

Practical Theology as a New Approach in Religious Discourse and Its Role in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

This study explores the capacities of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The significance of this topic lies in the potential of practical theology to offer a novel framework for understanding and implementing Iran's foreign policy. The main question of the article is: What are the capacities of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The research follows a descriptive-analytical approach, and data have been collected through library research and expert interviews. The research process includes examining the concepts of practical theology and foreign policy, analyzing expert perspectives, and identifying the capacities of practical theology in three main areas: shaping national identity and interests, guiding foreign policy behavior, and offering a new definition of the international order. The article's main contribution is presenting a new perspective on integrating practical theology with foreign policy, which could enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Iran's foreign policy while also providing a basis for more active Iranian engagement in shaping the future global order.

Keywords:

Practical Theology, Foreign Policy, Global Order, Islamic Republic of Iran, International System.

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Introduction

Practical theology emerged as a new approach in the study of religious issues from the 1960s onwards. In the early 19th century, Schleiermacher introduced practical theology alongside two other branches—philosophical and historical theology—thus challenging the traditional view that confined theology to these two branches (Sobhani, 1400). Practical theology seeks to use theology in the study personal and social lives of individuals, with foreign policy being one area where practical theology can be utilised. This prompts the question of to what extent/The research problem is as follows: Practical theology, in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, introduces a new discourse and a new pathway for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and creates capacities for it.

While practical theology is concealed in the Islamic tradition, it has not been translated and adapted to the modern era despite existing in traditional Islamic sources. Foreign policy is one of the arenas in which the confrontation of ideas and approaches is evident. In some cases, these confrontations arise from the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the other side. Practical theology provides the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy with the capacity to pursue its concerns and ideals in the global political arena with a new discourse, and through this pathway, secure the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. If the issue of theology in foreign policy is not addressed and practical approaches are not re-evaluated in accordance with the new conditions of the world and the region, decision-making and policymaking in the field of foreign policy will not be purposeful or intelligent.

Addressing the issue of practical theology in foreign policy is necessary because it creates a framework for the interaction between theology and foreign policy. The aim of the research is to examine the position of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to state how the use of practical theology brings about changes in the structure and institutions of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This research seeks to outline the capacities that practical theology creates for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The research addresses the question, what are the capacities of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The research hypothesis is that practical theology can increase the efficiency of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and contribute to the formulation of its policies and strategies. This study has been conducted using a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytical method. The descriptive-analytical method, as one of the common methods in social and political science research, enables an in-depth

examination of complex phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method begins with a precise description of the phenomenon under study and then analyses its relationships, causes, and consequences (Neuman, 2014). The data for the research have been collected through the documentary-library method and unstructured elite interviews. Descriptive-analytical studies are appropriate for addressing topics that are new from a research perspective and has been chosen for this study since practical theology is a relatively unexplored subject in political science research.

1. Literature Review

Since the literature on practical theology has only recently entered Persian research, the number of studies in this area is limited. Therefore, in the existing research, the relationship between practical theology and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has not been examined, and the nature and characteristics of this relationship have been explored through library sources, historical trends, and the practical experiences of foreign policy officials. Previous studies conducted on this topic can be categorised into the following three groups.

1.1. Works That Have Addressed Practical Theology

In his article, *An Introduction to Practical Theology in Modern Religious Thought* (1390), Babai introduces practical theology as a form of modern religious intellectual history. He examines the historical and social contexts of practical theology in the Western tradition and discusses its theological ideas, including pastoral and moral theology. Ultimately, he reviews practical theology as descriptive, interpretive, normative, and practical

In *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring the Boundaries* (2020), Annemie Dillen and Stefan Gärtner state that religion in late modern society has taken on various forms. In this book, special attention is paid to questions concerning hope and power in relation to pastoral care, the role of clergy in prisons and hospitals, and issues regarding children and theology. The book also serves as an introduction to empirical methodologies and hermeneutical theological reflections.

In the article *Practical Theology as Theology of Religion: Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline* (2005), Wilhelm Gräb introduces Friedrich Schleiermacher as the founder of practical theology as a distinct field within theological studies. He argues that in order to understand the subject of the practical, one must consider Schleiermacher's broader concept of theology and his understanding of religion and Christianity.

