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

Dr. Jojan L. Jonker
version July 2025

Abstract

This article, while being work in progress, investigates a suggested correlation between divine healing and Christian sanctification in the Japanese Holiness Movement from the late 19th to early 20th century and healing as understood in Reiki practice. It argues that for those who believed Jesus was a human being (Unitarianism), healing was not peripheral but central to Holiness theology in Japan, and that Dōshisha University—Japan's leading Protestant institute—played a formative role in this development. There is a substantial amount of literature about Christianity and the Holiness Movement in Japan. Drawing on authors like Eleanor Sonntag, Mark Mullins, Andrew Maxton, William Elliot Griffis, Yamaji Aizan, Irwin Scheiner and others, the article offers historical indications to suggest that Western missionary influences, Japanese revivalism, and institutional Christian education contributed to the formation of a healing-oriented religious environment in which Reiki could emerge. I also examine how in this unfamiliar environment Reiki's public identity adopted a Buddhist appearance while retaining a Christian theological substructure but still echoes concepts of the Holiness Movement. The article responds to an observed need in academia of early Reiki history for an account of how Christianity, the Holiness Movement, Dōshisha University, and the early development of Reiki were historically and theologically connected.

Introduction

At around age eighteen (December 1875–January 1876), Tokio Yokoi 横井 時雄 (1857–1927) experienced a formative spiritual awakening on Mount Hanaoka. This event marks a pivotal moment in the lives of Yokoi and his peers in the Kumamoto Band. There, in a setting of meditation 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 may have informed Japan's Christian healing movements and, ultimately, the emergence of Reiki.

The history of Reiki, a healing modality developed in Japan in the early 20th century, has traditionally been associated with Buddhist and esoteric sources. For decades, Mikao Usui 臼井甕男 (1865–1926) was regarded as its sole originator, yet little was known about his life prior to 1922 let alone about a quest for healing. Recent scholarship has challenged this view. In particular, new biographical findings and historical reinterpretations have proposed that Rev. Tokio Yokoi—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 period (1868–1912) and the emergence of Reiki in the Taishō period (1912–1926) 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).

This article should be regarded as work in progress, as a thought experiment rather than evidence carved in stone. To my knowledge, Reiki is the only Japanese healing modality that, as is currently suggested, on the one hand is theologically rooted in concepts of the Holiness Movement in the Meiji *Zeitgeist* and on the other hand presented to the public as a practice based on indigenous Buddhist and Shintō concepts and rituals in the Tashō *Zeitgeist*. Because of this uniqueness, there is no literature that explains how Reiki could come into being in such a complex context. This article is one of the first attempts contributing to a possible explanation.

1. Divine healing as core to the Japanese Holiness Movement

Recent scholarship confirms that divine healing was a core tenet of the Japanese Holiness Movement, which promoted a "fourfold gospel" of salvation, sanctification, healing, and the Second Coming of Christ. Healing was not an optional doctrine but a spiritual experience that confirmed sanctifying grace.

Although rooted in Methodist revivalism, Holiness themes were transmitted to Japan through Presbyterian and Congregationalist channels, particularly via Dōshisha School (later University) and the Kumamoto Band, of which Tokio Yokoi was a central member.

While Dōshisha remained formally orthodox, it encouraged moral renewal and practical spirituality—hallmarks of Holiness piety.

Yokoi's exposure to American revivalism and his role as preacher, educator, and reformer suggest that his theology integrated personal transformation with social and physical well-being. This synthesis laid the groundwork for a model of healing as both inner renewal and public witness. His activities represent a bridge between institutional Christianity and the emerging experiential practices of the Taishō period—including Reiki.

Publications on early Protestantism in Japan show that faith healing was promoted as an alternative to medicine among Japanese Holiness preachers, who saw healing as evidence of sanctification and spiritual rebirth. This attitude appears to resurface later in Reiki circles. The emphasis on healing without physicians, as a marker of holiness, reflects a theological—not anti-scientific—stance grounded in radical trust in divine power.

Together, these developments suggest that Yokoi, as a key figure in Meiji Christianity, operated at the crossroads of doctrinal teaching, moral transformation, and spiritual healing. His possible role in the early history of Reiki would thus reflect not a deviation from Christian tradition, but an expression of the Holiness ideal reinterpreted within Japan's changing religious and geo-political environment during the Tashō era.

2. Reading Usui's interview through the lens of Holiness theology

If one accepts the hypothesis that 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 the 'Q&A section'—must be read not simply as autobiographical statements but as adaptive strategies within a politically constrained religious landscape. As Japan lived already in the Taishō period, Christian elements in new religious movements faced 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).

