

A Catholic Critique of the Healing Art of Reiki

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Abstract

The complementary therapy known as Reiki is considered from a Catholic perspective. The irreducible content of the practice of Reiki is identified as putative manipulation of the healing energy known as *ki* by practitioners initiated through an attunement ritual using secret symbols. Some general problems of describing *ki* in the language of Catholic theology are discussed. Certain critiques of Reiki by Christian groups are found to be inadequate on the grounds of attributing guilt by association, or targeting beliefs not necessarily held by all Reiki practitioners. Nevertheless, attempting to manipulate *ki* according to the principles of Reiki is found not to accord with Christian revelation, and the necessity of practitioners being initiated by the use of secret symbols is particularly problematic. Some recommendations are made concerning the pastoral consequences of this conclusion: avoidance of promoting Reiki in a church context, appropriate support for Christians who have received or practiced Reiki themselves, and addressing the provision of Reiki through the public health care system.

1. Introduction

The Eastern “healing art” known as Reiki is growing in popularity in the West, and is widely available in Britain.¹ A number of Christian groups have become concerned about Reiki and published pamphlets² warning of the dangers they believe to be inherent in the technique. In my own pastoral experience, Catholic parishioners in England and Wales are having recourse to, and sometimes themselves offering, the practice of Reiki; therefore, it is important to have a well-grounded theological response. If the practice of Reiki is incompatible with Christianity, it is to be rejected; otherwise it should be regarded as a healing gift from God, to be welcomed in the same way as Western medicine.

2. Essential Aspects of Reiki

Like most alternative and complementary therapies, Reiki is not monolithic. Most sources attribute the origin of modern Reiki to one Mikao Usui (1865-1926), but offer their own variations.³ I have chosen as a typical example of teaching on Reiki, the website of the UK Reiki Federation. Their “What is Reiki?” page,⁴ with very minor variations, reproduces the content of a page they offered in October 2002,⁵ in which a National Consultation of Study Groups of the UK Reiki Federation sought to converge on a text, prefaced with the following:

A complete layperson's explanation of Reiki is needed that can be used in part or whole, for official documentation and for telephone enquiries with the Federation. It must be general enough to encompass all styles, whilst still being informative.

This indicates the Reiki community's acknowledgement of their own diversity, and indicates that the current statement of the UK Reiki Federation is likely to represent a broad cross section of UK practice (though there is also an alternative UK body, the Reiki Association⁶).

The Reiki Federation's web page makes four key assertions:

- ▶ There exists a “natural healing energy [which] works on every level, not just the physical, and promotes the body's regenerative self healing ability”. This energy is known as 'ki' in Japan, 'chi' in China, and 'prana' in India.

- ▶ The Reiki practitioner serves as a channel for this energy; the client's body draws in what it needs.
- ▶ Reiki practitioners must become attuned in order to receive and act as a channel for this energy.
- ▶ The use of symbols (here defined only as "devices used by Reiki practitioners") is an integral part of such attunement or initiation.

It is clear from usage in the various sources that the name "Reiki" itself is sometimes applied to the energy itself, and sometimes to the practice of channelling it. The presentation by the Reiki Association⁷ concurs with the first two points, and elsewhere⁸ confirms the concepts of initiation and symbols.

3. The Problem of Ki Energy

There is a widespread belief in the East (prevalent in at least India, Japan and China) of a form of "energy" which is believed to flow through the human body and can become unbalanced; in Japanese, this is called *ki*. Many Eastern practices invoke such energy – traditional acupuncture, reflexology, *Tai Chi*, yoga and qigong would be examples. As a theory or model of the behaviour of the human body, the idea of *ki* may have merit – especially since it seems useful enough to be accepted in so many parts of the East. Is *ki* purely a placebo, a meaningless elaboration of the feel-good factor which works whenever one human being invests time and energy in caring for another, or for one's own self?⁹ Is *ki* a description of a natural phenomenon which people call "spiritual" because they do not understand its true nature? Or is *ki* truly spiritual, a reality pertaining to the human soul rather than the body?

This paper aims to apply a Catholic ontological and moral analysis to the practice of Reiki. This is complicated by the fact that the categories of Catholic analysis do not map neatly into an Eastern worldview. In the dualistic Christian paradigm, a human person is a unity of body and soul; the realm of the body is natural (physical), and the realm of the soul is spiritual (supernatural). From an Eastern perspective, the whole human person – body, mind and spirit – would be regarded as natural, and so care must be taken in interpreting the word "natural" in references such as the "natural healing energy" quoted above.

