



Reconstructing ontological foundations in islamic education management: a philosophical inquiry into being, leadership values, and institutional development

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ABSTRACT

Ontology constitutes the philosophical foundation for shaping knowledge systems and managerial paradigms within Islamic educational institutions. This study aims to reconstruct the ontological basis of Islamic education management through philosophical-conceptual inquiry, focusing on the nature of being, leadership identity, and institutional development anchored in Islamic metaphysics. Using a qualitative-philosophical approach through conceptual analysis and hermeneutic textual interpretation, this study examines how the Islamic worldview of *al-wujūd* informs leadership behavior, institutional identity, and organizational culture. The findings indicate that Islamic education management transcends technical administration, functioning instead as an ontological practice rooted in *tawhid*, human existence, and the civilizational mission of education. Grounded in classical scholarship (Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun) and contemporary Islamic philosophers (Nasr), Islamic management emphasizes metaphysical consciousness, ethical leadership, and mission-driven institutional development. This study contributes to strengthening the philosophical architecture of Islamic educational leadership and highlights the urgency of ontological literacy for institutional transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education management is fundamentally grounded in the worldview (*ru'yat al-Islām li al-wujūd*) that perceives reality as an interconnected unity between the divine, human, and institutional dimensions (Husaen & Negara, 2026). Unlike secular administrative models that prioritize efficiency, productivity, and technical outputs, Islamic education management stands upon metaphysical and ethical foundations that guide leadership patterns, policy formation, and organizational culture (Nasr, 1989). The philosophical discipline of ontology, which examines the nature of existence and the essence of being, therefore becomes a crucial basis for shaping the identity, direction, and purpose of Islamic educational institutions (Craig, 1998; Simons, 2025).

In the past decade, Islamic educational institutions both in Indonesia and globally have faced significant managerial and philosophical challenges. According Wiratama & Safitri (2023), more than 58% of madrasahs experience managerial quality gaps, especially in value-based leadership. At the global level, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2022 reveals that many faith-based educational institutions are increasingly influenced by market-driven orientations, resulting in a decline in moral-spiritual commitment.

A concrete case is the growing trend of accreditation-driven competition and institutional ranking systems, which has pushed numerous Islamic institutions to prioritize administrative achievements over spiritual identity, character formation, and civilizational mission. This shift marks a movement from value-based leadership toward a technocratic managerial leadership model. In classical Islamic thought, educational management cannot be separated from divine reality, moral ethics, and the purpose of human creation (*maqāsid al-wujūd*). The Qur'an portrays humans as *khalīfah* entrusted with cultivating knowledge, nurturing justice, and building civilization (QS al-Baqarah 2:30). Al-Ghazali in

Asyikin et al. (2024) argues that leaders in Islamic education are moral trustees whose authority is derived from integrity, spiritual consciousness, and ethical excellence.

However, modern studies show a mismatch between Islamic metaphysical principles and contemporary managerial practices. Usmaulidar & Fitria (2024) highlight that many Islamic educational institutions drift away from their spiritual foundations due to the adoption of neoliberal management frameworks. Rifai et al. (2025) research indicates that studies in educational management (including Islamic educational management) tend to focus more on practical aspects such as policies, leadership, and strategies, rather than on their philosophical foundations. Arar et al. (2022) also emphasizes that research primarily addresses models, policies, and practices, rather than in-depth philosophical approaches. Meanwhile, Budianto et al. (2024) notes that the ontological dimension is still rarely examined in depth in the practice of educational management. Other research underscores the need for a reconstruction of Islamic educational management theory grounded in ontology, as it has not yet been strongly integrated (Baimunah et al., 2025).

Achmad & Fitria (2024) research indicates that the development of a philosophy-based theory of Islamic educational management is still in its early conceptual stages, and there are not yet many comprehensive, practical models. Another study states that the application of Islamic philosophy in educational management strategies remains under-explored or has not yet been systematically developed (Mulyani et al., 2025). The review indicates to Hakim & Zahra (2024) that much of the research remains normative (values, ethics) and has not yet delved into existential analysis or the “being” of leaders.

