“Introduction”: The joint authors (hereinafter “Paul” and “Roger”) explain that the origin of their collaboration is Paul’s course—offered at the Union Theological Seminary (N.Y.C.) in spring, 2012—entitled “Jesus and Buddha in Dialogue.” Roger Haight was a key “resource person” for that course. The procedure was to sketch the lives and teachings of the “historical” Jesus and Buddha, and then to “look alternatively at how the story of Jesus might be presented in an objective way to Buddhists, and reciprocally, how various authors have presented Buddha to outsiders, including Christians.” The next step was to consider authors who represented ways in which Jesus was received by Buddhists and Buddha appropriated by Christians. These “multiple criss-crossing but complementary views of the two figures” fostered a relatively deep appreciation of differences, and across these, of “analogous ways of seeing things (ix).” Such an approach is grounded in “spirituality” rather than a comparison of “doctrines,” Paul/Roger tell us. “Spirituality” is tentatively defined as “essentially a form of practice that has multiple layers that include sets of beliefs and teachings but is still distinguishable from them.” Spirituality “possesses a certain existential priority to doctrines,” and “the spiritual life practiced in the two spiritual traditions [Buddhism and Christianity] is more readily accessible than the belief structures” accompanying and shaping them (x).

It is from out of the above-described collaboration that the “conversations” comprising the present book arise. Paul and Roger next supply several directives essential for understanding the project upon which they are about to embark. The book “is intended for Christians rather than Buddhists because it measures most pointedly the influence that Buddhism might have on Christian spirituality.” The book consists of conversations between Roger, a Christian, and Paul, a “Buddhist Christian” who “speaks in particular out of his study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.” Paul/Roger affirm the mode of “comparative theology,” which entails that religionists in each religion enter as best as possible into the experience of the “other religion,” and then return to their own tradition, bringing back with them that which enriches their own religion (xii). Each of the twelve chapters addresses a key topic, and is formatted so that the two interlocutors each make an opening statement, followed by a response, each to the other. Each chapter ends with an “It Seems to Us” statement articulating where Paul and Roger agree and where there are differences that “either have to be further explored or simply accepted” (xvi).

Chapter One, “What Is Spirituality”: Paul affirms that “spirituality,” broadly speaking, is “what one does to stay connected,” since a satisfying human life needs “meaning” and “energy.” The meaning and energy arise from what “contemporary Buddhists call interconnectedness, or Interbeing,” and what “Jesus and his followers” call the “loving or interconnecting Spirit.” Spirituality
triggers a “paradigm shift” from “self-centeredness to other-centeredness,” and this shift can only be brought about via spiritual practice entailing Wisdom and Compassion. (2, 3) In fact, Compassion is Wisdom, since Reality is non-dual (thus the Buddhist dictum, “Emptiness is Form/Form is Emptiness). Christians, says Paul, seem to lack such a deep sense of the unity of all Reality. The mystery of non-duality, of the co-inherence of the “Big Picture” and “little pictures,” can only be known by non-thinking. Not that Buddhists do not also function conventionally, using thoughts, images, and feelings, but spiritual praxis should also get “beyond” them. (Here Paul is referencing, though in less technical terms, what is called in Buddhist “Big Vehicle” schools the Two Truths’).

Roger, for his part, introduces the very serviceable notion of “functional analogy,” whereby teachings and practices that mark differences between Buddhism and Christianity can be demonstrated to play structurally similar roles within their respective frames-of-meaning. Thus, for example, creation’s radical contingency in Christianity is analogous to Buddhism’s rejection of “self-inherence,” that is, in Buddhism, apparent entities do not found themselves, nor do “entities” as such even (really) exist. Another example would be God’s “creation out of nothing” and the ongoing evolution of creation—sustained continuously by God—is analogous to what Paul calls Buddhist “interconnectedness” (7). And so on, with other doctrinal parallels (Paul/Roger shrink from the word “doctrine,” but I use it as the adjective of the noun “teaching,” a word they like.) For Roger, spirituality “consists in the way persons or groups live their lives in the face of what they consider ultimately important or real.” Spirituality is “prior to religion because of the freedom of each person. Religion is ultimately constituted by the spiritualities of the members” (8). Paul’s response is to argue that Buddhist spirituality has a “different starting point,” namely, the suspicion that humans “do not really know what ultimate reality is.” Ignorance is the fundamental human problem, and religious practice—meditation, acts of compassion, the teachings—is necessary. Christians “follow” Jesus, but Buddhists come to the realization that everything is Buddha.

