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Challenges and Opportunities of Postmodernism in Christian Counseling: A Conceptual Review of Theological and Epistemological Integration

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Challenges and Opportunities of Postmodernism in Christian Counseling: A Conceptual Review of Theological and Epistemological Integration

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Abstract: Combining postmodern epistemology with Christian counseling prompts core questions about truth, narrative identity, and relational healing. Objective: This study explores the tensions and opportunities that emerge when postmodern therapeutic methods intersect with Christian theological principles. A systematic review of the literature was conducted across five databases: ERIC, Scopus, Garuda Garba, Google Scholar, and Dimensions. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English or Indonesian from 2007 to 2026. Out of 4,505 records initially retrieved, 377 were downloaded for screening. After applying specific inclusion and exclusion criteria—such as focusing on peer-reviewed articles (IC1) and the date range (IC2)—15 articles were included in the final review. Foundational works prior to 2007 (e.g., Blanton, 2004, 2005; Watson, 2004) are cited only for background and are not included in the analysed set. The literature highlights three main themes: (1) the conditional potential for integrating narrative and relational postmodern techniques within Christian counseling; (2) ongoing philosophical and theological tensions—particularly about epistemological relativism and scepticism toward grand narratives—that scholars discuss from differing viewpoints without reaching consensus; and (3) notable gaps in counselor education and methodological implementation. The integration of postmodern insights into Christian counseling is still debated and depends heavily on context. The link between postmodern epistemology and Christian theology calls for a critical, selective, and theologically responsible engagement rather than unrestricted adoption.

Key Words: Christian counseling; Conceptual review; Epistemology of love; Narrative therapy; Postmodernism; Theological integration

INTRODUCTION

The increasing influence of postmodernism has significantly reshaped contemporary perspectives in counseling, particularly in how knowledge, identity, and truth are understood. Postmodernism is characterised by scepticism toward universal and objective truth claims and emphasis on the socially constructed, contextual, and relational nature of human experience (Blanton, 2004; Kwok, 2016). Rather than relying on fixed diagnostic categories, postmodern perspectives understand identity as formed through language, narrative, and interpersonal interaction. This epistemological reorientation expands the scope of counseling practice while raising critical questions about the foundations of counseling theories.

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The integration of postmodernism into Christian counseling introduces significant philosophical and theological tensions (Kwok, 2016; Watson, 2004). At the epistemological level, postmodernism challenges the notion of universal, objective truth by emphasising pluralism, relativism, and contextual interpretations of knowledge. In contrast, Christian counseling is grounded in absolute truth rooted in divine revelation and scriptural authority (Balswick, 2012; Hathaway, 2021; Lelek, 2021). This divergence creates a fundamental tension in how truth is understood and applied in counseling practice. Furthermore, postmodernism's emphasis on individual meaning-making contrasts with the Christian theological vision of human beings as inherently relational—created for communion with God and others (Konacheva, 2021; Scott, 2025; Vlasova et al., 2021).

Postmodern therapeutic approaches such as narrative therapy and family therapy have offered notable conceptual contributions—emphasizing relational healing, collaborative dialogue, and reconstruction of meaning within social contexts (Kwok, 2016). Such approaches resonate, in varying degrees, with biblical themes of reconciliation and restoration. However, their epistemological assumptions raise concerns: emphasis on narrative reconstruction and contextual interpretation may lead toward the relativisation of truth. This presents a critical challenge for Christian counseling, which affirms that truth is anchored in the redemptive narrative of the Gospel. Multiple scholars argue that integration requires careful theological evaluation to ensure methodological flexibility does not undermine doctrinal coherence (Munday, 2013; Xu, 2010).

