Practical Theology and Religious Pathology: A Case Study of Morteza Motahhari[*]

Jahangir Masoudi[1] ⓘ

Abstract

Practical theology represents one of several new classifications within theology in the Western and Christian world, focusing on the application and function of theological teachings in human life. Although this branch of theology has no precedent in the Islamic world, the emphasis on its practical and functional aspects can be found in Muslim intellectuals' and religious reformers' orientations and thoughts. This connection is particularly evident in religious pathology, where Muslim reformers have sought to identify the causes of the decline of Islamic civilization and find solutions by revisiting Islamic teachings and beliefs. Among contemporary Islamic intellectuals, Martyr Morteza Motahhari, especially in the latter half of his life, has shown significant concern for this area, striving in most of his works to present an accurate understanding of Islamic teachings, which he believed have been misunderstood. After explaining the link between practical theology and religious reform, as well as the efforts of religious reformers in the pathology of religious beliefs and convictions, the author focuses on Motahhari and his works as a case study, eventually citing examples from his works.

Keywords: practical theology, religious pathology, religious reform, Morteza Motahhari, cognitive therapy

1. Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Wisdom, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. (masoudi-g@um.ac.ir)

1. The Nature of Practical Theology

To discuss practical theology, it is necessary first to obtain a clear and consensus-based understanding. Although there seems to be no single image of practical theology, we can at least define our perception of it. Practical theology is a relatively new branch rooted in Christianity and traces back to Schleiermacher in the West.

Practical theology expands the application and function of theological teachings in individual and social human life. Defining practical theology is challenging due to the breadth of its activities. Perhaps the most precise and comprehensive definition of practical theology is the following. "Practical theology refers to a field of studies where religious beliefs, traditions, and behaviors meet contemporary human experiences, concerns, and behaviors, resulting in theological enrichment, intellectual critique, and cultural transformation" (Babaei 2011, 115). In summary, practical theology contemplates individual and social human action from a theological perspective. This theology—selecting its theological issues from "the street"—initially analyzes and interprets social and cultural realities theologically. Then, with a critical perspective on faith and religious issues in the current culture, it seeks to pave the way for a life of faith for believers (solving existing problems in religious thought and life) and addresses the challenges of life for non-believers, drawing from theological sources. While practical theology utilizes human products and knowledge for worldly life, it assists the religious and the non-religious in managing a proper worldly existence. Such a mission depends on a considered relationship between methods of social analysis and interpretation to facilitate a deeper understanding of religion in connection with social experience and, on the other, to reform social life through a reasonable and justified reliance on religion (Babaei 2011, 116).

Practical theology is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between theological theory and practice. It examines theological viewpoints and ideas that can influence our religious behavior and actions, striving to trace the theoretical perspectives to their practical applications in the lives of the devout. Thus, practical theology's primary focus and task inevitably revolve around the interplay between theological theory and action. This focus leads to insights regarding the primary responsibilities of practical theologians, which will be discussed.

1.1. Practical Theology and Reform

Practical theology's emphasis on the nexus between theological thought and religious practice closely aligns it with religious intellectualism and reform. The terms "religious intellectual" [*rowshanfekr-e dīnī*, in Persian] and "religious reformer" [*nowandīsh-e dīnī*] have been widely used in the cultural and political literature following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. There has been

considerable debate over the meaning of the former term, to the extent that some consider its use contradictory (Malekian n.d., 1). However, less controversy surrounds the latter term, allowing for a more comfortable engagement. In Islamic societies, a religious reformer is a Muslim thinker who inherits a vast religious culture and the modern world's culture. Such an individual cannot entirely disregard their religious heritage, aware that some aspects may not align with the contemporary world's achievements. Consequently, the religious reformer seeks solutions for the issues facing Islamic society, especially the Muslims' backwardness, and attempts to address questions arising from the clash between Islam and modernity. Based on this, a religious reformer or intellectual is defined as a Muslim thinker whose primary concern is the issue of tradition and modernity and the possibility of reconciling the two (Masoudi 2007, 24). According to this definition, one of the critical differences between religious reformers and scholars teaching theology and other religious knowledge is their concern for the efficacy of religion; that is, religious intellectuals focus on the practical realization and effectiveness of religion in society and among individuals.