Energy has a precise meaning in the language of science: it can be measured, and converted from one form into another. In the realm of spiritual phenomena, the word "energy" is used analogously: something which flows and produces an effect at its point of destination. The Christian tradition recognises three possible sources of spiritual energy: God, the human soul, and evil spirits. There is no category of detached energy or life-force: the Hebrew Bible sees the life of living creatures as due to the *ruach*, the breath of God which at times appears as a "life-force" and other times as almost an independent being in God's service.¹⁰ In the New Testament tradition, this is understood as a divine person, the Holy Spirit; and another Divine Person, the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, is identified as "life"¹¹ and the one "through whom all things have their being".¹²

In this paper, I am not going to attempt to identify the true (ontological) nature of *ki*. This would be a vast undertaking requiring an analysis of many practices from numerous Eastern countries, and possibly also empirical tests of the usefulness of *ki* as a model. Fortunately, as demonstrated below, it will be sufficient to consider *beliefs* about *ki* as held by Reiki practitioners in order to compose a moral response to Reiki. Here I shall merely indicate the more general moral implications which would follow if the true nature of *ki* were resolved in the various possible ways:

- ▶ If it were shown that there were no evidence that *ki* was real, any further attempt to manipulate it would be *superstitious*, a sin under article 2111 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
- ▶ It may be the case that there are properties of the human body which Western medicine has not yet come to

terms with. If the concept of *ki* is shown to encode such a property of the physical body, then we may undertake exercises understood to “manipulate *ki*” within the limits validated by science without any special moral problems.

- ▶ If *ki* were established to be spiritual, and attributed to God as its source, then nothing alien to God could be ascribed to it. But in this case, the only assertions which could be made about *ki* could be those which do not contradict the contents of the Deposit of Faith insofar as they concern the nature and activities of the Divine Persons. In any case, techniques to manipulate *ki* would constitute the sin of “tempting God”¹³ except where clearly founded in revelation from the Triune God.
- ▶ If *ki* were established to be spiritual, but did not meet the above conditions for being due to the Triune God, then its source must be the human soul (psychic energy) or evil spirits. The invocation of evil spirits is both sinful and potentially dangerous, and clearly forbidden to Christians. But even if *ki* were shown to be a psychic power, its exercise would not be permitted to Christians: Article 2117 of the *Catechism* forbids as “gravely contrary to the virtue of religion” all “attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others – even if this were for the sake of restoring their health”. The scope of what is meant by “occult” here clearly includes psychic powers, since the same article later emphasises the gravity of recourse to demons as a special case.

In the remainder of this paper, we shall consider the question of what Reiki practitioners *believe* they are doing when they attempt to manipulate *ki*. The description above makes a baseline definition clear: *They believe they are channelling a spiritual energy which comes from beyond themselves, into their clients.* An individual Reiki practitioner may, or may not, espouse the belief that this energy is an all-pervasive monistic force;¹⁴ Western practitioners with limited training, especially if Christian in personal faith or cultural background, may hold a more syncretistic view. I shall offer my own moral critique of Reiki shortly, but first we shall examine criticism made by other Christians.

4. Inadequate Critiques of Reiki

In the absence of scholarly, peer-reviewed material in this area, the available critiques on Reiki are documents published by various concerned groups. Three have come into my possession: one by the *Maranatha* community, an ecumenical Christian grouping based in Manchester; another from a Catholic group in Dublin; and the third is a briefer document, Christian in tone but not in explicit content, by a group of ten concerned medical practitioners from Stockport. Addresses for all these sources are given in the endnotes. A particular difficulty in accepting the findings of all these documents is the diversity of practice within Reiki acknowledged above: their critique may apply to the version of Reiki which they have investigated, but may not apply to every practitioner.

A common line of argument found in these documents, as in much Christian literature opposed to New Age practices, is “guilt by association”. This seeks to establish that the person who invented/promoted a particular technique was a practitioner of occult arts; or that the technique in question is being promoted by a group which also offer practices clearly contrary to Christian morality; or simply that the technique originates from another religion. All of these are rightly treated as warning signs that the technique must be scrutinised carefully, and are of value in apologetics for building an emotional case to urge listeners to be wary of the technique; but none of them actually taint it. Catholic theology¹⁵ “rejects nothing of what is true and holy” from any of the world’s religions. An academic critique must consider the practice of Reiki itself.