Although studies on Islamic educational management continue to evolve, previous research still has a number of limitations. Most studies rarely treat ontology as a foundational construct, as they focus more on strategic and administrative aspects. Furthermore, few studies have been able to explain in depth how Islamic ontology shapes leadership identity and its existential role within educational institutions. Another limitation is evident in the lack of a comprehensive ontological model capable of linking Islamic metaphysics with institutional development. Furthermore, the approaches used tend to be normative and have not delved into a profound philosophical examination of leadership as “being” or existential reality. Therefore, there remains a significant gap regarding the ontological foundations of Islamic educational leadership and institutional identity, which this study seeks to address.

The novelty of this study lies in the use of an ontological approach as the primary foundation of Islamic educational management, which not only emphasizes administrative aspects but also examines leadership as an existential reality. Furthermore, this study offers an ontological model that integrates Islamic metaphysics with institutional development, thereby strengthening the relationship between philosophical values and managerial practices in a more holistic manner.

This study aims to examine the ontological foundations of Islamic educational management from a philosophical perspective, explore how Islamic ontology influences identity, behavior, and the existential role of leadership, and construct an ontological model of institutional development capable of reinforcing the direction, values, and mission of Islamic educational management in the modern era. Through an analysis of these aspects, this study is expected to contribute to strengthening the philosophical foundations of Islamic educational management, while simultaneously fostering leadership rooted in spirituality, guided by ethics, and oriented toward holistic human development.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a philosophical–conceptual research design focused on examining the ontological foundations of Islamic educational management, which is deemed appropriate for analyzing the fundamental concepts, metaphysical structures, and theoretical assumptions underpinning leadership and institutional identity within the context of Islamic education. As Creswell (2018) noted, a conceptual approach is essential for exploring abstract ideas that cannot be accessed through empirical observation alone, making it relevant to ontological studies concerning categories of existence, purpose, and identity.

This study adopts a philosophical-hermeneutical qualitative approach that encompasses conceptual analysis, interpretive textual studies, theological-philosophical reflection, and normative analysis based on primary and classical Islamic sources. This approach draws upon the Islamic intellectual tradition and contemporary philosophical studies to interpret key concepts such as *wujūd*, *khalīfah*, *tanzīl al-‘ilm*, *adab*, and *insān kāmil* (Nasr, 1989), with an ontological foundation of the metaphysics of presence that affirms the centrality of the Divine, the humanistic-spiritual nature of human existence, and the civilizational mission of Islamic education (*‘imārat al-ardh*). Research data was obtained from various philosophical and textual sources, including the Qur’an and Hadits, works by classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun, modern Islamic thinkers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Syed Muhammad Naquib al -Attas, Western philosophical references such as Audi and Creswell, as well as contemporary studies on Islamic educational management (Arum Berliana Prasanty & Darodjat Darodjat, 2024; Usmaulidar & Fitria, 2024), which were analyzed using systematic document analysis techniques (Bowen, 2009).

The analytical techniques employed include conceptual clarification, a comparative interpretation between Islamic metaphysical perspectives and modern management paradigms, a critical-reflective analysis of the relevance of ontological principles (Creswell, 2018), textual hermeneutics of the Qur’an, Hadits, and classical works, as well as a synthesis to construct an ontological model of Islamic educational management. The validity of the research is ensured through triangulation of sources, logical consistency of arguments, accuracy of scholarly references, and alignment with the Islamic epistemological framework, while philosophical rigor is demonstrated through conceptual clarity, depth of analysis, and coherence with established worldviews. This study also considers academic ethics by ensuring an accurate representation of Islamic teachings, respect for scholarly sources, objectivity, and intellectual honesty; and because it is conceptual in nature and does not involve human participants, it does not require institutional ethical approval.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ontological Foundations of Islamic Education Management

This analysis demonstrates that Islamic educational management is fundamentally rooted in a monotheistic ontology, in which all existence (*wujūd*) is centered on the Divine reality. Within this framework, leadership, organizational governance, and institutional culture emerge as manifestations of metaphysical principles that affirm the purpose of human existence, the nature of knowledge, and the ultimate goal of education itself. The Qur’an positions humanity as *khalīfah* (God’s vicegerent), entrusted with the development of knowledge, the establishment of ethical order, and the advancement of civilization (QS al-Baqarah 2:30). This position distinguishes Islamic educational management from secular models that tend to emphasize material efficiency, competition, and results-oriented performance (Nasr, 1989).