Chapter Two, “How Does Interreligious Dialogue Work”: Paul/Roger affirm, without naming them as such, the “four forms of dialogue” outlined by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in its document Dialogue and Proclamation, but start in a different place from all of them, and then push radically beyond. Here I list seriatim some of this Chapter’s assumptions and assertions. Dialogists must recognize at the outset that religious pluralism is the

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1 Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions consider themselves “Big Vehicle” schools because they claim to make “liberation” easier and more all-encompassing than does the Theravada tradition. In Buddhism, what are called the “Two Truths” are the “mundane” and the “Ultimate,” and Theravada also uses this terminology. However, Theravada rejects non-duality as the Big Vehicle schools understand it. The Theravada tradition understands the mundane to be the world of impermanence and the Ultimate to be Nibbana (not, for Theravadins, to be non-dually identified in any way with the mundane).
“natural condition of humanity” (32). No single religion can “harness the infinite” (21) and to absolutize religious teachings—as Christianity traditionally does—constitutes an obstacle, and indeed, foments dangerous situations. Religions accrete interpretations historically. Fruitful dialogue between Buddhists and Christians should use the Historical-Critical method to approximate the “primitive and original core” teachings of Buddha and Jesus respectively (23). Paul, in contradistinction to Roger, affirms that the “starting point for dialogue” is not to be found in a “common existential question of being,” but with “the one existential question,” namely “suffering” (25). In these extreme times, the religions must rally to confront the “unjust ways and structures” which threaten humanity and the whole world with destruction. Dialogists “trust” that the “incorrigible diversity of religions and their latent commonality and their potential interconnectedness” are grounded in what can be called an “ultimate Reality or Holy Mystery” (36).

Chapter Three, “What Did Buddha and Jesus Teach?”: Buddha, Paul explains, taught that human suffering (dukkha, Pali; duḥkha, Skt.) is caused by craving (tanha, Pali). Buddha taught a pragmatic spirituality: to attain peace, we must realize that everything, “even God,” is impermanent (41). The problem is not within us, as in Christianity’s ‘original sin’, but around us, in the “darkness” caused by pervasive ignorance. To attain true peace, we must become enlightened. To become enlightened is to find our “true nature,” our “Buddha-nature.” “Our real self is not our individual self. Our individual small minds are really part of a big Mind” (42). Jesus, Roger says, teaches that God is the loving creator of everything, and that God’s “personal character” implies a “moral universe.” At the heart of this underlying morality is justice: Jesus, “according to his [Jewish] tradition, imagines things narratively in time” (45). Humanity must move ahead, striving to establish the “rule of God,” what the Jewish tradition called the “Kingdom” of God. “The realization of God’s rule lies up ahead . . . maybe in fragments here and now, but [arriving] absolutely in the end” (45). We know very little about the historical Jesus. “The stories surrounding his infancy are generally considered theologically motivated legends” (46). We can discern that he performed the known roles of a Jewish “teacher, healer, and prophet.” After he was put to death, “his followers became convinced that God had raised him from death . . . “This faith conviction empowered the formation of a Jesus movement that gradually evolved into a Christian church . . . .” (47). Jesus “did not preach himself but the rule of God. . . . Jesus emptied himself” (Philippians 2:6-11). Paul responds by pointing out the stark contrast between the respective emphases of Buddha and Jesus: Buddha aims to “change hearts and minds” (51); Jesus aims to bring about the reign of “justice.” Granting that the core-teachings of Buddha and Jesus are “irreducibly different” (53), Paul and Roger join in the conviction that together these teachings constitute a “coincidence of opposites” that can help to heal the world.

Chapter Four, “Who Were Buddha and Jesus?”: I as reviewer foreshorten my synopsis of this chapter because much of my critique, later in this review, addresses the issues that Paul/Roger raise here. Roger, and Paul ‘on his Christian side’, reflect the conjectures and tentative conclusions about Jesus that
are associated with the Jesus Seminar (and its fellow-travelers), the most recent (and last?) wave of the historico-critical movement in exegesis that first gained strength through the work of German Protestants such as Semler, Baur, Schleiermacher, and Feuerbach (late 18th century/early 19th century and onwards) and peaked in the 1970 and 80s. The resurrection is a “faith experience”; and the need to “perceive” the invisible God produces dogmas that declare “God is like Jesus” (Councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon, etc). Paul as Buddhist rejects the Christian imaginaire that hopes in a resurrected Jesus on “the other side of finitude and time.” Nirvana, says Paul, is found “on this side or within finitude” (he means what he calls “Interbeing,” his version of Ven. Thich Nhat Hahn’s version of pratītyasamutpāda). (64) Paul and Roger conclude with four principles that are meant to guide their ongoing dialogue: (1) Dialogists should be non-competitive; (2) they should remain faithful to their own tradition but try to accommodate the spirituality of the other tradition; (3) they should “recognize the authority of the teacher [either Buddha or Jesus] who is not [their] own”; and (4) they should benefit from the mode of “functional analogy” (72-73).