This theorizing traces how Holiness theology may have influenced the formation of Reiki, where 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. Many Japanese Christians reinterpreted Christianity in non-Trinitarian and rationalist terms, often stressing moral transformation over doctrinal purity. This theological approach encouraged a Japanese search for an indigenous form of Pentecost—understood as spiritual empowerment, not sectarian conversion. Holiness teaching in Japan blended seamlessly with indigenous expectations for moral and spiritual renewal. And I theorize that divine healing signaled both sanctification and Spirit baptism. 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, and if so, this would make Reiki, as already said, unique.

A close reading of Usui's responses reveals several key themes that, while outwardly framed in universal and nonreligious 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. It sounds similar to testimonies of Spirit baptism: a transformative moment of divine empowerment following spiritual preparation. I assume that such experiences were often (also) 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. It seems that Yokoi participated in several study groups. While it seems to have been a forum for intellectual exchange, later interpretations suggest that a certain group may have also explored themes of ritual transmission and the structure of religious rites across Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian frameworks.

I interpret such activities as situating Yokoi within a theologically reflective milieu already engaged with questions of spiritual practice, authority, and moral formation. Although the 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. Presented externally 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, I theorize that Yokoi's participation in such study groups deepens our understanding of how Reiki could simultaneously fulfill Japanese spiritual expectations while retaining a Christian theological substructure.

In another answer, I interpret Usui's words as that he insists that Reiki healing does not require belief on the part of the recipient. He states that recipients 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 seems to me that it aligns with the notion of prevenient grace—God's healing initiative extended even prior to conscious belief. For Yokoi, trained in liberal Congregationalist theology, divine healing could have been conceived as a grace that surpasses doctrinal boundaries.

Usui seems to have emphasized 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) explored 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. This can be positioned in the Japanese context where *ki* is an outflux of *kami*.

Finally, Usui explains the moral teachings of Reiki by referring to the poetry of Emperor Meiji. These Meiji poems should reflect the ethical heart of Reiki practice. While this may appear as an overtly nationalistic gesture, I theorize that 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. Earlier research suggests that Usui may have based his precepts on Bizan Suzuki's 1914 *Principles of Health* (*Kenzon no Genri* 健全の原理).

Taken together, these statements may suggest that Usui preserved the structural theology of Holiness Christianity—sanctification through discipline, divine empowerment, healing by touch, and moral purification—while seemingly 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 portrays Usui in terms resonant with nationalistic Buddhist ideals, his interview responses appear to adopt culturally acceptable language by avoiding explicit references to Christianity. In both cases, it is plausible that these were adaptive narratives shaped by the socio-political climate, in which Christian affiliations could attract suspicion. If Reiki was influenced by Holiness theology—possibly through figures like Yokoi—then such public representations may reflect a process of theological adaptation, whereby themes of sanctification and divine healing were retained in substance but expressed in neutral or Buddhist-compatible terms.

3. Buddhist appearance, Christian substructure: The strategic framing of Reiki

While early Reiki's theological foundations may have drawn on Holiness ideals of sanctification and divine healing, its public presentation adopted Buddhist forms to ensure cultural legitimacy in Taishō Japan. This reframing was likely a strategic response to growing state suspicion toward Christianity under State Shintō ideology.

The reported site of Usui's awakening—Mount Kurama—was historically associated with syncretic Buddhism and mountain religion, including deities like Bishamonten. Positioning Reiki's origin here aligned the practice with accepted spiritual locations. Similarly, Reiki's five moral precepts, attributed to Meiji poetry, mirrored Buddhist lay ethics while concealing their Protestant virtue ethic roots.

Reiki's initiatory rite (*reiju*) structurally resembles esoteric Buddhist rituals like *chinkon kishin*, which transmit spiritual energy. A structure already discussed above suggest that *reiju* represents this ritual adaptation.

Even the term *reiki* (霊気), resonant with Chinese *língqì* (靈氣, 'numinous breath'), evokes broader East Asian traditions of moral-spiritual clarity and healing. Given Yokoi's academic background, it is plausible that the terminology itself was chosen to harmonize with Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian ideas of inner transformation.

Thus, Reiki emerged as a hybrid form—outwardly Buddhist in language and structure yet grounded in a Christian Holiness framework. This dual identity enabled it to thrive in a religious climate hostile to overt Christianity, while preserving its sanctification-through-healing core.