1.2. Works That Have Addressed the Role of Religion in International Relations

In the monograph *God and International Relations* (2012), Luoma seeks to explicitly demonstrate that international relations require a mode of inquiry that is closer to theology. He also seeks to reconsider international politics based on the assumption that there is a God in the world whose existence is connected to the lives of individuals, their societies, and their circumstances. In "Religion as the Overlooked Element in International Relations" (2011), Jonathan Fox and Sandal Nukhet argue that religion is one of the neglected factors in the study of international politics. They also emphasises that attention to the international movement for the protection of religious rights is one of the outcomes of the growing interdependence of the contemporary world, thus reinforcing the importance of religion in the study of international politics.

Kanwal Sheikh's *Why Does Religion Matter? The Ways of Religion in International Relations* (2012) explores the ways of using the essential and specific aspects of religion to advance research on religion and international relations. The article argues that scholars of international relations need greater methodological and critical conceptual reflection on how to integrate religion and international relations so as to navigate between the two prevailing analytical positions.

Fox and Sandal Nukhet discuss the multiple and potential impacts of religion on international relations in their article, *Towards the Integration of Religion in International Relations Theory* (2010). These include religious legitimacy, religious worldviews, non-state religious actors such as religious institutions, local religious issues crossing borders, transnational religious movements, and also international issues that intersect with religion.

1.3. Works That Have Addressed Islam in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

In the book *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (National Interests and Islamic Principles)* (1399), Hamid Sirat presents the Islamic Republic as a system built on political thought. Specifically, he refers to Islamic sources, including the Holy Qur'an and the Shi'i political jurisprudence, to explain the relationship between national interests and Islamic principles in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the article, *An Islamic Theory of Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analyzing the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (1390), Dehghani Firouzabadi argues that understanding the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran requires an approach that centres on its identity as an

Islamic government. Action based on the logic of duty (taklif), multilayered rational decision-making, and the concept of expediency (maslahat) are among the theoretical components of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which are derived from the Islamic tradition.

In *A Deconstructive Examination of the Role of Ideology in Iran's Foreign Policy and Its Link to Realism and Idealism* (1388), Ebrahimi argues that the religious nature of its political system renders the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran ideological. However, this ideological nature is not in contradiction with the two approaches of realism and idealism, as Ebrahimi argues that ideology plays a role in the foreign policy of most countries, varying in degree from minimal to significant.

A review of the existing studies reveals that they have not addressed the topic of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and no research has been conducted that examines the subject of theology and foreign policy simultaneously. The contribution of the present research lies in its examination of practical theology in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, both in terms of approach and subject matter, the present study is original.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual foundations begin with an explanation of the key concepts of this study.

2.1. Practical Theology

The term practical theology was first introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher in the book *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (1850). Publishing the book in 1811, Schleiermacher introduced the discussion of practical theology in addition to the two branches of philosophical theology and historical theology that had been recognised up to that time. Practical theology was initially presented as a subsidiary subject under theoretical theology (Schleiermacher, 1850: xvi).

Mohsen Javadi defines practical theology as "the revealed teachings related to the practical and affective aspects of human life that are aimed at securing the good life and the flourishing human existence" (Akbari, 1402: 79).

A concept can also be defined by using its opposite (Rasoulipour, 2023). Therefore, our definition of practical theology is: Bringing into the field and realising the doctrines of theoretical theology in order to address the challenges and problems of religious and non-religious individuals and communities.

The issue of practical theology is the pursuit of the goal and purpose of philosophical theology, meaning that practical theology is tasked with fulfilling the objective of philosophical theology (Schleiermacher, 1850: 187). Specifically, Schleiermacher (1850: 191–192) states that: The goal of practical theology is to impact life, and its other objective is the development of strategic activities within the system of worship, as well as strategic activities in organising ethics or sentiments.

The purpose of practical theology is thus to find methods that respond to the spiritual, psychological, social, and material needs of human beings (Akbari, 1403). In the twentieth century, practical theology has had a more serious presence in the social sphere. In the 1960s and 1970s, movements under the banner of liberation theology emerged in Latin America, in which the Christian clergy supported the oppressed and the poor. These movements, which also influenced the global order, were the product of the engagement of theology with the practical and social sphere.

2.2. Foreign Policy

For foreign policy as the subject of study, two definitions can be offered. Foreign policy as strategy is defined as the formal program of a country for guiding its behaviour and actions in securing its objectives with respect to other international actors and the external environment. And foreign policy as decision, behavior, and strategy is defined as the decisions, actions, measures, and behavior of a country toward other actors and the international environment, which are carried out based on a specific strategy by decision-makers to achieve defined objectives (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 1395: 197).

