Hidden Roots of Reiki:
Christian Sanctification and Spiritual Healing in Meiji and Taishō Japan (1875–1922)

Dr. Jojan L. Jonker
June 2025

Abstract

This article investigates the intersection of divine healing and Christian sanctification in the Japanese Holiness Movement from the late 19th to early 20th century. It argues that healing was not peripheral but central to Holiness theology in Japan, and that Dōshisha University—Japan's leading Protestant seminary—played a formative role in this development. Drawing on Eleanor Sonntag (2012), Mark Mullins (2003), Andrew Maxton (2017), William Elliot Griffis (1900s), Yamaji Aizan (1906), and others, the article offers historical evidence to suggest that connects Western missionary influences, Japanese revivalism, and institutional Christian education to the emergence of a healing-oriented religious environment. A final section examines how Reiki's public identity adopted a Buddhist appearance while retaining a Christian theological substructure. In doing so, the article responds to an observed need among scholars of early Reiki history for a well-grounded account of how Christianity, the Holiness Movement, and Dōshisha University were historically and theologically connected around 1900.

Introduction

At around age eighteen (December 1875–January 1876), Tokio Yokoi experienced a formative spiritual awakening on Mount Hanaoka. This event—often dated to 30 January 1876 by modern scholarship (Scheiner 1970, pp111–113)—marked a pivotal moment in the lives of Yokoi and his peers in the Kumamoto Band. There, in a setting of solemn covenant and prayer, it is believed that Yokoi began a lifelong quest for moral renewal, sanctification, and divine healing. This early mystical experience laid the spiritual foundation for theological developments that would later inform Japan's Christian healing movements and, ultimately, the emergence of Reiki.

The history of Reiki, a healing practice developed in Japan in the early 20th century, has traditionally been associated with Buddhist and esoteric sources. For decades, Mikao Usui (1865–1926) was regarded as its sole originator, yet little was known about his life prior to 1922. Recent scholarship has challenged this view. In particular, new biographical findings and historical reinterpretations have proposed that Reverend Tokio Yokoi (1857–1927)—a Congregationalist minister and former president of Dōshisha University—may have originated Reiki within a Christian theological framework informed by the Holiness Movement. While Usui likely played a key role in popularizing and transmitting the practice, its spiritual and conceptual foundations may trace back to Yokoi's engagement with Christian sanctification and healing.

These developments have prompted renewed attention to the broader historical context in which Reiki emerged. In particular, the relationship between Christianity and the Holiness Movement in Japan during the late Meiji and early Taishō periods (ca. 1880–1920) has become increasingly relevant. However, this relationship has been largely overlooked in academic literature. This article responds to that lacuna by investigating the theological and institutional conditions that enabled a healing-oriented Christianity to take root in Japan. Special attention is given to the role of Dōshisha University, a key site of Protestant education and spiritual formation, and to the doctrinal and experiential emphasis on divine healing that characterized the Japanese Holiness tradition. This historical-theological article complements recent efforts to reassess the early history of Reiki by grounding it in Japan's Christian and Holiness traditions (Latham 2023; Jonker 2024).

1. Healing as Core to the Japanese Holiness Movement

In her 2012 article, Eleanor Sonntag establishes that divine healing was a constitutive part of the Japanese Holiness Church's theology. She writes:

> "The Japanese Holiness Church (…) developed a fourfold gospel consisting of salvation, sanctification, divine healing, and the second coming" (Sonntag 2012, p39).

Sonntag clarifies that healing was not merely doctrinal but experiential:

> "In church documents and testimonies from early converts, physical healing is frequently cited as a confirmation of God's sanctifying grace" (Sonntag 2012, p41).

She attributes this emphasis to American Holiness missionaries who, by the early 20th century, had begun to institutionalize healing as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work in Japan.

2. Dōshisha University and the Transmission of Holiness Ideas

Though Dōshisha University was formally Presbyterian and Congregationalist, its educational and theological ethos aligned with Holiness emphases. According to Mark Mullins:

> "Although the Holiness Movement arose from the Methodist tradition, themes of sanctification and healing were transmitted to Japan via Presbyterian and Congregationalist missions, including through Dōshisha and the Kumamoto Band" (Mullins 2003, p219).

This transmission occurred not through formal theological statements, but through spiritual practices and educational values. Dōshisha trained many of the leaders who later joined or influenced Holiness revivals. Mullins notes:

> "Graduates of Dōshisha played prominent roles in the development of independent Christian movements… including those emphasizing healing and spiritual gifts" (Mullins 2003, p223).