When comparing religious scholars with religious reformers, it is evident that religious scholars are concerned with the purity of religion and are, in a sense, "Puritans," wary of their theological and religious ideas becoming contaminated with non-religious elements. In contrast, rather than focusing on religious purity, religious intellectuals worry about whether religion can succeed in its historical practice and guide its followers toward its goals, essentially realizing what is expected of it. Therefore, religious reformers pay significant attention to the efficacy of religion, which closely aligns them with the character of the practical theologian.

The curriculum of practical theology, focusing on the relationship between theological theory and practice, guides the practical theologian and the religious intellectual toward a common task: the pathology of religion. They have realized that undesirable events have occurred in religious practice, and the devout have encountered problems rooted in their religious beliefs and theological views. For instance, in his book *Human and Destiny and Revival of Religious Thought*, Morteza Motahhari discusses the decline of Muslims in the contemporary era, asserting that, with few exceptions, Islamic countries are the most backward in industry, science, ethics, humanity, and spirituality. However, he also examines the causes of this decline, paying particular attention to religious and belief-based factors that may have contributed to it (Motahhari 1995a, 346).

1.2. Practical Theology and Religious Pathology

Attention to the practical arena and the function of religion drives the practical theologian and the religious reformer toward the duty of religious pathology.

Religious reformers have made it one of their tasks to identify the harms that have emerged in the realm of religion or among the religious. Indeed, the Muslim reformer or the modern theologian does not limit this duty of pathology to Islamic beliefs and knowledge alone but extends it to encompass all aspects of Islamic civilization. What distinguishes his approach in the pathology discussion from other social science thinkers is that he looks at the problems of Islamic society and proposes solutions from religious studies and theological perspectives, making his solutions fundamentally theological and religiously knowledgeable. This distinction highlights the theological aspect of his work (Masoudi 2021, 14). This duty elevates the religious reformer to the role of a religious healer, as recognizing harm necessitates its treatment. Thus, practical theologians, like religious reformers, gradually take on the responsibility of identifying and treating any pain, disease, or affliction that has arisen in the practical arena of the religious community and believers. Religious healing is divided into two branches, which will be discussed later.

2. The Therapeutic Approach of Muslim Reformers

Muslim thinkers, in analyzing the reasons behind the decline of Islamic civilization—unwilling or unable to attribute this decline to Islam itself—inevitably sought the causes in factors external to Islam, including the behavior of Muslims. They concluded that there is no flaw in Islam; the main problem is that Muslims have failed to act upon authentic Islam and organize their behavior accordingly. Therefore, their primary advice for solving this problem is to reform Muslim behavior and return to authentic Islam, which they also made the motto of their reform program. This slogan precisely means a behavioral return to Islam and aligning behavior with the teachings of early Islam. Hence, the reform program of this group can be termed "behavior therapy" (Masoudi 2021, 66).

The approach in question was characteristic of the first generation of religious reformers. However, the second generation acknowledged the decline of Islamic civilization and the behavioral problems of Muslims and their religious community. Yet, they traced the root of this decline further back, identifying it in the thinking and understanding of Muslims, or more precisely, their interpretation of Islam. According to this group, errors and damages in Muslims' cognition have led to disorders and damages in their behaviors, which in turn resulted in the regression and decline of Islamic civilization. This perspective is called "cognitive therapy" (Masoudi 2009, 153).