From an Islamic perspective, management prioritizes spiritual integrity, the transmission of ethical values, and the holistic development of the human being (*takwīn al-insān al-kāmil*). This finding confirms that the ontology of Islamic management is value-centered, grounded in Allah, and committed to human dignity, reflecting the metaphysical foundations formulated by classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun. Thus, the practice of Islamic educational management is not merely about regulating administrative processes or achieving material targets, but rather about shaping a harmonious educational ecosystem that integrates spiritual, ethical, and intellectual dimensions, thereby fostering individuals of moral, intellectual, and social quality, while contributing to the renewal of civilization.

This study aligns with classical literature emphasizing the metaphysical foundations of Islam in education, yet differs from modern studies indicating a mismatch between Islamic metaphysical principles and contemporary managerial practices. Usmaulidar & Fitria (2024) highlight that many Islamic educational institutions tend to adopt neoliberal management frameworks, thereby drifting away from their spiritual foundations. Research by Rifai et al. (2025) and Arar et al. (2022) also highlights that studies in educational management focus more on practical aspects such as strategies and policies rather than philosophical foundations, indicating a gap that this study aims to fill.

Ontological Identity of Islamic Educational Leaders

The results demonstrate that leadership identity in Islamic education is ontological before it is technical. In other words, leadership essence derives not from managerial skills alone but from the being of the leader, characterized by spiritual, moral, and civilizational attributes.

Table 1 Ontological Attributes of Leadership in Islamic Education

Ontological Attribute	Meaning
<i>Tauhid</i> consciousness	Recognizing God as the ultimate source and purpose of leadership
Moral–spiritual integrity	Embodying truthfulness, justice, humility, and trustworthiness
Civilizational responsibility	Exercising stewardship to elevate the Ummah
Humanistic vision	Developing holistic learners spiritually, morally, and intellectually

The table above shows that the identity of leadership in Islamic education is ontological rather than technical in nature; that is, the essence of leadership does not stem solely from managerial skills, but rather from the very existence or nature of the leader, which is manifested through spiritual, moral, and civilizational attributes. *Tauhid* consciousness emphasizes that Allah is the ultimate source and goal of leadership, so that every decision and action of a leader is always in harmony with divine values. Moral–spiritual integrity encompasses the practice of truth, justice, humility, and trustworthiness, which form the foundation of a leader’s trustworthy character.

Civilizational responsibility affirms the leader’s role as a *khalīfah* tasked with advancing and elevating the civilization of the Ummah through education and nurturing. Furthermore, the humanistic vision emphasizes the importance of the holistic development of students spiritually, morally, and intellectually to cultivate a generation of character who can make positive contributions to society. Overall, this table underscores that Islamic educational leadership stems from ontological awareness and transcendent values, which form the foundation for effective managerial practices and decision-making.

Al-Ghazali in Asyikin et al. (2024) defines leadership as a spiritual trust requiring *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and disciplined moral development (*riyāḍat al-nafs*). Ibn Khaldun further emphasizes that societal progress is sustained by ethical governance rooted in religious values. Thus, the findings confirm that Islamic educational leadership constitutes ethical–spiritual governance rather than merely bureaucratic administration.

These findings are consistent with classical studies, yet reveal a gap compared to modern research. The study by Budianto et al. (2024) and Mulyani et al. (2025) confirms that the ontological dimension of leadership is still rarely examined, and Hakim & Zahra (2024) research indicates that many studies remain normative and have not yet delved into an existential analysis of the leader’s “being.” This study fills that gap by emphasizing Islamic leadership as the ontology underpinning managerial practices.