Despite a growing body of literature at this intersection, existing research has not fully resolved several critical issues. At the theoretical level, current studies tend to discuss postmodern therapeutic techniques and Christian theology in parallel rather than constructing coherent integrative frameworks (Rundio & Wong, 2022). At the practical level, methodological clarity required to translate integrative theories into concrete counseling practice remains underdeveloped (Munday, 2013). The present study aims to examine these tensions and opportunities through a systematic conceptual review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2007 and 2026. The central research question is: how may postmodern epistemological assumptions be critically and selectively engaged within Christian theological principles in the context of counseling?

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a systematic conceptual literature review design. Unlike quantitative systematic reviews, a conceptual review does not aggregate empirical findings but identifies, critically examines, and synthesises theoretical contributions across a body of literature (Durach et al., 2021; Mosadeghrad et al., 2022; Wotela, 2017). This design is appropriate given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. The review was structured around defined search procedures, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, a transparent screening process, and a deductive-inductive thematic analytical framework.

Search Strategy

Systematic searches were conducted across five academic databases: ERIC, Scopus, Garuda Garba, Google Scholar, and Dimensions. The primary Boolean search string used across all databases was „postmodernism“ AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling"). All searches were restricted to the period 2007–2026 and to publications in English or Indonesian. The search followed a broad-to-focused logic, beginning with wide retrieval and progressively refined based on conceptual relevance. Table 1 presents the complete search results for each database.

Table 1. Database Search Results

Database	Boolean Search String	Time Range	Records Identified	Records Downloaded for Screening
ERIC	postmodernism AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling")	2007–2026	0	0
Scopus	postmodernism AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling")	2007–2026	0	0
Garuda Garba	postmodernism AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling")	2007–2026	0	0
Google Scholar	postmodernism AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling")	2007–2026	4,320	300
Dimensions	postmodernism AND ("Christian Counseling" OR "pastoral counseling" OR "biblical counseling")	2007–2026	185	77
Total	—	—	4,505	377

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established a priori to ensure transparency and reproducibility. A critical stipulation is that the analysed corpus is restricted exclusively to peer-reviewed journal articles (IC1). Books, book chapters, and edited volumes—while cited as background references in the Introduction and Discussion where they provide foundational theoretical context—are not included in the systematic corpus, consistent with EC6. This boundary is maintained throughout the Results section and Table 4. Table 2 presents the complete criteria.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Code	Inclusion Criteria	Code	Exclusion Criteria
IC1	Peer-reviewed journal articles published in scholarly journals indexed in recognized academic databases (books, book chapters, edited volumes, and non-journal publications are excluded from the analyzed corpus)	EC1	Articles that do not engage with postmodern philosophical or therapeutic frameworks
IC2	Publication date between 2007 and 2026	EC2	Articles published before 2007 or after 2026
IC3	Articles written in English or Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)	EC3	Articles written in languages other than English or Indonesian
IC4	Articles that explicitly address the integration of postmodernism with Christian, pastoral, or biblical counseling theory or practice	EC4	Articles focused solely on secular counseling without any theological or spiritual dimension

Code	Inclusion Criteria	Code	Exclusion Criteria
IC5	Articles whose primary discussion is directly relevant to the integration of postmodernism and Christian counseling (thematic alignment with research questions)	EC5	Articles discussing postmodernism in general philosophical contexts unrelated to counseling
IC6	Articles addressing one or more of the following: narrative therapy, family therapy, pastoral counseling, theological integration, epistemological issues in counseling, or counselor education within a Christian framework	EC6	Books, book chapters, edited volumes, and non-journal publications (regardless of scholarly merit); grey literature; dissertations; conference abstracts; non-peer-reviewed materials
IC7	Articles providing theoretical, conceptual, or applied insights relevant to the integration of psychology and Christian theology in counseling contexts	EC7	Articles addressing spiritual care exclusively in non-Christian religious contexts without comparative or integrative relevance to Christian counseling
IC8	Articles available in full text for complete assessment	EC8	Duplicate records appearing across multiple databases

