Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic
and Millenarian Movements

Panacea Society

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The Panacea Society

The Panacea Society was a millenarian religious community formed in the years following World War I and centred on its two leaders: Mabel Barltrop (known as Octavia, 1866–1934) and her successor, Emily Goodwin (1858–1943). The group believed the expectations of the nineteenth-century prophet Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) were coming to pass in their time, and they believed that Octavia was herself the incarnation of the child of the woman clothed with the sun referred to in Revelation 12 and the child of Southcott born spiritually when she died in 1814. Their theology was constellated around three core principles: that the divine included a feminine aspect that would play a decisive role in the eschaton, that Britain was a chosen nation of cosmic importance, and that their system of healing was an essential part of complete individual salvation in the Millennium.

Octavia established the group from her home in Bedford, an English county town about forty miles north of London, and over time during the 1920s and 1930s its members came to occupy a number of houses adjoining hers and elsewhere in the town, forming a small localized religious community. The number of members resident in Bedford grew to a peak of sixty-six individuals by 1939, with about 1,300 additional members living elsewhere—however, numbers began a steady decline after World War II. At the heart of the society's practice was a system of healing and the receipt of divine messages communicated to Octavia from the Holy Ghost on a daily basis, and messages communicated by a divine figure known as the 'Divine Mother' through Emily Goodwin from time to time (and notably at times of crisis or challenge for the society). In addition to Joanna Southcott and the new revelations communicated through Octavia and Goodwin, the Society recognized a line of prophets from English mystic and leader of the theosophical Philadelphian Society, Jane Lead (1624–1704), followed by further prophets (known, including Southcott, as 'the Visitation'): Richard Brothers (1757–1824), George Turner (d. 1821), William Shaw (d. 1822), John Wroe (1782–1863), James White (c. 1848–85), and Helen Shepstone (known in the Panacea Society as Helen Exeter; c. 1853–1918). The core thrust of this prophetic tradition was understood by the Panacea Society to be about the arrangements for and signs of the return of Christ and the establishing of divine rule on earth under the oversight of the society and the British monarchy.

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Octavia (Mabel Barltrop). With permission of the Panacea Charitable Trust.

Over time, the society developed a complex theology, including a prominent feminine eschatology, which they understood to be disclosed in messages communicated by the Visitation. With their own printing press, they issued a considerable volume of literature—from leaflets and pamphlets to regular issues of a periodical and book-length works—that provides a valuable source of information on their beliefs and doctrines. Important aspects of their public profile included a campaign to open a sealed box of writings left by Joanna Southcott and the promotion of their system of healing—both of which they advertised widely with newspaper and periodical advertisements, in distributed leaflets, and on billboards and posters.

The movement drew heavily on non-traditional, new forms of religious expression popular in their day, notably Theosophy and Spiritualism. Nonetheless, many of its members were deeply rooted in the Church of England (Octavia was the widow of an Anglican vicar, Arthur Barltrop (1856–1906), and had been a

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practising Anglican all her life) and an important element of their teaching related to the idea that the Church of England had fallen under the influence of Lucifer and induced to delay the second coming. A significant part of their message, then, was addressed to the errors they detected in the Church of England—the overcoming of which would help to precipitate the Millennium. In the eyes of the Panaceans, at the heart of the Anglican error was an obscuring of the role of the female; they believed that the church illegitimately marginalized women as individuals from the church hierarchy and occluded the eschatological significance of a cosmic feminine presence counterpart to conceptions of a masculine God and the male incarnation of Jesus. Nonetheless, while the group broadly opposed the Church of England, they retained some special standing for it as part of their British Israelism; they believed that Britain (though they often referred only to England) had been the settling place for some of the lost tribes of Israel, and indeed that for this reason it would be the scene of the establishment of the New Jerusalem.

Under the Panacean scheme, while it was understood that Jesus Christ had brought a true message of spiritual salvation, it was also believed to be the case that a second process of bodily salvation was necessary to achieve complete preparedness for the apocalypse. Thus, the Church of England's error was as much to do with a blinkered promotion of Jesus's spiritual processes as it was to do with its neglect of the essential culmination of that in the physical processes of salvation that were to be carried through by a female messiah. To achieve that physical salvation, the society believed that a sacred substance had to be physically introduced into people's bodies, and they sought to achieve this by the distribution of transcendent power on small pieces of linen, which followers would dip in water and drink—achieving physical healing from all ailments at the same time. Full salvation required completion of the physical process of healing, and individuals who achieved this would find themselves living corporeally on earth in the divine Millennium. Those who had taken up Christ's message but not achieved physical salvation (i.e. by being Christian but not accepting Panacean healing practice) would only continue incorporeally in heaven following the eschaton.