Cognitive therapy, one of the most prominent methods and perspectives in psychotherapy, is utilized in our discussions on the pathology of religion. Founded in 1960 by the American psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck, cognitive therapy believes that

thought precedes the other two existential components of human beings: emotion and behavior. It asserts that all changes in human feelings and behaviors result from changes in thoughts. Cognitive therapists argue that our thoughts, ideas, and mental schemas construct our emotions, feelings, and actions. Therefore, to alter emotions and behaviors, one must begin with changing thoughts (Masoudi 2021, 67). Based on this, thought is the primary vertex in the existential triangle of human beings. Thus, one should start with people's thoughts to undertake a reformative project concerning an individual or a society.

David Burns' *The Feeling Good Handbook* is an example of translated work in this field, where the author states that if you want to feel better, you need to understand that it is not external events but your thoughts and perceptions that create your feelings. You can change your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This simple yet revolutionary principle aids you in transforming your life (Burns 1991, 28).

3. Morteza Motahhari and Practical Theology: A Religious Cognitive Therapy Project

Morteza Motahhari, a contemporary religious thinker, can be situated within the cognitive therapy project for religion. He posits that the foundation of the challenges faced in Islamic civilization can be traced back to our religious knowledge, perceptions, and thoughts. Motahhari argues that for these issues to be resolved there must be a transformation in our religious understandings and ideologies. He believes human actions reflect their thoughts and worldviews (Motahhari 2006, V. 2, 159).

In his article "The Revival[1] of Religious Thought" from the book *Ten Discourses*, Motahhari writes,

> Our religious thinking must undergo reconstruction. Our perception of religion is incorrect, incorrect. I boldly claim that beyond a handful of minor issues, particularly in worship rituals, with a few about transactions, once we move past these, we no longer hold a correct understanding of religion [...]. We are Muslims whose thinking about Islam is flawed ... Religion has become a societal opiate, but which religion? The concoction we have crafted today. (Moṭahharī 1995b, 15.)

We need this reform because our religious thought is erroneous. Islam exists, but the Islam that exists is

> ineffective and impactless, incapable of initiating movement or action, unable to provide energy or insight. It resembles a withered, pest-ridden tree standing erect yet wilted and depressed. If it bears leaves, those leaves are withered, exhibiting a pitiful state. (Motahhari 1995a, 78)

For this reason, he also believes: "It is necessary for us to revitalize our Islamic thought and to change our perception of Islam" (Motahhari 1995a, 143).

Therefore, according to Motahhari, our religious beliefs, especially in theology, are flawed, and we must rectify them. The outcome of this correction and change will transform the Islamic civilization. If we stand at this point today, it is our religious thoughts that have brought us here.

This concept is at the heart of practical theology, focusing on the relationship between religious theory and practice. If there have been undesirable outcomes in religion's function, we can trace their origins to our flawed theological thoughts. The solution? Cognitive therapy. But first, we must engage in a religious pathology of our theological thoughts.

It is crucial to recognize that religious reformers, particularly Morteza Motahhari, never intended to dismantle the traditional religious thought system in favor of establishing a new framework. Instead, they believed in the efficacy and strength of the existing intellectual system, identifying the primary issue as our misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Thus, they argued against altering the system, advocating for correcting erroneous interpretations instead. Their goal was to rejuvenate and modernize our perception and understanding of Islam and its teachings, not to revive or renew Islam itself (Motahhari 2006, 144-146; 1995a, 94). From this perspective, Motahhari can be considered a traditional reformer who, while steadfast in his belief in the conventional framework of religion, strives in his various works to present accurate interpretations of these teachings and concepts. He offers new and acceptable interpretations of diverse religious concepts such as monotheism, resurrection, prophethood, divine justice, the finality of prophethood, imamate, *ijtihād*, religious worldview, women's rights, *hijab*, and the event of ʿĀshūrā. These interpretations are not based on foundational upheaval but are refined and processed within the capabilities of the traditional religious system.

From when Motahhari moved from Qom to Tehran until his martyrdom, his writings and lectures consistently focused on practical theology. Whether discussing the Islamic system of women's rights, *hijab*, Islamic economics, the event of ʿĀshūrā, the issue of divine justice, human destiny, or other subjects, all his works fit within the framework of practical theology through the lens of religious pathology. His extensive work includes numerous examples of religious pathology based on a cognitive therapeutic approach, which will be discussed further.

