

Charismatic Authority and Transformative Da'wah: the Leadership of K.H Thoifur Mawardi in Pesantren-Based Community Empowerment

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Abstract

This article examines charismatic authority in pesantren-based da'wah, a dimension of Islamic education leadership that remains underexplored. While Max Weber's concept of charisma has been widely applied in political and organizational studies, its relevance to Indonesian pesantren leadership is rarely addressed. Taking KH Thoifur Mawardi of Daarut-Tauhid, Purworejo, as a case study, this research analyzes how charisma operates as both personal virtue and institutional capital in sustaining transformative da'wah. A qualitative approach was employed through interviews, participant observation, and documentation, with triangulation ensuring data credibility. The study shows that KH Thoifur's charisma, rooted in moral integrity, Islamic scholarship, and emotional proximity to the community, enables him to mobilize spiritual awareness, social solidarity, and pesantren-based economic initiatives. Although limited to a single institution, the study critically adapts Weber's notion of charisma to the pesantren context, offering a contextual framework that links leadership, spirituality, and social change. It concludes that effective da'wah must be participatory, human-centered, and sustainable to address contemporary challenges.

Keywords

transformative Islamic outreach, charismatic authority, pesantren, social change, KH Thoifur Mawardi

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1. INTRODUCTION

Transformative da'wah represents a dynamic and holistic approach to Islamic preaching that extends far beyond the mere transmission of normative religious teachings, aiming instead to generate substantive and multidimensional social change (Azra, 2002; Ghozali, 2005). In the context of contemporary Indonesia, where many da'wah practices remain entrenched in ritualism, doctrinal formalism, and symbolic religiosity (Geertz, 1960; Bruinessen, 1995), there is an urgent need for preaching models that actively address root causes of pervasive issues such as poverty, structural inequality, cultural marginalization, and ethical disorientation (Fauzi, 2017; Ridwan, 2020). Such models must be solution-oriented, participatory, and deeply contextualized to resonate with local realities and aspirations (Kuntowijoyo, 2001; Qaradawi, 1998). According to Azyumardi Azra (2002), transformative da'wah should be understood as an integral component of the broader Islamic modernization project, which seeks to integrate Islamic ethical and spiritual values with concrete initiatives in social, economic,



and political development. This approach repositions da'wah not as a passive conduit of sacred texts but as a moral and praxis-based force capable of driving structural, cultural, and psychological transformation within Muslim societies (Weber, 1947; Radkau, 2009).

A growing body of scholarship has examined transformative da'wah in various socio-cultural contexts. For example, Ghozali (2005) highlights the role of dakwah bil hal in community empowerment and social justice, while Shahrani (2017) shows its potential in fostering communal cohesion in Malaysia. Within Indonesia, Ridwan (2020) emphasizes the strategic role of pesantren as agents of social transformation. However, despite these contributions, most studies treat transformative da'wah descriptively and rarely connect it with the dynamics of charismatic leadership. This indicates a research gap in understanding how charisma, as a form of social capital, interacts with transformative da'wah to achieve sustainable impact.

Max Weber (1947), the pioneering sociologist of religion, classifies religious authority into three ideal types: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Charismatic authority, in particular, emerges from a community's collective recognition and endorsement of an individual's extraordinary personal qualities, which may include exceptional scholarship, unwavering moral integrity, spiritual depth, or profound emotional proximity to the followers (Radkau, 2009). In the realm of da'wah, such charisma can function as a powerful form of social capital that enhances the credibility, receptivity, and overall effectiveness of religious messaging and mobilization strategies (Bourdieu, 1986; Engineer, 1990).

KH Thoifur Mawardi, the caretaker (pengasuh) of Pondok Pesantren Daarut-Tauhid in Purworejo, Central Java, serves as a compelling contemporary example of a charismatic Muslim scholar who has consistently practiced and institutionalized a model of transformative da'wah (Ridwan, 2020). Unlike many kyai whose influence is confined to ritual or educational domains, KH Thoifur has systematically institutionalized his personal charisma through pesantren, cooperatives, and community organizations. This makes his case analytically significant for exploring how charisma can be embedded within organizational structures to sustain long-term social transformation. His extensive work encompasses not only the spiritual and intellectual empowerment of santri (students) but also innovative pesantren-based economic initiatives, social advocacy programs, and grassroots community development projects, all underpinned by a vision of Islam that is compassionate, practical, and socially engaged (Ghozali, 2005; Fauzi, 2017).