4. Echoes of Holiness Movement in contemporary Western Reiki

Hawayo Takata, the person who introduced Reiki in the West in the 1930s, died in 1980. Her successor was her granddaughter Phyllis Furumoto. The name of the Reiki style was Usui Shiki Ryoho and for many practitioners in the West, this is the system their lineage goes back to. Furumoto formulated Usui Shiki Ryoho in what became known as the nine elements and four aspects. For now, I only address the four aspects. Is it possible that these aspects (still) echo into concepts of the Holiness Movement?

In Beeler and Jonker's section 9.3.2, "The path of *doing-becoming-being*" (2020), Reiki practice is described as a developmental path marked by four *emic* aspects: (1) *Healing Practice*: self-treatment for healing, comfort, and well-being. (2) *Personal Development*: a path to one's core of being and to one's human unfolding. (3) *Spiritual Discipline*: stimulating the process of spiritual growth and development. Looking beyond individual healing, gifts, and self-expression, lays the question of our meaning and purpose as human beings. Searching for answers will offer the practitioner an inner transformation evidenced by a shift in being. (4) *Mystic Order*: practice will bring a practitioner in relation to reality beyond the realm of the five senses (the metaphysical unseen world). It is the emergence of flourishing as an alignment between body, mind, and spirit.

I theorize that this layered model mirrors the core tenets of the Holiness Movement. Japanese Holiness theology included a fourfold gospel, comprising salvation, sanctification, divine healing, and the Second Coming of Christ. Within this framework, divine healing was not merely physical curing but confirmation of sanctifying grace, marking a transition into a life renewed by the Holy Spirit. The emphasis on progressive transformation and bodily affirmation resonates with the Reiki practitioner's experiential arc from initial attunement to embodied flourishing. Beeler and Jonker also emphasize surrender as a *sine qua non* for this development—a motif that correlates to early Japanese Holiness views, where healing was seen as contingent on surrendering to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, I theorize that the four aspects of Usui Shiki Ryoho can be read as a functional equivalent to the sanctification-healing arc of the Holiness tradition, especially as adapted in Japan in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

When considering the Yokoi hypothesis as historically plausible, 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. It seems 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. Due to personal circumstances and *Zeitgeist*, it may have been that he did not become the public face of Reiki but Mikao Usui.

New biographical insights into this figure—Tokio Yokoi—suggest that his interest in religions and rituals may have laid the groundwork for Reiki's formal structure. He reportedly was engaged in study groups to investigate rituals of direct transmission across traditions, something I interpret as an initiative that points to an intentional effort to translate Christian theological content into culturally resonant ritual form. If so, then 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 and placed in the complex Japanese *Zeitgeist*, Reiki's Buddhist appearance—its affiliating with 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, I 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.

Suggested Literature

Beeler, Dori-Michelle, Jonker, Jojan L. *Reiki Practice and Surrender. An intersection of Body, Spirituality, and Religion*. 2020.

Griffis, William Elliot. *Verbeck of Japan: A Citizen of No Country*. early 1900s.

Heine, Steven. *Did Dōgen Go to China? What He Wrote and When He Wrote It*. 2008.

Irwin Scheiner, *Christian Converts and Social Protest in Meiji Japan*. 1970.

Jonker, Jojan L. *Reiki. The Transmigration of a Spiritual Healing Practice*. 2016.

——. *Tokio Yokoi. From Japanese Christianity to Universal Reiki*. 2024.

——. *Reframing the Early History of Reiki: The Converging Paths of Mikao Usui and Tokio Yokoi*. 2025.

Latham, Elizabeth M. *The Samurai Reiki Master*. 2023.

Maxton, Andrew. *A Band of Evangelists: Protestant Revivalism in Japan 1903–1940*. 2017.

Mullins, Mark R. *et al. Handbook of Christianity in Japan*.

Narita, Tatsushi. *Masaharu Anesaki: A Life Chronology*. 2013[1].

Sonntag, Eleanor. "Divine Healing in the Japanese Holiness Church". In *Religious Studies in Japan*, vol. 1, 2012.

Usui, Mikao. "Interview". In Jonker, Jojan L., 2016, pp595-599.

Yamada, Shoji. *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West*. 2011.

Yamaji, Aizan. *Essays on the History of the Modern Japanese Church: Christianity in Meiji Japan* (*Gendai Nihon kyōkai shiron* 現代日本教会史論 1906). [Graham Squires. Ann Arbor. 1999.]

Yamanaka, Hiroshi. "Foreword: Religious Studies in Japan." In *Religious Studies in Japan*, vol. 4, 2018.

[1] Accessed June 2025. https://tatsushinarita.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/masaharu-anesaki-a-life-chronology/.