

H-Net Reviews

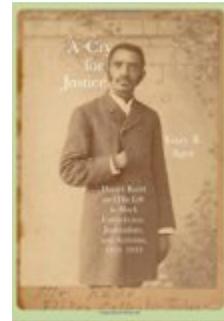
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gary Bruce Agee. *A Cry for Justice: Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, and Activism, 1854-1933*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55728-975-9.

Reviewed by Gwyneth Mellinger (Baker University)

Published on Jhistory (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek



Born into slavery in 1854 on a Kentucky plantation owned by a Catholic, Daniel Rudd would embrace his master's religion and, in the years following Reconstruction, found a newspaper to advocate Catholicism as the path to social equality for African Americans. Rudd's literal interpretation of the Catholic doctrine expressed in the "Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man" provided the foundation for his agitation, within the American Catholic Church, for full racial equality. Church politics would force him to ameliorate that position on some issues—he eventually supported segregated churches and remained neutral on the question of intermarriage, for example—but his memory of taking his first communion alongside white children informed his vision of the possible.

The vehicle for this activism was the *American Catholic Tribune*, a weekly newspaper that Rudd established in 1886 in Cincinnati. Six years later and with financial support from white clergy and lay Catholics, the *ACT* had 10,000 subscribers, which, according to biographer Gary B. Agee, made it one of the most successful black newspapers of the time. Rudd, a frequent lecturer whose reputation extended beyond the Catholic community, also founded the Colored Catholic Congress movement, which held five annual conventions, beginning in 1889. The *ACT*'s run ended in 1897, four years after Rudd moved the newspaper to Detroit. The relocation followed a rift that emerged at the Second Colored Catholic Congress in 1890, when attendees criticized the paper and demanded that Rudd make changes. In 1891 many of Rudd's detractors founded a competing paper in Philadelphia.

Unquestionably, Rudd's journalism and activism deserve to be chronicled and *A Cry for Justice* contributes to the record on black-owned nineteenth-century newspapers. The project is constrained, however, by a thin archive that many historians would have considered too deficient to support a book-length biography. As Rudd left no journals or correspondence, Agee relies on the *ACT* for insight into the philosophy underlying Rudd's work and supplements it with the Catholic archive. Unfortunately, the record of the newspaper is incomplete, as extant copies are available for only seven of the newspaper's eleven years, and the missing issues belong to the important first year, when Rudd presumably was establishing the newspaper as his mission, and the final three years in Detroit, when Rudd was struggling to maintain the paper.

Moreover, without adequate source material, Agee is unable to explain significant developments in Rudd's story. In particular, the complaints about the *ACT* that emerged at the Second Colored Catholic Congress and Rudd's subsequent ostracism from some in the church hierarchy are vaguely presented. John Slattery, superior general of the Josephites and an advocate for black equality, offered an undetailed report that some delegates had complained about such issues as the *ACT*'s "makeup matter" and "poor paper" (p. 156). Slattery had wanted Rudd to move the *ACT* to Philadelphia and a year later, following the Third Congress, a competing black-run paper called the *Journal* appeared there. As plans were being made for the Fourth Congress, Slattery reportedly agreed that Rudd, the founder of the Colored Catholic Congress movement, should not speak to the convention. This is a pivotal episode in Rudd's life, perhaps the begin-

ning of the end of the *ACT* and Rudd's direct activism in the church, yet we do not know what triggered the falling out between Rudd and Slattery.

Similarly, Agee apparently has insufficient source material to examine the influence upon the *ACT* of John Mackey, a white priest in Cincinnati who was its co-editor for several years. It is unclear whether Mackey was selected for that position by the Catholic hierarchy and the extent to which he influenced *ACT* content or moderated Rudd's social justice positions. Notably, Mackey did not believe in full social equality for African Americans, particularly on the issue of intermarriage, and delivered a sermon at the Second Congress in which he described the color line as a product of nature. Such a position was anathema to Rudd's view, and it seems unlikely that Rudd would have hand-picked him as co-editor. The question of Mackey's involvement in the newspaper is a worrisome gap in the historical narrative.

The inadequate archive becomes particularly problematic as the narrative moves forward from the *ACT* years and into the final chapter, which attempts to chronicle the last thirty-six years of Rudd's life and where the research is no longer anchored in the text of the newspaper. The book might have ended at this point. Instead, it continues despite there being no record of Rudd's activity, including in the 1900 census, from 1898 to 1910, when he turns up, inexplicably, in Mississippi, a state where his advocacy for full equality for blacks would have been unwelcome. In 1912 Rudd was hired by Scott Bond, a wealthy African American businessman in Arkansas, and became an accountant and supervisor for Bond's various enterprises, which included a farm and sawmill. Rudd also developed a means of efficiently loading gravel into rail cars for Bond's gravel operation. Rudd's work for Bond, Agee posits, is evidence that the former editor was pursuing racial equality through ingenuity and business.

At this point, Agee turns for source material to a biography of Bond that Rudd co-authored with Bond's son and draws on its content related to race as Rudd's own philosophy. This is a dangerous move. The biography itself should be viewed with suspicion, as it was commissioned by Rudd's employer and co-authored by the employer's son, and the assumption that the text reflected Rudd's thinking is unwarranted without corroboration from other sources.

Without source material directly related to Rudd,

Agee pieces together a hypothetical philosophy that he assumes Rudd embraced in the later years of his life. The final chapter devotes considerable discussion to the ethos of Booker T. Washington and draws a tenuous link to Rudd, namely that Rudd probably followed Washington's prescription for racial uplift. This is undocumented speculation that is not reconciled with Rudd's possible affiliation with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose founder, W. E. B. DuBois, was at philosophical odds with Washington. Rudd spoke to an NAACP convention in 1919 and received financial support from the Catholic Church to travel to Cleveland for the meeting. There is no record of his remarks, however, and it is uncertain whether he was merely an invited speaker or whether he was a member of the organization who saw it as a vehicle for racial equality. When Rudd died in 1933, his death certificate listed teaching as his occupation. There is no archival evidence to explain this, and Agee speculates that he may have taught at any number of black schools that had been established in the South.

A Cry for Justice is strongest in its analysis of the content of the *ACT*, though Agee might have done more to contextualize the newspaper within the black press of the late nineteenth century. Similarly, Agee's explication of church positions on racial equality and the discussion of the Colored Catholic Congress movement add to our understanding of the religious dynamic within post-Reconstruction American race relations. This is a book that historians of the black press and church-affiliated newspapers will note, though they will focus their attention on Rudd's career with the *ACT*, not the extraneous and unsubstantiated material about the second half of Rudd's life.

One of Agee's stated objectives is to persuade us that Rudd deserves to be added to the pantheon of black social and intellectual leaders of his day, alongside Washington, T. Thomas Fortune, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Although Rudd's activism deserves notice, his documented contribution was the eleven-year run of the *ACT* and it is not clear how far beyond Catholic circles Rudd's influence may have extended. Moreover, the telling of Rudd's story is complicated by an inadequate archive, a dilemma that confronts many scholars of African American history. While Rudd is too important to let slip into obscurity, the record cannot support the claim that Rudd's accomplishments deserve book-length treatment.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Gwyneth Mellinger. Review of Agee, Gary Bruce, *A Cry for Justice: Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, and Activism, 1854-1933*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36401>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.