This study, therefore, aims to conduct a thorough and nuanced analysis of how KH Thoifur Mawardi conceptualizes and operationalizes his transformative da'wah, why he adopts such an approach, and what tangible impacts it has generated on the surrounding communities. It hypothesizes that KH Thoifur Mawardi's charismatic authority functions as a pivotal and enabling factor in the success and sustainability of pesantren-led social transformation, particularly because his charisma is not merely a personal attribute but has been effectively institutionalized through religious, educational, and socio-economic organizations (Weber, 1947; De Jong, 2006; Kuntowijoyo, 2001). This study seeks to fill the gap by critically integrating Weber's theory of charisma with the praxis of transformative da'wah in pesantren. Its originality lies not merely in combining two concepts, but in showing how charismatic authority is institutionalized and translated into concrete programs of empowerment. In doing so, the study contributes both empirically—by documenting KH Thoifur's model of leadership—and theoretically, by extending Weber's framework into the pesantren context of Indonesia.

The scholarly discourse on transformative da'wah has garnered considerable attention across various socio-cultural and geographical contexts, reflecting a growing recognition of the need for Islamic preaching to engage meaningfully with contemporary social realities (Fauzi, 2017; Hassan &

Moosa, 2019). Ahmad Fauzi (2017) and Ahmad Ghazali (2005) have been particularly instrumental in articulating a vision of da'wah that moves beyond ritualistic or dogmatic approaches to prioritize tangible community empowerment, social justice, and the cultivation of collective critical consciousness (Ridwan, 2020; Shihab, 2001). Their works emphasize the strategic importance of dakwah bil hal (preaching through action) and sensitive cultural engagement as mediums for achieving sustainable development goals within Muslim communities (Qaradawi, 1998; Azra, 2002). This approach fundamentally repositions da'wah from a primarily discursive or ceremonial activity into an active, participatory instrument of social change—one that addresses material deprivation, educational gaps, and political disenfranchisement alongside spiritual needs (Kuntowijoyo, 2001; Freire, 1970).

In the broader theoretical landscape concerning religious authority, Max Weber's seminal typology—first elaborated in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (1947)—remains profoundly influential (Radkau, 2009). Weber categorizes authority into three ideal types: traditional (rooted in longstanding customs and inheritance), legal-rational (based on impersonal rules and bureaucratic structures), and charismatic (deriving from the extraordinary qualities of an individual leader) (Weber, 1947; Turner, 1991). Charismatic authority, in particular, derives its legitimacy from the collective recognition and attribution of exceptional qualities to a leader—whether intellectual brilliance, moral purity, spiritual insight, or personal magnetism (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of authority is often volatile and personalistic but can be powerfully mobilizing (Engineer, 1990). Building on Weber, Fredrik De Jong (2006) argues that charismatic authority plays a decisive role in shaping the direction, mobilization capacity, and overall legitimacy of Islamic movements, particularly in revivalist or reformist contexts where established structures are being challenged or transformed (Burke, 2016; Rizvi, 2011).

The function and impact of charisma in religious leadership have been analyzed across a diverse range of Muslim societies. For instance, Roland Burke (2016) explains that charismatic leadership can serve as a catalyst for profound spiritual transformation and can build deep-seated collective trust within religious movements, enabling them to navigate periods of crisis or change (Weber, 1978). In a different context, Syed Rizvi (2011) documents how charismatic preachers in Pakistan exert considerable influence over social participation and religious mobilization among their followers, often translating personal devotion into community-wide initiatives for education, charity, and political advocacy (Mambuay & Abbas, 2018). These studies collectively reveal the enduring role of charisma not merely as a psychological phenomenon but as a social and institutional catalyst capable of driving both spiritual awakening and structural transformation within Islamic communities (Hassan & Moosa, 2019; Ridwan, 2020).

Within the specific context of Indonesia, Muhammad Ridwan (2020) demonstrates that pesantren-based da'wah often relies heavily on the charismatic leadership of the kyai (religious scholar) to bridge the gap between spiritual formation and sustainable social transformation (Geertz, 1960; Bruinessen, 1995). The kyai's authority—often a blend of religious knowledge, genealogical prestige, and personal virtue—enables them to initiate and legitimize community projects, educational reforms, and economic cooperatives (Shihab, 2001; Ghazali, 2005). Similar patterns have been observed in other Muslim-majority regions. Research in Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Africa indicates that local ulama and preachers have utilized their charismatic appeal not only to preach theological doctrines but also to advocate for practical community development, interfaith dialogue, and liberationist da'wah practices that address colonial legacies and economic oppression (Hassan & Moosa, 2019; Mambuay & Abbas, 2018). These cross-cultural examples illustrate that charisma often functions as a critical form of

social capital that legitimizes, sustains, and amplifies transformative initiatives, making them more acceptable and motivating to grassroots communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Kuntowijoyo, 2001).

