

Five Decade of Religious Family Counseling: Past, Present, and Future Direction

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Abstract

Integrating religion and spirituality into therapy raises ethical concerns like respecting client beliefs, setting boundaries, and addressing value conflicts. Research on religious family therapy can inform ethical guidelines and best practices. However, despite extensive research on religious family therapy in Indonesia, these studies are not visible in the Scopus database. The aim of this study was to identify research trends, hot topics, and new areas in the field of religious family therapy. This study used bibliometric analysis in the Scopus database. The keywords used are "religious family therapy" or "spiritual family therapy". Articles to be analyzed were previously identified and filtered using the PRISMA analysis model. A total of 398 articles were selected independently and then analyzed using bibliometrics with the help of Scopus and VOSviewer. The highest number of publications on religious family therapy was recorded in 2022. The country that contributes the most to the topic of religious family therapy is the United States. North Dakota State University is the affiliate with the most publications. The journal with the largest number of article publications is the Journal of Religion and Health. McGeorge, C.R. as the author who contributed the most to publications on the topic of religious family therapy and the keywords that often appear in research titles on the theme of religious family therapy are human, human article and family. This finding has provided the opportunities for religious countries like Indonesia to encourage further research on the topic of religious family therapy in the Scopus database.

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1. Introduction

The family represents the fundamental unit of society, where the dynamics among family members, their interaction with the broader social milieu, and the structural configuration of the family exert profound influences on social fabric (Tsai, 2016). Consequently, adverse familial conditions coupled with discontentment constitute significant precursors to mental health issues, potentially engendering irreversible consequences (Derrick et al., 2016). One critical determinant of familial harmony is cohesiveness and adaptability, as posited by Olson's (2019) model, wherein emotional bonds and cohesion among family members foster heightened sensitivity to each other's values. Adequate social support from family can significantly enhance individuals' ability to manage stress, improve psychosocial health, and augment overall well-being (Kosherbayeva et al., 2024). Thus, the health of the family unit, as the foundational component of social structure, profoundly impacts the overall societal construct.

As individuals, members of a family encompass physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions, all intricately interconnected, exerting varying degrees of influence on systemic change (Dallos & Dlapar, 2015; Holmberg et al., 2021; Garssen & Pool, 2021). Spirituality, a profound aspect of human existence, is closely intertwined with the body, manifesting through emotions, behaviors, and relationships, and imbued with a humanistic perspective on life's meaning, values, and coherence (Wright, 2017). Within the familial context, spirituality holds significant sway over human experience and family dynamics (Walsh, 2012). Hence, an individual's spiritual well-being,

fostered within the family unit, profoundly shapes familial adaptability and subsequent societal constructs.

Religion plays a pivotal role in the lives of numerous individuals, shaping personal and communal practices and beliefs. Within families, spirituality influences interpersonal dynamics, guiding decision-making, conflict resolution, and emotional well-being. This assertion is supported by Genc (2020), who notes that many couples seeking counseling often base their expectations on religious belief systems, including interpretations of divine intent within their marriage. Given this deep integration of faith in familial relationships, therapeutic approaches must account for the spiritual dimension to be truly effective.

Moreover, religious family therapy emerges as a viable approach to address familial disorders. Empirical studies underscore its efficacy, demonstrating that structured family therapy significantly mitigates emotional distress and contributes to the reduction of somatic symptoms (Maynard et al., 2018; Carr, 2019; Alexander & Robbins, 2019). Religious family therapy integrates clients' religious and spiritual beliefs, values, and practices into therapeutic interventions (Cashwell et al., 2020; Kimbel & Osteen, 2022), aiming to acknowledge and honor the profound significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of many families (Apostolides, 2019).

Implementing religious family therapy involves integrating the family's religious or spiritual worldview into therapeutic practices. This approach, supported by studies (Coyle, 2017; Koenig et al., 2022), aims to deepen individuals' understanding of how their religious or spiritual beliefs influence family dynamics. By incorporating religious or spiritual resources such as scriptures, rituals, and practices into therapy sessions (Butler et al., 2022), therapists can facilitate exploration of issues related to faith, meaning, and purpose. This process contributes to enhancing spiritual well-being, as evidenced by research (Phenwan et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2021).

