Jn.3.16 NRSV: "For God so loved the world that he gave his **only** Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."
L.21.2 NRSV: "She out of her poverty has put in **all** she had to live on."
(M.12.44 NRSV adds "**everything** she had.")

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"COSMIC GENEROSITY" AND HEAVY/LIGHT DEITY-IDEAS

Tomorrow, Millard Fuller (Habitat's founder) & Rosa Parks (mother of "The Movement") will receive from Pres. Clinton's our nation's highest honor, the Medal of Freedom. Today, after he spoke here (Cape Cod), he said to Loree "I remember well" when she & I were on our knees with Millard & Linda in their home in prayer as to whether the Fullers should go to Zaire to start Habitat for Humanity.

Millard's religion is--as is Billy Graham's--**heavy**. His God paid the heaviest price to save sinners: "he gave his **only** Son." As did the widow in his Son's parable, he gave it "**all**," "**everything**." So great was the weight of sin.
Also today, I read in PARADE some excerpts of Harold Kushner's new book HOW GOOD DO WE HAVE TO BE? He's a non-sin-guilt rabbi with a **light** religion: "I don't believe in a God who looks for reasons to punish people for being less than perfect. I believe in a God who knows how complicated human life is,...who expects not a perfect life but an honest effort at a good one." Kushner has a commonsensical religion with a laid-back, generous deity--none of that Sermon on the Mount stuff, "Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt.5.48 NRSV).

Deities, & therefore religions, are of different weights. That's what this Thinksheet is about, together with my argument for heavy--specifically, for canonical Christianity. My biblical focus is on the first text on this page.

1 Consider the heavinesses of Jn.3.16. In the Christian Story, God has only one Child, a Son (whom gender feminists insist on calling "Child"). Now, in the Abrahamic prototype, the Akedah (Gn.22), Abraham offers Isaac as a sacrifice, in worship of God; but in God's case, there was no angel to cry "Do not lay your hand on the boy" (v.12): Jesus died, a sacrifice for our sins, to redeem us to God. The text's 2nd heaviness is the weight of believing all that (that God has an only Son, that our sins are all that heavy to God, that somebody dying for me can lift my sins off me): it's easier, lighter, to go with UTS/NY prof. Delores Williams: "No man dying on a cross is going to do me any good." The 3rd heaviness is the teaching that unbelief in all this causes one to "perish" (Gk., "cease to exist"). And the 4th heaviness: that the outcome in believing all this is, for the believer, "eternal life." For modern & postmodern consciousness, that's four hurdles to jump. But while the verse doesn't express all Christian truth, it remains as the simplest statement of Christian faith, the Christian religion. Yes, it needs nuancing in varying cultural situations both lateral (different cultures) & vertical (levels of sophistication). But any fudging on any of these four fundamentals destroys Christianity, the evangelical religion to which Millard Fuller has testified the 50,000 times owners of Habitat houses have entered their homes for the first time: in an entrance ritual, each has received a Bible.

2 But the Christian Story is "foolishness" (1Cor.1.18, on response to "the message of the cross") to those who've not come to know themselves as sinners salvable by "grace" (Jn. Newton's "Amazing Grace"). Since liberal religion doesn't tell them they're sinners in the sight of God, the Christian religion can make sense to them only when it's dumbed down into secularly verifiable good advice on how to live--the kind of advice Kushner, who often displays his distaste for the Christian Story, gives.

3 **Case study**: "John's gospel and the image of Jesus which derives from it seemed to be the core of what I as a Christian was supposed to believe. The first Bible verse I learned was the famous John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...." The notion that [the historical] Jesus did not say that, and that he did not proclaim himself as a divine figure, was unsettling. Moreover, it seemed to invalidate John's gospel, imply that John was a 'false' account of the ministry of Jesus. But rather than invalidating John's gospel, that realization enables us to see more clearly what John's gospel is. Instead of being a picture of the historical Jesus, it is about the risen living Christ of Christian experience....the historical traditions about Jesus are thoroughly transformed by the early Christians' ongoing experience of the risen Christ. John's gospel is the church's memory trans- +

figured....it speaks of the significance of Christ in the spiritual life of Christians....the product of projecting later Christian convictions...back into the period of the ministry itself....They remembered Jesus with the 'eye of faith,' that is, in the light of Easter and afterward" (Marcus J. Borg, JESUS A New Vision [HSF/87; HC/91], 5-8).

In this account, which is accurate to "modern scholarship," we learn what the early Christians were doing, viz., "projecting." But we're not told what God was doing, if anything. This is alien to the historical Jesus, whose focus was on what God had done, was doing, would do: the author is unaware of the irony that in his zeal to uncover "the historical Jesus," his account is alien to the mind of the historical Jesus. Yet at the beginning of the passage he quotes a verse that states precisely what God was doing: through his sacrifical gift of "his only Son" he was opening "eternal life" to all believers in his gift. And we are not told what Jesus was doing in/through the Gospel of John: he was post-death speaking to his Church. Nowhere I know of does this author identify himself with the Christian belief that the dead-risen Jesus speaks in/through the NT.

4 The Christian Story is about "cosmic generosity," (as a hymn puts it) God's "grace that is greater than all our sin." The phrase is Borg's (op.cit., 103, 107), but he does not use it with reference to God's Christianity-creating act, viz. the generous gift of his Son. Rather, he begins with the second chapter, viz. the Son's (i.e., Jesus') teachings about God's generosity, which Borg likes to treat as indiscriminate (sun/rain on un/just, etc.). The prodigal son's father welcomes him home, "not judging him upon his return" (101)? But the father's judgment is built into the story (L.15), which narrativizes the physical base ("return") for the Hebrew word for repentance: no repentance ("return"), no forgiveness; no "unconditional love." 103: "Reality is marked by a cosmic generosity. But....we typically live our lives as if reality were not gracious." 107: "Jesus invited his hearers to see reality as marked by a cosmic generosity." Rabbi Kushner would be pleased, but much of the NT (e.g., 1Cor.1-2) would scowl. Like Kushner's, Borg's deity/religion is light.

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