

## INTRODUCTION

### The Panacea Society and the Study of Religion

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In 1924, a group of women living as a religious community in the town of Bedford in the south of England began a public campaign to promote what they believed was a method of spiritual healing discovered under divine inspiration. For ninety years, the group, which called itself the Panacea Society, advertised its healing system and attracted inquiries and applications from all over the world. While the Society continues to exist as a secular institution with charitable and educational purposes (and the funding for the research on which this book is based was provided by that charity), the healing closed in 2012 when the last member of the Bedford leadership passed away. While the healing was available, nearly 130,000 people from more than one hundred countries submitted applications; all of those wrote to the Society at least once (when they applied), many wrote several times, and a few wrote a great many letters during their periods of contact. With a striking level of efficiency, the Society's workers in Bedford took great pains to catalogue the letters they received from the users of the healing, and for thousands of users the Society retained complete runs of original correspondence. As such, the Society's archives contain many thousands of letters on spiritual and religious matters, across nearly a hundred years of recent history, from people who are normally lost to the historical record. The purpose of this book is to present the outcome of a close study of the materials in that archive—to provide insight into the spiritual and metaphysical thinking of people whose ideas about such things are otherwise almost invisible in the historical study of religion.

The method of healing offered by the Society was a simple one; an applicant who wrote to the Society asking for healing was sent a small piece of linen to which the Society's leader had imparted healing power. The linen came with an instruction paper that detailed how the linen should be dipped in water, and how the water should be either drunk or applied to the body in special ways with the

intention of healing specified ailments.<sup>2</sup> In addition to using the water as prescribed, users were required to write regularly to update the Society about their progress in recovering from their ailments. Those letters provided the occasion for many users of the healing to communicate about their experience of the healing, and to go beyond that to discuss their personal and spiritual concerns in their own ways and on their own terms. In this way, the letters of the users of the healing are samples of a conversation about religious matters that is carried on, to varying extents, in all societies and at all times. Whatever the historical trajectory of religious belief and practice across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the Panacea Society's healing letters have a unique capacity to show the nature of individual grappling with the transcendent (or its absence) through that recent history and across a range of countries and societies. The approach taken in this book turns to these noncanonical and highly individual sources and pieces of evidence as valid accounts of the theological views of people we would not normally treat as theologians. This provides the material for the central purpose of the book: an attempt to understand something of what religion *is* in people's lives, how people experience it, and how they understand it.

Scholarly discussion about religious change has frequently centered on a distinction between two forms of religion: large, mainstream, organized movements of allegiance to what is thought to lie beyond the mundane on the one hand, and small-scale, personal experience of whatever is experienced as beyond each individual's earthly existence on the other. Of course, both "forms" of religion are invariably blended together, and the distinction is a useful if somewhat artificial convenience of contemporary understandings. Nonetheless, the processes affecting these two forms of religious activity, the relationship between them, and their destinies (whether each is growing or shrinking so as to eventually either flourish or fade away) has been a central interest of historians and social scientists of religion for some time. It is a core claim of this book that scholarly debate has inadequately accessed something of fundamental importance but hard to see when attempting to understand religious change from an overview position: complex and dynamic individual thinking in all types of religious activity. Based on the evidence of the Panacea Society healing letters, this book seeks to excavate the signs of complexity and dynamism in the religious lives of people without access to publication outlets or conventional religious authority. In essence, it seeks to understand people's experience of religion and spirituality by acknowledging that they can all be metaphysicians, and by treating them all as such. Following an appraisal of how theories of secularization have been assessed (in chapter 3), this book argues that classics in the secularization literature have been underestimated

for the extent to which they propose complexity and dynamism rather than outright decline. The method in this book pays special attention to that complexity and dynamism and uses the archives of the Panacea Society's healing department to generate a deeper understanding of the meaning of religion in people's lives in recent history. It ultimately suggests that, for many people, the transcendent is not an object distinct from their everyday lives that they try to relate to, but something caught up in the everyday conundrum of understanding life in the world.