The healing continued from its inception in 1924 until the Panacea Society ended its religious activity with the death of the last resident member in 2012—though its decline was a protracted affair beginning around the time of World War II (Lockhart 2020). Today, the central houses of the community at Albany Road in Bedford are preserved as a museum of the society and of apocalypticism and millenarianism more generally. The secular trust that maintains these in the present day—the Panacea Charitable Trust—also supports a number of academic and wider charitable activities, one of which is the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements, which created and oversees the *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. The author of this article is one of the centre's academic directors.

Mabel Barltrop and the Beginnings of the Panacea Society

On 29 April 1915, Mabel Barltrop, a middle-aged and middle-class widow and mother of four (her three sons were all away serving in the war and her daughter was being looked after by relations) was admitted to a mental asylum near her home town of Bedford with a diagnosis of melancholia. Her medical notes describe the ebb and flow of her health and mood, noting in particular a strong religious bent to her thinking and a charismatic and appealing aspect to her personality. She would be discharged after 18 months, by which time she had begun to receive messages from the spiritual world channelled through

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another patient and to receive some messages directly herself. During her time in the asylum, Barltrop also entered into a postal correspondence with two spiritualists: Helen Shepstone and Rachel Fox (1858–1939). Helen Shepstone lived in South Africa and was herself regularly receiving messages from Christ and St Andrew about the second coming. Fox had published *Rays of the Dawn or Fresh Teaching on New Testament Problems* (1912), under the name 'A. Watcher', which she had written through divinely inspired automatic writing; she was also a practising spiritualist of long standing. Jane Shaw describes the intense epistolatory relationship between these women, built on 'a sense of their being on the verge of discovering the meaning of … the ultimate mystery' of the identity of 'the messiah-child Shiloh' (Shaw 2011, 29).

Barltrop had been a conventional practising member of the Church of England throughout her life, and when she discovered the writings of the nineteenth-century prophet Joanna Southcott in 1914 she found a powerful religious vision around which she began to orient her thinking. Southcott had been a prolific writer, and Barltrop acquired copies of her books and read them voraciously, becoming a convinced believer in Southcott's religious message, at the heart of which were the ideas that the events described in Revelation were imminent and that there was a special female role in the eschaton. When she left the asylum, Barltrop returned home to Bedford and began to build a network of contacts and to pursue her religious vision. By early 1919, a group of followers had begun to gather around her; she was recognized by them as the female messiah (at which point she took on the name 'Octavia' as the eighth in the line of prophets who came after Lead) and the group formed themselves into a distinct religious community with the institution of a set of 'Ordinances and Doctrines' in 1920 (Fox 1927, 79–104, 120; Lockhart 2020). They originally called themselves the Community of the Holy Ghost, but they became the Panacea Society in 1926, by which time the group had acquired six houses, including two large mansions, with a chapel and gardens created by breaking down the walls between the properties. The garden became part of an idealized vision of Englishness, which came to be linked to the group's Anglo-Israelism. At first the pleasure of the garden was light-heartedly spoken of as a taste of Eden. However, as events the group understood as having cosmic significance took place within the community, the parallelism developed into allegory and perhaps literalism as they came to see it as Eden. (The group's central site remains preserved as a museum by the Panacea Charitable Trust.) The group had a predominantly female membership throughout its existence, with the members living in Bedford largely drawn from Octavia's personal contacts and her wider networks—especially in the early days of the society's establishment.

Prophets and Doctrines

As we have seen, the society regarded itself as the most recent and final expression of a modern prophetic tradition. Its members understood this to have been active since the seventeenth century and to be preparatory to 'the way for the Last Act in the Great World Drama' (Octavia 1925, 25). The Visitation had opened with the London mystic Jane Lead, whose multifarious insights the group understood to have been selectively re-emphasized by the subsequent prophets. The essential aspects of Panacean theology that they understood as evident in these prophets were summarized in Octavia's *Healing for All* (1925). The first core idea was that England (or Britain) would be the New Jerusalem and that twelve new apostles must be established to gather in 144,000 followers (see Revelation 7:4). Also, as we have seen, the divine must act through an eschatological female—this was a response to the woman's role in bringing about the Fall. Jesus had completed only part of the long eschatological drama (offering salvation for the soul), and

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the final act would be carried out by a divine Daughter, counterpart to Jesus as divine Son—offering salvation for the body. This physical salvation would be expressed in healing of bodily ailments for those who took part in it.

