

RESEARCH NOTE

MONSIGNOR CHARLES OWEN RICE AND THE FBI

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The occasion for this short note is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) release of Monsignor Charles Owen Rice's Headquarters (HQ) and Pittsburgh Field Office (FO) files. Rice (1908–2005), as many readers of this journal know, was an extraordinarily controversial figure throughout much of his life. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1934, he was militantly pro-labor and anticommunist from the late 1930s through 1950. After heading up parishes in Natrona and Washington outside Pittsburgh, Rice returned to the city in 1966, where he visibly and actively participated in the antiwar and civil rights movements. It should not surprise us, then, that historians have disagreed considerably about how to assess his career. One of the central issues at stake is his connection to the FBI during his anticommunist period, especially during the 1940s.¹

The newly released material is important for three reasons. First, it allows us to say something conclusive about Rice's connection with the FBI. This is significant because no one, except Rice himself, as far I know, has before this, seen the complete file.² Second, it provides the basis for discussing briefly the ways in which Rice participated in radical activities from 1966 through 1972, the period for which the FO files are particularly rich. In so doing, it also will become apparent how useful these files are for studying the 1960s. Finally, the material suggests the ways in which during that period Rice reinvented himself as he shifted from anticommunist "labor priest" to political militant who daily worked with communists and other radicals.

Researchers, including myself, found Rice's FBI material, which he allowed scholars to read at his office, to be frustratingly difficult with which to work. Not only were HQ and FO files intermingled, but both were agonizingly incomplete. Rice had given permission to one scholar, Patrick McGeever, to get the files, but he did not receive anything close to what Rice got in the 1970s.³ That has now changed. In its letter of July 30, 2009, the FBI released almost 1,300 pages of material maintained under Rice's name. The HQ portion comprises about 100 pages; the FO part makes up the rest.



FIGURE 1

What do these pages tell us about Rice's connection to the FBI? The files do not, for the period prior to the 1960s, add substantially to what we already know. The four serials that were missing from the HQ material Rice allowed researchers to examine provide further detail on his proposed meeting with the FBI, brokered by journalist Victor Riesel, which never occurred. There are eighteen pre-1960s serials in the FO file. Most of these consist of reports on meetings of the Communist Party of the United States (CP or CPUSA) that mention Rice or include discussions of his anticommunist work. The last three serials, though, contain useful information on conflict within the International Union of Electrical Workers #601 and United Electrical and Machine Workers of America #610 in 1954 and 1955. Rice is only mentioned tangentially, but it is evident that his activity in the 1940s was still an issue, as several meetings saw heated references to him and his politics.⁴

Rice's "Correlation Summary" takes on considerable importance now that its contents can be placed within the context of his complete file. A correlation summary was, in the FBI's words, a "summary of information obtained from a review of all 'see' references to the subject in Bureau files."⁵ Much of my analysis of Rice's connection to the FBI, in fact, rested upon the evidence in his correlation summary. The version I received in 2009 contained more information, but nothing that substantially changes the story of Rice and the FBI that I told in *The FBI and the Catholic Church*: Rice had a close working relationship with the FBI. As the newspaper headline read in a story on the Monsignor's FBI files, "I used the FBI, It Used Me, Msgr. Rice Says."⁶

All this changed in the 1960s when Rice joined the movement against the war in Vietnam and participated in the Pittsburgh civil rights movement. The Pittsburgh FO coverage of both of these, if the file maintained on Rice was typical, was extensive and intensive. It had informers and/or observers present at dozens of meetings, rallies, and demonstrations. Among the organizations that were the subject of Bureau surveillance and which, therefore, contain information on Rice are Pittsburgh Committee to End the War in Vietnam; International Days of Protest; CP-USA Western Pennsylvania District; W. E. B. DuBois Clubs of America; November 8 Mobilization Committee; Socialist Workers Party; Western Pennsylvania Trade Unionists for Peace; Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam; Peace and Freedom Center; Resistance, Pittsburgh; United Movement for Progress; Pittsburgh Free University; Young Workers Liberation League.

