

ETHICS & MEDICS

A Commentary of The National Catholic Bioethics Center on Health Care and the Life Sciences

REIKI POSES THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

In March 2009, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine published a brief statement titled "Guidelines for Evaluating Reiki as an Alternative Therapy."¹ The Reiki healing technique, developed in Japan in the late 1800s, involves the practitioner's "placing his or her hands in certain positions on the patient's body in order to facilitate the flow of Reiki, or 'universal life energy,' from the Reiki practitioner to the patient."²

The committee conducted its study in order to respond to inquiries concerning whether this particular healing technique was compatible with the Catholic faith. The committee concluded that "Reiki therapy finds no support either in the findings of natural science or in Christian belief," and it warned that "a Catholic who puts his or her trust in Reiki would be operating in the realm of superstition."³ The committee also stated that "it would be inappropriate for Catholic institutions, such as health care facilities or retreat centers, or for persons representing the Church, such as chaplains, to promote Reiki therapy."⁴

The guidelines did not attract a great deal of media attention. Many Catholics have never heard of Reiki, and, for some who had, it was simply self-evident that a Catholic should not resort to Reiki, but the committee also heard from some Catholics who regard Reiki as another means of healing. They asked why the bishops would prohibit a type of healing. With this group of Catholics in mind, I offer on behalf of the Committee on Doctrine these reflections on its 2009 guidelines.

Not a Supernatural Healing

The Catholic Church recognizes two kinds of healing: natural healing, accomplished by the forces of nature with some human assistance (the practice of medicine), and supernatural healing, accomplished by a special intervention by God (a miraculous healing that by definition cannot be attributed to natural forces). Should Reiki be considered a natural healing or a supernatural healing? The language used by Reiki proponents is frequently confusing on this point. Sometimes Reiki is presented as a natural means of healing and sometimes as something more, a "spiritual" means of healing.

While Reiki therapy poses certain problems when considered as a natural form of healing, the primary

reason why the Committee on Doctrine found it necessary to issue guidelines is because some proponents confuse Reiki with supernatural healing by the power of God. In some instances it is asserted that Reiki healing is the same as what Christians explain as healing by Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Reiki therapy, in this sense, is not compatible with the Christian understanding of supernatural healing. Reiki healing is understood to be under the control of the Reiki practitioner, whereas truly supernatural healing is not at human disposal, but takes place only when God wills it.

Reiki proponents frequently point out that they see the Reiki practitioner as a channel for healing energies that do not have their origin in the practitioner but come from without. The committee noted, however, that even as a conduit, the Reiki practitioner retains a certain degree of real control over the healing energy. The decision to serve as a conduit, as well as the decision as to when and where the channeling ability should be exercised, belongs to the practitioner. It is precisely this ability to serve as a conduit that Reiki training and attunements are supposed to provide. This ability does not come to one on its own, apart from the attunement received from a Reiki master. Reiki practitioners make appointments with patients for the channeling of the healing power. This practice seems to demonstrate that Reiki healing is in an important sense under the control of the Reiki practitioner.

By contrast, Christians who petition God for healing do not attempt to control or manipulate God. Christians have always prayed to God for healing. This goes back to the ministry of Jesus Himself. Our prayers, however, no matter how earnest and devout, cannot force God to perform a healing. God is not subject to manipulation by us. We can pray for healing for ourselves and others, but we cannot control whether or how God answers our prayer. We can teach other people to pray for healing, but we cannot teach them how to control the divine healing power. A Christian petition for healing should always be a humble appeal for God's grace.

From time to time God grants a special charismatic gift of healing to certain individuals, but this does not

MAY 2011 VOLUME 36, NUMBER 5

REIKI POSES THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS
A WORLDVIEW INCOMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIANITY
His Eminence Donald Cardinal Wuerl

give them control over the divine power to heal. They, too, must pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus to ask for a healing, recognizing that whether or not a healing takes place is a decision that belongs to God, not to them. Such individuals cannot offer courses on how to control divine power, as if they had a technique that they could teach others for a suitable fee. One cannot take a course or undergo training that will give one control over whether or not God will answer one's prayers for healing. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained in its instruction on prayers for healing, "the only thing to do is to entrust oneself to the free decision of the Holy Spirit, who grants to some a special charism of healing in order to show the power of the grace of the Risen Christ. Yet not even the most intense prayer obtains the healing of all sicknesses."⁵

To bring Reiki into conformity with the Christian understanding of supernatural healing, the idea of the practitioner's control, which is central to Reiki practice, would have to be eliminated. If one were to reduce Reiki to another way of praying to God for healing, there would be nothing left of Reiki; all the training and practices that are specific to Reiki, such as the attunements and hand positions, would be meaningless. For a Catholic, our prayers for healing are directed to God, who alone truly heals by divine power.

Not a Natural Healing

Given that Reiki therapy is incompatible with the Christian understanding of supernatural healing, one may still ask if it could be justified as a purely natural means of healing. This is a question that cannot be definitively answered by the Catholic bishops, who do not possess any special competence in purely medical matters. For this reason, the committee noted that to evaluate Reiki as a natural means of healing, it had to turn to the judgment of members of the medical and scientific community.

