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0521782716 - A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy

Robert S. Corrington

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A SEMIOTIC THEORY OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The concern of this work is with developing an alternative to standard categories in theology and philosophy, especially in terms of how they deal with nature. Avoiding the polemics of much contemporary reflection on nature, it shows how we are connected to nature through the unconscious and its unique way of reading and processing signs. Spinoza's key distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* serves as the governing framework for the book. Suggestions are made for a post-Christian way of understanding religion.

Robert S. Corrington's work represents the first sustained attempt to bring together the fields of semiotics, depth-psychology, pragmatism, and a postmonotheistic theology of nature. Its focus is on how signification functions in human and nonhuman orders of infinite nature. Our connection with the infinite is described in detail, especially as it relates to the use of sign systems.

ROBERT S. CORRINGTON is Professor of Philosophical Theology in the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at Drew University. He has written fifty articles in the areas of American philosophy, semiotics, theology, and metaphysics and has authored six other book-length studies: *The Community of Interpreters* (1987, second edition in 1995), *Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* (1992), *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce: Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist* (1993), *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (1994), *Nature's Self: Our Journey from Origin to Spirit* (1996), and *Nature's Religion* (1997). He was the coeditor of *Pragmatism Considers Phenomenology* (1987), Justus Buchler's *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, second expanded edition (1989), *Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics* (1991), and *Semiotics 1993* (1995). He has also written a full-length play, *Black Hole Sonata*, and a one-act play, *1, 2, 3*. Past president of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America, Professor Corrington has also served on the executive boards of the Semiotic Society of America and the Highlands Institute for American Religious Thought. Professor Corrington is an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12½ pt [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Corrington, Robert S., 1950–
 A semiotic theory of theology and philosophy/ Robert S. Corrington.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 78271 6

1. Philosophy of nature. 2. Semiotics. 3. Nature – Religious aspects.
 4. Semiotics – Religious aspects. 5. Philosophical theology. I. Title.

BD581.C667 2000

146 – dc21 99–087092

ISBN 0 521 78271 6 hardback

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This work is dedicated to the memory
of two former graduate students
whose untimely deaths have
deprived philosophy and theology
of part of their actualization:

Todd A. Driskill
and
Roger A. Badham

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By means of the Higher Knowledge the wise behold everywhere
Brahman, which otherwise cannot be seen or seized, which has no
root or attributes, no eyes or ears, no hands or feet; which is eternal
and omnipresent, all-pervading and extremely subtle; which is
imperishable and the source of all beings.

Mundaka Upanishad I.i.6
as translated by Swami Nikhilananda

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Preface

The immodest proposal in this book is that the interdisciplinary science and art of semiotics can transform philosophy and theology and pave the way for a new metaphysics. To frame a problematic semiotically is to focus on those elements in the world that signify in some respect, no matter how primitive or complex. Closure marks both ends of the human journey, but profound traces of the *whence* and the lure of the *whither* enter into and shape everything that the human process contrives, thinks, and assimilates. Semiotic reflection can evoke and describe these traces as well as enter into and articulate the more manifest meanings that we can communicate with each other.

Yet on a deeper level, semiotic theory remains itself provincial insofar as it refuses to enter into the much more capacious horizon of a metaphysics of nature, a metaphysics that refuses to let anxiety or narcissism divert its native generic drive toward an encompassing perspective. The failure to develop an adequate and compelling conception of nature has haunted thought down through the centuries, but we are now at a historical nexus in which our categorial framework can be broadened through a semiotic cosmology that probes into the ultimate texture of meaning in an evolutionary world. This is not to equate semiotic cosmology with the cosmology that is experiencing such a profound revival in astrophysics, although, as will emerge, there are striking points of convergence between the two enterprises. The “object” of semiotic cosmology is broader in scope than the worlds of energy and matter, and includes anything that is an order in any respect whatsoever, whether discriminated by human sign users or not.

The convergent streams that support and nourish semiotic cosmology are ready to enter into a creative intersection in which they can both enhance and challenge each other. Among the more important streams are: (1) a transformed philosophical naturalism that is open to the depth-dimension of nature, (2) a more generic psychoanalysis that

honors the insights of Freud, Jung, Reich, and Kristeva, but moves toward the depth-fields that undercut the narcissistic frameworks of Western psychology, (3) a genuine paleopraxmatism that honors the spirit of Peirce and Dewey while avoiding the subjectivism and historicism of neopraxmatism, and (4) a truly universalistic religious consciousness that can move thought beyond the patriarchal tyranny of the three Western monotheisms. Needless to say, these are each complex threads in their own right, but it is possible to weave them together into a tapestry with some contour that can provide a map for the future work of semiotic cosmology.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to envision in such an enterprise is the true depth-dimension of nature, a dimension that lies just beyond our categorial frameworks, no matter how robust. In a fine unpublished manuscript on my work, Catholic theologian Guy Woodward pluralizes the notion of *natura naturans* (*nature naturing*) that continues to play such a large role in my still-evolving perspective:

Natura naturans are at once in these chaoses the self-fissuring, thus the rending. Differences crackle through them, like lightnings through a night, quartering the darkness. Differences thus fissure (ceaselessly) *natura naturans* in all their magnitudes, and, thus fissured, constitute them as domains (as mappings constitute once “uncharted” lands into domains, realms); these same fissurings are as plowings, cultivating *natura naturans* by rending them (as the plough blades did the prairies), thus rend-erring them seed beds, *seminaria*. (Woodward 1998)

He has clearly grasped my intent; namely, to evoke or show those fissures that open up beneath both thought and the innumerable orders of the world. This depth-dimension is presemiotic yet finds its way into the life of signs. Each of the four conceptual horizons noted above contributes in its own way to a much broader understanding of an inexhaustible nature and its depth-dimension that can appear to finite and horizon-bound experience when the lightning-like potencies of *nature naturing* punctuate the world of signs and objects.

This work is the natural outgrowth of my previous six books. Yet the present work also struggles to advance into new territory, especially around the phenomena associated with infinite semiosis, sacred folds, the ontology of signs, and the depth-field that is linked to the underconscious of nature. Theologically, this work has been influenced by both the universalist criteria of contemporary Unitarianism and the Westernized form of Hinduism known as Vedanta. But these twin sources

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operate in the wings, as it were, providing a sense of the sheer scope of the matter of religion rather than presenting particular doctrines.

As Heidegger knew so well, no way station can still that hunger that sign users have to get closer to the ultimate origins and goals of the elusive world of meaning. Any linguistic contrivance such as this one can satisfy the hunger only for a brief time, but it represents a necessary concrescence of those energies that propel us forward.