

The Catholic Church and Reiki: A Reconsideration of the Evidence

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Abstract

Reiki, a Japanese energy healing modality, has long been a point of contention within the Catholic Church in the United States. Classified as a New Age practice and lacking robust scientific validation until recently, Reiki was formally discouraged in a 2009 statement by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This article proposes a reconsideration of that position in light of emerging medical evidence demonstrating Reiki's potential benefits for patients with various conditions. The discussion unfolds in three parts. First, it distinguishes the Church's measured magisterial responses to New Age phenomena—including Reiki—from the more dogmatic interpretations advanced by prominent Catholic clergy and laity on social media ("YouTube theologians"). This section critiques the ways these commentators have extended magisterial caution into sweeping condemnations, sometimes dismissing practices that are neither inherently immoral nor unsupported by evidence. Second, the article clarifies Reiki's conceptual foundations, and reviews recent scientific developments regarding the practice. Advances in quantum physics offer plausible theoretical frameworks for understanding energy-based modalities, while post-2021 medical studies—featuring control groups, blinding, and rigorous data collection—provide substantive evidence of Reiki's efficacy. Third, the article reexamines the 2009 USCCB document in light of contemporary research, reassessing its scientific assumptions and addressing the moral concerns it raises. Based on these findings, the article proposes that the Church reconsider and reappropriate energy healing practices within a framework grounded in Catholic theology. This reevaluation invites a broader, more discerning approach to emerging spiritual and medical practices in the years ahead.

Keywords: Reiki, New Age spirituality, Christian theology, integration of western and eastern spiritualities, Catholic doctrinal discourse

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Reiki is a healing modality in which the practitioner uses various hand motions as well as intentionality to channel energy through themselves to the patient in order to promote healing, balance, and well-being. Due to its esoteric nature and (until recently) lack of scientific evidence, most consider Reiki a “New Age” spiritual practice.

Over the past forty years, the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church and Roman Catholic laity have responded somewhat differently to the introduction of “New Age” spirituality into mainstream conversation. In 1989 the Vatican published their first response to New Age topics, specifically on meditation and prayer. In this document the Church addresses the impending spiritual and doctrinal challenges that arose as a result of the “blending” of eastern and western ideologies, and it acknowledges the nuance required in its response:

With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, *to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian*. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1989, para. 12)

In the footnotes of the same document, Pope Saint John Paul II is quoted in a homily given on November 1, 1982: “Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6)” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1989, footnote 12). The deduction, therefore, is that the problem is not the practice of meditation, specifically, but the fusion or reduction of meditation and prayer with un-Christian beliefs and heretical ideology. Put simply, the problem is not the behavior, necessarily, but the intention.

In 1996, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, released *The*

current situation of faith and theology when meeting with the Doctrinal Commissions of Latin America, in which he also discussed the dangers of the New Age ideology and its incompatibility with Catholicism. He notes that within the New Age, “The Absolute is not to be believed, but to be experienced. God is not a person to be distinguished from the world, but a spiritual energy present in the universe” (Ratzinger, 1996, section 6). The reduction of God from an absolute, omnipotent, and ever-present creator, as the *Catechism* says, “the beginning and end of all things” (Catholic Church, 1994, para. 198), to a “spiritual energy present in the universe” is not a small doctrinal error. Interestingly, this “underlying energy” in the universe has long been discovered by quantum physics—but is incongruent with the Catholic definition of God, who (unlike this energetic network) is not part of nor dependent on creation.

In 2003, the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue released a provisional report entitled, *Jesus Christ the bearer of the water of life: A Christian reflection on the “New Age”*. It states, “Even if it can be admitted that New Age religiosity in some way responds to the legitimate spiritual longing of human nature, it must be acknowledged that its attempts to do so run counter to Christian revelation” (Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2003, section 1.4). The reasoning stated is due to the gnostic nature of New Age ideology, which prefers an individual and often secret spiritual knowledge over institutional spiritual authority. Prudently, the document also acknowledges, “It would be unwise and untrue to say that everything connected with the New Age movement is good, or that everything about it is bad” (Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2003, section 2). This moderate and calculated approach fits with the Church’s commitment to investigate and teach the truth without error.

In contrast, some members of the laity and clergy, including several exorcists who claim

to extract information from demons during exorcisms, have stated that basically all practices associated with New Age or eastern spirituality are demonic and should be avoided entirely. They are using alleged information given to exorcists by demons (during exorcisms) as their evidence. After doing a deep dive into the testimonies of various exorcists on YouTube, Fraune notes, “Exorcists learn much of what they know from the time they spend interacting with demons within exorcisms. Demons will talk and exorcists have recounted that they can even get the demons to talk to one another during an exorcism” (Fraune, 2019, p. 5). This statement, and its inherent belief system, presents a theological inconsistency. The Church does not recognize information spoken by demons during exorcisms as educational material. In fact, the Christian Church as a whole maintains that “he (the devil) is a liar and the father of lies” (*New American Bible Revised Edition*, 2011/2010, John 8:44). In sharing with the public what demons allegedly teach them, these exorcists are acting as a conduit for demons to educate the laity. This phenomenon is problematic, at best. Contrast this with the official statements made by the Vatican over many decades, and the inconsistencies are not difficult to identify. Rather than taking the words of fallen spiritual entities as doctrine, one may consider engaging in a serious scientific inquiry of any given practice. Upon doing so, it may be easier to determine if, like meditation, the behavior can be separated from the intention.

