Love

A Brief History Through Western Christianity

Carter Lindberg

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To Alice

Contents

Preface

''What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?''
Judges 14:18

For Samson, that great athlete, sexual and otherwise, whose story is related in the book of Judges, the answer to the riddle is love. As the story progresses through Samson's affair with Delilah, we learn that love not only makes the world go 'round; lack of love literally brings everything crashing down. In the words of the Song of Songs (8:6–7): ''love is strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.'' The centrality of love to human life permeates biblical writings from the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs to the shorthand gospel of John 3:16 that ''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.'' Not only the biblical writers, but philosophers, poets, and theologians from Plato through Dante to C. S. Lewis have struggled to describe, define, and demonstrate love. Their

efforts continue to inform, deform, and reform present understandings and experiences of love. The history of love ranges from Adam and Eve to the most recent pot-boiler romance novel, from star-crossed lovers to parents and children, from friends to enemies, from medieval troubadours to contemporary minstrels of all stripes, from churches to talk shows. Is love an ''eternal idea''? Or does the understanding of love have a history? Does love change, grow, diminish? Does spousal profession of love have the same meaning at the altar and at the golden anniversary? Can marriage be based on love? Is love in an arranged marriage of the tenth century comparable to love in a voluntary marriage of the twenty-first? Indeed, what do marriage and love have to do with each other? Do parents love their children less or more now than in prior times? Is love a feeling? Is love an act? Is love an art? Is love voluntary or involuntary, or both? How is self-love related to love of the neighbor? Does love extend to enemies? What is the relation of love to sexuality? Can love be commanded? Is love redemptive? Is love divine? Is divinity love? How does love form and inform our existence? What, indeed, *is* love? The questions seem to have no end, and any effort to set forth a history of love, especially a ''brief'' one, must be highly selective. Rather than ''justify'' my selections, I take refuge in the candor of Eusebius (c.260–c.340), ''the father of church history,'' who wrote at the beginning of his *The History of the Church*: ''I have picked out whatever seems relevant to the task I have undertaken, plucking like flowers in literary pastures the helpful contributions of earlier writers, to be embodied in the continuous narrative I have in mind.'' Obviously, in the following ''history,'' many beautiful flowers have been left in the pastures.

The following ''brief history of love'' presents some of the theoretical and practical ''answers'' to questions about love set forth in Western culture from early reflections in

Greco-Roman culture to the present. Since a dominant thread running through Western culture is Christianity in its many expressions, we shall approach our subject from its perspective. But even this limitation is too broad because every aspect of Christian theology expresses in one way or another a concept of love. It is possible under the rubric of love to include anything and everything. Library shelves groan under the weight of innumerable studies on this theme. To read and understand even a small fraction of all these studies is far beyond my ability. There is also the dangerous professorial penchant of killing the subject. As Søren Kierkegaard noted, theology professors too often reverse the miracle of Cana: they turn wine into water. Therefore I have attempted a broad narrative of love in Western history. The downside of such a ''brief'' history is that every reader will miss his or her favorite philosopher, theologian, or saint. I hope that in spite of such disappointments, this little volume may provide an entrée to a fascinating and complex subject. To that end, I have avoided footnotes but have provided a bibliography of the works directly informing my views for those who wish to fill in the gaps of this endeavor as well as find correctives to my synthesis.

So many people have contributed to this project that there is not space to grant them their deserved gratitude. Blackwell's editors, especially Rebecca Harkin, have been wonderfully supportive. I am grateful to students at Boston University School of Theology who shared their insights in seminars on the topic of Christian love. I am also grateful to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia where I was privileged to be the St. John's Visiting Professor of Church History in the spring of 2005. The students there in the seminar on Christian love provided valuable insights and perspectives, but of course like my other students should not be blamed for the final text. Our neighbors, Pat and Deb Garner, often – with wine-fortified courage! – asked how this project was going, listened

patiently, and asked great questions during the many months of writing. As always I am grateful to George W. Forell, my Doktor-Vater, perpetual mentor, and friend, who many decades ago introduced me to this subject in his own seminar, and then guided my dissertation on Luther's concept of love. Above all, I am grateful for the love and laughter of Alice.

Chapter 1

The Language of Love

''The Greeks have a word for it'' is an old cliché but nonetheless apt for our subject. Indeed, in relation to ''love,'' the Greeks not only had *a* word, they had many words! Like so many aspects of Western culture, our understandings and views of love have been influenced by contributions from Greek thought. The Greek vocabulary for ''love'' includes the nouns ''storge,'' ''epithymia,'' ''philia,'' ''eros,'' and ''agape,'' and their respective verb forms. On occasion some of these words for love are interchangeable but they are not strong synonyms. As we shall see, the history of the language of love is intimately related to the history of ideas. But as some wag once put it, the history of ideas is akin to nailing jello to the wall. Hence, caveat emptor, readers are warned that past historical contexts are often foreign countries and that words familiar to us may have been used quite differently in different times and places. For example, Cheyette notes in his study of medieval troubadour literature that when we moderns limit our concept of love to a sentiment, we miss its medieval political and social meanings. Bolkestein makes a similar

point in his study of pre-Christian social welfare when he notes that in classical culture ''philanthropy'' meant love among men or human love not charity or social welfare. And Jaeger notes that by the time of Shakespeare, the increasing privatization of love viewed public expressions of love for such charismatic persons as kings, rulers, churchmen, and saints – common in the Middle Ages – as hypocritical gambits for advancement.