The mainstream medical and scientific community has not accepted Reiki as medical therapy. It remains in the category of "alternative therapies," and its efficacy remains doubtful and unproven. Even the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes for Health, which was established by those who sought to provide evidence for the efficacy of alternative therapies, and which has been sponsoring studies of Reiki for years, offers no scientific studies in support of Reiki. The NCCAM Web site references a study that shows that Reiki had no effect on the pain of those suffering from fibromyalgia. The researchers of the study concluded, "Energy medicine modalities such as Reiki should be rigorously studied before being recommended to patients with chronic pain symptoms."⁶ The best that can be said for Reiki is that its effectiveness as a therapy is unproven by scientific medical standards.⁷

The central difficulty for establishing a scientific basis for Reiki is that Reiki is something unverifiable, something apparently undetectable by scientific instruments. Reiki proponents, along with proponents of similar New Age

theories that view the world in terms of patterns of energy flows, frequently claim that their worldview is vindicated by the "new physics," according to which mass and energy are convertible.

A crucial flaw in this argument is that Reiki healing requires not only that matter be equivalent to energy but also that energy be equivalent to mind and spirit. This, the committee points out, reflects a fundamental element in the Reiki worldview, the belief that the mind and the material world are ultimately the same.⁸ The two are energy in different forms. The alteration in one's mind gives one access to the flow of energy that underlies the physical world. Reiki depends on the idea that matter can be manipulated by the power of the mind. This is most obvious in the claim that some Reiki masters can perform healing even at long distances without touching the patient in any way. It is also evident in the fact that a Reiki healer must undergo training and a ritual "attunement" from a Reiki master in order to have the power to channel the Reiki energy. The average person, who has not undergone this change in consciousness, is unable to control the flow of Reiki energy.

Modern science has indeed come to the conclusion that there is a certain convertibility between mass and energy, but it has not found that matter can be manipulated by the power of the human mind. The "universal life energy" of Reiki theory is not the energy known to science. Reiki's central claim—that matter can be manipulated by the power of the mind—does not seem possible by the laws of physics as we know them.

The committee points out in its guidelines that scientific knowledge of the world is by no means complete.⁹ Some aspects of Reiki may have some still undetected but measurable physiological effect. For example, simple physical touch may have some unmeasured, perhaps psychological, effects on a patient due to a reduction in stress. Or, perhaps even apart from physical touch, there may be some measurable psychological effect of receiving expressions of concern from others. In order to qualify as scientific knowledge, however, these effects would have to be observable by scientific means and explained as the results of physical forces in a way that is coherent with the rest of the physical, chemical, and biological sciences. The burden of proof remains on those who would claim a scientific basis for Reiki therapy; an explanation in scientific terms, and not in the "universal life energy" language of Reiki theory, would be needed.

The Reiki Worldview

Reiki therapy appears to present little physical danger to patients, although one must always add the proviso that Reiki not be taken to be a substitute for proven medical techniques. But Christians face a subtle spiritual danger here, because as soon as one asks the question, how does Reiki work? one receives an explanation that becomes understandable or credible only if one accepts the particular worldview on which Reiki is based.

As the committee pointed out, Reiki belongs neither to Christian faith nor to modern science. The origins of Reiki

are elsewhere—in Eastern religions and philosophies. The question remains, Is this worldview compatible with Christian faith?

Given that Reiki has its origins in Eastern religions, it should not be surprising that the Reiki worldview does not accord with the Christian worldview on certain critical points. Reiki has a strong tendency toward monism, toward dissolving the distinctions among things. We have seen that Reiki theory tends to view all things as different configurations of energy. While this creates philosophical problems in terms of the distinction between the material and the spiritual, it creates a major theological problem in terms of the distinction between God and creation.

Sometimes Reiki proponents state flatly that there is ultimately no distinction between the self and Reiki, the “universal life energy.” Even when not stated openly, the Reiki terminology frequently implies that the self is ultimately identical with the divine power. Various religions, particularly from the East, have a worldview that does not recognize an absolute distinction between Creator and creatures. This distinction, however, is fundamental to Christian faith.

In its pastoral concern, the committee noted that it is difficult to imagine how a Christian could turn to Reiki as a medical therapy.¹⁰ In theory, a Christian could experiment with Reiki as a natural means of healing as long as he or she did not accept the worldview underlying Reiki, but the explanation given by Reiki practitioners for how Reiki works depends precisely on this understanding of life and reality.

A Supra-Religious Perspective

In contemporary society an increasing number of people describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” While interested in spiritual matters concerning the divine, they do not identify with any specific religion, particularly not with any institutional religion. They prefer to use the term “spiritual” in a generic sense. Their approach is supra-religious, in that they seem to adopt a perspective that is above and beyond all particular religions. From this perspective, which is described sometimes as a superior vantage point, they feel free to borrow concepts and practices from various religions to the extent that the practices are found appealing and useful. While this syncretistic tendency can be seen very readily in the many variants of New Age spirituality, the phenomenon is more widespread. Implicit in this religious outlook is the assumption that the standards to be used to evaluate religious matters are essentially those already possessed by the human seeker rather than standards furnished by divine Revelation.