Screening and Selection Process

Phase 1 (Identification): Searches yielded 4,505 records. Of these, 377 were downloaded for screening (Google Scholar $n=300$; Dimensions $n=77$). ERIC, Scopus, and Garuda Garba returned no results. Phase 2 (Title/Abstract Screening): After removing 27 duplicates, 350 unique records were screened. A total of 278 were excluded: language other than English or Indonesian ($n=15$), outside the 2007–2026 date range ($n=14$), not relevant to postmodern-Christian counseling integration ($n=187$), and non-Christian spiritual context without comparative relevance ($n=62$). This left 72 records for full-text review. Phase 3 (Full-Text Eligibility): Of 72 records assessed, 57 were excluded: insufficient theological engagement with postmodern therapy ($n=22$), purely empirical focus without conceptual contribution ($n=16$), books or book chapters not qualifying as peer-reviewed articles under IC1/EC6 ($n=10$), and duplicates resolved at the full-text level ($n=9$). A final corpus of 15 peer-reviewed journal articles—all published between 2007 and 2026—was included. Table 3 presents the complete flow.

Table 3. Systematic Screening and Selection Process (PRISMA-Informed)

Phase	Description	Records (n)	Exclusions / Notes
Identification	Records identified through database searches (ERIC, Scopus, Garuda Garba, Google Scholar, Dimensions)	4,505	
	Records downloaded for initial screening (Google Scholar $n=300$; Dimensions $n=77$)	377	Not downloaded / out of initial scope: 4,128
Screening (Title & Abstract)	Records screened after deduplication	350	Duplicates removed: 27
	Records excluded at title/abstract stage		Excluded ($n=278$): language other than English/Indonesian ($n=15$); outside 2007–2026 date range ($n=14$); not relevant to postmodern-Christian counseling integration ($n=187$); non-Christian spiritual context without comparative relevance ($n=62$)

Phase	Description	Records (n)	Exclusions / Notes
Eligibility (Full-Text Review)	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	72	
	Full-text articles excluded		Excluded (n=57): insufficient theological engagement with postmodern therapy (n=22); purely empirical focus without conceptual contribution (n=16); books/book chapters (not peer-reviewed articles, per IC1/EC6) (n=10); duplicates resolved at full-text level (n=9)
Included	Peer-reviewed journal articles (2007–2026) included in conceptual synthesis	15	

Quality Assessment

Quality was assessed based on: (1) clarity of argumentation and theoretical coherence; (2) depth of engagement with both postmodern and Christian theological dimensions; (3) methodological transparency; and (4) relevance to the research questions. To minimise selection bias: all sources were assessed against the pre-specified criteria in Table 2; sources representing divergent scholarly positions were actively included; and limitations of included sources were explicitly acknowledged in the synthesis.

RESULTS

Systematic screening yielded 15 peer-reviewed journal articles (2007–2026) meeting all inclusion criteria. Table 4 presents all included articles organised by three themes: (1) integration of postmodern therapeutic techniques with Christian theology (n=4); (2) philosophical and theological tensions (n=4); and (3) educational gaps and practical adaptation (n=7).

Table 4. Summary of 21 Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles Included in the Conceptual Synthesis

Author(s) (Year)	Topic / Focus	Journal	Language	Key Contribution to This Review
Theme 1: Integration of Postmodern Therapeutic Techniques with Christian Theology (n = 4)				
Kwok (2016)	Narrative therapy, theology, and relational openness	Journal of Psychology and Theology	English	Connects narrative re-authoring with Lutheran law/gospel distinction; cautions against relativizing theological metanarrative
Mutter (2013)	Integration with postmodern therapies: EFT and Ingram's model	Journal of Psychology and Theology	English	Examines compatibility of Emotionally-Focused Therapy with covenantal theological anthropology
Rundio & Wong (2022)	Writing and praying collects as narrative therapy intervention	Contemporary Family Therapy	English	Integrates liturgical prayer practice with narrative externalization; concrete clinical application