“Guilt by Association” arguments include claims that Mr Usui was involved in fortune telling and a member of a spiritualist group;¹⁶ assertions that Reiki groups falsely claim Mr Usui was a Christian scholar or minister;¹⁷ and quotes

such as: “Reiki training is offered at Stonehenge and Glastonbury ... a web-site ‘Reiki healing Glastonbury’ also offers links to Tarot and astrology readings”¹⁸ or: “It should be noted that many Reiki practitioners are also involved in a range of other psychic activities.”¹⁹ All of these give a Christian cause for concern, but none build a substantial argument.

Some Reiki practitioners, it is alleged, explicitly acknowledge that “spirit guides” assist the performance of Reiki,²⁰ or that the energy is directed to the right place by a higher intelligence.²¹ Where this is the case, then the practice of Reiki is certainly mediumship, a practice forbidden²² and spiritually dangerous. But both the *Maranatha*²³ and Dublin²⁴ documents cite Diane Stein’s book *Essential Reiki* as acknowledging that the presence of spirit guides is not apparent to those practicing Reiki at the lowest level. If first level Reiki practitioners are not aware of such guides, and do not invoke them, can their practice of Reiki fairly be called mediumship? And is the involvement of such guides proven, or merely a belief held by some Reiki masters? Such questions undermine the universal applicability of critical statements such as “Practitioners are actually spiritist mediums who channel spiritual powers in the same way as mediums in séances.”²⁵

“Many Reiki practitioners use dowsing to identify their [clients’] problems.”²⁶ If some form of divination is used to advise about appropriate treatment, this is a valid objection to Christian participation – but the objection is to the diagnostic method, not the application of Reiki.

“Reiki dismisses the concept of a personal God.”²⁷ Some Reiki practitioners may do so, especially if they hold a monistic belief that the energy they channel is part of the ultimate force which governs the universe.²⁸ But in my pastoral experience, Christian Reiki practitioners may claim they are channelling energy from God; an individual practitioner may have reached a syncretistic blend of prior personal beliefs and Reiki formation.

“Reiki teachers are first asked to accept five basic innocuous principles ... [which] are Buddhist in origin: ... *For today only, do not anger, do not worry. Be grateful and do your work with appreciation. Be kind to all living things.*”²⁹ These principles may be of Buddhist origin, but of themselves are not opposed to Christianity. The difference is in the world-view which informs their practice: a Christian seeks God’s grace for what the Buddhist attempts to achieve by force of will. And to whom can a Buddhist be grateful? Since the text itself acknowledges that there are other formulations of the principles, critiquing them does not constitute a critique of Reiki.

5. Problematic Universal Features of Reiki

Two defences may be offered by Christian Reiki practitioners: that the treatment is natural; or that it is a spiritual technique which should not be rejected because the Catholic Church rejects nothing true and holy from other religions. We have already seen that the term “natural” in this context does not equate to “non-spiritual”, and that Reiki practitioners generally believe they are manipulating an energy which affects both body and spirit. They do not generally believe (at least in the case of low-level practitioners) they are calling upon a personal being, nor do they believe they are exercising psychic powers to release something sourced in themselves. Given our earlier general discussion of *ki*, we must ask if they could be exercising something good which has its origin in the Triune God.

Luke 11:11-13 tells us that, as a human father will not give bad gifts but good things to his children, so God will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask”. At face value, this seems to be a strong promise of protection, that no harmful power will be received when the true God is sought; and the nearest equivalent to *ki* in Christian thinking is the Holy Spirit. But Scripture must be read in context, and elsewhere affirms the importance of honouring only the one true God, and testing the spirits.³⁰ Nowhere does Scripture teach us to “channel energy” in the way characteristic of Reiki; and in fact, presuming that God will assist in a way which He has not revealed to be His will constitutes the sin of “tempting God”.³¹

Furthermore, given reason to doubt that God has sanctioned the manipulation of *ki*, channelling Reiki constitutes the kind of taming of spiritual energy (actual or attempted) which falls short of explicit recourse to demons but which is nevertheless forbidden by article 2117 of the *Catechism*.

Of even greater significance is the process of initiation³² which Reiki practitioners must undergo, with the use of secret “symbols” for initiation. First level practitioners are initiated by having the symbols made over them, though they are not taught the symbols themselves; these are taught at the second level. If these symbols originate in a non-Christian mystical experience undergone by Mr Usui, as claimed by the Christian anti-Reiki literature,³³ then any attempt to use them (including the attunement to become a first-level initiate) constitutes a use of knowledge obtained by divination – though the first-level initiate may not be aware of this at the time. The mere fact of needing to be initiated rather than simply being taught to manipulate *ki* gives Reiki the character of a ritual rather than a therapy. Since the attunement enables the initiate to connect to the source of *ki*, it is religious in the etymological sense that *religare* means to reconnect.

