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Book Review. Love: A Brief History through
Western Christianity, by Carter Lindberg.
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Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity, Carter Lindberg, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008 (ISBN 9780631235996), 195 pp., pb £14.99

Church historian Carter Lindberg has written an engaging and informative survey of love in Western Christianity. He examines love not merely as an idea in the history of Christian theology, as a topic in literary criticism, or as an aspect of the social history of Western Christianity, but as all of the above and more. Lindberg takes an interdisciplinary approach to his topic that does it ample justice in the small space allotted. And despite the book's popular orientation, betrayed by its lack of footnotes, there is an eighteen-page bibliography that hints at the author's own research into this topic and provides the interested reader with numerous suggestions for further reading. Moreover, Lindberg generously quotes from primary sources without weighing the text down; his prose is always limpid and light.

Love is divided into ten chronological chapters framed by a preface and a conclusion. The first three chapters lay the groundwork for the rest of the book by examining the language of love, biblical views of love, and the practice of love in early Christianity. Lindberg begins by pointing out that the English word love translates numerous Greek (*epithymia*, *eros*, *agape*, and *philia*) and Latin (*amor*, *caritas*, and *dilectio*) words, each of which has various nuances of meaning. In particular, love in Western Christianity was more influenced by certain of these words (*agape*) than others (*eros*). This discussion hints at the much fuller examination of *agape* and *eros* in modern theological debates in the final chapter. Chapter two highlights the absence of any single, uniformly consistent view of love in Scripture. Nevertheless, Lindberg urges that the Old Testament espouses primarily an ethical view of love, while the New Testament presents 'Jesus as the definitive revelation of God's love' (27). He often makes his point by way of contrast: whereas ancient fertility and mystery religions were, by nature, preoccupied with love and sex, the ancient Israelite ethic of love found expression in care for the poor, widows and orphans, aliens and sojourners – the vulnerable in society. Christians' practice of love in the ancient world is brought into relief by

contrast with its near absence among contemporary pagans. For example, the fourth century Roman emperor Julian sought to appropriate Christian social charity into the practice of pagan religion in order to combat the spread of Christianity in his empire.

After this wide-ranging narrative, Lindberg focusses his gaze on the father of Western Christian theology, St Augustine, whose most noteworthy theological contribution was 'grounding Christian faith in the concept of love' (58). Also in St Augustine is the 'foundation for both the theology of ordered love that will develop in medieval scholasticism and the drive to union with God expressed by medieval mystics' (60). Thus, the love doctrine of St Augustine introduces the elaboration of his ideas in the Middle Ages, which form the subject of the next three chapters. Lindberg jumps then, from St Augustine (357-430) to Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), skipping more than six centuries of Western Christian history and theology. Abelard is noted for his 'ethic of intention', while St Bernard individualised the earlier ecclesiastical exegesis of the Song of Songs by interpreting the bride as the human soul rather than as the Church. In the sixth chapter Lindberg points illuminates the intermingling of erotic and mystical language in the language of love used by female mystics such as St Mechtild of Magdeburg and in medieval romances like Tristan and Isolde. Love in the Middle Ages, however, found its most influential forms in St Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the right ordering of charity and in St Francis' love of Lady Poverty, discussed in chapter seven.

In his survey of love in Western Christianity from the Reformations to the present – the subject of the final three chapters – Lindberg almost entirely ignores Catholic contributions in favour of Protestant ones. While he understandably needs to pay some attention to Protestantism, which is naturally absent from the first two-thirds of the book, one still ought to hear something about the immensely important work of the Jesuits and the role that love played in their evangelisation of the Americas and the Far East, as well as more than a passing reference to devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Moreover, the

Protestant emphasis falls overwhelmingly on German history and theology. Furthermore, in emphasising the distinctiveness of Protestantism vis-a-vis Catholicism, Lindberg fails to note the common ground between them in terms of social welfare. His Reformation chapter on Martin Luther continues the Protestant theme into the ninth and tenth chapters, with their forays into social history (pietism and the Social Gospel) and modern thought (romanticism, nihilism, and existentialism). Lindberg's discussion of love in modern theological debate rightly places Anders Nygren's influential *Agape and Eros* at the centre. This debate shows no sign of resolution, however, given the recent encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), which brings Lindberg's brief history right up to the present.

Carter Lindberg's *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity* is by no means the last word on the subject, nor does it claim to be, but it aptly surveys and summarises the subject – and does so with panache. Notwithstanding the above criticisms, Lindberg has written an excellent book that deserves a wide readership. Its vastness of scope is breathtaking and its selection of topics comprehensive. Indeed, love itself is breathtaking and its role in human life comprehensive. Without love, no history, however brief, could be written of Western Christianity or of Christianity as a whole.