Author(s) (Year)	Topic / Focus	Journal	Language	Key Contribution to This Review
Polischuk & Kang (2020)	From text to therapy: Philippians 4 and anxiety (CBT/ACT)	Journal of Psychology and Theology	English	Scriptural integration combining CBT and ACT with faith-based epistemological grounding
Theme 2: Philosophical and Theological Tensions (n = 4)				
Xu (2010)	Impact of postmodernism on counseling: Boon or bane?	Int'l J. for the Advancement of Counselling	English	Balanced critique distinguishing moderate perspectivism from radical relativism; both affect counseling differently
Baron (2022)	Postsecular political and fundamental theology	Int'l Journal of Philosophy and Theology	English	'Theology of interruption': holds Christian particularity with dialogical openness to postmodern pluralism
Greene (2025)	Reclaiming the Bible's metanarrative for postmodern audiences	Religions	English	Argues postmodern skepticism toward metanarratives directly challenges Christian proclamation and pastoral authority
Vikström & Barsnes (2024)	God's alterity in a postmodern setting	Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift	English	Examines Hart & Kearney on divine otherness as resource for Christian identity within postmodern epistemology
Theme 3: Educational Gaps and Practical Adaptation (n = 7)				
Garzon & Hall (2012)	Teaching Christian integration in psychology and counseling	Journal of Psychology and Theology	English	Identifies key gaps in integration pedagogy; calls for adaptation to digital culture and new student characteristics
Tan (2012)	Principled, professional, and personal integration	Journal of Psychology and Theology	English	Three-dimensional integration model for counselor formation; emphasizes character and personal spiritual maturity
Delkeskamp-Hayes (2010)	Psychologically informed pastoral care and Orthodox theology	Christian Bioethics	English	Critical assessment of secular psychological assumptions in pastoral care from an Orthodox Christian perspective
Munday (2013)	Postmodern frameworks and methodological inconsistency in counseling	Counseling and Values	English	Critiques lack of methodological coherence when postmodern approaches are selectively adopted without integration rationale
Lusk & Corbett (2021)	Inclusivity and theological coherence in Christian counseling	Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health	English	Examines unresolved tension between postmodern inclusivity and doctrinal integrity in counseling settings
Lusk & Corbett (2021)	Christian centrism in postmodern philosophy education	Youth Voice Journal	English	Explores impact of digital-postmodern context on

Author(s) (Year)	Topic / Focus	Journal	Language	Key Contribution to This Review
Abd Razzak et al. (2025)	Eco-spiritual well-being: flora's psychological impact	AlBayan	English	Christian formation and counseling education Emerging holistic framework integrating faith-based ecology with contemporary wellness and counseling models

Integration of Postmodern Therapeutic Techniques with Christian Theology

Four peer-reviewed articles examine the compatibility of postmodern therapeutic approaches with Christian theological frameworks. The literature suggests, on balance, that certain techniques offer meaningful points of convergence with Christian theology, though scholars differ in the degree of compatibility they claim and in the conditions they specify for integration. The most consistent finding across multiple articles (Kwok, 2016; Rundio & Wong, 2022) is that narrative therapy's emphasis on re-authoring personal stories may resonate with Christianity's narrative structure of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Kwok (2016) extends this by linking narrative re-authoring to the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel, suggesting that narrative therapy's externalisation of problems may serve a theologically analogous function to the liberation of grace. However, Kwok (2016) also cautions that narrative therapy's commitment to deconstructing dominant narratives can conflict with Christianity's affirmation of a normative theological metanarrative—a tension acknowledged in the article itself. The compatibility, therefore, is presented in the peer-reviewed literature as partial, conditional, and requiring ongoing theological discernment.