According to Christian theology, because of the effects of sin on our natural powers and because God transcends our natural powers of understanding, the ultimate criterion for truth about God is divine Revelation. While we may be able to judge a number of the more simple spiritual matters according to our natural powers, even if something appears

desirable and true to us, it will have to be put aside if it does not accord with divine Revelation. Here again we see a consequence of the sharp distinction between Creator and creatures in the Christian faith.

Many Reiki proponents maintain that this therapy should be seen as a supra-religious phenomenon. They see their practices as “spiritual” in a generic sense and encourage people to incorporate elements of their own religions into their use of Reiki. For example, Reiki proponents suggest that a Hindu might want to refer to the divine energy by the Hindu term *prana* or that a Christian might refer to it as the Holy Spirit. Since Reiki proponents maintain that the practitioner is not the source of the healing energy and does not direct energy to where it is needed in the body, the very practice of Reiki logically presupposes the presence of some more-than-human intelligent power. Reiki proponents use different terms to name this power and invite others to name this intelligent power according to their preferences—for example, as Christ or as the Buddha or as some angel. Prayers may be addressed to this power in the language of one’s choice. The guidelines reflect the understanding that the role of one’s own religion can be seen as basically cosmetic, adding a name to what is already known by Reiki.

What the committee sought to clarify with its guidelines was the distinction between what Reiki involves and what the Catholic faith accepts. On the one hand, Reiki could be a matter of religion for someone whose worldview is in accord with that underlying Reiki. On the other hand, for a Catholic, Reiki can be a matter neither of proven science nor of religion.

The committee felt the need to point out that some therapies like Reiki can potentially cause harmful spiritual side effects. In raising these pastoral concerns, the committee sought to share the Catholic Church’s teaching on the nature of healing in the hope that it would be helpful to all involved.

During our lives, we all are in need of healing. Every day, our Catholic health care workers and institutions seek to bring help and healing to people, utilizing the latest scientific knowledge and medical practices. Every day we turn to God in prayer, seeking healing for ourselves and others, trusting in God’s plan for us. As people of faith, we know that Christ continues to bring us healing and hope, now and forever.

His Eminence Donald Cardinal Wuerl

Cardinal Wuerl is Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine.

¹ U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine, “Guidelines for Evaluating Reiki as an Alternative Therapy” (March 25, 2009).

² *Ibid.*, n. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, n. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 12.

⁵ Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Prayers for Healing” (September 14, 2000), I. 5. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., trans. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), n. 1508.



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Views expressed are those of individual authors and may advance positions that have not yet been doctrinally settled. *Ethics & Medics* makes every effort to publish articles consonant with the magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church.

⁶NCCAM, "Reiki Does Not Improve Fibromyalgia Symptoms in Clinical Trial," <http://nccam.nih.gov/research/results/spotlight/050809.htm>; and Nassim Assefi et al., "Reiki for the Treatment of Fibromyalgia: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 14.9 (November 2008): 1115.

⁷The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health has been criticized by physicians and scientists for failing to uphold strict scientific standards. Some have called for the elimination of NCCAM and for the redistribution of its research responsibilities to the more rigorously scientific departments of NIH.

⁸USCCB, "Guidelines," n. 9.

⁹*Ibid.*, n. 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, n. 10.

Do you teach high school bioethics?

The National Catholic Bioethics Center is reviewing manuscripts and materials for the preparation of a textbook in bioethics designed for high school students.

If you are a teacher of a high school course in Catholic bioethics and would like to have your manuscript or materials considered for inclusion in this project please contact:

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Please include "High School Bioethics" in the subject line.

General Information about Reiki:

- Mikao Usui developed Reiki in 1922 while on a Buddhist training course on Mt. Kurama, a sacred mountain north of Kyoto, Japan.
- The term *Reiki* comes from two Japanese words, *rei* (universal) and *ki* (life energy).
- According to a 2007 report of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 1.2 million adults have used Reiki therapy.

Claims of Reiki training centers:

- Reiki is taught through a process called attunement, in which healing energies are supposedly transferred from the teacher to the student. It is said that the minimum time necessary to teach Reiki is six hours.
- Reiki practitioners use various hand positions on or near the patient to supposedly transfer healing energy from the *ki* through the palms.
- Since Reiki is said to be guided by "the Higher Power," the Reiki energy "knows" the condition of the patient and adjusts itself appropriately.
- Reiki is said to work at a distance through use of sacred symbols. Reiki symbols are kept confidential and only revealed to those initiated into the Second or Third degree of Reiki.
- If children request instruction in Reiki, training centers will teach them so long as they are old enough to understand what Reiki is.
- Animals are said to have a natural understanding of what Reiki is and what its supposed benefits are. Plants are also said to respond well to Reiki.