3. Early Japanese Christian Leaders and the Holiness Ethos

Andrew Maxton's 2017 dissertation discusses the case of Tokio Yokoi, a Dōshisha graduate and later president of the university. Yokoi was deeply influenced by American revivalism during his time in the United States. Maxton writes:

> "Yokoi's sermons reveal a strong emphasis on moral purity and spiritual rebirth (…) elements that paralleled Holiness understandings of sanctification" (Maxton 2017, p112).

Although Yokoi remained formally Congregationalist, his preaching and teaching resonated with Holiness ideals. This allowed him to serve as a bridge between institutional Christianity and the more experiential forms of faith healing that emerged in Japan during the Taishō period.

4. Missionary Lineage: Verbeck, Yokoi, and Healing

William Elliot Griffis, writing about the missionary Guido Verbeck, describes how early Japanese converts—Yokoi among them—were encouraged to integrate religious conviction with social and physical transformation. Verbeck's teaching emphasized the total transformation of life through faith. As Griffis puts it:

> "Verbeck inspired in his disciples the idea that Christianity was not merely doctrine but life—moral, physical, and social renewal" (Verbeck of Japan, Griffis, ch. X).

Yokoi is noted as one of Verbeck's intellectual and spiritual heirs:

> "Yokoi, with Verbeck's encouragement, adopted a broad view of Christianity as the renewal of all human faculties" (*ibid.*).

This philosophy created fertile ground for an understanding of healing—both spiritual and physical—as an integral part of sanctified life.

5. Uemura Masahisa and the Japanese Language of Sanctification

The theology of Uemura Masahisa (1857–1925), one of the first-generation Japanese pastors, reveals deep affinities with Holiness themes. Uemura emphasized the transformation of the self through sanctification and personal rebirth. One of his sermons, titled "*Sukui to Ishi*" ("Salvation and Healing"), explicitly links physical healing to spiritual aspiration:

> "Uemura's reference to aspiration regarded the healing of the body as a symbol or result of the sanctified life" (*Uemura Masahisa*, p643).

Another passage states:

> "The re-birth and sanctification of the sinner became the central motif of Uemura's soteriology" (*ibid*., p644).

Such statements confirm that even outside of formal Holiness institutions, Japanese Protestant leaders were integrating themes of moral renewal and divine healing into mainstream Christian preaching.

Additional evidence comes from indigenous Japanese Holiness leaders themselves, reinforcing that divine healing was not only a theological ideal but a lived practice. Barclay Fowell Buxton emphasized Mitani's strong advocacy for divine healing—a stance which, according to Sonntag, may have implied a deliberate avoidance of medical treatment. Eleanor Sonntag further substantiates this emphasis with a focused study of the early Japanese Holiness movement. She observes:

> "The promise of divine healing as a personal benefit had been the most attractive early holiness doctrine."

Sonntag traces how this emphasis matured under Nakada Jūjirō's leadership:

> "By 1923, divine healing had become part of Nakada's entirely biblical view of the Christian life."

Together, these accounts confirm that healing practices in Japanese Holiness Christianity were championed by local leaders, grounded in theological conviction, and embraced by the faithful during the very decades under discussion.

6. Japanese Holiness Leaders and Healing Without Physicians

The Japanese Holiness Movement did not merely adopt foreign ideas of divine healing; it developed a distinct and often radical stance toward medical treatment. Japanese evangelists like Mitani and Nakada Jūjirō promoted healing practices rooted solely in faith, prayer, and sanctification—explicitly rejecting conventional medicine. Eleanor Sonntag reports that Buxton noted:

> "Mitani advocated divine healing without recourse to physicians". (Sonntag 2012, p45)

This illustrates the depth of this theological commitment among local leaders.

This position was not marginal. Eleanor Sonntag notes that between 1901 and 1923, divine healing became central to the Holiness identity in Japan (Sonntag 2012, pp39–

55). Under Nakada's leadership, the movement articulated a fully biblical worldview in which illness and healing were interpreted spiritually. Sonntag writes:

> "By 1923, divine healing had become part of Nakada's entirely biblical view of the Christian life" (Sonntag 2012, p45).

She further observes that:

> "(…) the promise of divine healing as a personal benefit had been the most attractive early holiness doctrine" (*ibid*., p44).

These indigenous leaders transformed healing into a public and embodied testimony of sanctification. Their rejection of physicians was not anti-scientific per se but reflected a theological stance: reliance on God alone marked the sanctified life. Healing, therefore, became a performative act of holiness, rooted in Japanese expressions of Christian revivalism.