3.1. An Example of Religious Pathology: Predestination and Divine Decree

One exemplary case of Motahhari's approach to religious pathology is his discussion on fate and destiny. In the introduction to his book *Human and His Destiny*, Motahhari examines theological issues through the prism of practical theology, stating that,

> The issue of fate and destiny, both thematically and pedagogically, falls within the realm of philosophical matters [...]. However, this treatise is part of a series of discussions titled "Discussions on the Causes of the Decline of Muslims," covering various topics, phenomena, and issues [...]. What connects these diverse discussions is an investigation into their positive and negative effects on the advancement and decline of the Islamic community. (Motahhari n.d., *Human and His Destiny*, 8)

Concerning the link between the issue of fate and destiny and the decline of Muslims, Motahhari explains,

> The purpose of addressing this issue in this treatise is to investigate whether, as philosophical principles dictate, it belongs to the type of beliefs and thoughts that lead its adherents to laxity and laziness. Do people who lean towards this belief inevitably drift towards decline? Or, if this belief is properly taught, does it not have such a negative impact? (Motahhari n.d., *Human and His Destiny*, 8)

Motahhari further explains that for the past twenty years, the decline of Islamic civilization has engaged scholars, presenting a variety of theories regarding its causes. Some attribute this decline primarily to colonialism, while others point to despotism. Another perspective suggests that the root cause lies in the division among Muslims, which fragmented them into different sects that eventually conflicted with each other, leading to the civilization's downfall.

In this context, Morteza Motahhari discusses these factors, also mentioning the views of some Orientalists who have delved deeply into Islamic studies and the history of Islamic civilization, proposing another candidate and suggesting that while all these factors are correct, they are merely effects. They argue that the primary cause of the decline of Islamic civilization is the beliefs and viewpoints of Muslims, or in other words, Islamic theology. According to them, Islamic theology has led Muslims to the depths of disgrace and the decline of Islamic civilization (Motahhari n.d., 16-23, 46).

According to these Orientalists, if the religious views of Muslims on topics such as the origin and end of the universe, God, humanity, and many other subjects were to be adopted by any society, that society would also face decline. Motahhari enumerates several of the most significant beliefs that have been criticized in this regard, including fate and divine Decree, the afterlife and the disdain for worldly life, intercession (*shifāʿa*), dissimulation (*taqīyya*), and the return of the al-Mahdī (PBUH) (Motahhari n.d., 16).

In his book *Human and Destiny*, Motahhari elaborates on these premises solely to address the challenge of whether the divine Will and other theological views regarding the relationship between God and humans can ground them in practical and civilizational issues, leading to the decay of civilization in the social and civilizational arena. It appears that Motahhari's approach is to articulate and

critique the orientalists' viewpoint and to respond to it. However, the book concludes with a paradox: on the one hand, Motahhari seems to believe that a correct interpretation of theological views does not necessarily lead to decline, but on the other hand, he implicitly acknowledges that Muslims have misunderstood the concept of fate and divine Decree in their civilization for a thousand years, thereby conceding that the claims of orientalists who have raised such arguments may not be entirely unfounded.

Motahhari presents two distinct perspectives on fate and divine Will, delineating a complex theological concept within Islamic thought. Initially, he describes a view where humans are entirely passive, with divine Will as the primary agent shaping our desires and actions. This depiction suggests a deterministic universe where the overarching Will of God effectively nullifies human agency. However, Motahhari also acknowledges an alternative perspective, emphasizing human agency and responsibility. In this view, individuals actively make choices and perform actions that, in turn, construct divine fate. This perspective positions humans not as passive recipients of divine Will but as active participants in shaping their destiny.