Following Lead, the first prophet was Richard Brothers, whose essential message was the declaration that Britain was in fact Israel. After Brothers, Joanna Southcott was the successor prophet; however, she was in many respects the most important of the seven prophets in the Panacean theology for her general millenarian scheme and, not least, because the group understood her to have given birth in 1814 to the child who was 'caught up unto God, and to his throne' (Revelation 12:5, *KJV*). Octavia, as they understood her, was that child returned from a transcendent sojourn. In the Panacean conception derived from Southcott, the apocalypse was not ultimately destructive. Following tribulation:

> *catastrophic end of the World is no part of God's plan. Christ will reign on this Earth (Rev. xi. 15), and all that is good in our laws, our institutions and our inventions, and is beautiful in our productions, will be preserved. … Satan will eventually be chained or bound for a thousand years [during which period] Man will be judged without the Powers of darkness to work upon him, and Man will be pronounced 'good'. (Octavia 1925, 42)*

Southcott had left a box of sealed writings (also called 'the Ark'), believed to contain reserved final words by her. The society published elaborate rules surrounding the procedures for opening the box, including the requirement that twenty-four bishops of the Church of England must call for the box to be opened and for three days before the box was opened Southcottian manuscripts should be studied by the bishops accompanied by twenty-four Southcottian believers. They carried out a systematic but ultimately unsuccessful public advertising campaign to persuade the bishops to play their part in opening the box (to this day the box forms part of the Panacea Charitable Trust collection, though only a replica is on public display; it remains unopened). While they were initially concerned by the bishops' reluctance to engage in the process of opening the box, by 1925 they had concluded that the apocalyptic processes were evidently underway anyway—though they considered the box would nonetheless be opened at some appropriate point.

George Turner and William Shaw—the prophets following Southcott—were less prominent in the society's accounts; they were noted for their prophecies of the impending Kingdom of God and the appearance of a new messiah figure. John Wroe was understood by the society to have taught that Southcott was the Woman of Revelation 12, the true nature of salvation (as a physical outcome), and to have explained 'the actual sin which Adam and Eve committed' (citing Leviticus 25 and Acts 15:29), which was the breaking of purity laws around sex and conception (Octavia 1925, 50). The society believed that because men had no purifying period, it was impossible for them to conceive perfectly good children. (It was theoretically possible for women to do so, though practically impossible due to male inoculation with evil.)

The two final prophets were James White and Helen Exeter, who were regarded as having lesser status than the others. White's *Flying Roll* (1881) (written under the name James Jezreel) was valuable as an account of the Visitation for a general readership (rather than for believers alone). White was also noted for his complex theological anthropology, including the principle that the divine included a male and a female essence. As we have seen, Exeter had been in correspondence with Octavia since the earliest days

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of the group. Her principal importance seems to have been to provide clear insight and guidance during Octavia’s period in the mental asylum.

The Divine Feminine

In 1923, one of the Panacea Society’s inner core, Emily Goodwin, who would become Octavia’s second in command and would lead the society after Octavia’s death in 1934, spoke with the voice of ‘the Divine Spirit of the Mother Jerusalem’. She said, ‘I have come to abide with you for ever, and to prepare the Kingdom for My Son’ and communicated and reinforced various aspects of the society’s doctrines (Octavia 1925, 75). It was not insignificant that Goodwin was a woman and spoke as the mouthpiece of the divine feminine:

> *Even as the Father prepared the way of the Son at His first Coming, by speaking through the Prophets, so to-day, actually to-day, is the Mother preparing the way of the second coming, and the women who are publishing the tidings are becoming a great company. (Octavia 1925, 75)*

Thus, women, as workers on earth or divine entity, were seen to be completing or rectifying the prior work of the men. This activation of a female aspect of eschatology was reflected in a revised interpretation of the Trinity as a quaternity, to include the feminine, interpreting the Holy Ghost as the Mother, and adding the Daughter (Octavia): Father, Mother, Son, and Daughter. Octavia and Jesus were, in effect, regarded as divine siblings, the earthly expressions of the feminine and masculine in the divine respectively.

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Emily Goodwin. With permission of the Panacea Charitable Trust.

