

PROLOGUE

Love and the absence of the beloved matter most, but *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* is first of all a reading of the biblical *Song of Songs* (*Shir ha-Shirim*) and the Hindu *Holy Word of Mouth* (*Tiruvaymoli*).¹ All that follows is entirely in the debt of this biblical and Hindu poetry, and proceeds as reflection more particularly on the experience of a woman whose beloved has not returned and seems nowhere to be found. It is this experience of love and absence that in more than one culture has been taken to manifest what loving God is all about. It is a drama of love and loss that has been written about abundantly, over and again.² In this reading, therefore, I attend especially to the absence of the beloved as this has been imagined, suffered, and turned back into presence in several strands of Hindu and Christian tradition. I do so in order to write about the real God who can be absent, a real beloved whose real absence makes life impossible. But it is also true that this absence is a particularly powerful site for encounter with God.

To encounter (or not) the God who at times hides from us may be first of all recognized as an intimate event, personal to the seeker, even private. But the absence of God is also a matter of public concern and interest, in an age when a multitude of religious possibilities abound and when any particular religious love stands near to religious and secular alternatives. As such, the particularity of God and the possibility that God is real enough to be absent are also matters of public import, if we are still to think and talk about God in an intelligent way.

Quite apart from arguments about the existence or importance of God, there is room here the work of the imagination: for the individual and for society, God may be most real when it is uncomfortably noticed—felt—that the beloved has gone away, as if into hiding, no longer to be found in familiar places, no longer responsive to ways of speaking and acting that worked in the past. It is a more passionate love of God that cares about this beloved's coming

and going. In this sense, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* speaks to the matter of a deep love for a real beloved, noticed most vividly when suffered in absence. In the pages that follow I also argue—by way of a single extended example—that more particular and specific faith commitments enable rather than deter our learning from the images and words, events and surprises, of other religious loves, in religious traditions other than our own, and in the gaps no tradition can quite manage.

To love deeply and affirm deep truths in a world where many loves flourish in the particular, we need first of all to be grounded in the specificity and particularity in our own enduring love—for this author, in Jesus Christ. This is particularly in an age when the centrality of this beloved, or any, is by no means evident. Confident rhetoric about God and God's presence will be to many of us unconvincing, particularly if a true love is supposed to exclude all others. Love has its own reasons, but at our moment in history it does not translate into a truth that rules out every exception, every alternative. It is better, then, to honor the fragility of this passionate and particular truth about Jesus—or Krishna, or the beloved known by still other names—while admitting that this claim “speaks for itself” only in particular places and times. No matter how universal the truth, what we say is still the tale of the comings and goings of a beloved whose presence cannot be conceptualized as simply universal. To speak to the truth and love central to our faith bears with it an acute awareness of the failures and gaps that make claims to faith more fragile, vulnerable—and only in that way more convincing. The more evident and difficult the failing of our words, the deeper their truth. This book is not an elegy about the end of theology, but rather a plea that we leave room for the silence that comes upon us when we stretch our words beyond their capacity, mindful that we are speaking of just one love.

Ours is an era that both celebrates and tames religious diversity. It privatizes religion and shifts the deepest experiences to the realm of the inner life. It is difficult now for a Christian to speak and write openly of the intense, singular fact of Jesus, the concrete and universal Reality at the heart of the Christian faith, without also giving the impression that she does not really understand or have room for passions aflame in other traditions too. A Hindu in a devotional tradition likewise faces a challenge nearly the same as that of the Christian: one love surrounded, impinged upon, by many loves, in a world that might well be satisfied with less of such loves. It is good then that committed members of faith traditions insist upon the concrete, universally significant particulari-

ties of their faith, provided we view honestly and without amnesia the myriad intense and concrete religious possibilities so evident around us. The challenge is to find a way to speak of and from the specificity of our faith—our faiths—even as our religious imagination wanders uncertainly across myriad religious possibilities. As we read carefully back and forth, sensitive to the literary possibilities and not just to the ideas, this practice accentuates the problem of particular, passionate engagements. We learn and remember multiple commitments, while yet learning our way beyond the dichotomy of too much and too little religious belonging.