However, despite the proliferation of scholarly works focusing either on transformative da'wah as a praxis or on charismatic authority as a sociological concept, integrated empirical research examining the intersection of both dimensions within the Indonesian pesantren milieu remains relatively scarce (De Jong, 2006; Ridwan, 2020). The existing literature tends to treat these as separate domains: studies on da'wah often focus on message, media, or method, while studies on charisma frequently concentrate on leadership psychology or political mobilization (Turner, 1991; Radkau, 2009). The gap is particularly pronounced in understanding how local religious leaders like kyai strategically institutionalize their personal charisma through tangible organizational structures—such as pesantren, cooperatives, microfinance institutions (BMT), and community study circles (majelis taklim)—to achieve long-term, sustainable transformation that outlives the leader's physical presence or direct involvement (Weber, 1947; Burke, 2016).

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This study, therefore, seeks to fill this identifiable gap by integrating the theoretical lens of Max Weber's concept of charisma with the grounded praxis of transformative da'wah as developed and implemented by KH Thoifur Mawardi in Purworejo, Central Java (Ridwan, 2020). In doing so, it aims to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse in Islamic preaching and leadership studies by offering a nuanced, integrative model of charismatic-based transformative da'wah that is both contextually grounded in the Indonesian pesantren tradition and relevant to wider discussions on socially engaged religion, community development, and sustainable social change (Fauzi, 2017; Hassan & Moosa, 2019).

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design to generate a contextualized understanding of transformative da'wah as practiced by KH Thoifur Mawardi at Pondok Pesantren Daarut-Tauhid (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). A single-case study approach was selected because the pesantren represents a theoretically strategic case: KH Thoifur is widely recognized for combining spiritual authority, pesantren-based economic innovation, and grassroots advocacy. This unique constellation makes him analytically significant for exploring how charismatic authority can be institutionalized within pesantren structures—an issue underexplored in existing scholarship (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). Thus, the case was not chosen for anecdotal interest but for its capacity to illuminate broader dynamics of charisma and transformation in Indonesian Islam.

The locus of inquiry was Pondok Pesantren Daarut-Tauhid and its surrounding community in Purworejo, Central Java. Informants were selected through purposive sampling with explicit criteria: (1) direct involvement in pesantren leadership or administration, (2) sustained engagement in pesantren educational or economic programs, (3) experience as beneficiaries or observers of pesantren-based community empowerment, and (4) ability to provide contrasting perspectives, whether favorable or critical. This strategy yielded 13 participants, including KH Thoifur himself, family members, senior santri and teachers, pesantren administrators, alumni, BMT (microfinance) partners, local residents, and community leaders. Diversity of gender, age, and institutional roles was considered to minimize bias and avoid reliance solely on supportive voices.

Multiple methods were used to enhance depth and breadth. Data collection involved (a) participatory observation of pengajian, classes, BMT meetings, and communal rituals; (b) semi-structured interviews with the 13 informants; and (c) document analysis of curricula, sermon manuscripts, pesantren reports, and social-media posts. Integration of these sources followed a convergent design: field notes were cross-checked against interview claims, and both were compared with documentary evidence. For example, Thoifur's narrative of pesantren-led economic empowerment was triangulated with BMT reports and corroborated—or problematized—through interviews with local residents. Credibility was further strengthened through member checking, where key findings were presented back to participants for verification and clarification. Source triangulation was ensured by including informants with different positionalities, while time triangulation involved observations across multiple months and ritual cycles. An audit trail was maintained through detailed field notes, coding memos, and reflexive journals to document analytic decisions and researcher positionality.