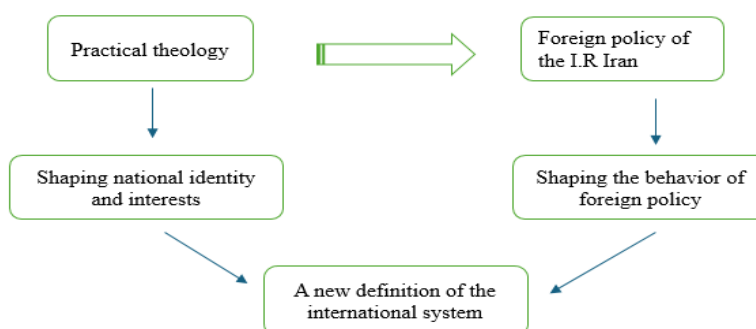


Figure1 : Analytical Model of the Capacities of Practical Theology in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is an approach that seeks, based on certain propositions, to address the shortcomings of other theories and provide a more precise picture of the behavioral patterns of international politics. Constructivism does not focus solely on material forces but also considers ideas and beliefs as relevant factors. Constructivism in international politics is an effort to establish a connection between rationalism and critical approaches (Ghavvam, 1397: 223). Constructivism emphasises intersubjective structures that assign specific meanings to material capabilities. For example, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War emerged from a social structure in which the two countries defined each other as enemies, and the Cold War ended when both sides abandoned this shared social construct.

3. The Capacities of Practical Theology in Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic has always been influenced by theological foundations (Samiei, 1403). While some of the content of these capacities has thus far also been present in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, practical theology helps us to use a new understanding of theological concepts and the function of theology in foreign policy by creating a new discourse (Khani, 1403).

Theology is an intra-religious matter, and its audience is usually those who have accepted the theological foundations of the faith. However, practical theology even has the potential to create a shared discourse for hayat-i tayyibah (the good life) even with non-believers, who, in the words of Imam Ali (AS), are "your equals in creation" (tanzīr laka fī alkhalq). Therefore, while the audience of theoretical theology is only the followers of the faith, the audience of practical theology are all humans.

The Capacities of Practical Theology in Foreign Policy
Shaping national identity and national interests
Shaping foreign policy behaviour
Creating a new definition of the global order

Table1 : The capacities of practical theology in foreign policy

3.1. Shaping National Identity and National Interests

Practical theology shapes national identity and national interest. According to constructivism, states do not have fixed national interests, as national interests is derived from the way they define themselves. In other words, national interests emerges from national identity, and national identity itself is a fluid concept that is a social construct, originating from ideas, beliefs, intersubjective meanings, and norms (Saidi, 1402).

In a country that operates based on practical theology, theology acquires the capacity to promote its own ideas and beliefs in society, and these beliefs and ideas influence the formation of the national identity of that society and that state. Therefore, it can be said that from the Islamic Revolution until now, Islam has shaped the national identity of the Islamic Republic, meaning that Iranian national identity before and after 1979 has been different. Consequently, Iran's national interests and definition of friend and enemy has also changed after the Revolution.

By drawing upon theological principles as well as an understanding of global dynamics, practical theology can help shape the priorities of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and focus the country's priorities on the issue of the economy. Just as defending the country is a theological matter, striving to prevent the impoverishment of the people is also theological.

One of the shortcomings of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is that practical theology has been defined ideologically and non-contextually. Therefore, it is necessary to move away from an abstract understanding of practical theology and to adopt a contextual perspective that is attentive to existing realities. Contextual perspective of practical theology means that instead of relying solely on general, broad, and purely theoretical solutions, we seek specific, situational, and adaptive solutions to address foreign policy issues. According to the definition of practical theology presented, we use the theoretical capacities of theology to solve the practical issues of foreign policy. It follows naturally that solving concrete and specific problems requires a detailed and problem-oriented perspective.