Furthermore, religious family therapy fosters a framework of mutual respect for discussing and navigating differences in religious beliefs within the family unit (Thoburn et al., 2023). This dialogue not only promotes understanding but also strengthens family cohesion (Group, 2022), creating a supportive environment where individuals can reconcile differences and cultivate harmony based on shared values and beliefs.

Many societies worldwide identify as religious or spiritual, and these beliefs profoundly shape their worldview, values, and methods of coping with challenges (Koenig et al., 2022). Research in religious family therapy plays a crucial role in helping mental health professionals understand and cater to the specific needs of clients who incorporate religion or spirituality into their lives (Oxhandler & Parrish, 2018; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018; Cashwell et al., 2020). However, integrating religious and spiritual aspects into therapy raises ethical concerns. These include respecting clients' beliefs, maintaining professional boundaries, and addressing potential conflicts in values (Maximo, 2019; Elzamzamy & Keshavarzi, 2019; Currier et al., 2023).

The body of research in this field contributes to developing ethical guidelines and best practices for therapists (Cashwell et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2022). Notably, despite extensive research on religious family therapy in Indonesia, it may not be well-represented in international databases like Scopus. This presents an opportunity for further research to optimize the visibility of Indonesian research by employing specific keywords that enhance discoverability in academic searches on platforms like Scopus.

This research aims to conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis to identify trends, emerging topics, and potential new areas in the field of religious family therapy. The study intends to address knowledge gaps and outline future research directions by examining several key aspects. It will analyze the annual publication trends in religious family therapy research, identify significant contributing countries and affiliated universities, and assess the journals that publish substantial works in this domain. Furthermore, the study will highlight prolific authors and their contributions to the literature, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of keywords used to enhance the discoverability of religious family therapy research. Through this systematic approach, the research seeks to provide valuable insights that can guide future studies, uncover underexplored areas, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in religious family therapy.

2. Method

This study used bibliometric analysis to analyze patterns, trends and metadata of scientific articles regarding religious family therapy. Articles to be analyzed were previously identified and filtered using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) model. The primary sources used are articles indexed by Scopus. Scopus indexed articles are selected because they have gone through a strict review process so that their quality is considered suitable for publication and study. The keywords used in searches on Scopus are religious family therapy or religiosity family therapy or spiritual family therapy. The selection process follows specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria are: (1) articles published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings, (2) articles within the subject areas of psychology, social sciences, arts and humanities, and multidisciplinary studies, and (3) articles available in English. Conversely, the exclusion criteria are: (1) articles that are book chapters, editorials, or reviews, (2) articles that do not focus on the application or theoretical discussion of religious family therapy, and (3) duplicate articles found in multiple sources. The types of documents analyzed are also limited to articles and conference papers. The selection results using the PRISMA model are presented in Figure 1.