But this is difficult. Our way forward lies not in stepping back and theorizing the other, but in greater particularity and more refined, carefully considered instances. Reading is a wonderful way to do this, so in these pages we will be reading of the absence of the beloved in the *Song* and the *Holy Word*. *That* we read and *how* we read therefore become inseparable questions. In *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* I will be reading the *Song of Songs* guided by a single medieval Christian tradition of good reading, that Bernard of Clairvaux and Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford, three monks who over many years produced a complete series of sermons on the *Song*, each beginning where the previous had left off. One could spend a very long time learning from these sermons, but I pay particular attention to the situation of the woman at those moments when her beloved is absent. Along with the *Song*, I read also the songs of another woman in love, similarly bereft of her beloved in the *Holy Word of Mouth*, and here too I am guided by its medieval interpreters, particularly the revered teachers Nanjiyar and Nampillai. Each tradition of reading opens up poetic and spiritual possibilities in an unanticipated yet deeply engaging way, and all the more so by the double reading itself, as the songs cohere in a still greater Text.³ Not that any of this will be easily achieved. The *Song* and the *Holy Word* are similarly intense in their love and love's particularity, and both care about the problem of divine absence, but in the distinctiveness of their poetry and the intensity of the love driving them, they are not easily susceptible to the work of comparison. Yet, as poetry, they also cannot resist the play of imagination—so in the end these utterly distinct works yield a shared reading.

In this shared reading, there is more at stake than either text provides on its own. To negotiate the possibilities and gaps arising in this sacred poetry with respect to this beloved who hides from us—we need to imagine ourselves falling, mostly by choice, into the somewhat obscure and unstable space lying between traditions. For the beloved hides from us in each text, in both, and at

the point where they meet but neither has the final word. If we find ourselves reading and writing of a love that is both intensely focused yet laced with ambiguity, we do well not to retreat to the ready answers of relativism or exclusivism. Instead, we find ways to suffer the adventures of our imagination, moving to theological judgments only when we have found the right words, words arising in the midst of today's mix of uncertainty and longing.

In its conviction that depth and particularity are the means to greater openness and that love can be a matter of improbable, ill-advised excesses, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is the last act in a project I began implicitly in *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (1996). In that book, I first explored the lyric and dramatic dimensions of divine-human love, sought and suffered, so richly evident in the Hindu text central to this book as well: the *Holy Word*. In terms of the intensity of focus and care for the poetic, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (2005) manifests the same energy, clearing the way for Christian readers to take seriously and learn from Hindu goddess traditions, even when there is no place for goddesses in Christian theology. The immediate predecessor of the current book is *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (2008), where I explored the narratives of loving surrender proposed and cultivated by two prominent medieval theologians, the Srivaishnava Hindu Vedānta Deśika (fourteenth century) and the Catholic Christian Francis de Sales (seventeenth century). There I once more argued that engaging multiple traditions of loving surrender increases rather than attenuates the uncompromising devotion deeply rooted within a particular tradition. *Beyond Compare* highlighted the choices before the individual seeking God, and so too the aesthetics of love intensified by acts of interreligious reading. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* goes a step farther in focusing on the holy uncertainty afflicting those who love God most intensely. In pondering the God of absences, my writing is not an innocent bystander, since the double reading essential to comparative study most often accentuates a sense that the beloved is present somewhere but not here, ever remembered even if never known in some definitive way. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* thus pushes to a still greater extreme the necessary risk of interreligious reading that lies at the heart of the practice of comparative theology. It is dangerous work, love's burden, for we are now implicated in the dilemma arising when one finds that the texts studied—such as these songs of loss in love—deepen the reader's own loss in love, not by less concreteness and intensity, but by more than we can handle. There is a holy

abundance in the beloved's departure. Yet when his absence is acutely, painfully noticed, the prospects of his return become all the more intense.⁴