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Coding proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive codes captured empirical domains such as "economic empowerment," "educational innovation," and "ritual authority." Second, theoretical codes linked these domains to Weber's concept of charisma (e.g., "extraordinary recognition," "institutional routinization") and to the transformative da'wah framework (e.g., "dakwah bil hal," "structural empowerment"). Third, interpretive matrices were developed to compare convergent and divergent cases—for instance, contrasting how alumni versus local residents perceived Thoifur's authority. This process ensured that theory guided, but did not predetermine, the interpretation of data. Ethical protocols—including informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data storage—were strictly observed. While generalizability is limited by its single-case design, the study provides analytically transferable insights into how pesantren-based charismatic authority can be routinized into sustainable programs of socio-religious transformation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Field findings indicate that KH Thoifur Mawardi's da'wah represents a comprehensive yet contested form of transformative leadership, one that integrates multiple layers of spiritual and socio-economic engagement. Rather than celebrating it as simply "profound," this study situates his model within broader debates on the sustainability and routinization of charismatic authority in pesantren contexts, drawing on Weber's framework. This approach seamlessly integrates spiritual, intellectual, and socio-practical dimensions into a cohesive and dynamic whole. His methodology consciously and deliberately moves beyond the confines of normative, text-centric preaching (*dakwah bil lisan*) and instead focuses on the tangible translation of universal Islamic values—such as justice (*al-'adl*), compassion (*ar-rahmah*), public welfare (*maslahah*), and trustworthiness (*al-amanah*)—into measurable and sustainable change operating simultaneously at individual, communal, and structural levels. This embodies a praxis-oriented Islam that is lived and experienced, rather than merely preached.

A distinctive and highly effective feature of his da'wah methodology is its skillful and respectful integration of Sufi ethical principles and elements of local Javanese wisdom. Community bonds and trust were not built in a vacuum but were carefully nurtured through well-established and culturally resonant traditions such as *tahlilan*, *slametan*, and the incorporation of traditional Javanese *tembang* during sermons. Rather than being dismissed as innovations (*bid'ah*), these cultural practices were strategically adopted and reframed as effective *wasilah* (mediums) to contextualize Islam. Observations

in routine pengajian (study gatherings) show that he skillfully infused messages of tawhid, ethics, and social piety into such traditions, making them well accepted by local communities (Misbahul Huda, interview, May 12, 2025).

Through this dual emphasis, KH Thoifur's educational model at Daarut-Tauhid exemplified what can be termed transformative pesantren education: an approach that preserves the spiritual depth of traditional Islamic pedagogy while simultaneously preparing students to address pressing social, political, and economic realities. His da'wah was not confined to the pulpit or classroom; rather, it was practical, solution-driven, and rooted in everyday concerns of the community. One of the most striking features of his leadership was the consistent effort to link religious discourse with socio-economic empowerment.

Internal pesantren documents reveal KH Thoifur's pivotal role in the establishment of both the Santri Cooperative and Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) Al-Ma'arif, institutions that became integral to the pesantren's outreach and economic resilience (BMT Annual Report, 2024). These initiatives were not peripheral but central to his vision of da'wah. By fostering cooperative structures, KH Thoifur translated Islamic values of solidarity (ukhuwah), justice ('adl), and mutual help (ta'awun) into tangible programs that improved livelihoods. The cooperative enabled students and local residents to access fair credit, develop micro-businesses, and practice profit-sharing in accordance with Islamic economic principles.

According to Ustaz Salman, the current director of BMT, the original inspiration came directly from KH Thoifur: "This idea came directly from Kiai Thoifur. He told us: don't just teach people to save in banks, teach them to share risks and profits—this is economic jihad" (Salman, interview, May 14, 2025). This statement underscores the theological framing of economic initiatives as a form of struggle (jihad) in the path of God—not through confrontation, but through the construction of a just and inclusive economy. Such framing reflects KH Thoifur's ability to embed economic practices within a broader religious and moral discourse, thereby legitimizing and motivating community participation. Over time, these institutions also became laboratories for integrating Islamic scholarship with real-world problem-solving. Students were not only exposed to abstract discussions of fiqh al-mu'amalah (Islamic jurisprudence of transactions) in the classroom, but also to living examples of how such principles could be operationalized in community-based financial systems. The BMT and cooperative thus served as both economic engines and pedagogical tools, allowing da'wah to be enacted in ways that were immediately visible, beneficial, and sustainable.

In this sense, KH Thoifur's approach blurred the boundaries between education, da'wah, and social activism. He demonstrated that pesantren could function not only as centers of piety but also as hubs of socio-economic transformation, where religious ideals were translated into institutional innovations that directly improved the welfare of the ummah. Field observations further confirmed that the pesantren curriculum incorporated innovative subjects such as Social Da'wah and Contemporary Fiqh of Transactions. These courses equipped students with the ability to understand socio-economic realities, including modern financial practices, while grounding their responses in Islamic jurisprudence. The curriculum thus reflected an integration between spiritual formation and social responsibility. Spiritual training was reinforced through collective practices—communal dhikr, regular tahajjud prayers, and guided ethical discipline—which shaped students' inner resilience and moral integrity. At the same time, practical exposure to community life was provided through da'wah practicums in nearby villages, where students directly engaged with residents in religious teaching, social service, and cooperative economic initiatives (Salman, interview, May 14, 2025).