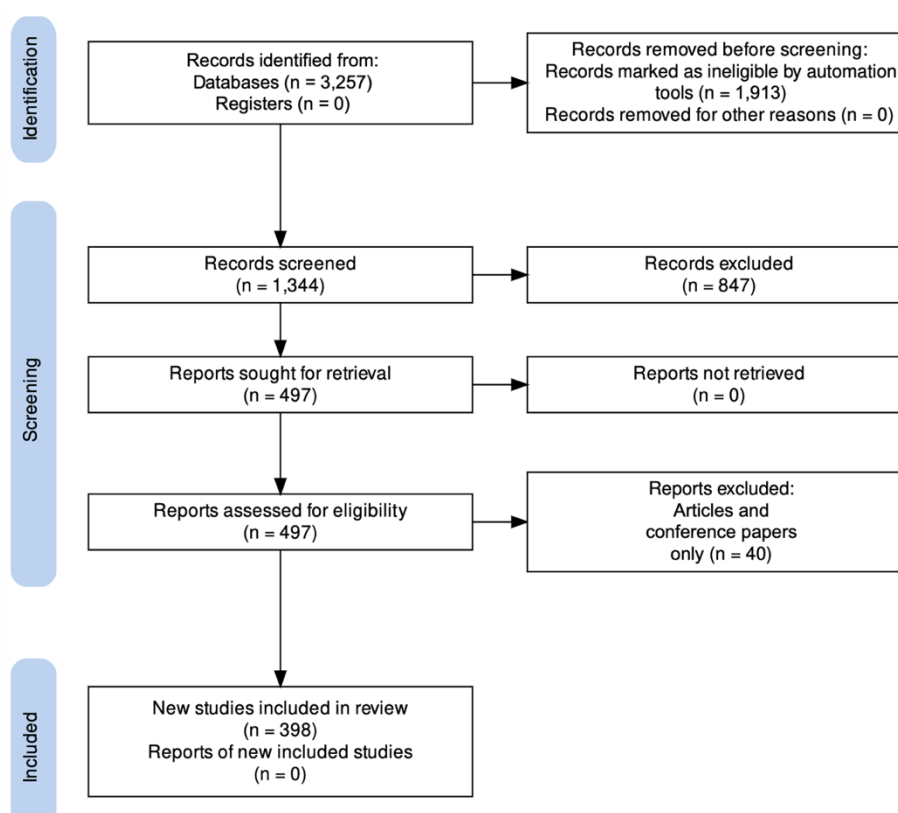


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram

Three hundred ninety-eight articles were selected independently for further analysis using bibliometrics. The selected articles were then exported into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using the VOSViewer application version 1.6.16. Through this application, graphical representations can be obtained to interpret bibliometric maps. The results of the analysis in this study were presented using pictures, graphs and tables.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Documents by Year

Religious family therapy is a potential alternative in overcoming complex family problems that have different personal religious experiences. As a promising alternative, research on religious family therapy is also quite diverse from year to year. Figure 2 shows the number of publications carried out from 1976-2024, with a total of 398 articles published and cited 10,075 times. Through Figure 2, it is known that publications about religious family therapy began to be widely published in 2004

and the most will be in 2022, namely 36 documents with citations of 794 articles. Apart from that, it was also identified that in 1976 there was 1 publication that had the highest citations at 277 times.

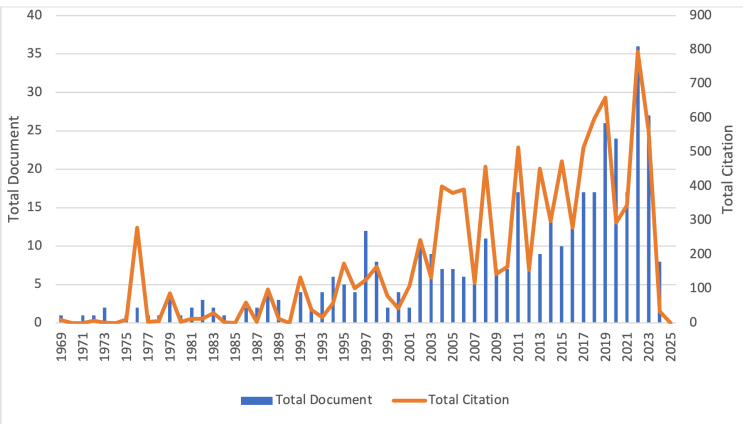


Figure 2. Published Data From 1969 to 2024 With the Number of Citation

3.2. Documents by Countries

Judging from the country of origin, several countries have quite a large number of publications related to the topic of religious family therapy. Table 1 shows the ten countries with the highest publication rates and the most contributions to religious family therapy research. The contribution of each country can also be known through the number of citations made.

Table 1. The Top Ten Countries in Publication and Citation

Countries	Document	Citation
United States	185	3508
United Kingdom	42	632
Canada	21	421
Australia	15	139
Iran	13	156
Malaysia	12	95
France	10	50
Israel	10	158
Brazil	9	276
Germany	9	53

Table 1 highlights the global distribution of scientific output and impact across the top ten countries. Leading the list, the United States demonstrates a significant presence with 185 publications and 3508 citations, underscoring its robust scientific research infrastructure and influence in academia. Following closely, the United Kingdom contributes 42 publications and 632 citations, reflecting its strong research output relative to its size. Canada and Australia also maintain notable positions with 21 publications and 421 citations, and 15 publications and 139 citations respectively, showcasing their contributions to the global scientific landscape. Finally, the first article published in the United States was Kinzie (1972), United Kingdom (Alder et al., 1986), Canada (Morrison, 1971), Australia (Treloar, 1977), Iran (Tehrani 1997), Malaysia (Kinzie, 1972), France (Zempleni, 1969), Israel (Payne, 1976), Brazil (Ferrão et al., 2006), and Germany (Schweighofer, 1982).