Chapter Five, “Ultimate Reality”: Given that Buddhism affirms Śūnyatā and Christianity affirms a personal Creator-God, Paul and Roger here propose some “functional analogies” that help the two religions understand each other better, and recognize “samenesses”2 that at first blush seem not to be the case. From my point of view, this chapter is one of the best in the book: a “magisterial (or ‘Church-’) theologian” can agree with much of what it says. Paul calls Śūnyatā the “Really Real”—“devoid of individual identity, or substantial being, or specific location” (79). These are good enough as explanations, I suppose, but it seems to me that scholastic language such as “the unconditioned,” or the phrase “lacking determinations,” actually conveys much better what Buddhists mean by Śūnyatā. The Buddhist monk-scholars whom I have known find the scholastic language very congenial here. Strange that Paul/Roger seem so averse, on principle, to philosophical and theological terminology. Thus it comes as quite a surprise that, when seeking a “functional analogy” between Christianity’s God and Buddhism’s Śūnyatā, Roger deploys, and very effectively, Aquinas’s understanding of God as “pure, uninhibited, utterly free, and infinite power of being without any limiting form” (83), or as “Pure Act” (93). Paul describes service of neighbor via Compassion as a Bodhisattvic activity (82), and then summons Roger to account for Christianity’s belief in a personal God. Roger replies: “The elementary desire for justice . . . reflects a built-in longing for a moral universe. And this basic longing, in turn, finds grounding, in a subjective, intentional, and personal God” (87).

Chapter Six, “Where Did the World Come From—And Where Is It Going?”: Roger aims to re-interpret the Christian teachings of creation and the “eschatological future,” so they become more accessible to the contemporary “scientific” mindset. Thus he moves emphasis to God-as-ground, and

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2 This word reflects my own treatment of the same question: it is explained in my review.
understands creation primarily as the “continually acting ground of whatever exists” (100). The eschaton or climax of history he explains this way: “The one who continually creates will bring reality to its rightful end” (101). Paul sees no sense in the ideas of a primal creation and a climactic eschaton. Interbeing means that “every thing has an end, but there is no end to everything, for the ever-changing, interconnecting energy carries on. There, every end is a beginning. No end is only an end” (103). He goes on to urge upon Christianity his version of “process theology”: just as there cannot be, in Buddhism, “Emptiness without form,” so there should not be, in Christianity, a God who doesn’t “need” what is created. (106)

Chapter Seven, “The Problem in Human Nature”: Christianity has consistently sought “salvation” from three “marks of existence,” says Roger, namely death, egocentrism, and meaninglessness” (119), and these arise from some negativity rooted in our being (120). Paul attributes humanity’s plight to the classical Buddhist “three poisons,” “delusion, greed, and hatred” (126), but emphasizes that their cause is epistemological (namely, humans think they are “individuals”) and not ontological (namely, intrinsic to their human being). Roger and Paul revise their respective traditions by shifting ethical awareness to the social collective—both “original sin” and “karma” are best understood as collective selfishness.

Chapter Eight, “The Potential in Human Nature”: Paul emphasizes that Buddhist enlightenment is a mystical experience, and urges Christians to take the next step after theosis (becoming God-like, sharing in the Divine Nature), and actually realize they not only “partake of the Divine nature” but are the Unconditioned, they are “God.” Paul also urges Christians to realize that after death they will “go on” differently, not as conventional identities, but as “we-consciousness” (Interbeing). Roger begins by debunking the notion that Buddhism is an “elaborate system of self-help,” and as such, strictly dichotomous with Christianity’s “outside” help (142). I hope that he does not attribute so simplistic a dichotomy to my very detailed treatment of what I call “self-help,” “same-help,” and “other-help” in my recent book. In fact, my book makes several of the main points that Roger does here, namely, that the presence of God in us is more intimate than a subject-object relationship (so God, strictly speaking, is not “outside” us), and conversely, as Paul explains in several places, Bodhisattvas help “others” (so a strict Buddhist “self-help” does not seem to apply). I call Christianity an “other help” religion only in the sense that—according to established Catholic teaching—the individual remains somehow distinct from God: the individual is not God. In the Mahayana tradition to which Paul belongs, enlightenment is precisely to recognize that one is the Unconditioned, Emptiness,