Some of the many Greek terms for love no longer have much currency in our vocabulary. *Storge*, a more literary term for familial love or parental affection, and *epithymia*, a term associated with libido or desire have not had a significant impact on the Western vocabulary of love. *Philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, on the other hand, have significantly influenced Western languages and ideas. *Philia*, with meanings of friendship, close family relations, and human solidarity, is familiar in its English forms of *philadelphia* for brotherly love and philanthropy for benevolence. These expressions of concern for the well-being of others, both of which are present in the Greek New Testament, are reversed in the related term philander. Eros is familiar in modern languages in the related forms of the word ''erotic.''

In the pre-philosophical Greek cosmogonies, theories of the generation or birth of the cosmos, Eros appears as a uniting force. Hesiod, the great eighth-century-BCE poet next to Homer, presents Eros as one of the first to emerge from the dark abyss of Chaos, and then as the one who draws everything together, the creative, uniting force. Eros is ''the most beautiful of the immortal gods, who in every man and every god softens the sinews and overpowers the prudent purpose of the mind.'' Ancient Greek literature portrays Eros as a violent, crafty god whose arrows drive people into torment and passion for the first person seen after they are struck. In the later Greek myths, Eros is the personification of love as sexual desire.

His famous shrine at Thespiai, a site for Plutarch's (45–c.125 CE) *Erotikos* (''Dialogue on Love''), held quadrennial festivals to love. Eros was often presented as the son of Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans; goddess of love and beauty) and Ares (Mars to the Romans; god of war). Hesiod portrays Aphrodite's origin in the white foam that arose from the severed genitals of Uranus thrown in the sea by his son Cronos. Hence the famous Botticelli image of Venus on the half-shell arising from the sea. And Ares, Homer tells us in the *Iliad*, was hated by his father Zeus. With parents like that, it is no wonder that Western culture has perennially associated sex and violence. Epicurus (300 BCE) defined Eros as ''a strong appetite for sexual pleasures, accompanied by furor and agony.'' The aggressive aspect of love in the Greek tradition often portrayed the lover as pursuer. Thus in the myth of Apollo and Daphne, Apollo – the god of manly youth and beauty – pursued the nymph Daphne who escaped him by being transformed into a Laurel tree. One needs only to review the Greek myths to realize that Freud was not the first to posit the relationship of sex and death, nor was Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, its first artistic expression.

Eros, the handsome god of sexual love – ''the most beautiful of all the gods'' – also is associated with the chaos and death accompanying the violent physical desire seen in the stories of Paris and Helen, Zeus and Hera. Paris gave the ''apple of discord,'' a gold apple inscribed ''for the fairest,'' to Aphrodite who thereupon promised him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. So Paris carried off Helen, the wife of Menelaus, thereby setting in motion the Trojan War, the destruction of Troy, the death of Achilles, and his own death. The Olympian gods, of whom Zeus is the ''father,'' were not paragons of monogamous or faithful marriages, but rather it seems the initiators and models of the dysfunctional family. Their love stories are

stories of violence and rape. The relations of Zeus and his sister-wife Hera with each other as well as others cannot be abbreviated here, but their activities in sex and war make the most bizarre television talk shows pale in comparison. The Greek poets could portray Eros as cunning and cruel, instilling people with a maniacal drive that disrupts reason and life itself, a theme later explored in Plato's (c.429–327 BCE) *Phaedrus*. Centuries after Hesiod, the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE) noted in his *The Art of Love*, ''love is a kind of war.'' We often forget this disruptive element because we are more familiar with the personification of Eros under his Latin name, Cupid (also named Amor). But the cute, winged, chubby lad of our Valentine's Day cards is far removed from the primal force of nature with its potential for mad passion, the irrationality and chaos epitomized by Eros's sharp arrows that cause severe, painful, and even mortal wounds. There is a sense in which this divine madness of Eros was ''baptized'' in medieval and early modern Catholic mysticism. For example, St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a ''Doctor of the Church'' since 1970, wrote of the divine madness that overcame her when pierced by the arrows of God her Lover: ''The pain was so great that I screamed aloud; but at the same time I felt such infinite sweetness that I wished the pain to last forever.'' The (orgasmic) rapture of such wounds are captured in Bernini's sculpture ''The Ecstasy of St. Teresa'' (1645–1652; Santa Maria Vittoria, Rome) that depicts her ''transverberation'' – an angel plunging a flaming golden arrow into her heart. When the angel withdrew the arrow, ''I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God.'' The image is repeated in the baroque engraving, ''Beatrice and the Arrow of Divine Love'' (by Liska, 1708) that depicts the Cistercian Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268) being stabbed in the chest by an arrow.