Motahhari supports the latter view as the correct interpretation, illustrating his point with a narrative involving ʿAli ibn abī Ṭālib (PBUH), the first Imam of Shiʿa Islam. The story recounts how ʿAli, sitting under a structurally unsound wall, chooses to move to the safety of a tree's shade upon realizing the wall's instability. When questioned if he was fleeing God's Decree, ʿAli eloquently replies that he is moving from one divine Decree to another. The wall may collapse and obliterate me, but now that I have distanced myself from it if the wall does collapse, I will remain unharmed (Motahhari n.d., 73).

Motahhari's point is that there is not just one decree; instead, there are multiple decrees and destinies from which we choose. For instance, if a child suffering from a high fever is taken to a doctor and treated, they can survive. However, if, due to negligence, the child is given the wrong medicine and dies, one might attribute it to fate, whereas the choice not to take the child to the doctor was mine. Motahhari believes that we shape our destiny.

Motahhari laments how the first, more deterministic view has historically overshadowed the second, more active interpretation within the Islamic tradition. This shift, he argues, has contributed to a sense of fatalism among Muslims, hindering the progress of Islamic civilization. By contrast, embracing the second view, which acknowledges human agency in shaping divine Will, could foster a more dynamic and responsible approach to life and civilization building. There is one theological thought about the divine Will, which is understood in two distinct ways. The first perspective posits that God's will imposes itself upon humans and all their actions, resulting in a passive role for humanity. Conversely, the second

perspective assigns an active role to humans, fostering a responsible and proactive outlook on their choices and actions. (Motahhari n.d., 56; 76-93; 97-104).

3.2. The Second Case Study: *Badāʾ*

Continuing our exploration of exemplary cases, the second case study focuses on *Badāʾ*.[2] Motahhari highlights and lauds this concept in *Human and Destiny* as a unique Shiʿa knowledge.

In the entire history of human intellectual systems, it is unprecedented. Among the Islamic sects, only the scholars of Twelver Shiism have managed to grasp this truth through guidance and drawing from the words of the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (PBUT) and have distinguished themselves with this honor. Here, we cannot delve into this sophisticated philosophical topic in detail and clarify the matter as it truly is. We merely point out that *Badāʾ* has Quranic roots and represents one of the most subtle philosophical truths. Among Shiite philosophers, only a few who have deeply contemplated the Quran and benefited from the works and words of Shiite leaders, especially the words of the first Imam, ʿAli (PBUH), have achieved a deep understanding of this matter. (Motahhari n.d., 66)

Motahhari elaborates on the commonly held view that there are two realms— the higher and the lower (the earthly world)—with influences typically descending from the higher to the lower. However, the question arises whether the lower realm can impact the higher. The answer is affirmative, embodying the essence and reality of *Badāʾ*. This concept opens a different worldview, theology, and understanding of divinity. Rather than confining humans to earthly limitations, this theology actively engages them in the sphere of action, making them vibrant and active participants (Motahhari n.d., 64-73).

3.3. The Third Case Study: Divine Justice

The discourse on divine Justice, as explored by Motahhari in works such as *Human and Destiny* and *Ten Discourses*, represents one of the numerous instances that could be cited from his varied contributions. This allows for an examination of his other texts, including *Divine Justice*, *The Ḥusaynī Epic*, and *The Distortions of ʿĀshūrā*, through the lens of practical theology and cognitive therapy. In *Divine Justice*, Motahhari dissects the complex concept of divine Justice into more straightforward and specific issues. A focal point of this discussion is the perception of Islam among many Muslims, prompted by the Quranic verse "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" (Quran, 3:19), leading to questions about the acceptance of non-Muslims' beliefs and deeds and the implication that righteous non-Muslims are condemned to hell. Such a view, it is argued, seems incompatible with divine Justice. Motahhari contends that the prevailing image of Islam held by these questioners is flawed and necessitates the portrayal of an

accurate understanding of Islam. He asserts that true Islam requires individuals to submit to and uphold the truth to the extent they comprehend it, distinguishing it from the superficial practice of declaring faith verbally.