While the text of Yamaji Aizan's *Essays on the History of the Modern Japanese Church* (1906) does not explicitly record a personal relationship between Tokio Yokoi and Uemura Masahisa, it discusses both figures in overlapping contexts, particularly concerning their roles in the spiritual and theological development of Meiji Protestantism. Yamaji treats both men as leading voices in shaping the moral and doctrinal direction of Japanese Christianity—Uemura through a conservative theological lens emphasizing rebirth and sanctification, and Yokoi through liberal Christian engagement that encouraged independent moral and spiritual reflection. Their co-appearance in Yamaji's work, and their parallel prominence within Dōshisha-affiliated and Congregationalist networks, suggest that they operated within intersecting ecclesial and intellectual circles during the same period. Although direct evidence of personal interaction is lacking, it is historically plausible that Yokoi and Uemura were aware of each other's work and influence.

7. Concealment and Continuity: Reading Usui's Interview through the Lens of Holiness Theology

If one accepts the hypothesis that Tokio Yokoi originated the Reiki system within a theological framework shaped by the Holiness Movement, while Mikao Usui became its public transmitter after 1922, then Usui's later interview, often referred to as Q&A section) responses must be read not simply as autobiographical statements but as adaptive strategies within a politically constrained religious landscape. As Japan entered the Taishō period, Christian elements in new religious movements faced growing scrutiny. Under these pressures, the public face of Reiki may have been deliberately de-Christianized by Usui, while still retaining its theological substructure in encoded form. (Jonker 2025)

In tracing how Holiness theology may have influenced the formation of Reiki, it is important to recall that not all Japanese Christians in the early 1900s adhered to Trinitarian orthodoxy. A Unitarian strand—rooted in liberal Protestantism—emphasized the humanity of Jesus, viewing his healing acts as attainable models rather than divine exceptions. Mark Mullins observes that many Japanese Christians reinterpreted Christianity "in non-Trinitarian and rationalist terms", often stressing moral transformation over doctrinal purity (Mullins 2003, p223). This theological approach encouraged a Japanese search for an indigenous form of Pentecost—understood as spiritual empowerment, not sectarian conversion. As Ikegami notes, Holiness teaching in Japan blended seamlessly with indigenous expectations for moral and spiritual renewal (Ikegami 2003, p236). Eleanor Sonntag further explains that divine healing (神癒) became "the most attractive early Holiness doctrine", signaling both sanctification and Spirit baptism (Sonntag 2012, p44). Against this background, healing by laying on of hands—such as practiced in Reiki—can be understood as a culturally localized expression of Holiness theology rooted in Unitarian belief in human spiritual potential.

A close reading of Usui's responses reveals several key themes that, while outwardly framed in universal and nonsectarian language, mirror core Holiness doctrines. When describing the origin of his healing ability, Usui claims he underwent a period of intensive training, fasting, and meditation at Mount Kurama, during which he experienced a sudden descent of powerful energy and lost consciousness. This narrative parallels Holiness testimonies of Spirit baptism: a transformative moment of divine empowerment following spiritual preparation. As Eleanor Sonntag (2012, p39) documents, such experiences were often reported by Japanese Holiness preachers as the source of healing power and moral transformation.

Additional support for this interpretation comes from a biographical detail, not present in mainstream Reiki literature but substantiated by recent reconstructions of Tokio Yokoi's intellectual activities. In 1897, Yokoi founded a discussion group known as the *Hinototori Konwakai* (丁酉懇話會), an early version of what later became more formally known as the *Teiyū Konwakai*. Then, on 17 December 1899, he co-hosted a documented meeting of this group at his home, joined by leading scholars Nobuta Kishimoto (1865–1928), Ōnishi Hajime, and Anesaki Masaharu—all of whom shared Dōshisha backgrounds and a commitment to theological and ethical inquiry. According to Narita's chronology, the gathering responded to the rising influence of Japonisme in ethics and sought to revitalize cross-traditional dialogue. While the documented sources describe it as a forum for intellectual exchange, later interpretations suggest that the group may have also explored themes of ritual transmission (*denju* 伝授) and the structure of religious rites (*shūkyō gishiki* 宗教儀式) across Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian frameworks.

