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BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Response

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My driftin' memory goes back to the spring of '23.

With apologies to Merle Haggard for slightly altering the lyrics of his 1971 hit California Cotton Fields, I begin by noting when these generative discussions began of putting in conversation Jonathan Ebel's *From Dust They Came* and my own book *Sowing the Sacred*. In that spring, Ebel and I planned to organize a pair of authors-meet-critics panels, one for the American Academy of Religion (2023) and another for the American Society of Church History (2024), shortly after he had become the newly installed President-Elect of the latter. With ASCH scheduled to be in San Francisco, there were fewer locations that could have better served as the location for our panel, "Picking and Choosing: Book Panel on Agricultural California and American Religions, Hindsight and Foresight." Our books, we reasoned, bore such similarities in terms of geography, labor, class, and even with respect to focus Pentecostalism. The operation of religion among farmworkers is at the heart of both of our books.

Born of those critical conversations, is this forum. I'd like to thank my colleagues for taking the time to offer comments on our books. Like Andrea Johnson, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Cori Tucker-Price, I, too, am from California. And like Johnson and Tucker-Price, I hail from the Central Valley, the veritable garden under the sun. Reading the reflections of the forum participants took me back to my countless drives up and down Highway 99. It's been reassuring to know that my book, along with Ebel's, has inspired fellow historians and scholars of religion to regard the history of religion in the American West in a new light. My fervent hope is that scholarship on California will take seriously the massive project of faith as lived out in the fields, between and beyond Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. If Paul was right: that we reap what we sow, then, the coming years will tell what scholars gleaned from our books.

First, I'm struck by Randall Stephens' choice to open with journalist Carleton Beals' observations, noting the large presence (perhaps "excess" for camp managers) of Pentecostal Okies arriving in the 1930s. In spirit and letter, it's not all that different from the decade-later observation made by sociologist Walter Goldschmidt that I used to open *Sowing the Sacred*.

> There are ten Christian churches for whites alone in the community, not counting a small Mormon group and the one or two unorganized religious groups which meet in private homes. Besides these, there are three Negro Organizations and there was at one time a Mexican Pentecostal group. The schismatic Pentecostal church represents a still

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> lower level on the scale of formality, a higher one on the scale of emotional appeal… This schismatic Pentecostal group is made up entirely of laborers, of whom 82 percent are unskilled. Its ministers have always been lay people— farm laborers in fact. At first, they met in a tent; now they have a dingy frame building.

Change was afoot in the Golden State and much of it was thought to be a "problem," be it the "Okie problem" described in Ebel's book or the "Mexican problem," described in my own. California had been dedicated to the project of modernity and scientific progress, as Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes. This development was exemplified in the reconfiguration of its waterways and transformation of agriculture. Had such a machine in the garden drawn in only dollars and desirable populations, no problem. But Depression-Era America quickly revealed what Tucker-Price referenced regarding "the underside of modernity." Together, the reviewers in this forum point to the larger, structural throughline – one even bigger than big ag – the perilousness of progress. Ebel and I attended to those people left in its trail, and had no other choice but to shake off the dust and wander into the state's labyrinth of vineyards, orchards, and fields.

Ebel and I took different paths to arrive at the same fields. Putting our two books into conversation brings to mind the diverging manner in which these two projects were even possible to begin with. Ebel's lucubrations in the thick of bureaucratic paper are evident (and nothing short of downright impressive), as a vast paper trail made its way into archives and government repositories. My own project relied on oral histories and photographs shared with me by interviewees as well as two massive collections (the Manuel J. Gaxiola Collection and the Papers of Manuel Vizcarra) that I co-led in organizing and processing at Fuller Theological Seminary's special collections. One other marked difference in our approach concerns the seemingly ubiquitous cameras that shuttered up and down the state's crop-combed fields. *Everyone Had Cameras*, as historian Richard Steven Street put it, referring to farmworkers in California. Two images from government photographer Dorothea Lange's collection at the Oakland Museum of California set these differences in approach and method in high relief. Picture this: on the left, one of the most famous American photographs, the "Migrant Mother"; on the right, "Stoop Laborer." (Thanks to digitized collections, readers of this forum can view these on the museum's website). The Migrant Mother is now one of the most iconic photographs, featuring the saturated, up-close profile of the Dust Bowl refugee Florence Owens Thompson who gazes despondently into the distance. Lange shot that image at a pea pickers camp in Nipomo in 1936. That same camp, according to Street, was comprised mostly of Mexican farmworkers. Chances were that if Lange had turned her camera a bit and cast it in the direction of active work in the fields, she may have captured a so-called "stoop labor." After all, the image of the Mexican (or Filipino) stoop laborer, a faceless, nameless silhouette bent over performing back-breaking labor, became an anonymous icon of American agriculture. I read Ebel's book as one that seeks to understand how the state sought to reform the piety and pathos of the Migrant Mother and her Okie ilk. My book sought to bring the "stoop laborers" out of the shadows by shedding light on their religious lives. Nevertheless, even with our different historical methodologies, arguments, and interventions, Ebel and I could have begun our books at that same pea pickers camp in Nipomo. As Stephen's citation from Beals reveals, Pentecostals had also made their way to Nipomo by the 1930s. From camps as far south as the Imperial Valley to the northern reaches of the Central Valley, Pentecostals seemed to be everywhere in fields.