A classic Greek expression of the effort to exert rational control over Eros or at least to gain understanding of such

love is Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, also known as the *Banquet*. Martha Nussbaum in her study, *The Fragility of Goodness*, extensively analyses the historical–political context and multi-faceted content of this dialogue, juxtaposing Socrates' famous speech on love (Eros) to that of Alcibiades. I shall focus on Socrates to the neglect of the other major participants because it is largely Socrates' perspective that has influenced the idea of love as an ascent from the material to the spiritual world, the striving for immortality. The immediate setting for the dialogue is a banquet hosted by the poet Agathon who has just won a prize for his poetry. The company decides that their topic of conversation will be Eros. When it is Socrates' turn to discuss love, he relates the knowledge of love revealed to him by the priestess Diotima. Love is either the desire for that which is not possessed or the desire not to lose what is loved. In either case, love is marked by a lack and thus the desire to acquire what is lacking. This is because, Diotima explains, love was born at the gods' feast celebrating Aphrodite's birthday at which Poverty and the god Plenty slept together and conceived Love, who is neither mortal nor immortal. In Diotima's words, love ''is always poor,'' ''is always in distress,'' always in search of fulfillment. Here Eros is the human quest for fulfillment; the drive to possess the good forever.

Plato's understanding of love is tied to his *eudaimonia* (eudaemonism), often translated as the drive toward happiness. We miss the dynamic of eudaemonism, however, if we think of it in a modern psychological sense of feeling pleasure. Plato, and then Aristotle, thought of eudaemonism as an active drive (*daimon*) toward the good (*eu*), that is, the drive to living and doing well. Diotima says to Socrates: ''the happy are made happy by the acquisition of good things.'' Eros in this sense is what C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* termed ''need-love.'' Love is the striving or ambition that characterizes all human activity. However, the love of pleasure, wealth, fame, persons,

beauty does not finally alleviate love's poverty or need because all temporal things perish. That is why, Diotima affirms, ''all men . . . desire the immortal.'' Ascent toward immortality begins on the biological level – the hope that children will preserve the memory of the father – and progresses toward the more permanent ''children'' of fame and ideas. ''Who,'' Diotima says, ''when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones?'' The imagery of ascent is explicit: ''[B]egin from the beauties of the earth and mount upward for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions . . . [to] the notion of absolute beauty, . . . '' The perception of beauty in the world recalls in the soul the memory of ideal beauty, and the recollection of beauty and truth inspire yearning for a higher existence in the realm of pure ideas; an immortal realm not subject to the decay and death of the world. With its spiritualizing ascent to the primal form of beauty, the soul discovers a radiance of the Beautiful, the inspired order of the world. The motif of ascent from lower to higher, earth to heaven, will imbue medieval Christian mysticism and theology. The influence of Plato's *Symposium* extended into the early modern period through Dante's (1265–1321) *Convivio* and Marsilio Ficino's (1433–1499) *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* that in turn influenced literature for the next couple of centuries.

The downside of this Hellenistic ''beatific vision'' was that in identifying the good with the beautiful, there arose the tendency to associate evil with the ugly and the deformed. As Younger notes in the entry ''Beauty Contests'' in his *Sex in the Ancient World*, ''male beauty was considered to connote good character. Similarly, the ugly man was reckoned poor in spirit. . . . '' It should be added that the Greeks were not

alone in associating external circumstances of life with the intellectual, spiritual, and moral condition of persons. In the Bible, Job's sufferings are attributed to his sin; in the medieval period, leprosy is seen as a disease of the soul, and the Knights of the Round Table are always exceedingly handsome; in our days, poverty is often attributed to a moral flaw in the poor person.

The image of love as an ascent motivated by a hierarchy of increasing value for the lover is graphically displayed in the long art history of images of the ladder to heaven. The best known of these innumerable artistic renditions relate, in the Byzantine world, to John Climacus's (c.570–c.649) ''Ladder of Paradise'' and in the medieval West to the ''Ladder of Virtues'' in the twelfth-century ''Garden of Delights.'' In the Garden of Delights image, figures fall off the ladder because they are attracted to lesser goods than the highest good, heaven, at the top of the ladder. It is significant that the figure at the very top of the ladder receiving the ''crown of life'' from the hand of God is labeled ''caritas,'' medieval Latin for love. Thus Plato's recasting of the older myths of Eros into a teleology of love was appropriated by Christian iconography. Love is directed toward an end, toward an immortality freed from the fetters of physical existence, freed from the downward pull of appetites such as sexual desire, and freed from loving things or persons for their own sake because eternal happiness cannot be acquired in what is perishable. Eros is finally the desire to overcome desire. Paradoxically, then, Eros may lead to asceticism. At any rate, Eros is the ladder to divinity, from the perishable world to the imperishable, from mortality to immortality. So understood, love is redemptive; it transcends the vulnerabilities of life in the world. Yet in a sense this may be called a kind of redemptive hedonism, the search for spiritual pleasure beyond mere physical pleasure; the use of things and others for one's quest for immortality. That is why some