The remaining three articles in this theme explore more specific integrative proposals. Mutter (2013) examines the compatibility of Emotionally-Focused Therapy (EFT) with covenantal theological anthropology, finding that EFT's emphasis on attachment and vulnerability may align with a theological vision of covenantal love, though this alignment is described as emerging rather than established. Rundio & Wong (2022) present a specific clinical application—the use of written prayers and liturgical collects within narrative therapy—as a concrete example of integration in practice. Polischuk & Kang (2020) demonstrate how integrating scripture with CBT and ACT may ground therapeutic practice in a faith-based epistemology anchored in Philippians 4. It should be noted that all three proposals are based on theoretical arguments and clinical illustrations rather than empirical outcome data; no randomised or quasi-experimental evidence is present in the included peer-reviewed corpus.

Philosophical and Theological Tensions

Four peer-reviewed articles address the philosophical and theological tensions between postmodern thought and Christian theology as their central concern. These scholars do not converge on a single resolution; rather, they map the tension from different vantage points, ranging from conditional engagement to fundamental incompatibility.

Xu (2010) offers the most balanced assessment in this cluster. Distinguishing moderate perspectivism from radical relativism, the article argues that moderate forms of postmodern epistemology may be selectively appropriated in counseling without abandoning normative theological claims, while radical relativism poses genuine theological risks. This nuanced position contrasts with Greene (2025), who argues that postmodern scepticism toward metanarratives constitutes a direct challenge to Christian proclamation that cannot be accommodated without theological loss. The divergence between these two positions—both published in peer-reviewed journals during 2007–

2026—illustrates that no consensus exists in the field. Integration cannot be described as either straightforwardly compatible or straightforwardly incompatible with Christian theology.

Baron (2022) and Vikström & Barsnes (2024) propose constructive theological frameworks for navigating this tension. Baron's 'theology of interruption' holds Christian particularity open to postmodern dialogical engagement without collapsing into relativism. Vikström and Barsnes examine Kearney and Hart's treatment of divine alterity and otherness as resources for maintaining Christian identity within postmodern epistemological contexts. Both articles originate primarily in philosophical and systematic theology, and their applicability to clinical counseling practice remains an open question.

Educational Gaps and Practical Adaptation

Seven peer-reviewed articles address gaps in counselor education, methodological consistency, and the operationalization of postmodern-Christian integration in practice. This is the largest thematic cluster in the analysed corpus, reflecting the breadth of practical challenges that remain unresolved.

Garzon & Hall (2012) document that while integration courses are common in Christian counseling programs, pedagogical adaptation to digital culture and evolving student characteristics remains insufficient. They identify the need for integration learning theory to evolve beyond content transmission toward cultivating integrative thinking in technologically mediated contexts. Tan (2012) proposes a three-dimensional model—principled, professional, and personal integration—as a counselor formation framework, emphasizing that integration must extend beyond intellectual alignment to shape the counsellor's character and relational presence. Delkeskamp-Hayes (2010) contributes an important counter-perspective from an Orthodox Christian standpoint, arguing that the uncritical adoption of secular psychological assumptions in pastoral care—including postmodern-informed approaches—risks displacing theological categories with therapeutic ones.

Munday (2013) critiques the methodological inconsistency that arises when postmodern approaches are selectively adopted without a coherent rationale for integration, identifying this as a structural problem in the field rather than a matter of individual practitioner preference. Lusk & Corbett (2021) examine the tension between postmodern inclusivity and doctrinal integrity in counseling settings, finding this tension to be unresolved in the literature. Balukh et al. (2022) explore the implications of digital-postmodern culture for Christian formation in educational contexts, while Abd Razzak et al. (2025) contribute an emerging holistic framework integrating faith-based ecology with contemporary wellness models. Together, these seven articles indicate that practical and educational dimensions of integration significantly lag behind theoretical discourse, and that multiple specific tensions—methodological, pedagogical, and cross-cultural—remain unaddressed.

DISCUSSION

This conceptual literature review examined the challenges and opportunities of integrating postmodern therapeutic approaches with Christian theology, based on 15 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2007 and 2026. The literature suggests that certain postmodern approaches offer conditional and context-dependent contributions to Christian counseling, while significant philosophical, theological, and practical tensions persist. The relationship between postmodernism and Christian theology remains, by the evidence of the analysed corpus, inherently contested rather than smoothly integrable.