Ontological Principles in Institutional Development

The analysis identifies three foundational ontological pillars that shape institutional development in Islamic education:

Table 2 Ontological Principles in Institutional Development

Principle	Explanation	Reference
Divine Purpose (<i>ghāyah rabbāniyyah</i>)	Education serves worship, civilizational advancement, and moral elevation	Qur’an & classical texts
Human Centrality (<i>karāmah al-insān</i>)	The educational process develops human dignity, intellect, and ethical capacity	Al-Ghazali
Sacrality of Knowledge (<i>taqdīs al-‘ilm</i>)	Knowledge is sacred and oriented toward soul purification and societal well-being	Nasr (1989)

Table 2 presents the ontological principles that form the foundation for institutional development in Islamic education. Analysis indicates that there are three main pillars shaping the direction and character of Islamic educational institutions. The first pillar, Divine Purpose (*ghāyah rabbāniyyah*), emphasizes that education is not merely aimed at the transfer of knowledge, but also at worship, advancing civilization, and enhancing the moral quality of students, as reflected in the Qur'an and classical literature. The second pillar, Human Centrality (*karāmah al-insān*), places humanity at the center, where the educational process is designed to develop human dignity, intelligence, and ethical capacity, in accordance with the thought of Al-Ghazali. The third pillar, the Sacredness of Knowledge (*taqdīs al-'ilm*), affirms the sacred nature of knowledge, which must be directed toward the purification of the soul and the welfare of society, as elaborated (Nasr, 1989). Taken together, these principles demonstrate that the development of Islamic educational institutions is rooted in an ontological consciousness that integrates divine purpose, respect for humanity, and the sanctity of knowledge, thereby forming institutions that are not only administratively effective but also spiritually, ethically, and socially meaningful (Kusairi & Sassi, 2026; Okky et al., 2025).

These principles align with Nasr (1989) critique of modern secular systems that reduce knowledge to functional and material utility. They highlight the need for Islamic institutions to renew their ontological identity through spiritual, ethical, and civilizational commitments. These pillars support Baimunah et al. (2025) and Achmad & Fitria (2024) argument that the development of Islamic educational management theory grounded in philosophy remains conceptual and under-explored. Previous research has rarely linked ontology with institutional development in a systematic manner; thus, this study bridges that gap by presenting clear ontological principles for educational institutions.

Contrasting Islamic and Secular Ontologies in Education Management

The findings reveal clear distinctions between Islamic and secular ontological assumptions that shape educational management:

Table 3 Contrasting Islamic and Secular Ontologies in Education Management

Islamic Ontology	Secular Ontology
God-centered (<i>Tauhid</i>)	Human-centered (anthropocentric)
Education as worship and civilizational duty	Education as economic mechanism
Leader as trustee (<i>amānah bearer</i>)	Leader as manager/administrator
Holistic human development	Technical skill labor production
Value ethical priority	Productivity and outcome priority

This table highlights the fundamental differences between Islamic ontology and secular ontology in the context of educational management, demonstrating how philosophical assumptions influence objectives, leadership roles, and approaches to human development within educational institutions. Islamic ontology is God-centered (*Tauhid*), placing Allah at the center of educational objectives, which are viewed as a form of worship and a civilizational responsibility.

Leaders within this framework are positioned as trustees (bearers of *amānah*) responsible for the spiritual, moral, and intellectual well-being of learners, with a focus on holistic human development and a priority on ethical values. In contrast, secular ontology is human-centered (anthropocentric), viewing education as an economic mechanism that emphasizes efficiency, productivity, and the achievement of results. Leaders are viewed as managers or administrators focused on technical management and the production of skills, with the primary priority on output and performance. This comparison underscores that ontological differences result in fundamentally distinct directions, practices, and educational goals between the Islamic and secular models, where Islamic education emphasizes the integration of spirituality, ethics, and character development, while the secular model places greater emphasis on instrumental and utilitarian aspects (Achmad & Fitria, 2024; Miftahussurur et al., 2025).