The Church of England and British Israelism

A central theme of the Panacea Society's theology was its members' frustration with the attitude of the established church—the Church of England—to the expected return of the messiah. They presented the church's error as failing to recognize the Visitation and misunderstanding the process of the second coming in preparing to be spiritually ready for the apocalypse (through repentance) but making no practical action to activate it (through the healing or opening the box). Nonetheless, despite the faults of the clergy, the Church of England was the eschatologically authentic church because this had been taught by Southcott:

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> *Her works declare our Church to be the Standard and the gathering-place for all the Churches of the world, and contain the solution to the question which cause the differences between East and West, between Clergy in our own Church, and between us and Nonconformity. (Ye Shall Hear, 1923, 98)*

The church's faults were to some extent an effect of the apocalyptic arc of history. Under a dispensational structure of eschatological progression, the healing and the new Panacean revelation could not occur until close to the year 2000, when the Millennium would dawn. Any preaching or prophecy from the time of Moses onwards that was ignorant of the Visitation or the healing would be necessarily incomplete. By performing its duties since the time of Jesus, the Church of England had been a kind of eschatological placeholder; now the new revelation had come to fruition under the Panacea Society, the members expected the church to absorb the society's doctrines. The society undertook a systematic pamphlet and letter-writing campaign to persuade the clergy of the importance of their revelation, with little success. They noted candidly, however, that the complete failure of the church to pay them attention served to further confirm their eschatological vision:

> *Indeed to have had replies would have spoilt our cause, and we publicly thank the Clergy to-day for having been so delightfully unanimous. … Persons with good brains will recognize how very tiresome it would have been if there had been a few who had 'saved the situation' from its present completeness. (Octavia 1925, 82)*

The special status of the Church of England (despite its faults) was the corollary of Panacean ideas about England itself (often used interchangeably with 'Britain'), which stemmed from the society's British Israelism. In common with the wider British Israel movement, the Panacea Society regarded the British people as being made up of the tribes referred to in 2 Esdras, who did not return to Palestine and who instead made their way to northern Europe and to the British Isles. They alluded to Westminster Abbey as a counterpart to the Jerusalem Temple and envisaged the second coming as establishing a civil kingdom 'ruled by Jesus Christ as King, under Whom George V, will continue to reign' (Octavia 1925, 105). This political element to their vision of Britain was linked in their writings to the global political uncertainty they were witness to after World War I and the rise of totalitarian forms of government in Europe in the interwar period. They saw the rise of fascism as the natural corollary to the emergence of communism and socialism because, they said, these 'can only be dealt with by a Dictatorship' (Octavia 1925, 120). While they seem to have given cautious approval to the rise of dictators ('really an armed prophet') as the only viable counterpoint to Bolshevism, they recognized that such individuals were sustained ultimately by force alone (Octavia 1925, 120). Lamenting the impasse presented to them by Bolshevism on the one hand and fascism on the other, they saw the growth and power of their healing as expressing a third way through the morass of political extremes: 'God Himself should manifest His power in the healing, to show that He has other Powers, whereby the world shall be saved from descending into the prehistoric chaos' (Octavia 1925, 120, emphasis removed).

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The Healing

In Panacean theology, there were three main categories of human eschatological outcome: those who die in the body ‘receiving only an incorruptible body, a heavenly or celestial body, a *spirit* body’ and those who receive an immortal body and continue to live in a physical body made perfect but still joined to its spirit (Octavia 1925, 15–16). A third group would receive no physical or celestial body and would not continue in any form. Those furnished with a physical eschatological body, the Panacea Society taught, would be those who continued to inhabit the earth after the second coming. The overall scheme was also understood, at one time, in terms of a racialised system of 'identity and the categorisation of people' linked to their ideas about race and British Israelism (Shaw 2011, 251). This would make it possible for some British people to achieve immortality, excluded Black people, and probably excluded most other national and ethnic identities. The healing system offered by the society was at the heart of their apocalyptic process because it provided a mechanism to introduce the spirit element that would achieve an immortal body in the bodies of individual people—a counterpart to the introduction of breath that gave life to the soul in the creation of Adam (see Genesis 2:7).

The healing was divinely revealed to the society on 4 May 1923, and its mechanism, ‘through water and Spirit, which means “Water and the Breath”’, was activated (Octavia 1925, 76). Within a year, all the members at the Bedford headquarters were understood to have been cured or relieved of any ailments, and it was decided that the healing should be offered to the world. The healing was offered without charge (and the society pointed out that they in fact incurred expenditure in providing the service) and did not require any subscription to their doctrines to be effective. The absence of any doctrinal requirement was itself understood as part of the eschatological significance of the healing: as obedience was the ‘first Covenant between God and man’ (broken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden), its recapitulation would be the final covenant—so obedience to the instructions superseded faith for the purpose of salvation (faith and repentance, the second and third covenants, would become unnecessary in the end times) (Octavia 1925, 74; see also 78).