Theme 1 articles suggest that narrative therapy (Kwok, 2016) and integrative models that combine EFT, CBT, and ACT with theological anthropology (Mutter, 2013; Polischuk & Kang, 2020; Rundio & Wong, 2022) offer meaningful yet limited and theoretically derived points of engagement. None of the four analysed articles in this theme provides empirical outcome data; all present theoretical arguments and clinical illustrations. This finding is consistent with conclusions found in broader foundational literature (Béres, 2022; Blanton, 2004, 2005), though those works fall outside the analysed corpus. The peer-reviewed evidence base within 2007–2026 for Theme 1 claims therefore remains small ($n=4$) and exclusively theoretical.

Theme 2 reveals a substantive disagreement within the peer-reviewed literature: Xu (2010) argues for selective appropriation of moderate postmodern perspectivism, while Greene (2025) argues that postmodern scepticism constitutes an irresolvable challenge to Christian proclamation. Baron (2022) and Vikström & Barsnes (2024) each propose constructive theological frameworks, but these remain within philosophical and systematic theology rather than applied counseling. The most frequently referenced constructive framework in the broader literature falls outside the 2007–2026 window and is therefore not among the analysed articles; future peer-reviewed work within the inclusion window may need to empirically test or operationalise this framework for it to carry evidential weight in a systematic review.

Theme 3 identifies the most practically urgent finding: seven articles converge on significant gaps in counsellor education, methodological consistency, and cultural adaptation, yet offer no systematic solutions. The concentration of seven articles in practical gaps (versus four each in Themes 1 and 2) suggests that practical and educational concerns may be more actively debated in recent peer-reviewed literature than theoretical integration *per se*. This imbalance itself warrants attention from the field.

Several limitations of this review require explicit acknowledgement. The restriction to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2007 and 2026, while necessary for methodological consistency, excludes foundational works that substantially shaped the theoretical landscape. The finding that ERIC, Scopus, and Garuda Garba returned zero results for the primary search string indicates that the field is poorly represented in major indexed databases, raising questions about publication venue and indexing practices. The final corpus of 15 articles is relatively small and concentrated in English-language publications, with no Indonesian-language articles ultimately meeting all criteria, suggesting that Indonesian scholarship on this topic may use different terminological conventions or remain in non-indexed venues.

CONCLUSION

The integration of postmodernism into Christian counseling presents genuine opportunities and fundamental challenges that, according to 15 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2007 and 2026, remain unresolved and contested. The relationship between postmodern epistemology and Christian theological commitments cannot be characterised as straightforwardly compatible; it requires critical, selective, and theologically accountable engagement. The analysed corpus suggests that certain postmodern therapeutic approaches—particularly narrative therapy and integrative models combining psychological and scriptural frameworks—may offer conditional contributions to Christian counselling when engaged with theological accountability. However, these contributions are presented in the literature as developing theoretical proposals rather than empirically validated practices. The philosophical and theological tensions identified in Theme 2 confirm that integration is a contested project, with scholars disagreeing on whether partial compatibility is achievable or whether fundamental epistemological incompatibility remains. The practical gaps documented in Theme 3 indicate that even where theoretical proposals exist, their translation into counselor education, clinical practice, and cross-cultural adaptation has not yet been adequately addressed.

Future research may most productively address these gaps through: (1) empirical studies examining how Christian counselors navigate postmodern epistemological tensions in actual practice; (2) cross-cultural investigations of integration in non-Western and Indonesian Christian contexts; (3) systematic evaluation of integrative models such as scriptural CBT/ACT within the 2007–2026 peer-reviewed literature; and (4) expanded search strategies to capture relevant scholarship in Garuda Garba, Scopus, and ERIC through alternative search terms and languages. The development of a cautious, theologically grounded, and empirically informed approach to integration—one that acknowledges the limits of compatibility—represents a necessary direction for the field.

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