I close this prologue with a word of thanks to the many friends, colleagues and students, who have helped me think through this project and at long last bring it to conclusion. My Harvard colleagues Kimberley Patton and Luis Girón Negrón kindly read the manuscript. I was greatly encouraged by my conversations and shared teaching with Stephanie Paulsell, as she was finishing her own beautiful commentary on the *Song*, and likewise I am indebted to the recent theological commentary by Paul J. Griffiths, which, though so very different from mine, has to no surprise been an instigation and inspiration. Gloria Hernandez, West Chester University, went through the manuscript in detail as well, enriching it with insights drawn from her own brilliant reading of John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle* and Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. While the translations from the *Holy Word of Mouth* are my own, I benefited greatly from working together with John Carman, Vasudha Narayanan, and A. K. Ramanujan on the songs many years ago, and more recently with Archana Venkatesan, in a new collaboration that moves slowly but surely toward a full translation of the songs. I am grateful also to my students at Harvard University for their comments, especially Brad Bannon, Jim Robinson, Shoshana Razel, Axel Takacs, Ben Williams, and, with reference to the poetry of Jorie Graham, Kythe Heller. Lee Spriggs, a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School, took on the added work of proofreading the manuscript and preparing the bibliography and the index. Finally, I appreciate the never-failing support of my faculty assistant, Lori Holter, and my staff at the Center for the Study of World Religions—Charles Anderson, Jane Anna Chapman, Alicia Clemente, Alexis Gewertz, and most recently Corey O'Brien—who patiently helped me to balance the work of the Center with precious moments eked out for the tasks of writing and then revising every word of this book.

I have been fortunate to have had opportunities to present parts of this project in a variety of settings: the Translating God(s) seminar at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin (June 2010); the Hanley Memorial Lectures at St. Paul's College of the University of Manitoba (October 2010); the New England–Mid-Atlantic Region of the American Academy of Religion (New Brunswick, March 2010); the Bishop Jonas Thaliath, CMI Endowment Lectures at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India (August 2011); the Advent Mission, Memorial Church, Harvard University (November 28–December 3, 2011); the Loyola Lecture at Le Moyne College (March 2012); a presentation at the Hans

Urs von Balthasar Consultation at the Catholic Theological Society of America (St. Louis, June 2012), where I was helped in particular by the comments of Martin Bieler, Barbara Sain, and Edward Ulrich. I had occasion to discuss my project several times during my stay in Melbourne, Australia, as Visiting Research Scholar at the Australian Catholic University in the summer of 2012. Last of all, I benefited from discussing the book as a whole in my presentation at the conference, "The Song of Songs: Translation, Reception, Reconfiguration," held at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, April 13–15, 2013. I wish also to acknowledge that part of Act Two appeared in an earlier form in the journal *Exchange: A Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, with the title "By the Power of Her Word: Absence, Memory, and Speech in the *Song of Songs* and a Hindu Mystical Text."

I thank the editors of the new Encountering Traditions series with Stanford University Press for their interest in my work and invitation to include this book in this most interesting and timely series. I wish also to thank the renowned Indian artist Jyoti Sahi for his kind permission to adorn the cover of this book with his "Mountain of Meeting." Finally, I am very much in the debt of the Association of Theological Schools, which awarded me a faculty research fellowship for 2010–11 to write this book, for giving me the occasion to present a draft at the annual meeting in Pittsburgh in November 2011, where I could benefit from the feedback of those in attendance, particularly the kind and insightful response offered by Denise Hanusek of Emory University. While duties at Harvard prevented me from actually taking a sabbatical for the project, I am grateful to Stephen R. Graham, Director of Faculty Development and Initiatives in Theological Education, for his patience with the vagaries of my academic life.

I put the final touches on this manuscript in the days just after the bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013. While my book is thematically unconnected to the topic of such violence, the sad events of that day and its aftermath have darkened this final writing, how I read my own work and weigh it against greater things. I therefore dedicate this book to the victims of that day, those who died and those who lost their loved ones; and by extension, to the still larger group of lovers everywhere who have lost, for a time, those they have loved most dearly.

Center for the Study of World Religions, Cambridge, Massachusetts
January 13, 2013