A possible defence might be that *ki* exists and of its very nature can only be manipulated by a person who has been enabled to do so by a *ki* manipulator, so initiation is not sinister but logically necessary. If eventually *ki* were found to be a natural phenomenon with this very property, this approach would be defensible, though it would need to account for how the original manipulator (Mr Usui) acquired his ability to do so. This, however, smacks of special pleading given that *ki* is believed to be spiritual by Reiki practitioners; one who submits to a Reiki initiation allows spiritual authority to be exercised over oneself. Since the authority is not clearly sourced in the Triune God, this act of submission must constitute idolatry; and the indispensability of initiation³⁴ is the clearest sign of why Reiki cannot be compatible with Christianity.

6. A Pastoral Response to Reiki

Given that we have established that recourse to Reiki is forbidden by Catholic moral principles, we can assert that soliciting or practicing Reiki is always wrong in the sight of God, though only formally sinful to the degree that the persons involved realise the wrongness of their actions. Evidence from those exercising the ministry of deliverance and exorcism indicates that deliberate and informed choices to resort to non-Christian spiritual powers can result in the form of demonic attack known as obsession or infestation, and that uninformed exposure to such powers (as might be the case with a person who receives Reiki having been assured that it is a simple form of “healing touch”³⁵) can result in the lesser form of demonic irritation known as oppression.³⁶ Anecdotal evidence indicates that involvement in Reiki has led to Christians needing deliverance, although the nature of the cases makes it difficult to publish evidence. It must be stressed, however, that demonic attack is a vulnerability, not a certainty, for those who have exposed themselves in these ways.

It is clearly not appropriate for Reiki to be promoted in any way under Catholic auspices: it should not be offered on church property,³⁷ nor by clergy or members of religious orders, nor should it be promoted in any kind of church literature. It is not necessary to argue that there is no such thing as *ki* or that Reiki is ineffective; pastors and superiors may prescind from the questions of whether it works, and the mechanism, by simply stressing that Christians are committed to turn to no spiritual source other than the Triune God, who has not revealed Reiki as a means of harnessing his power. Opposition to Reiki can be turned into an opportunity for evangelisation: the emphasis can be placed less on what is forbidden, and more on the true healing power of Christ which can be accessed through the sacraments, through the pastoral care mechanisms of the faith community, and through explicitly Christian healing prayer ministries.

In the case of Christians who have received or practiced Reiki, sacramental confession is always appropriate as a means of coming to term’s with one’s own wrongdoing, even the case of one for whom ignorance may have precluded formal sin. The confessor should stand ready to pray for deliverance from oppressive spiritual influences (this may be done inaudibly);

under current Vatican directives,³⁸ if there is evidence of *obsession* (often manifested in the form of strong recurrent temptation in a particular area), prayer for deliverance from this is reserved to the diocesan exorcist.

Preachers should consider whether to publicly warn against recourse to Reiki in their homilies; there are many texts about worshipping God alone or the healing power of Jesus Christ which could provide an appropriate opportunity. Pastors may consider the implications of presenting such teaching if a member of the congregation is making their living as a Reiki practitioner; what support might the Christian community offer if a member must be challenged to give up their livelihood for the sake of the Gospel?

Reiki is now offered in some hospitals and health centres, and it may not be helpful to lodge appeals with secular authorities on the basis that Reiki might actually invoke evil spirits. The authorities may truthfully reply that Reiki practitioners deny attempting to invoke evil spirits, and clients genuinely feel better after receiving Reiki. The best that might be sought realistically in the secular arena is a clear labelling of Reiki as a spiritual technique in all relevant literature and publicity; it is up to the Churches to remind Christians that they must turn to no spiritual power other than Jesus Christ, His Father and the Holy Spirit.

7. Conclusion

Reiki practitioners believe that they are invoking a spiritual energy, *ki*, which has healing properties. Even if *ki* exists as a natural phenomenon not yet explained by science, the practitioners attempt to manipulate *ki* in the belief that it is spiritual.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing “true and holy” from other religions. The truth about Reiki, however, in the sense of whether it works at all, would demand a clinical trial to demonstrate its efficacy; another aspect of truth demands a full understanding of *ki*, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The “holiness” of Reiki depends on whether or not it can be shown to honour and call upon the Triune God to the exclusion of all other spiritual powers; since this cannot be demonstrated, the exercise of Reiki constitutes a sin of “tempting God” and is unholy. The practice of Reiki therefore constitutes a forbidden manipulation of spiritual powers, and renders both practitioner and client vulnerable to attack by evil spirits.

