CHAPTER FIVE

VESTIGES OF THE TRINITY IN CREATION

The word “God,” so “capitalized” (as we Americans say), is the definable proper name, signifying Ens necessarium: in my belief Really creator of all three Universes of Experience.

C. S. Peirce, 1908¹

This book is, among other things, a contribution to Christian thinking about God as Trinity. Narrowly understood, the doctrine of the Trinity concerns the ‘intra-Trinitarian’ relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the oneness and the three-ness of God. More broadly, Trinitarian thought stems from reflection on the human person Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore necessarily requires and incorporates thinking about anthropology and Christology. Even more generally, Trinitarian thought concerns the relation between God and the world. In this chapter I explore the relation between my semiotic model of the Trinity and Christian thinking about creation. In doing so I shall be proposing a new Trinitarian theology of nature, an approach to the Christian doctrine of creation that draws on and develops the idea that it may be possible to find ‘vestiges of the Trinity’ in the created order.

The overarching metaphor that will help the reader to keep track of the relatively complex structure of the argument to be developed in the following sections is that of a rope, or plait, braided from three separate but related strands.² The first strand in the plait is primarily a scientific one, stemming originally from reflection on evolutionary and theoretical biology. In Chapter 4 I set out a way of thinking about the challenges posed by Darwinian evolutionary biology to


² There are two main methods of rope making. One method is simply to twist the fibres together. The other, braiding, involves the same process as that commonly used to plait together bunches of hair. Recall that Peirce used the metaphor of knowledge as a cable with many fibres (EP 1.29; see §1.4.3).
Christian theology, and I suggested that a ‘biosemiotic’ approach might offer a general basis for a theology of nature capable of responding to these challenges. However, the value of the biosemiotic approach in this regard would be seriously weakened if it turned out to offer a merely metaphorical description of living things. The second half of Chapter 4 was therefore devoted to developing a philosophically robust definition of interpretation and showing how this might give rise to empirically testable scientific hypotheses in the field of origin of life research. The scientific strand of my argument will be developed further in this chapter by exploring how the themes of continuity, contingency and naturalism – originally identified in the context of reflection on evolutionary biology in the previous chapter – reflect fundamental aspects of the evolving cosmos.

The second strand of my argument is constituted by Peirce’s philosophy, particularly his categories, his semiotics, and his theory of inquiry. I began this book by setting out some of the key elements of this strand. I shall extend the Peircean strand in the present chapter by introducing Peirce’s evolutionary cosmology, a speculative scheme into which all the other elements of his philosophy are implicitly incorporated, and according to which the categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness may be regarded as underpinning the whole process of cosmic evolution.

The third strand is the theological one. In Chapter 2 I argued that Peirce’s triadic metaphysics and semiotics may be in some sense analogous to the ‘inner’ Triune being of God. I suggested, further, that the semiotic model may help to clarify some of the perennial conceptual problems in Trinitarian thought. I went on, in Chapter 3, to develop the model by proposing a semiotic approach to the Incarnation and to scientific and theological anthropology. This theological strand will be extended in this chapter by introducing the idea that creation is not only an act of the Father but also of the Son and the Spirit, and by developing a Peircean version of the concept of ‘vestiges of the Trinity in creation’.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I begin by sketching some biographical background to Peirce’s development of his philosophical scheme into an evolutionary cosmology (§5.1.1). I then introduce (§5.1.2) Peirce’s concepts of evolution by chance and evolution by necessity, which correspond respectively to his categories of