This data underscores the diverse geographical representation in scientific research, illustrating how countries like Iran, Malaysia, France, Israel, Brazil, and Germany each contribute varying levels of scientific output and citation impact. The differences in contributions across countries may be influenced by cultural and policy-related factors. For instance, nations with strong governmental support for mental health and family counseling research, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, tend to have higher publication and citation rates. These findings are crucial for understanding the distribution of research excellence globally and highlight the varying contributions of different nations to the advancement of knowledge across scientific disciplines.

From the results of data analysis obtained through searches on Scopus, there have been no publications originating from Indonesia on the topic of religious family therapy. Therefore, this topic can be recommended for researchers from Indonesia to conduct research and publications on the topic of religious family therapy because it has a lot of potential as a country with diverse religious communities. Furthermore, a map of the collaboration that exists in each country can be seen in Figure 3.

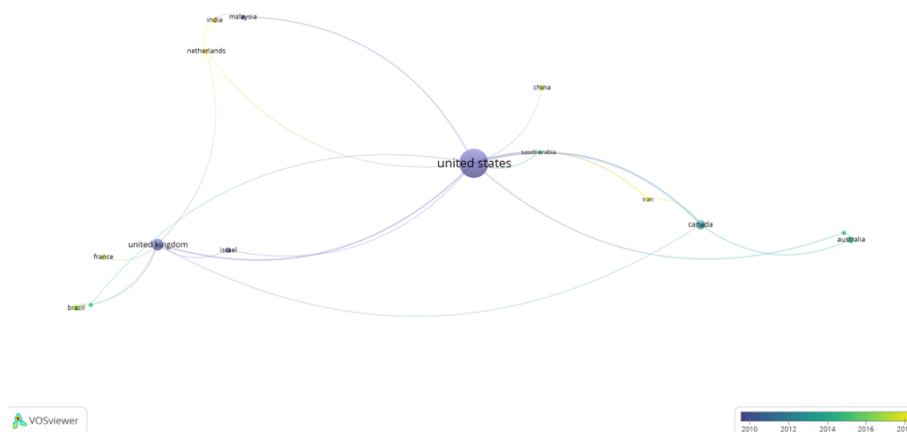


Figure 3. Map of Co-authorship Between Countries

Figure 3 shows that the United States is the center for publications about religious family therapy. Countries that have relations with the United States include the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Australia.

3.3. Document by Affiliates

Data analysis continued by identifying affiliates who contributed to religious family therapy publications. The affiliation that will be displayed can be a reference if researchers are interested in collaborating, especially on the topic of religious family therapy. The results of the analysis of the 10 affiliates with the most contributions can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Ten Most Contributing Affiliates

Affiliation	Documents	Citation
North Dakota State University	9	145
Brigham Young University	6	88
King's College London	6	68
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	5	26
Harvard Medical School	5	140
University of Nebraska–Lincoln	5	117
Kansas State University	4	28
Iowa State University	4	63
La Trobe University	4	87
Baylor University	4	58

Table 2 shows that North Dakota State University has the most publications on the topic of religious family therapy, with a total of 9 documents published with 145 citations. The second highest affiliations are Brigham Young University and King's College London, each with 6 publications with 88 citations. Nevertheless, the usefulness of articles affiliated with the fifth institution, Harvard Medical School, is evident, with 5 articles receiving 140 citations. This implies that the quantity of publications does not necessarily correlate directly with the number of citations.

3.4. Documents by Source

The next analysis was conducted to identify the journals that contribute the most to publications on religious family therapy. The identification results can be used as a reference for researchers seeking information or intending to publish on the topic of religious family therapy that shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Ten Journals Contributing the Most to Publications

Source	Documents	Citation
Journal of Religion and Health	24	305
Journal of Marital and Family Therapy	17	365
Contemporary Family Therapy	12	111
PLoS ONE	12	80
Journal of Family Therapy	9	207
Palliative and Supportive Care	9	133
American Journal of Family Therapy	8	436
Family Process	8	464
Social Science and Medicine	8	225
Journal of Family Psychotherapy	6	60

Table 3 shows that the journal with the highest number of articles published is the Journal of Religion and Health, with 24 articles. Considering the number of citations, Family Process has the highest citation count at 464 citations. The second is the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, with 17 articles. This indicates that these journals can be used as references for seeking information or publishing related to religious family therapy. The data also suggests that studies on religious family therapy are quite popular in family-based and religion-based journals (Rose et al., 2018; Pearson, 2017; Coburn & McGeorge, 2022).