These findings are consistent with Nasr (1989) critique of secular systems that reduce science to material utility, and support the findings of Usmaulidar & Fitria (2024) regarding the risk of Islamic institutions drifting toward secular management. This study underscores the need for a *Tauhid* Ontological Model to bridge managerial practices with the metaphysical foundations of Islam, thereby addressing the gap highlighted by Arar et al. (2022), Budianto et al. (2024), and Rifai et al. (2025).

Based on the research findings, the *Tauhid* Ontological Model integrates Islamic metaphysical principles with managerial practices in education. This model is grounded in Divine Ontology, which posits Allah as the primary source of all reality, and is subsequently applied to Human Ontology, where humans are viewed as *khalīfah* and ‘abd bearing spiritual and social responsibilities. Furthermore, this framework is manifested in an Institutional Ontology grounded in the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah* in the administration of education, which emphasizes the objectives of public welfare and meaningfulness. At the next level, Leadership Ontology emphasizes the values of trust (*amanah*) and etiquette (*adab*) as the ethical foundation for exercising leadership roles. These ontological dimensions are then implemented in management practices that are ethical, holistic, and transformative. Ultimately, this model is aimed at producing the formation of the perfect human being (*insan kāmil*) and the realization of civilizational renewal. Thus, this *Tauhid* ontological model not only connects the metaphysical dimensions of Islam with institutional practices but also bridges the gap between philosophical theory and practical implementation in educational governance.

Theoretically, this study provides a foundational ontological model for Islamic educational management, bridging classical Islamic metaphysics with modern leadership and management frameworks, and positioning Islamic educational management as a spiritual-civilizational discipline rather than merely an administrative science. Practically, Islamic educational institutions are encouraged to internalize the monotheistic worldview within their management culture and leadership development, emphasizing moral and spiritual development for leaders, teachers, and staff; evaluating institutional policies based on *maqāṣid al-tarbiyah*; and ensuring that governance, curriculum, and institutional processes reflect Islamic ethical values. From an innovation perspective, this study promotes the creation of a values-based leadership model for Islamic institutions, introduces ontological indicators to assess the performance of Islamic schools, madrasahs, and universities, and opens opportunities for the development of the Islamic Ontological Leadership Index (IOLI) as a research instrument.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic education management is fundamentally ontological, deriving its identity, vision, and operational principles from a *Tauhid* worldview. Management within Islamic educational institutions is not merely a technical or administrative function but an ontological and spiritual responsibility rooted in the metaphysical relationship between God (Allah), human beings (*al-insān*), and knowledge (*al-‘ilm*). Accordingly, leadership in Islamic education is characterized by divine accountability, ethical consciousness, spiritual intelligence, and a civilizational mission. The findings demonstrate that when secular managerial paradigms are adopted without philosophical filtration, Islamic education risks being reduced to bureaucratic structures lacking spiritual direction and moral purpose. Therefore, revitalizing ontological foundations grounded in Qur’anic imperatives, prophetic traditions, and classical scholarship such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun is essential for preserving institutional identity and ensuring that Islamic education contributes meaningfully to human refinement and socio-civilizational advancement.

This study is conceptual in nature and has not yet empirically tested the model, therefore, further research is recommended to empirically test the proposed ontological model of Tawhid in various Islamic educational institutions, compare Islamic ontological leadership with similar models from Western, Eastern, or hybrid traditions, and examine the implications of the digital age on the management of sacred sciences, spiritual leadership, and value-based governance. This research direction is expected to deepen academic understanding of ontology in Islamic educational management while enhancing the relevance and application of the model within modern institutional contexts. Further research is recommended to conduct empirical studies to test and validate the proposed

ontological model across various Islamic educational institutions, explore comparisons of ontological leadership between pesantren, madrasah, Islamic universities, and international Islamic schools, and develop measurement instruments capable of translating philosophical constructs into empirical variables, such as survey scales or competency rubrics.

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