An Investigation into Reiki

The term “Reiki” comes from the Japanese language and translated means “universal life energy.” The International Association of Reiki Professionals (2014) states, “Reiki is not affiliated with any particular religion or religious practice. It is not massage, nor is it based on belief or suggestion. It is a subtle and effective form of energy work using spiritually guided life force energy” (para. 1). It is based upon the belief that within every living thing there is an

energetic or spiritual life force flowing within them—a belief that has been held by many ancient cultures across the globe (Manasa et al., 2020).

Modern quantum physics, though it would not use this language, does support this idea. The “building blocks” that make up every single thing in the known universe are actually subatomic phenomena made up of kinetic and potential energy called quarks (Lincoln, 2023). This energy is present within the substantial “empty” (as we used to think) space inside of atoms, which is not actually empty at all. (Leinweber, 2003–2004) Furthermore, the well-known Double-Slit Experiment shows that an observer can affect electrons without touching them and change their behavior through mere intention. This phenomenon has been confirmed through more recent and rigorous testing (Fedoseev et al., 2025). Astrophysicist Ethan Siegel (2023) said of these experiments, “What’s going on here? It’s as though the electrons ‘know’ whether you’re watching them or not. The very act of observing this setup—of asking ‘Which slit did each electron pass through?’—changes the outcome of the experiment” (para. 11). It seems as though there is some sort of energetic connection between atoms in the universe, even those not physically connected. This “energetic connection” sounds suspiciously familiar in light of eastern spiritual teachings.

Obviously, ancient Eastern cultures and religions did not have access to this knowledge. However, they did believe that we all have access to life force energy and can connect with it in order to help ourselves or others. It is not an unfathomable intellectual leap to think that the “life force energy” they were referring to is the exact subatomic energy that makes up the foundation of our world, and all living things.

Regarding the history of Reiki, it is widely believed that Mikao Usui, a Japanese man, rediscovered the healing energy of Reiki and brought it to the west in his travels (International

Association of Reiki Professionals, 2004). However, the truth about its origin story seems unclear. Much like language or other forms of alternative healing such as midwifery or the use of herbs, Reiki seems to be a practice that has been pieced together over many millennia through human trial and error.

The truth is, there would be no reason to engage in a discussion on Reiki if it were not effective in supporting physical health. In recent years, peer-reviewed medical journals have published studies showing that Reiki sessions reduce anxiety and stress among hospitalized patients with various ailments (Thrane & Cohen, 2014). In controlled studies with up to 800 participants, Reiki was found to reduce health and procedural anxiety in patients with chronic conditions such as gastrointestinal endoscopy inflammation, fibromyalgia, and depression, as well as in the general population (Guo et al., 2024). In another study with 156 stage 3 and stage 4 cancer patients, Reiki interventions were found to be effective in reducing levels of pain, analgesic use, and fatigue (Utli et al., 2023). In 2022, a study with two control groups and 102 participants showed that after receiving Reiki sessions women who had undergone a hysterectomy experienced a statistically significant improvement in pain levels, and it reduced the use of analgesics overall (Utli & Yağmur, 2022). This particular study is exceptionally informative because in addition to pre- and post-session surveys, against which it could be argued that these are too subjective, the patients' vital signs, such as pulse rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure, were also taken. Researchers found a significant reduction of those objective vital signs in the Reiki group. A 2019 study of over 1,400 Reiki sessions observed statistically significant improvements in pain, drowsiness, tiredness, nausea, appetite, shortness of breath, anxiety, depression, and the overall well-being of the patients (Dyer et al., 2019). Finally, though Reiki has long been seen as an alternative therapy, several mainstream hospitals such as the

Massachusetts General Hospital (Harvard) (Massachusetts General Hospital, 2022), Johns Hopkins (Sibley) (Sibley Memorial Hospital, n.d.), and the Boston Children’s Hospital (Boston Children’s Hospital, n.d.) are incorporating it into their patient care, especially for long-term cancer patients.