## THE ARCHIVE

In the early days of the healing in the 1920s, all letters making inquiries about the healing were reviewed by the Society's leadership and replied to. As time went by, and as the number of healing users grew, only the most difficult cases were formally assessed by the leadership; nonetheless, letters were regularly replied to, especially in special or difficult cases. The settled daily routine seems to have been that the head of the Healing Department would deal with new applications and letters from overseas, while a subdepartment dealt with update reports from ongoing "water-takers."<sup>3</sup> As the healing work grew, the Healing Department evolved a sophisticated and extensive filing and referencing system ("simple but efficient methods, so concise, complete, orderly, and up to date"<sup>4</sup>) to manage the enormous numbers of applicants and complexity of information it received. For every applicant, an index card was made with the patient's details, and a record was kept of every letter and ailment reported on. The Society also appointed an officer "in charge of the search for duplicate applications."<sup>5</sup> Each card includes the applicant's postal address, name, application date, and information about letters received at the Society and the progression of ailments as reported. For many longstanding healing users, there are a number of closely handwritten cards stored together. Although some are now missing from the archive, and there may be entire cabinets missing (for example, there are only a very few cards remaining for U.S. applicants), a substantial number remain in their original drawers. Cards are stored in drawers in alphabetical order by surname, so the contents are effectively randomly arranged as far as gender, geographical location, date of application, and other metrics are concerned. For the purposes of this research, a sample of the index cards of approximately the first fifty applicants stored in each of the eighty-one drawers were studied for information about their applications and careers as users of the healing. A process of eliminating blank or evidently erroneous data, and removing cards with inadequate or incomplete information (for example, those without a stated country or with missing application dates), resulted in a sample

of 3,894 applicants from thirty-five countries or territories and with application dates from January 1924 to July 1990. Applicants with addresses in Jamaica and England made up the majority of those in the sample (with 1,893 from Jamaica and 1,206 from England).<sup>6</sup>

To reduce the workload at the headquarters in Bedford, a number of agents, called Towers,<sup>7</sup> were set up to manage affairs in specific countries and regions. Countries without Towers were all managed from Bedford, and over time the Healing Department developed a sophisticated network of translators both in house and outside.<sup>8</sup> Tower offices were organized in a similar way to the head office (“they have Index Cards, Reference numbers, Case-Papers, Registers, &c., just as we have”), and on a monthly basis they were expected to send full details of every applicant and ongoing patient to the Society’s central registers—though some Towers, notably the one in the United States, were overwhelmed on a regular basis.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the index cards in the Society archive’s Healing Collection, its general holdings include numerous volumes of manuscript register books alongside a great array of personal, institutional, and administrative papers. The registers are sometimes inconsistent and discontinuous, though there are long runs of integrated information for some countries in some time periods, and it is possible to assemble an overview sketch of the rise and fall of subscriptions to the Society’s healing method over the course of time. The appendices include summary data based on these materials, giving an overview sketch of national patterns of interest in the healing. However, the nature of the source material is such that these data should not be treated as more than approximate.

The final major archival source of information about the healing is hundreds of packets of letters stored in dozens of large archival boxes held in the Panacea Society archive’s Healing Collection. Periodically, the Society’s members in Bedford seemed to have gathered runs of letters from individual users, carried out sorting and disposal, and wrapped them into packets for long-term storage. While these letters were apparently stored in various places at the Society’s headquarters over the years, when the last two members of the Society at the headquarters sought to modernize and regularize the Society’s activities amid fading membership at the end of the twentieth century, a process of reorganization took place in the archives. Under the oversight of academic researchers and archivists, letters and registers were gathered together from cellars and cupboards, the process of cataloguing began, and suitable archival storage was introduced. That process was initiated by members of the Oxford Prophecy Project, led by Dr. Jane Shaw and Professor Christopher Rowland, one outcome of which was the cataloguing

of the Healing Collection and the wider Panacea Society archives. In 2010, when just one Panacean, Mrs. Ruth Klein, remained active at the headquarters, this project began to attempt to penetrate and understand the contents and significance of the materials in the Society's Healing Collection.

While in recent years the letter bundles have undergone a process of archival reorganization and rescue from sometimes precarious storage conditions, they reflect a long history with their own processes of sorting, triage, and, no doubt, occasional accidents. As such, while there are many thousands of letters from thousands of correspondents, runs of letters are not always consistent or complete, and the individual items are yet to be fully catalogued. The samples examined in this book are based on a detailed analysis of letters uncovered during a long process of reading and searching through the Healing Collection. While there has been some systematic sampling, the selection of letters for inclusion in the analysis carried out for this book had the intention of encompassing a wide and deep range of expressed religious and spiritual thinking, so letters were included opportunistically as they were identified. The intention in the letter analysis has been to subject correspondents to close analysis in order to understand the nature, function, and experience of religion and transcendence in people's lives.