A typical report on a meeting covered by an informant included what appears to be a verbatim copy of his or her written account of what happened. Sometimes direct quotes were used in describing the discussion, but more often paraphrases. If the informant knew the names of those present, he or she noted them. Major differences of opinion, as well as outright disagreement, were indicated. Informants' reports on significant demonstrations are less informative than these, but still useful to the historian. Rice's whirlwind activity is apparent throughout. He went to meeting after meeting and demonstration after demonstration, sometimes two or three times a week. Most were in Pittsburgh, but he also participated in events in other cities, particularly New York City and Washington, DC. We already know something about these activities, but the FO files often provide us with more than we knew before, as well as, in some cases, more detail than already known.⁷

All concerned were all acutely aware that Monsignor Rice's commitments had drastically shifted since the 1940s: In its simplest terms, he had moved from being a liberal or even conservative to being a radical. The first reference to this in the FO files occurs in the informant's report on a CP meeting of March 23, 1966, about the "International Days of Protest" that began that day in Pittsburgh. At their conclusion, Rice was going to speak at an antiwar rally at the Federal Building along with the DuBois Club's president. Someone present noted that "this was a first and could not have happened a year ago."⁸ Participants in these meetings, especially the CP and its satellites, apparently discussed and/or noted this change in Rice's politics until it had become certain that it was permanent.⁹

The monsignor himself discussed this seismic shift in his thinking at a DuBois Club meeting held to protest the Subversive Activities Control Board's investigation of it. He, according to the informant, "disclaimed" the title of "labor priest" since "peace and race issues," on which he spoke "most often," did not "go down very well" with labor. He was once "strongly anti-communist," but no longer. The DuBois' Clubs connection to the CP did not concern him because the local American Legion post was more "dangerous" to the country's well-being than communists were.¹⁰

It is now time for other scholars to look at the ways in which Rice's activities and the interests of the FBI intersected throughout his long life. These Headquarters and Field Office files have been deposited, along with the Charles Owen Rice Papers, in the Archives of Industrial Society at the University of Pittsburgh Archives Service Center.

NOTES

1. Charles J. McColester, for example, in his collection of Rice's writings, deleted several references to the cleric's confession to cooperation with the FBI when he reprinted the pieces in which they appeared: McColester, ed., *Fighter with a Heart: Writings of Charles Owen Rice, Pittsburgh Labor Priest* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996); Rosswurm, *The FBI and the Catholic Church, 1935–1962* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 244n56.
2. This includes my most recent discussion, "Anti-Communism in the CIO: Monsignor Charles Owen Rice and the FBI," in *The FBI and the Catholic Church*, 226–73. In this case, "complete" means what could be obtained at the time the files were processed; this changed dramatically over time.
3. McGeever, the author of *Rev. Charles Owen Rice: Apostle of Contradiction* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), kindly provided me with the correspondence connected to his FOIA request as well as the files that he received. McGeever's review of McColester's book deserves reading, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 84, no. 3 (July 1998): 591–94.
4. Special Agent (SA) [deleted] Memorandum to Special Agent in Charge (SAC), Pittsburgh, [March 1954], 100-655-16; SA [deleted] to SAC, February 8, 1955, 100-655-17; SA [Deleted] Memo for SAC, February 8, 1955, 100-655-16.
5. "Correlation Summary," December 14, 1970, 62-83517-6. These summaries, done on a case-by-case basis, are particularly useful to historians because the Bureau no longer processes see references as part of its response to a FOIA request.
6. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, January 6, 1978. McGeever provided me with a copy of this article as well as the correlation summary that I used in writing my book. McGeever's summary, to make matters even more complicated, contains some information that was withheld in the version that I received.
7. McGeever, *Rev., Charles Owen Rice*, chaps. 6, 7; Kenneth J. Heineman, "Reformation: Monsignor Charles Owen Rice and the Fragmentation of the New Deal Electoral Coalition in Pittsburgh, 1960–1972," *Pennsylvania History* 71 (2004): 53–84; Simone M. Caron, "Birth Control and the Black Community in the 1960s: Genocide or Power Politics," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 545–69.
8. SA [deleted] to SAC, Pittsburgh, April 21, 1966, 100-655-24.
9. For example, see SA [deleted] to SAC, Pittsburgh, February 16, 1967, 100-655-51; SA [deleted] to SAC, Pittsburgh, March 21, 1967, 100-655-58; SA [deleted] to SAC, Pittsburgh, June 9, 1967, 100-655-76.
10. SA [deleted] to SAC, Pittsburgh, April 24, 1968, 100-655-153.