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Kiai Nasihin Zain stated in an interview: "KH Thoifur has cared for the poor since his youth; he would often bring food from the pesantren kitchen to the homes of the needy" (Nasihin Zain, interview, May 10, 2025). Likewise, a local villager, Bapak Karno, testified: "I was only a farm laborer. After joining the pesantren's entrepreneurship training, I now own a small rice milling business. It's all thanks to Kiai's guidance" (Karno, interview, May 9, 2025). Direct observation revealed his modest lifestyle—his bedding consisted only of a mat and a small pillow—demonstrating his spiritual simplicity and personal integrity (shiddiq and amanah) (Musyarofah, interview, May 11, 2025), which became the cornerstone of his charismatic authority. As Ustaz Mujib stated: "Students who neglect tahajjud are usually advised directly by Kiai. He believes strong spirituality leads to strong social action" (Mujib, interview, May 8, 2025).

Da'wah under his leadership not only preserved local traditions but also engaged with contemporary challenges. Documents from the pesantren's 2009 curriculum included Social Da'wah and Media and Information Jihad, indicating a modern vision (BMT Archive, 2009). A 2003 Social Report documented his fundraising efforts for drilling wells in drought-affected areas (Social Report, 2003). The sustainability of his transformative impact lies in the routinization of charisma, as theorized by Max Weber (1947; 1978). His charisma was not confined to personal influence but was institutionalized through pesantren structures, BMT, and majelis taklim (study circles), ensuring continuity beyond his physical presence.

KH Thoifur's da'wah has produced significant spiritual, social, economic, and educational transformations: spiritually through dhikr, sholawat, and voluntary night prayers (Salman, interview, May 14, 2025); socially by shifting mindsets from fatalism to active participation (Karno, interview, May 9, 2025); economically by supporting over 500 active BMT members by 2024 (BMT Annual Report, 2024); and educationally by nurturing a generation of socially conscious preachers and community leaders. The consistency of KH Thoifur Mawardi in practicing transformative da'wah is shaped by internal factors (humble upbringing, early empathy—Musyarofah, interview, May 11, 2025) and external factors (critique of formalistic da'wah—Thoifur sermon, 2008). His spiritual formation in Mecca, marked by prolonged uzlah and reading Ihya' Ulumuddin Al-Ghazali, laid a Sufi-based foundation for his approach (Misbahul Huda, interview, May 12, 2025). This study confirms Max Weber's (1947) concept of charismatic authority and resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of conscientization and Kuntowijoyo's (1991) model of prophetic da'wah—humanization, liberation, and transcendence. The integration of Sufi ethics, critical pedagogy, and socio-economic empowerment demonstrates that charisma, when institutionalized, can transcend personal devotion and become collective social capital.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explores the transformative da'wah model of KH Thoifur Mawardi, a prominent pesantren leader whose charismatic authority combines Sufi ethics, humanistic education, and socio-economic empowerment. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research examines how his leadership translates Islamic values into concrete transformation at three levels: personal (spiritual awareness), communal (social solidarity), and structural (institutional innovation through pesantren cooperatives and BMT). Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed thematically to identify the patterns of charismatic routinization and its socio-religious implications.

The findings reveal that KH Thoifur's charisma is not limited to personal magnetism but institutionalized through pesantren-based structures that ensure the sustainability of da'wah-driven community development. His leadership demonstrates how Islamic spirituality can generate enduring social and economic impacts within a rural pesantren context. The study extends Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority by showing that charisma in Islamic contexts can be routinized not only through bureaucratic mechanisms but also through moral-economic institutions that integrate piety with social transformation. Methodologically, this research is limited to a single pesantren and relies on qualitative description, which restricts generalizability and measurable economic analysis. Nevertheless, the study provides an empirically grounded insight into how transformative da'wah functions as a bridge between religious charisma and institutional resilience.

This study contributes to contemporary scholarship on Islamic leadership and pesantren transformation by offering a theoretically enriched and contextually grounded model of routinized charisma. Practically, it provides implications for pesantren leaders and policymakers to develop da'wah-based educational and economic initiatives rooted in moral integrity and institutional sustainability. Future interdisciplinary research connecting Islamic studies, development economics, and organizational sociology is recommended to deepen understanding of how spiritual authority interacts with social innovation in Muslim communities.

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