The society advertised the healing widely in newspapers and periodicals, and through leafleting and billboard campaigns, and received more than 122,000 applications from 102 countries between 1924 and 2012 (when it closed). Three-quarters of the applications were received before 1939, and most came from the United States and Jamaica (30 percent each) or from the United Kingdom (20 percent). When people applied, they were sent a small piece of blessed linen and an instruction paper, which directed them in how to prepare the healing water (by standing the linen in ordinary water, and with further dilutions of that solution) and then how to use it (usually, drinking it and applying it to the body in prescribed ways). A considerable number of those who tried the healing did not continue with it; however, many did find benefits, and some of those went on to become dedicated followers of the movement (see Lockhart 2019 for a full account of the healing).

Healing users could expect a wide range of positive effects beyond mere healing of physical suffering, and these individual scenes of divine improvement would each be a small step in the process of the restoration of Eden:

> *With a body freed from disease, impervious to accident, with a mind that no longer can be*

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> *interfered with by angels nor devils, but has become an ark, from the window of which (the fontanel) the raven-like bird of fear has flown forth in order that the Dove of Peace may enter to abide within for ever, with a home protected from every phase of distress by a God who will supply every need—will it not be justifiable to say, 'the blissful seat' is on the road to being 'regained' on earth on which it was lost? Are we not justified in declaring that the long-closed Gate of Paradise is slowly opening? (Octavia 1925, 122)*

The Panacea Charitable Trust

Octavia died on 16 October 1934 and was immediately succeeded by her second in command, Emily Goodwin. Goodwin had joined the society in 1920, having been involved in Southcottian spirituality for much of her life, and moved to Bedford to live in Octavia's house as nurse to Octavia's elderly aunt shortly after joining (Shaw 2011, 93). Goodwin passed away a decade later, in 1943, in the middle of World War II. With no suitable divinely inspired individual to take over the religious leadership, the society continued to function under the oversight of its managing committee. While financial security and effective governance ensured the persistence of the society and many of its functions, membership rates began to drop, and a slow but steady institutional decline set in. By 1993, there were just two members running the society in Bedford—John Coghill (1912–2008) and Ruth Klein (1932–2012)—and the last resident Panacean—Ruth Klein—died in 2012. Coghill and Klein had begun the work of modernizing the work of the society, which has been registered as a charity under UK charity law since 1926, including introducing new trustees who were not believers in Panaceaism. In 2012, the charity changed its name from the Panacea Society to the Panacea Charitable Trust' (see Lockhart 2020).

Sources and Further Reading

The Panacea Society published an official history—written by Rachel Fox, one of Octavia's earliest followers—in four volumes (c. 1921, 1927, 1931, c. 1934). The society had its own press and was prolific in publishing a wide range of authorized literature—including sixteen volumes of *Writings of the Holy Ghost* (1919–34), spiritually communicated to Octavia on a daily basis and providing a prodigious if somewhat periphrastic insight into her spiritual mental life. Octavia's *Healing for All* (1925) provides a more organized account of many important Panacean beliefs. The society's periodical, *The Panacea*, was published undated during the 1920s and 1930s; it includes a diverse range of articles, poetry, and other items written by members of the society. While Panacea Society publications from this period are not widely available, the Panacea Charitable Trust retains a complete set of Panacea Society publications in the society's archives at 14 Albany Road, Bedford, UK.

Jane Shaw's *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (2011) remains the only broad history of the group and provides an excellent general account of its formation and development, especially during its flourishing interwar years. In particular, Shaw sets the society in the religious and social contexts of the time. Shaw's 'Englishness, Empire and Nostalgia: A Heterodox Religious Community's Appeal in the Inter-war Years' (2018) in *Studies in Church History* examines the society in relation to a 'nostalgic notion of "Englishness"'. See also Shaw's (2012) *Oxford Dictionary of National*

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Biography entry on Octavia.

Alastair Lockhart (the author of this article) has published focused studies of the healing including in the United Kingdom (2015) and Finland (2013), both with a focus on the group's relationship to other movements and the wider spiritual economy, and a study of the demise of the society as a religious institution (2020). Lockhart's monograph, *Personal Religion and Spiritual Healing: The Panacea Society in the Twentieth Century* (2019), examines the history and theology of the healing, and its adoption and adaptation across countries and cultures, with special study of the dynamic personal theologies and experiences of healing users in the United States, Jamaica, the United Kingdom, and Finland.

Both Shaw (2017) and Lockhart (2017) contributed chapters on the Panacea Society to Shaw and Philip Lockley's edited volume *The History of a Modern Millennial Movement: The Southcottians* (2017), which includes valuable chapters on diverse expressions of the wider Southcottian tradition.

Ryan Williams and Fraser Watts (2014; 2020 with Lockhart) provide interesting empirical insight into the healing via research using the archives of the Panacea Society to investigate aspects of the psychology of healing (using the letters of healing users who wrote to the society).

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