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4 FRDD, pp. 40, 41.
5 Also, the individual is “not not-God”: FRDD, p. 169.
Spaciousness (and not “outside”... indeed, there is no Real “outside”): thus I argue that Mahayanist enlightenment involves the gradual recognition of “same-help,” so that—at the moment of enlightenment—individuality is recognized as a fabrication, and the fabrication slips away into the “sameness” of the Real, of Emptiness. The Mahayanist path towards enlightenment involves the gradual recognition of the true Buddha-nature, which works upon individual fabrications that in fact are Really itself (the Buddha-nature): in short, the pure Buddha-nature is helping what is Really itself but concealed under the fabric of individuality. Thus I regard “same help” as the Mahayanist form of “self help” (Theravada’s “self-help” works in a very different way, because Theravadic Nibbana is not Buddha-Nature, and there is no Interbeing in Paul Knitter’s sense). My book cites well-known Buddhist monk-scholars and Buddhologists who have approved the accuracy of my schema of “self-help” and “same-help” in Buddhism.

Chapter Nine, “Words Versus Silence in Spiritual Practice”: Buddhism privileges silence over words, Paul says, and he warns Christians not to absolutize words: words are mischievous, and do not tell us “what is really going on” (157). Paul cites koans as a way that “Buddhists use language to extinguish language.” Unfortunately, he resorts to D.T. Suzuki’s discredited popularization of how koans work, regarding them as insoluble puzzles contrived to blast away discursive thinking, and catapult us into non-rational awareness. Actually, Buddhologists such as Steven Heine and many others have, over the last few decades, demonstrated that there are many ranks of koans, and that usually koans are “soluble,” but in ways that are situationally fluid and ad hoc: they are elaborately designed to teach specific enlightened skills and perceptions, such as—for example—“all is infinite space,” or “all is infinite consciousness.” They teach spiritual “knacks” that are off/rational rather than “irrational.” Roger, granting the importance of Christian silence and apophaticism, also vindicates the crucial roles of words in prayer. Human beings have intellect and will, and these correlate to God who is not a person but who is “personal.” Thus sometimes words of prayer, petition, etc., are necessary. Paul and Roger together agree that “Words without silent encounter are empty; silent encounter without words has no object and fails the community.”

Chapter Ten, “To Attain Peace, Work for Justice”: Roger explains that the Christian “lives in a double relationship to God and to the world of other persons and our common habitat.” He emphasizes the prophetic vocation of all Christians to work for justice (178). Paul asserts that “Buddha’s understanding of human

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6 FRDD, pp. 64-69.
nature is even more social than Christian current notions.” Western Christianity, he explains, “defines the human being as an individual who has to have social relations. Buddhism views the human being as a network of relationships that bring about an ever-changing individual” (181). Paul reverses the activist slogan, “If you want peace, work for justice” by quoting Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, “To make peace you first have to be peace.” Christian activists often both suffer burnout and indulge self-righteousness because they “cling to ego-thoughts” and absolutize ideologies. Roger and Paul agree that classical Buddhism can help contemporary Western culture be less individualistic; and that Christianity can help Western Buddhists “in North America and Europe” from “falling prey to the secular privatization of spirituality.”

Chapter Eleven, “To Attain Justice, Work of [should this be “for”?] Peace”:
Paul opens by saying that because Buddhists hold to a priority of “contemplation over action,” they “don’t really have a clear concept of justice.” Paul acknowledges that because justice demands “something more than charity,” namely, structural change (“such as the Civil Rights Act” in the U.S.A.), Buddhists “have much to learn” from Christians about justice. Buddhists, however, can teach Christians much about non-violence: violence leads to more violence, and seldom works in the long run. Furthermore, continues Roger, again quoting Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, the “preferential option for the poor . . . can be dangerous.” A “duality” between oppressor and oppressed must be overcome, since both “are expressions of and are held in and by Interbeing.” The actions of oppressor and oppressed “are clearly different, but their identities are the same” (199). For Roger, compassion and peace are not oppositional but complementary. He proceeds, saying that interreligious dialogue experiences an analogous problematic. Thus we should “profess that no religion is superior to another” (201). Creation “out of nothing” implies the universal presence of “God as Spirit.” Thus, “all religions exist within the sphere of working of God’s grace,”

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8 Paul omits what is the prime factor explaining why, historically, Buddhists have not become directly involved in issues of civil justice. From the Buddhist point of view, the “unfolding of events” is determined by karma, the Buddhist Law of Causality. In short, the Buddhist typically has interpreted life’s events to be just, not unjust, because life’s outcomes are deserved. I met both in Taiwan and Thailand during my years in these countries many a student who told me that their father maltreated their mother or their mother maltreated their father, but the whole family felt that the maltreated party was getting just recompense for pertaining faults of a previous life. “My mother tolerates that my father maltreats her because she realizes she must have maltreated him in a previous life” was a common refrain. I have even heard eminent Buddhist monks attributing the rise and fall of nations to group-karma. Only now, with the rise of the “engaged Buddhism” that Paul Knitter references, are Buddhists becoming more socially engaged in controversial issues—they usually do so by justifying such engagement as a form of compassion, even—for some of them—the indispensable duty of compassion.