Motahhari further argues that our perceptions of God, the relationship between God and humanity, and numerous other aspects are problematic. For instance, as pointed out in *Divine Justice*, some conceptualize intercession as reminiscent of favoritism, implying possible discrimination within God's system and His relationship with humans. Across his works, Motahhari endeavors to present a correct understanding of these concepts to his readers (Motahhari n.d., 221).

4. Conclusion

Practical theology is a branch primarily focused on the application and function of theological teachings and their role in individuals' practical and social lives. This focus closely aligns with contemporary religious reformers in the Islamic world. Among these thinkers, individuals such as Sayyid Jamāl and many of his students and followers attribute the decline of Islamic civilization to the behaviors of Muslims, advocating for behavioral therapy as a remedy. Conversely, another group led by Mohammad Iqbal identifies the root cause of the decline not in behaviors but in the theological thoughts of Muslims, focusing on cognitive therapy and theological therapy as a solution. They believe that the issues observed in the religious behavior and actions of Muslims over the past centuries, leading to the decline of Islamic civilization, are the result of their religious thoughts and knowledge, especially their theological thoughts. Therefore, the primary duty of the religious reformer is to examine the pathology of religious viewpoints and theological doctrines to achieve a correct understanding of them. This task initially requires religious pathology and, subsequently, religious cognitive therapy. Among contemporary Iranian religious thinkers, Motahhari was one of those who valued examining the decline of Islamic civilization and its solutions, and in his various works—such as *Human and Destiny*, *Divine Justice*, *The Ḥusaynī Epic*, etc.—he focused on the project of cognitive therapy and theology therapy. He endeavored to accurately depict the Islamic teachings and concepts such as predestination and free will, dissimulation, *jihad*, intercession, dissimulation, women's rights, Islamic economics, the return of the al-Mahdī (PBUH), etc. The examples described in the final section of the article well illustrate Motahhari's constructive efforts in this direction. It seems that understanding this process aids us in better comprehending practical theology and the narrative of religious reform.

References

Babaei, Habibollah. 2011. "An Introduction to Practical Theology in Modern Religious Thought." *Naqd wa naẓar, 16*(61): 115-135. (In Persian)

Burns, David D. *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Translated into Persian by Mehdi Qarachehdaghi. Tehran: Āriyan Kār Publications, 1990. (In Persian)

Malekian, Mostafa. N.d. "Rationality, Religion, Reform." *Kherad*, *16*: 1. (In Persian)

Masoudi, Jahangir. 2007. *Hermeneutics and Religious Reform*. Qom: Research Institute of Islamic Sciences and Culture. (In Persian)

Masoudi, Jahangir. 2009. "Muṭahharī and the Neo-Religious Thinking." *Essays in Philosophy and Kalam 41* (2): 149-172. (In Persian)

Masoudi, Jahangir. 2021. *Islamic Modernism*. Mashhad: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad Press. (In Persian)

Motahhari, Morteza. 1995a. *Collected Works*, vol. 1. Tehran: Sadra. (In Persian)

Motahhari, Morteza. 1995b. *Ten Discourses*. Tehran: Sadra. (In Persian)

Motahhari, Morteza. 2006. *Notes of Master Motahhari*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. Tehran: Sadra. (In Persian)

Motahhari, Morteza. n.d., *Human and Destiny*. Tehran: The Scholarly and Cultural Foundation of Martyr Morteza Motahhari. (In Persian)

Notes

1. Regarding the title of this article, Motahhari does not interpret "revival" in its literal sense. Rather, he employs the term to signify "reconstruction."

2. In Motahhari's definition, *Badā'* is a term in Shiite theology that refers to the revelation of a matter by God, contrary to what the servants had anticipated. In this phenomenon, God essentially obliterates what was expected and brings forth a new Decree. This change in Divine Will and action occurs due to factors such as the prayers of the servants or alterations in the lower world.