3.5. Document by Authors

Researchers who focus on the topic of religious family therapy significantly contribute to the depth of this topic. The top 10 contributors are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Ten Authors Contributing the Most to Publications

Author	Affiliation	Documents	Citation
McGeorge, C. R.	North Dakota State University	8	12
Coburn, K. O.	Kansas State University	6	12
Oxhandler, H. K.	Baylor University	4	58
Dollahite, D. C.	Brigham Young University	3	12
Hecker, L.	Purdue University Calumet	3	16
Marks, L. D.	Brigham Young University	3	12
Piercy, F. P.	Purdue University	3	246
Schwartz, L. L.	The Pennsylvania State University	3	169
Toomey, R. B.	The University of Arizona	3	127
Asad, N	Aga Khan University	2	35

Table 4 shows highlights key aspects of author productivity, research impact, collaboration, and potential research areas. C.R. McGeorge and K.O. Coburn stand out as highly productive authors, while F.P. Piercy, L.L. Schwartz, R.B. Toomey, and H.K. Oxhandler have garnered significant citations, indicating the relevance and influence of their work. The data reveals collaboration among various U.S. institutions and an international dimension with the presence of N. Asad from Aga Khan University. Although specific research areas are not explicitly mentioned, the authors' affiliations suggest potential focus on topics related to psychology, counseling, and family studies. Overall, this data provides insights into a research landscape featuring productive and impactful individuals, inter-university collaborations, and the potential for diverse, interconnected research areas.

McGeorge C. R. as the most contributing author to publications on religious family therapy with 8 articles. The article by McGeorge, C. R. with the highest number of citations is "The intersection of spirituality, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in family therapy training: An exploration of students' beliefs and practices" (McGeorge, 2014). Considering the number of citations, Piercy, F.P. has 3 articles that make a significant contribution, with a total citation count reaching 246 citations. The article by Piercy, F. P. with the highest number of citations is titled "Spirituality, religion and family therapy: Competing or complementary worlds?" (Stender, et al. 1994).

3.6. Collaboration Opportunities in Religious Family Therapy Research

The substantial contributions can be a recommendation for researchers seeking collaboration in the field of religious family therapy. The collaboration map of each author can be seen in Figure 4.

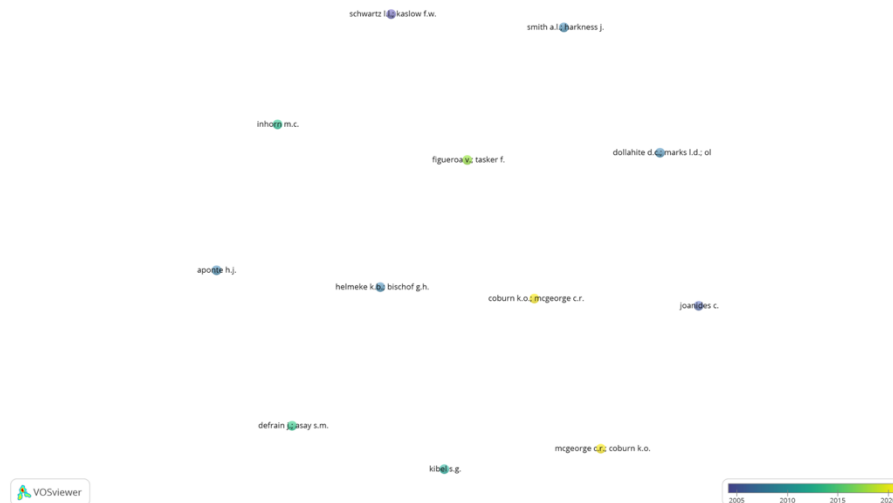


Figure 4. Collaboration Map Among Authors

Figure 4 shows that there has not been any collaboration among authors related to religious family therapy. This information can be a recommendation for researchers to collaborate in further studies. Meanwhile, out of all the articles analyzed, the article with the highest number of citations belongs to Moos & Moos (1976) with 277 citations.

Various research on religious family therapy is identified through several keywords. These keywords provide an overview of sub-themes that can be explored when conducting research on religious family therapy. Frequently used keywords in research titles can be seen in Figure 5.