The rejection of Reiki poses numerous pastoral problems: the exclusion of Reiki from Catholic auspices, pre-emptive advice to Christians not to become involved; appropriate challenge and pastoral care (including deliverance, where necessary) for those already involved; provision of a Christian healing ministry as a positive alternative to Reiki; and advocacy to prevent Christians being misled into accepting Reiki in a secular (healthcare) context.

Endnotes (incorporating Bibliography)

¹ See, for instance, the “practitioner list” of the UK Reiki Federation: <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/pub/dir/counties.shtml>; also a short list at <http://www.reiki4u.free-online.co.uk/healerdirectory.htm>. All websites cited here were accessed on August 12th/13th 2004 except where indicated.

² Should a Catholic use “Reiki Healing”? / The Truth About Reiki – “A WARNING TO CATHOLICS”. Published by: Catholic Response to the New Age, PO Box 8340, Rathmines, Dublin 6, Ireland (hereafter, “Dublin”);

Maranatha Briefing – REIKI. April 2002, The Maranatha Community, 102 Irlam Road, Flixton, Manchester M41 6JT (hereafter, “Maranatha”);

Notes for Health Professionals and Patients / REIKI ‘treatment’ – a warning. Dr Janice Allister and nine other named doctors and health care professionals, dated 2002, from 6 Green Tree Gardens, Romiley, Stockport, Cheshire SK6 3JL.

³ The website <http://www.naturalhealers.com/ga/reiki.html#g4> acknowledges Lightarian Reiki™, Urevia™, Shamballa Multi-Dimensional Reiki, and Karuna, in addition to Traditional Usui Reiki.

⁴ <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/pub/about/reiki/index.shtml#whatisit>

⁵ <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/define.htm>, consulted October 2002 but no longer active.

⁶ <http://www.reikiassociation.org.uk/i/identity.html>

⁷ <http://www.reikiassociation.org.uk/reiki.html>

⁸ <http://www.reikiassociation.org.uk/definition.html>

⁹ Samuel Pfeifer, *Healing at Any Price?*, Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1988, p. 58, quoting A. Kohlrausch in J. Grober & F. E. Steive (eds.), *Handbuch der physikalischen Therapie*, Vol I/II, Stuttgart, 1971, p.180.

¹⁰ See any text dealing with Christian anthropology, e.g. Anton van der Walle, *From Darkness to the Dawn*, London: SCM Press, 1984, p. 37.

¹¹ John 14:6

¹² John 1:3-4

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 2119.

¹⁴ For a summary of the typical New Age monist understanding of God or “divine energy”, see *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the “New Age”*, (hereafter JCBWL) §2.3.4.2. Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 3/02/2003

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, 2

¹⁶ Maranatha, §2

¹⁷ Maranatha, §2; Dublin, page 1.

¹⁸ Maranatha, §4

¹⁹ Maranatha, §5

²⁰ Maranatha, §5

²¹ Maranatha, §3

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 2116.

²³ Maranatha, §2

²⁴ Dublin, page 3

²⁵ Allister *et al.*, *op. cit.*; an almost identical statement is found in Maranatha, §1

²⁶ Maranatha, §3

²⁷ Maranatha, §5

²⁸ JCBWL §4 highlights the difference between Christian belief in a personal God and the idea that God is an impersonal force which characterises many New Age ideas.

²⁹ Maranatha, §4

³⁰ I John 4:1-3

³¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 2119.

³² Maranatha, §4, verified by the text at <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/pub/about/reiki/index.shtml>

³³ Maranatha §2

³⁴ JCBWL §6.2 highlights the presence of an initiation rite as a danger sign that a New Age activity might in fact be a forum for false worship.

³⁵ It may be offered without full explanation in a health-care context: see Allister *et al.*, *op. cit.*, also Maranatha §7.

³⁶ Scanlan & Cirner, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*, Servant Books, 1980; S. Conaty, The ‘How’s and ‘Why’s of Deliverance, unpublished lecture notes. Also F. MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual*, Chosen Books, 1995, pp. 67-74.

³⁷ JCBWL §6.2 acknowledges that some New Age practices are inappropriately offered in Christian spirituality centres.

³⁸ Canon 1172 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, interpreted in the light of the 1985 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith letter *Inde ab aliquot annis*