Ōnishi, in particular, contributed a deep reservoir of philosophical and theological insight, having studied theology at Dōshisha Eigakkō, philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, and later lectured on ethics, aesthetics, and logic at Waseda University. This high-level intellectual collaboration situates Yokoi within a theologically reflective milieu already engaged with questions of spiritual practice, authority, and moral formation. Although the group's potential focus on ritual transmission and its formalization into a foundation remain speculative, the thematic relevance to Reiki is striking. Yokoi's early interest in interreligious ritual frameworks provides a plausible antecedent to the development of reiju, the initiatory rite central to Reiki practice. Framed outwardly in the style of Japanese esoteric initiation, *reiju* may have served as a culturally encoded form of Christian Spirit baptism. The Buddhist appearance thus veiled an inner Holiness theology of sanctification-through-healing. In this light, Yokoi's participation in Teiyū Konwakai deepens our understanding of how Reiki could simultaneously fulfill Japanese spiritual expectations while retaining a Christian theological substructure.

In another answer, Usui insists that Reiki healing does not require belief on the part of the recipient. He states that unconscious patients and even children can benefit from Reiki, suggesting that it operates independently of the subject's faith or intention. Although this may initially appear to diverge from Holiness emphasis on healing through faith, it actually aligns with the Wesleyan notion of prevenient grace—God's healing initiative extended even prior to conscious belief. For Yokoi, trained in liberal Congregationalist theology, divine healing would have been conceived as a grace that surpasses doctrinal boundaries.

Usui also emphasizes that Reiki is not suggestion-based or psychological in nature. Rather, it involves a palpable energy that flows through the hands of the practitioner regardless of verbal interaction. This reflects the Holiness view of healing as a spiritually real, divinely mediated force—not a placebo effect but a tangible expression of sanctifying grace. In traditional Holiness services, healing occurred through the laying on of hands, accompanied by prayer and expectation, not by psychological persuasion. Usui's language mirrors this theology while translating it into culturally neutral terms. In a separate study, Beeler and I (2020) explore the perception among Reiki practitioners that the *reiki* energy itself possesses a form of agency—that it acts independently and purposefully within the healing process.

Finally, Usui explains the moral teachings of Reiki by referring to the poetry of Emperor Meiji. He claims that the Meiji poems reflect the ethical heart of Reiki practice. While this may appear as an overtly nationalistic gesture, it is better understood as a strategic substitution. In place of citing biblical ethics, which could have provoked state suspicion, Usui appeals to a culturally respected moral source. Yet the actual precepts of Reiki—such as gratitude, honesty, and diligence—echo the virtue ethics of Protestant moral teaching, especially as found in the Holiness tradition's emphasis on sanctified living.

Taken together, these statements suggest that Usui preserved the structural theology of Holiness Christianity—sanctification through discipline, divine empowerment, healing by touch, and moral purification—while consciously removing overt Christian references. This strategic concealment allowed Reiki to survive and flourish in a socio-political environment that was increasingly hostile to Christian expressions of spirituality. If Reiki originated with Yokoi in a Holiness context, as argued in this article, then Usui's interview becomes a rare document of theological translation: from Christian sanctification to religiously neutral healing, shaped by necessity but retaining the spiritual architecture of its source.

Just as the Memorial Stone constructs an image of Usui aligned with nationalistic Buddhist ideals (Jonker 2025), Usui's interview responses appear to frame his teachings within culturally acceptable terms, omitting direct references to Christianity. In both cases, we are not looking at neutral records but at adaptive public narratives—designed to ensure the survival of Reiki in a time when Christian identities could attract suspicion or repression. This comparison underscores the argument that Reiki's original theological content—rooted in Holiness ideals of sanctification and healing—was deliberately obscured but not erased.

7. Buddhist Appearance, Christian Substructure: The Strategic Framing of Reiki

While the theological structure of early Reiki may have been rooted in Christian Holiness principles of sanctification and divine healing, the external presentation of the practice adopted a distinctly Buddhist vocabulary. This syncretic reframing was not accidental. It reflected a strategic adaptation to the sociopolitical climate of Taishō-era Japan, in which Christianity—particularly in its missionary forms—faced growing suspicion and marginalization under the ideology of State Shintō.

Several features of Reiki's public image point to this Buddhist alignment.

First, the site of Usui's spiritual awakening—Mt. Kurama—is historically significant as a center of syncretic mountain religion (Shugendō), esoteric Tendai Buddhism, and folk Shintō practices. The mountain is associated with Bishamonten (Vaiśravaṇa), a Buddhist deity of healing and protection, as well as Mao-son, a local guardian spirit. By situating his transformative experience on Mt. Kurama, Usui invoked a sacred geography recognized by both Buddhist practitioners and lay seekers (Yamada 2009, 85–89).

