neoliberalism, and international economic competition (Moens, 2001). Ideologically, Christian Realism presents a critique of two major extremes in modern politics: liberal utopianism and the cynicism of political realism. Christian Realism rejects the belief that human beings can create a perfect world order through rationality and global institutions, but it also rejects the view that politics merely constitutes a struggle for power without any space for morality (McCann, 2001; Polinder, 2024).

This study also reveals both the functions and dysfunctions of Christian Realism within the context of global geopolitics. The primary function of Christian Realism lies in its ability to provide a

framework of political ethics that realistically acknowledges human limitations while still preserving moral orientation within international politics. Christian Realism can function as a critique of the domination exercised by major powers, global neoliberalism, and technology corporations that tend to ignore humanitarian dimensions. In addition, Christian Realism can provide an ethical foundation for international diplomacy, the limitation of political power, and global digital governance. However, Christian Realism also contains potential dysfunctions when scholars or policymakers apply it too fully compromise toward political realities. Niebuhr's emphasis on the moral ambiguity of politics can be interpreted as justification for the use of power or certain interventions in the name of stability and justice. Therefore, Christian Realism still requires critical and normative supervision so that it does not transform into a new justification for global political domination.

Based on these findings, this study emphasizes the need to strengthen global political ethics capable of responding more contextually to the challenges of multipolarity, neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics. First, international institutions need to strengthen the principles of global justice and the limitation of major-power domination so that international law does not function merely as a hegemonic instrument. Second, global economic governance should prioritize distributive justice and the protection of vulnerable groups in order to reduce the impacts of neoliberal global inequality. Third, international digital governance must establish ethical regulations concerning the domination of technology corporations, artificial intelligence, and global data control. Fourth, scholars and policymakers should expand dialogue between political theology and international relations so that global political ethics does not become trapped within secular approaches that ignore the moral dimension of humanity. Therefore, Christian Realism can function as a realistic, normative, and relevant framework of global political ethics for confronting contemporary geopolitical crises.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that contemporary geopolitical crises involve not only the distribution of global power, but also reflect an increasingly profound crisis of international political ethics. Global multipolarity, international conflict, neoliberalism, and digital geopolitics reveal that mainstream international relations theories have not yet provided adequate normative foundations for confronting twenty-first-century systemic chaos. Within this context, Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism offers a framework of political ethics that is simultaneously realistic and normative. Christian Realism views human beings, states, and global institutions as entities that possess moral capacities while also remaining vulnerable to sin, egoism, and the abuse of power. Therefore, global politics cannot separate itself from the need for justice, moral responsibility, and limitations on power. This study also demonstrates that Christian Realism operates at three major levels: epistemological, normative, and practical. At the epistemological level, Christian Realism helps interpret global political reality dialectically. At the normative level, Christian Realism emphasizes the importance of relative justice as a limitation on domination. Meanwhile, at the practical level, Christian Realism remains relevant for diplomatic ethics, international conflict, global neoliberalism, and contemporary digital governance.

The primary scholarly contribution of this study lies in its effort to reconstruct Christian Realism as a framework of contemporary geopolitical ethics. This study positions Christian Realism not only as a form of theological moral reflection, but also as a theoretical approach capable of bridging the tension between political realism and ethical normativity within international relations studies. The study expands the application of Niebuhr's thought from the context of world wars and the Cold War toward issues of global multipolarity, technology-corporation domination, neoliberalism, and twenty-first-century digital geopolitics. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of interdisciplinary dialogue among political theology, geopolitics, and international relations. In addition, this study also critiques the limitations of mainstream international relations theories, which tend to become excessively cynical, overly optimistic, or overly descriptive in interpreting the moral problems of global politics.

Nevertheless, this study contains several limitations. This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, so it has not empirically examined the application of Christian Realism within foreign policy or the diplomatic practices of specific states. In addition, this study focuses primarily on

theoretical and normative dimensions and therefore has not discussed in depth specific regional dynamics such as the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, or African geopolitics. Future research can develop empirical studies concerning the application of Christian Realism in conflict resolution, global digital governance, multilateral diplomacy, and the international policies of developing countries. Therefore, scholars can continue to develop Christian Realism as a contextual framework of global political ethics for responding to the transformation of the contemporary geopolitical world.

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