Having noted these commonalities and contrasts between Ebel's entry point and my own, I now turn to answer the questions posed to me by my colleagues in this forum. First,

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Maffly-Kipp and Stephens wondered about the disagreements in these church communities. What did these ruptures look like? And Stephens further queried what hostilities between Mexican Catholics and Pentecostals looked like. For starters, the Pentecostals I studied in *Sowing the Sacred* maintained a modalistic oneness view of the godhead and as such performed baptism exclusively "in the name of Jesus." I say that as a reminder of their heterodoxy, a fundamental disagreement, and a theological gulf too wide for most to bridge. Mexican Pentecostal disagreements with Catholics were legion but the main one lay in their competing soteriology. With Catholicism having unparalleled influence among Mexicans (diasporic and otherwise), Pentecostals were always fighting uphill to convert members. To convert Catholics was more than a theological feat; it meant convincing people to break with deep cultural traditions and accept a different and exclusive soteriological scheme. As Pentecostal farmworkers took to evangelizing their "lost" and "unconverted" Catholic counterparts, they found some advantage in California's labor camps where priests paid only occasional visits.

To answer the point that Maffly-Kipps raised regarding how photographs captured difference: they did so subtly. These disagreements largely hinged on biblical literalism and restorationism. One such disagreement (which I point out in chapters 1 and 3) centered on the issue of tithing. Pedro Banderas, whose story is featured in both of these chapters, is one such example. Banderas, who refused to preach a compulsory tithe found himself on the outs of the denomination, later back in, and once again excommunicated. The photographs in commemorative volumes I studied did not feature Banderas the most important and prolific *Apostólico* evangelists of northern California of the 1920s and 1930s; rather I found photographs of Banderas among the originals not included in the jubilee commemorative volume. Banderas merited mention in the volume but his evangelistic labor served as a warning of departure from the movement's restorationist teachings.

Bandera's story bespeaks of other types of disagreements that seemed to be rather common in the world of early Pentecostalism: divine revelation that led to schisms. Schisms bore a variable impact on the budding *Apostólico* denomination, but it is curious that several schisms were recorded in the commemorative volumes or discussed by my interviewees. The most notable schism occurred in the time frame just after that covered in the book. In the 1970s, Efraín Valverde, upon losing his bid to become the Presiding Bishop of the Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus, founded La Iglesia de Jesucristo de las Americas. I will note that on one occasion, I drove 2.5 hours to Salinas to interview a longtime member, only for her to cancel our appointment upon my arrival, fearing I would ask about the then nearly forty-five-year-old schism. The deep wounds seemed to have never fully healed, or, at the very least, the scar tissue left behind couldn't go unnoticed.

The last of these examples of disagreement pertains to modesty/holiness dress codes, a point raised by Johnson in response to my book and Ebel's. Holiness dress standards were one element that was most subject to change over time, as fashion and notions of modesty were consistently negotiated. In Chapter 5, "Sacred Nostalgia" we find a curious example in which restorationism was taken too far, to the extent that it transgressed *Apostólicos*' own ideas of conservative modesty standards. This occurred when Reis Lopez Tijerina (the later Chicano revolutionary) taught that in the mid-1950s men should have long beards and wear long robes while women should wear tunics that cover the entire body below the neck. Because of these teachings, Tijerina was dismissed from a two-week revival in Salinas and he shortly thereafter founded his own apocalyptic utopia in the desert of Arizona.

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This restorationism also points us toward an answer to Tucker-Price's question: How does genealogy function in the worldview of a faith group that has been marginalized by oppressive structures? The answer to this lies in a similar vein: restorationism. The commemorative jubilee volume I studied in Chapter 1 concerned itself with little to no Christian history between the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Azusa Street Revival. These early Oneness Pentecostals knew they existed on the periphery of American religion. Claims to the Reformation and the Medieval Church bore little importance given their profound disagreements with the majority of Protestants and all Catholics.

The ample opportunities to put our books in conversations (both the academic conferences from 2023 and 2024 and now this book forum in 2025) leave me convinced that Ebel and I could swap book titles and little would be lost in applicability. *From Dust They Came* seems to me to also capture a raucous, sensorial, and sometimes sudatory phenomenon of worship (jumping, dancing, stomping, and kicking up dirt) known in the *Apostólico* labor camp tents – what one interview described as *polvaderas* (cloud of dust). Likewise, the migrants in Ebel's book fundamentally altered the religious landscape of California, especially sowing the sacred in places like Kern County. Some scholars have regarded California's Central Valley as the state's Bible Belt. If that's true, then the sites that Ebel and I studied show where it is fastened most tightly.

I'll conclude my comments by sharing that the comparison between Okie and Mexican streams of Pentecostal migrant farmworkers is a conversation I've entertained for nearly a decade. Ebel's book instantly captured my attention due to my previous dissertation research on the topic of Okie Pentecostal farmworkers. At present, I'm unsure if I'll take up that comparison in book form. But if I were to decide to revisit Merle Haggard's California Cotton Fields ("where labor camps were filled with worried men with broken dreams") there is now no richer place to begin than with Ebel's *From Dust They Came.*

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