3.2. Determining and Shaping the Behavior of Foreign Policy

Practical theology provides decision-makers with a normative and spiritual framework for guiding foreign policy, and it also plays a role in shaping Iran's image and international identity. Through this framework, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to present itself as a moral power on the global stage; a power whose policies are not based solely on material interests but are shaped according to human and religious values. This kind of behavioral orientation leads Iran's foreign policy towards a completely different direction

from that of other countries. For example, major decisions such as supporting Palestine or resisting the influence of major powers are made not only based on strategic calculations but also as a religious and moral duty. This type of decision-making, which is based on practical theology, can result in behaviors that, from an outside perspective, may sometimes seem illogical or even costly. However, from the perspective of the Islamic Republic, they are considered part of a larger mission and a divine duty.

Furthermore, attention to the “Islamic Republic’s forms of appeal” is one of the most important opportunities that practical theology has to offer. From the perspective of Ayatollah Khamenei, the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, part of which involves a challenge to the global order, have created two significant attractions for the Islamic Republic at the global level: first, political appeal, and second, spiritual appeal (Khamenei, 1403). The political and spiritual appeal factors of the Islamic Republic are a significant resource derived from theology. Attention to these appeal factors can position the Islamic Republic as a pioneering and exemplary country. Indeed, it can be argued that the political and spiritual attractions of the Islamic Republic of Iran stem from its practical theology. Resistance and standing up against the interference of major powers in the affairs of others are among the appeal factors of the Islamic Republic, with the global public being its primary audience.

3.3. Creating a New Definition of the International Order

Part of the challenge of the Islamic Republic with the international order concerns the grouping of the global order, in which countries are divided into the First World, the Second World, and the Third World, or into the center and the periphery. When a country seeks to move from the periphery to the center, it encounters resistance from the core countries, and this leads to the creation of challenges. In this regard, by creating a new discourse in the international system, the Islamic Republic seeks to act beyond the existing structures (Amouei, 1403). The dichotomy of the *mustaz’afin* (the oppressed) and the *mustakbirin* (the arrogant) is a demarcation that goes beyond the Westphalian order, because it recognises the *mustaz’afin* beyond the framework of the nation-state, and wherever there is an oppressed person, the Islamic Republic of Iran considers it its duty to support them. This is the very movement toward both a cosmopolitan world, and an global Islamic community.

Until now, the division of the First World, the Second World, and the Third World has been prominent in liberal discourse, and the core–periphery division has been prominent in the literature of international relations. The

mustaz'afin–mustakbirin dichotomy is a new binary, based on which anyone in the camp of the mustaz'afin bears responsibility toward the other oppressed peoples of the world (Jaberi Ansari, 1403).

3.3.1. The International Role of Religions

Based on practical theology, religions can play a profound role in redefining the global order, because religions, unlike political or economic ideologies that are usually limited to national or specific group interests, are founded on a universal and global basis (Moqaddam Damad, 1403). This universality allows religions to promote values that are not only acceptable among their own followers but also among all human beings.

Within this framework, religions can act as moral and spiritual references that redefine the global order based on principles such as justice, peace, and human solidarity. Practical theology assigns an active role to religions in this redefinition, meaning that religions must act not only as moral observers but also as active participants on the global stage. This active role includes conflicts resolution, combating injustice, and create spaces for international dialogue based on shared values. For example, a religion can draw upon its unique position to mediate in international or regional conflicts and help create peaceful and just solutions.

3.3.2. The Principle of Kalimatun Sawa' in Global Politics

Practical theology helps foreign policy to move beyond the dominant metaphors in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to introduce new metaphors. For example, in foreign policy, metaphors such as "friend and enemy" are among the most common metaphors used; however, by utilising the capacities of practical theology, it is possible to arrive at new metaphors. The metaphor of Kalimatun Tayyibah (the pure word) can present a foreign policy based on moral conduct and sound speech. The principle of Kalimatun Sawa' in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is one of the opportunities that practical theology has created for foreign policy.

The principle of Kalimatun Sawa' is one of the shared principles among all, upon which a new global order can be built. The story of this principle traces back to the event of Mubahala in the tenth year after the Hijra. This event refers to when the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) wrote a letter to the Christians of Najran and invited them to Islam. After receiving the letter, a delegation of Christians from Najran came to Medina to negotiate with the Prophet. After discussions between the two sides, the Christians of Najran refused to accept Islam and proposed that both sides pray and ask God to curse the liars: Now, whoever disputes with you 'O Prophet' concerning Jesus after

full knowledge has come to you, say, “Come! Let us gather our children and your children, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves—then let us sincerely invoke Allah’s curse upon the liars (Al-Imran, verse 61).