Second, the structure of Reiki's moral teachings mirrors Buddhist ethical frameworks. The five precepts of Reiki—such as "Do not anger," "Be grateful," and "Work diligently"—echo the five Buddhist lay precepts (*gōkai*) in form and tone. Rather than cite biblical sources or theological statements, these maxims were attributed to Emperor Meiji's poetry (*gyosei*), thus aligning Reiki with culturally sanctioned expressions of virtue. This rhetorical substitution allowed Reiki to avoid Christian

connotations while preserving the Holiness emphasis on moral purification and sanctified living (Heine 2008, 122).

Third, Reiki's initiation ritual (*reiju*) shares structural similarities with esoteric Buddhist rites of transmission, particularly those found in Shingon and Tendai traditions. These include *kaji* (empowerment rituals), *kishin* (inviting the spirit), and *chinkon* (calming the soul)—all intended to transmit spiritual energy from master to disciple. The adoption of such forms provided Reiki with a familiar ritual framework that would be legible within Buddhist practice, even if the underlying theology drew on Holiness notions of Spirit baptism and divine empowerment (Yamanaka 2018, p2). In my doctoral thesis (2016), I put forth a hypothesis that the initiation ritual *reiju* might have been based on *chinkon kishin*.

Moreover, the concept of *reiki* may itself reflect a deeper religious synthesis. In classical Chinese spiritual discourse, the compound 靈氣 (*língqì*), meaning "numinous energy" or "spiritual breath", was used to describe the presence of awakened, morally attuned spirit. Notably, the Zen and Huayan master Zongmi (780–841) employed related terms such as 靈知 (*língzhì*, "numinous awareness") to express the direct realization of the true mind–moments of inner clarity akin to enlightenment. As Peter Gregory notes, Zongmi saw such awareness as the pure, ever-present root of spiritual understanding, unclouded by conceptual thinking. This resonance between *reiki* and *língqì* suggests that even the terminology adopted by Usui (or more likely Yokoi given his academic background) may have drawn from longstanding East Asian notions of moral-spiritual illumination. In this sense, the vocabulary of Reiki—though presented in Buddhist terms—evoked a broader religious landscape that encompassed Confucian, Buddhist, and implicitly Christian themes of inner awakening and healing.

Taken together, these features illustrate how Reiki's public identity was constructed using Buddhist language, symbols, and sites, even while retaining a deeper theological architecture rooted in Christian revivalism. This dual structure allowed Reiki to survive and expand in an environment hostile to overt Christian expressions, especially after the enactment of policies such as the 1899 *Education Ministry Order* banning religious instruction in schools. The result was a practice that appeared indigenously Japanese and spiritually neutral yet bore conceptual continuity with the Holiness ideal of sanctification through divine healing.

Conclusion

The early development of Reiki in Japan cannot be fully understood without recognizing the theological and ritual dynamics of the Holiness Movement, particularly its emphasis on sanctification, Spirit baptism, and divine healing. Evidence suggests that at least one Japanese Christian leader, formally trained and later politically active, pursued a lifelong quest for healing rooted in biblical models of Spirit baptism. Drawing on Protestant theology, Confucian ethics, and Japanese ritual

vocabulary, he crafted a healing practice that embodied the Holiness ideal of sanctification-through-healing while grounding it in a native religious idiom.

New biographical insights into this figure—Tokio Yokoi—suggest that his engagement with ritual studies in the 1890s may have laid the groundwork for Reiki's formal structure. In 1897, he reportedly founded a *gakkai* to investigate rituals of direct transmission across traditions, an initiative that points to an intentional effort to translate Christian theological content into culturally resonant ritual form. This context illuminates the emergence of *reiju* as a performative core of Reiki—ritually resembling Buddhist initiation, but conceptually grounded in Holiness theology.

From this perspective, Reiki's Buddhist appearance—its use of Mt. Kurama, poetic ethics, and esoteric structure—can be understood as a strategic adaptation, not an indication of doctrinal origin. The healing practice preserved a Christian theological substructure while adopting a public form that aligned with Japanese religious expectations. This concealment ensured both its cultural legitimacy and spiritual continuity.

By triangulating theological discourse with historical biography and ritual performance, we can more accurately assess how religious healing movements like Reiki emerged—not as isolated inventions but as culturally and spiritually negotiated expressions of transnational Christianity in Japan.

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