9 The works of some recent theologians—and I do not mean those of Roger Haight in this instance—have prompted official Notification from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, because they have been seen to imply either or both of the following two erroneous propositions: (1) That the Holy Spirit directly inspires founders of religions other than Christianity, so that the other religions are salvific in their own right (this proposal disassociates the Holy Spirit from the unique saving mission of Jesus Christ); and (2) That the Word (the Logos) directly embodies in
but “whenever Jesus Christ is introduced into a dialogue with other religions, he appears as potential alternative, if not actual rival,” to the other “mediations of ultimate reality that are in place” (206). “How can Jesus not be divisive if he is proposed by Christians as the true revelation and mediation of God?” Roger asks, and he attaches a telling footnote here: “If Christians hold that Jesus was not the only and the absolute mediator of God, but rather one among others, the theoretical problem would be resolved. . . . But for Christians the question of how this is a legitimate interpretation of the tradition has to be engaged.” Roger and Paul close with some suggestions. “Biblical criticism [meaning here the ‘Historico-Critical method’] gives us the ability in some measure to distinguish Jesus of Nazareth from later interpretations of him even in the New Testament.” “Entering into Jesus’s portrayal of the God of all means that the Spirit of the God he preached is actually present in . . . all religions, broadly conceived.” Jesus, the “Jewish prophet and teacher,” represents “authentic human existence or nature in the face of transcendence. . . . When Jesus is recognized as representative of all, it is right to think of him as awakened or enlightened. Therefore, Jesus, like Moses, Buddha, and Muhammad, does not stand above or between people but among us all” (212).

Chapter Twelve, “Is Religious Double Belonging Possible? Dangerous? Necessary?”: Roger begins by distinguishing between “being spiritual,” meaning the way persons directs their lives “in face of some transcendent reality,” and “being religious,” meaning the way some people “add” their spirituality to a “community and tradition” (216). “Dual belonging” happens when persons are drawn to live within more than one religion. Dual belonging becomes more plausible as an “authentic place to be” when approached via “spirituality.” Roger denies that dual belonging “in objective terms” constructs a “third religion”; instead, he claims its presence is in the “subjectivity” of those professing it. Paul emphasizes that dual belonging can happen because one’s religion can become a “prison” (221). Dual belonging enables “double nourishment,” and he goes on to affirm the mode of “crossing over and crossing back” described by “John Dunne over forty years ago” (and associated nowadays with the “comparative theology” modeled by Fr. F. X. Clooney and his “school”). Paul rejects the accusation of “syncretism” because for a dual belonger the two pertaining religions “remain distinct” while nourishing each other (225). He points to the example of Raimon Panikkar, who lives the religions as “complementary.” Roger proposes three reasons why authentic dual belonging is possible: (1) Transcendence is infinite, so no religion can exclusively coopt it; (2) “Spiritual encounter” draws one into a sphere transcending finite representations (“finite representations” belong to “religion”); and (3) Pluralism pushes us to break-through doctrinal impasses: it is a means for the development of “truth.” Next, Paul and Roger invoke the concept of “border,” and talk about it in three ways. “Strong borders” refers to the duty one has to plumb one’s own religion, and

founders of religions other than Christianity (this proposal offends against the unique Hypostatic Union).
appreciate it insofar as possible. “Flexible borders” refers to the eclecticism that permits the “crossing over and returning” of interreligious dialogue: historically Christianity at its best has always appropriated from other religions. ‘Blended borders’ (“borders that seem to blend”) references what can be called a “hypostatic union” of two religions, so one lives—as Paul says is his case—a co-inherence of two religions: for him (and he does not propose this mode for everyone), “it is not that double-belongers have two religious homes. . . . Rather, they have only one home, but it has both Christian and Buddhist furniture and decorations.” Paul and Roger close their book with a statement meant to open towards the future: Whether double belonging will become a new way of dialogue “is one of the open questions and adventures of this dialogical church.”