This act is known as mubahala, and its lesson to the world today lies in the proposal that the Messenger of God presented in response to the proposal of Mubahala by the Christians. Mubahala, or invocation of curses, was proposed by the Christians, but the Prophet’s response was to stand on *Kalimatun Sawa’*: Say, O Prophet, “O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms: that we will worship none but Allah, associate none with Him, nor take one another as lords instead of Allah.” But if they turn away, then say, “Bear witness that we have submitted to Allah alone” (Al-Imran, verse 64).

The principle of *Kalimatun Sawa’* is a principle that can unite the world based on a theological idea around shared human principles. The characteristic of this principle is that it emphasises unity and oneness, and all can unite under this principle. This principle minimises differences and maximises commonalities. It does not permit the oppression of one group by another, and according to it, no one has superiority over others. These are precisely the needs of the global order.

The practical theology of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran must strive to advance a positive idea in its challenge with the global order, an idea that can first unite the Islamic world and then align religions and all freedom-seekers in a single front. *Kalimatun Sawa’* emphasises commonalities, in contrast to religious radicalism, which focuses on differences and adopts an exclusionary approach. Practical theology in politics thus seeks maximum inclusion and the expansion of shared grounds with others; that we worship God, do not serve anyone besides God, and do not associate partners with Him are the three principles that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) teaches us in the principle of *Sawa’*. These principles can also be translated into the realm of politics and relations with other countries.

Sawa’ therefore means that maximising commonalities should be a priority in foreign policy, and that we should build friendly relations with countries with whom we share even a minimal level of common ground. One of the dichotomies that practical theology creates is the dichotomy of inclusion versus exclusion, which is based on the principle of *Sawa’*. In this dichotomy, practical theology primarily advocates and emphasises inclusion.

Conclusion

Our structures present an image of practical theology, but this image is not necessarily complete. Sometimes it is partial, and sometimes it is

asymmetrical. The practical theology that exists in the Islamic Republic does not necessarily encompass all of theoretical theology and, in some cases, has been selective. The Islamic theological tradition is not limited solely to the principle of Nafiy-e Sabil (negation of domination), rather, other practical principles such as Kalimatun Sawa' can be derived from within theology, and the foundation of foreign policy can be built based on a set of these principles. Practical theology is also not merely the practical implications of theoretical theology. Rather, what we do in practice shows what we think in theoretical theology, and since actions are important, the deficiencies and weaknesses in practice indicate that there are also challenges at the level of theoretical theology. In fact, practical theology is a test for assessing theoretical theology. Therefore, practical theology not only helps us bring theology into the realm of action but, through the back-and-forth between theory and practice, also reveals the theoretical weaknesses and helps to revise the existing understanding of theoretical theology.

Practical theology has a worldly and functional perspective on religion. This does not mean a rejection of the otherworldly dimension of religion, but rather an attempt to expand the ideational and functional capacities of religion. Before the modern era, the prevailing understanding was that religion was responsible for constructing the afterlife of human beings, and that the world was a place of passage. However, modern human beings have focused all their attention on this world. Practical theology seeks to utilise religion to improve the worldly life of human beings and to alleviate their suffering and hardship. As a result, the audience of practical theology is not limited to believers; rather, its aim is to help all human beings.

The Islamic Republic can use practical theology to reform its roles, strategies, policies, and consequently, its foreign policy behavior. This does not mean that decision-makers have not used religion and theology until now; rather, it means that by returning to religious sources and also paying simultaneous attention to human achievements and experiences, a new understanding of the role of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy can be achieved. The Islamic Republic has engaged with the existing discourse in the West Asia region, but we do not have a shared discourse for engaging with Muslims in East Asia and Europe and know little of their concerns. Practical theology can help the Islamic Republic's foreign policy manage its challenge with the global order and move Iran toward development. However, this will be achieved only when we return to traditional sources with a new perspective and, instead of adopting a selective approach to theological concepts, strive to utilise all of its capacities. Innovation in understanding religious concepts and

using them to define the interests and roles of foreign policy is a necessity for today's Iran.

This research has not sought to explore how theological concepts should be redefined, but it has to show that, despite the absence of an established literature, we currently do have practical theology, and by turning to our religious tradition, our historical experiences, and the experiences of others, we can use practical theology to address the issues of foreign policy. Evidently, we must understand that in order to change the current conditions, it is not only others who must change; we, too, must take a critical look at ourselves and strive to address our theoretical and practical weaknesses.

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