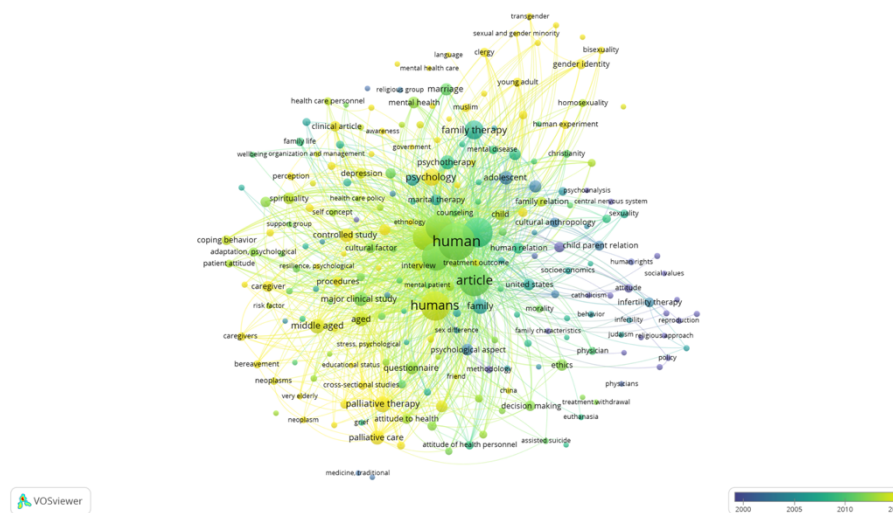


Figure 5. Co-Authorship Map Among Keywords

Figure 5 shows that the keywords frequently appearing in the titles of research on the theme of religious family therapy are human, humans' article, and family, with a minimum occurrence of 307 times out of 4.163 words that appear. The presented bibliometric image illustrates a network of interconnected terms, with "religion", "spirituality", and "faith" as central nodes, indicating their pivotal role in the research landscape. These terms are closely connected to concepts such as "health", "mental health", "coping", "cancer", and "palliative care", suggesting intersections between religion, spirituality, and various aspects of health. The presence of healthcare-related terms, such as "nurses", "physicians", and "patients", and their interconnectedness within the network, highlights the relevance of these topics in clinical contexts. Meanwhile, the increasing number of items over time, particularly after 2010, indicates a growing research interest and scholarly output related to religion, spirituality, and health. Overall, this bibliometric image provides insights into a dynamic and

interrelated research landscape centered on the relationships between religion, spirituality, and various aspects of health, with important implications for patient care and clinical practice.

Figure 6 shows several sub-themes of research that can be used in studies on religious family therapy, namely spirituality, religion, and family therapy. It can also be seen through Figure 6 that religious family therapy is popularly used in the context of mental health (Wendel, 2003; Hebert, 2007; Smith, 2017), LGBT (Heiden-Rootes, 2020; Acosta, 2020), and culture (Eppler, 2020).