In presenting these themes, the importance of preserving the anonymity of those whose letters and records were studied for this research has been kept constantly in mind. This reflects the established practice of the Panacea Society's periodical, *The Panacea*, which regularly published anonymized testimony from water takers. In this book, the names of users of the healing are included only in the very few cases where people wrote publicly about their use of the healing. Other than those few individuals, healing users are referred to in the text by randomly allocated identification numbers; the corresponding archive codes and locations for these are held by the archivist at the Panacea Charitable Trust. As an additional precaution, potentially identifying information, such as specific geographical references and definite ages, have been omitted or changed.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the personal stories that the letters make available to us and illustrates how the Panacea Society's healing was experienced in people's lives. It also introduces the Society and its early formation and discusses how letters from users of the healing provide insight into the underlying metaphysical and theological ideas of people not normally regarded as metaphysicians or theologians. While the healing and

the Society were very much products of their time and era, the Society's leaders and central administrators believed themselves to be the expression and fulfillment of an ancient spiritual impulse dating back to a line of esoteric prophets in England including Joanna Southcott and Jane Lead. Chapter 2 provides detail on the sources of the Panacea Society's theology. It describes the lineage of the English prophecy tradition the Society believed itself to be a continuation of, and it presents an account of the two core elements of the Society's theology: a physical form of salvation and the fundamental role of the female in eschatology. This is framed against contemporary scholarship examining the continuities between ancient nonmainstream religious traditions and newer forms of alternative and New Age religion.

The third chapter presents an account of the ways in which processes of religious change during the period of the Panacea Society's religious function have been described and explained in historiography and sociology. It discusses how the Panacea Society's healing and those who used it can inform us about the nature of those descriptions and explanations. The chapter develops an account of the secularization thesis that extracts the essential insight that recent times have seen a religious and spiritual dynamism that is unpredictable and highly energetic. Deemphasizing the need to use a grand historical trajectory to make predictions about a future state of religious culture, the chapter proposes that dynamism and religious persistence are inherent in a range of classic accounts of secularization, and it suggests a way of using the core insight of the idea of secularization—not that religion is in decline, but that it is in flux—as a methodology in the study of recent religious history, using the letters in the Society's Healing Collection in particular. The chapter also examines the information that Collection records can provide about the patterns of use of the healing.

With the broad framework thus established, chapters 4 and 5 begin with the deep historical, spiritual, and theological sources that the Society understood itself to be part of and the analysis of scholarship seeking to understand the nature of religious change in recent history. The chapters move on to the more immediate social and cultural history of religion that makes up the ecosystem within which the Society came to be formed. Chapter 4 provides a detailed case study of how the healing in Britain was interlaced with new spiritual movements and the response of the Anglican Church. Chapter 5 extends that discussion to the national contexts of the United States, Jamaica, and Finland. Those countries each had very distinct religious histories, and the chapter examines the ways that the Panacea Society's healing was articulated and how it can inform us about those distinctive landscapes and the personal stories enacted in them. Commencing

the process of assessing how the letters allow us to see and understand ordinary people's religious and spiritual ideas and experiences, chapters 4 and 5 discuss the range of religious forces that are represented in the letters of the users—and the ways the water-takers encountered, understood, and engaged with those forces.

The great wars of the twentieth century were fundamental social and cultural crises in the history of Europe and the world, and the evidence from the rates of application to the healing and from the personal testimony of the letters shows how the Second World War caused a significant fluctuation in the way the healing was taken up. Building on theoretical and empirical research in the relationship between existential anxiety and religiosity, chapter 6 discusses war and geopolitical anxiety as themes in the letters of the water-takers.

Chapter 7 tracks the variety of ways that individual users of the healing understood it, expressed their religious ideas, and grappled with the metaphysics they were practically engaged with. The chapter develops the core theme of seeking to understand the meaning and function of religion in the lives of ordinary people and excavates how they engaged with and enacted transcendent and metaphysical concerns. Developing the theoretical themes discussed in chapter 3 and emerging from the examination of personal modes of engaging with transcendent and metaphysical concerns in subsequent chapters, the concluding chapter, chapter 8, develops the notion of vernacular religion to formulate an understanding of the complexity of religious and spiritual thought in terms of vernacular or quotidian engagement with the transcendent.

The Panacea Society's healing came to an end in 2012, when the Healing Department was closed after the death of the last active member. A postscript presents an account of the healing membership in the final decade and reflects briefly on the end of the Panacea Society's healing.