It is important to mention that according to the research, it is clear that Reiki is not a methodology that is intended to necessarily heal serious ailments, but rather to help improve outcomes, reduce pain, and support the mental health of the patient.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Response to Reiki

In 2009, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document entitled, *Guidelines for Evaluating Reiki as an Alternative Therapy*. This document states as its conclusion, “Since Reiki therapy is not compatible with either Christian teaching or scientific evidence, it would be inappropriate for Catholic institutions, such as Catholic healthcare facilities . . . to promote or to provide support for Reiki therapy” (Committee on Doctrine, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2009, para. 12). The claim regarding a lack of scientific evidence may have been more true in 2009 but today it is patently false. However, the citation of Christian teaching as an incompatibility raises some questions. Christian teaching very rarely discusses healing modalities. It leads one to wonder how modern medicine is compatible with Christian teaching? What makes an agnostic or amoral practice either compatible or incompatible?

A premise of the USCCB’s document is that we cannot invoke God’s power at will to heal (Committee on Doctrine, USCCB, 2009, para. 3). It also insists upon “natural” (i.e., scientific) healing methods being employed to support the sick (Committee on Doctrine, USCCB, 2009, para. 10). The document admonishes Reiki for not having clear scientific support,

despite the lack of studies at that time: “The basic criteria for judging whether or not one should entrust oneself to any particular natural means of healing . . . remain those of science”

(Committee on Doctrine, USCCB, 2009, para. 6). The very next paragraph states that Reiki lacks the scientific credibility necessary to be considered a natural healing modality (Committee on Doctrine, USCCB, 2009, para. 7). Again, while this was true when the document was published, there is now an abundance of evidence. Finally, the conference states, “Neither the Scriptures nor the Christian tradition as a whole speak of the natural world as based on ‘universal life energy’ that is subject to manipulation by the natural human power of thought and will” (Committee on Doctrine, USCCB, 2009, 9). This is a curious argument, because neither the Scriptures nor Christian tradition claim to be the basis for scientific or medical knowledge. The omission in Christian tradition of a physical phenomenon that modern physics has only just discovered, but which other spiritual traditions acknowledge, is a lackluster case against the phenomena.

It appears as though the Catholic Church in the United States spoke too soon. It would have been clearer if the conference had said something like, “As of yet there are no definitive scientific studies that show whether or not Reiki is an effective form of therapy,” and continued along that vein. This is an example of why a process of discernment for alternative spiritual practices is necessary so that the Church does not find itself in a position where it is at odds with new medical and scientific discoveries, as they inevitably continue to arise.

Additionally, it is possible that this spirit of hyper-dogmatism is causing unnecessary stress upon Catholic medical patients. The Catholic Church maintains that faith and science cannot be contradictory: “Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason” (Catholic Church, 1994, para. 159). Therefore, it does not appear that the Church has to accept heretical teachings or compromise in any meaningful way to

acknowledge that there is a foundational energy field within the natural world and that we have the means and ability to access it at any time. It is also evident that accessing this energetic field intentionally, as part of a method of healing, is beneficial for a recipient, particularly before or after a major medical procedure. Based on the evidence that exists it appears that patients at Catholic hospitals—and even the general lay population—could be supported by the adoption and/or reappropriation of certain energetic healing practices, such as Reiki, that are scientifically proven to be beneficial to the ailing. The Church as a whole would benefit from a model of discernment by which to determine right from wrong regarding alternative medical and spiritual practices. Patients and laity alike would benefit from the development of doctrine in this area (Noonan, 1993).

Conclusion

In light of this evidence, I propose that the Catholic Church, and in particular the USCCB, reconsider Reiki and other practices that may be considered Eastern in origin but which have been proven to produce positive health outcomes. Since Reiki has been shown to have actual, measurable therapeutic effects, it is worth exploring how we can give permission for energy healing methods to be incorporated into practice by the Catholic laity in a way that aligns with Church teaching. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to take another look at other objectively neutral yet highly contentious “New Age” practices and make logical determinations about their efficacy—without the “demon” drama. Without minimizing the very real spiritual battle Christian theology teaches that we face, it is important to acknowledge that the “spiritual safety” of a practice does not come simply from its western or Judeo-Christian origins.

It appears as though the development of an official system of discernment of new (or “new to us”) practices is in order. It stands to reason that Catholics worldwide are going to be

confronted with practices that are foreign to Christian tradition on a regular basis. Through this process, the Church can provide an example of how lay Catholics can discern what is right or wrong about the non-western practices they will undoubtedly come across within our globalized culture. It would be supportive for the Catholic Church to give the laity a model by which to discern the wheat from the chaff in eastern or alternative spiritual traditions—rather than making blanket statements that may reduce trust in the Magisterium, encourage disobedience among the laity, and potentially cause undue discomfort to patients within the care of Catholic hospitals worldwide.

In some ways, this incorporation has already been done. An example is the Hallow app—a Catholic app that offers prayerful meditations and breathwork sessions to the faithful. Catholics would benefit from the “official” Church taking a proactive approach regarding the discernment of ancient spiritual traditions—in a manner which does not categorically condemn, but which takes the philosophical nuances and burgeoning scientific evidence into account.

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