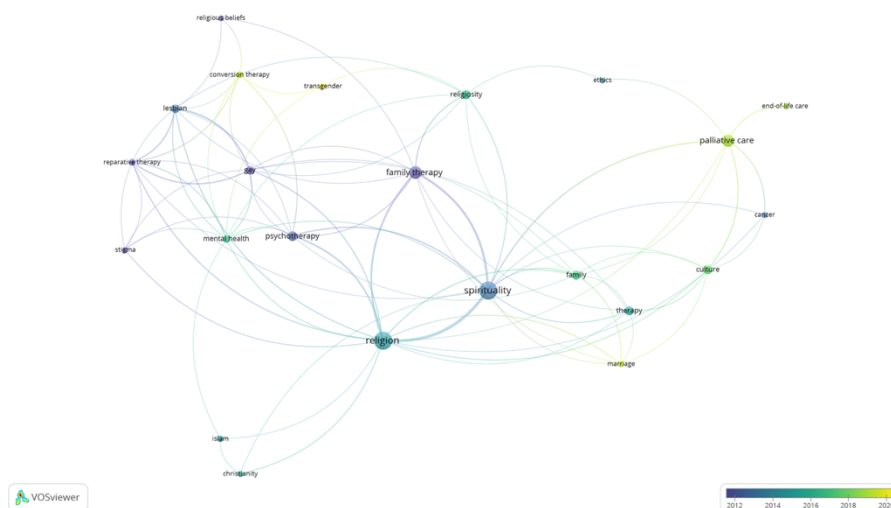


Figure 6. Map of Emerging Research Themes

The study of religious family therapy continues to evolve from various aspects. Theoretically, many researchers focus on developing theoretical frameworks that integrate religious and spiritual perspectives with family therapy models. For instance, Kimbel and Osteen (2022) proposed the "Spiritual Integrated Psychotherapy" framework, which incorporates spiritual practices and interventions into evidence-based therapy for Christian clients. In terms of cultural competence, there is an increasing emphasis on developing cultural competence in religious family therapy. Garcia et al (2021) conducted a systematic review of the need for culturally responsive interventions. Thoburn et al. (2023) discussed strategies for fostering religious and spiritual sensitivity in behavioral health practice.

Empirical studies have also explored the efficacy and outcomes of religious and spiritually integrated family therapy. For example, Carlson et al. (2022) conducted a randomized controlled trial examining the effectiveness of spiritually integrated cognitive-behavioral therapy for depression. In the field of education, there is an increased focus on training mental health professionals in the integration of religion and spirituality. Polzer et al. (2021) investigated the teaching of clinical integration of spirituality and religion in secular counseling and psychology doctoral programs. Butler et al. (2022) discussed strategies for integrating spirituality and religiosity into counselor education programs.

The ethical implications of incorporating religion and spirituality into therapy have been explored. Cashwell et al. (2020) discussed ethical considerations and professional competencies for religious and spiritually oriented psychotherapy. Apostolides (2019) also examined the integration of narrative therapy with religion and spirituality from an ethical perspective. Researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding and respecting diverse religious and spiritual beliefs in family therapy. Huff et al. (2022) explored the experiences of religious and spiritual minority clients in therapy, highlighting the need for inclusive and affirming practices.

Religious family therapy plays a crucial role in the realm of education, particularly in assisting students and their families to overcome emotional, behavioral, and spiritual challenges that may influence the learning process. Building good attachment and communication between parents (especially mothers) and children with warm and supportive interactions can reduce children's emotional and behavioral problems (Rahmawati et al., 2022). Research indicates that faith-based

family therapy approaches can enhance family resilience, strengthen relationships among family members, and promote positive values that support students' academic and social development (Shen, 2018; Kim & Yoon, 2020). Furthermore, religious family therapy can aid students in managing academic stress, increasing learning motivation, and developing adaptive coping skills (Pearce et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2021). In the context of inclusive education, this approach has also proven effective in supporting students with special needs and their families by fostering acceptance, empathy, and collaboration between schools and families (Anderson & Steen, 2017; Ravalier & Walsh, 2018).

This research has several limitations. First, it uses a single database as the primary source, namely Scopus. It is possible that other search engines may contain articles resulting from research on religious family therapy, although they may be categorized as articles not published in reputable international journals. Second, this study relies on the use of keywords in the selection of primary sources, resulting in some articles that do not fully contain the terminology of religious family therapy. The results of this research open up opportunities for religious countries like Indonesia to encourage further research on the topic of religious family therapy in the Scopus database.

4. Conclusion

Religious family therapy is a potentially effective aid in addressing family disturbances, as most people identify themselves as religious or spiritual, and their beliefs and practices can greatly influence their worldview, values, and coping mechanisms. This research provides information on publications about religious family therapy, with the highest number in 2022, totaling 36 documents and 794 citations. The country contributing the most to the topic of religious family therapy is the United States. North Dakota State University is the affiliation with the most publications. The journal with the highest number of published articles is the *Journal of Religion and Health*. C.R. McGeorge is the most contributing author in publishing on the topic of religious family therapy, and the keywords frequently appearing in research titles on the theme of religious family therapy are human, humans' article, and family. The results of this research open opportunities for religious countries like Indonesia to encourage further research on the topic of religious family therapy in the Scopus database.

Future research in religious family therapy should focus on evaluating its effectiveness across diverse cultural contexts, using rigorous methodologies like randomized controlled trials. Cultural adaptation of therapy approaches to meet the specific needs of different religious groups and longitudinal studies on its long-term effects are essential. Comparative analyses between religiously integrated and secular therapy approaches can illuminate the unique contributions of religious beliefs to therapeutic outcomes. Additionally, exploring ethical considerations in religious family therapy, such as respecting diverse beliefs and navigating potential conflicts, is crucial for developing culturally sensitive practices.

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All authors have equal contributions to the paper. All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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