2001-01

The Religious Significance of the Satir Model: Philosophical, Ritual and Empirical Perspectives [Abstract]

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The Religious Significance of the Satir Model:

Philosophical, Ritual and Empirical Perspectives

by

Bonnie K. Lee

Dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, University of Ottawa,
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Religious Studies

Ottawa, Canada
January 2001

© Bonnie K. Lee, Ottawa, Canada, 2001
To my mother.

Anna Maria, Pui Yin
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My doctoral studies and research began with some unanswered questions after I completed my Masters program in Pastoral Counseling at St. Paul University, Ottawa. An Ontario Graduate Scholarship opened up an opportunity for me to continue my academic pursuit for a deeper understanding of the phenomena of religion and healing. I located myself in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa because of religious studies' interdisciplinary resources to explore vital human and religious issues historically and cross-culturally.

Events conspired such that two strands of my interest at the beginning of my doctoral program intersected: my natural interest in symbols and rituals and an invitation to learn about a model of family therapy developed by the late Virginia Satir by Satir trainers, Dr. Janet Christie-Seelye and Dr. Maria Gomori. With the trust and blessing bestowed on me by my thesis advisor, Dr. Marie-Françoise Guédon, I ventured out beyond the security of my study and my books between 1994-1998 to travel to fourteen Satir-based workshops from Ottawa to Winnipeg, Seattle, and one of the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. Entering the world of Satir culture as a stranger, and having to learn all I could about Satir's model from the inside was an adventure and life-changing experience. To Dr. Guédon, who initiated me into anthropological fieldwork which allowed me to develop many skills and experience a sea-change, my heartfelt thanks.

Many professors from Religious Studies encouraged and supported me throughout my doctoral journey. I am particularly grateful to: Dr. James Forsyth, who even after his retirement, attended my colloquium, read chapters of my thesis and gave me his astute comments, and reminded me at timely intervals that my first priority was my thesis; Dr. Peter Beyer, who turned
my mountains into molehills by his availability and always sensible advice; Dr. Naomi Goldenberg, who told me at every opportunity how much she looked forward to learning all about Virginia Satir from reading my thesis and invited my article on “Performance Theory” to be submitted to the *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religions*; Dr. John Dourley, whose passion for Tillich inspired my own, and who spent a day to read aloud every word I wrote on Satir and Tillich.

Sustained academic advice from outside of one’s department is not easy to come by. It was indeed my good fortune to have had the expert and generous guidance of Dr. Henry Edwards, School of Psychology, for the empirical section of my thesis. Incisive, systematic, and deeply committed, he helped me make order out of chaos and my thesis took quantum steps forward after every meeting with him. To him, I extend my deep gratitude.

Members and trainers of Avanta, The Virginia Satir Network, fuelled this research with their enthusiasm, input, moral and practical support. Sincere thanks are due to Dr. John Banmen, Dr. Maria Gomori, Dr. Janet Christie-Seelye, Dr. Glenda Reiser, Dr. Connie Lundgren, Dr. Miriam Freeman, Jean McLendon, Gloria Taylor, Nancy MacDonald, Dr. Joseph Dillon, all those who took part in the interviews and questionnaire study, and last but not least, Margarita Suarez, Avanta's Executive Director. Two grants from Dr. Maria Gomori and The Satir Professional Development Institute of Manitoba subsidized my workshop attendance in 1995. A research grant from Avanta made possible my attendance and presentation at the 1998 Avanta Annual Conference and Training, and assisted with the implementation of the questionnaire research.

Friends and colleagues have been important to me throughout the program and at critical
junctures. My special appreciation goes to Lucie DuFresne, who edited and proofread my manuscript with care; to Tannie Liu, Dilys Patterson, Melanie Takahashi, Rubina Ramji, and George Pappas for friendship, coffee, conversations, and feedback.

For the sympathetic reading of my thesis, insightful feedback, and a stimulating and lively defense discussion, I wish to thank the esteemed members of my thesis committee: Dr. David Wulff, Dr. Naomi Goldenberg, Dr. Henry Edwards, and Dr. John Dourley.

It’s hard to know where to begin when it comes to thanking those closest to me. Over the years, my husband, Michael, has given me his unwavering moral and practical support in all the major projects I have undertaken. With infinite patience, he has successfully conducted salvage missions in numerous computer crises. He was there at all the crucial moments, including the challenge of formatting, printing, and collating the final version of this thesis. My son, Theo, helped me with creating the statistical tables when he would rather be going out with friends. My daughter, Colleen, told me she was behind me all the way, and indeed she was, with her love and her radiant being. Daisy, our collie-shepherd, insisted on taking my husband and me on nightly walks so that my ideas could crystallize. My mother, Anna Lim-Lee, sacrificed many leisurely visits with me out of her belief in the importance and worthiness of my thesis. Sadly, she did not live to see its way into the world. It is to her loving memory that I dedicate this work.

I am grateful for the academic financial support I received for my doctoral studies and research, including the Excellence and Doctoral Scholarships awarded me by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Ottawa, two Ontario Graduate Scholarships, and a Doctoral Research Fellowship by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Travel grants from the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Studies, the Graduate Students’ Association, and the Association of Part-time Professors of the University of Ottawa gave me the exciting opportunities to present and discuss my ideas and research at numerous North American and international conferences, which all contributed to bringing this project to fruition.
ABSTRACT

The contribution of Virginia Satir (1916-1988) as a pioneer in the field of family therapy has been undervalued due to the lack of systematic writing about her theory and method. Over three decades, she relied predominantly on conducting workshops to transmit her ideas and to effect healing. Using a multi-methods research approach, this thesis exposes the religious root of the Satir Model from three perspectives: philosophical, ritual and empirical. The coherent ontology implicit in the Satir Model, and the similarity of Satir's concept of congruence to an understanding of salvation as integration with oneself, others and the "ground of being" are explicated, using Tillich's philosophical-theological categories as a framework. Victor Turner's anthropological model of ritual process is used to bring out the liminality, symbolic enactment, oral discourse, deconstruction and reconstruction in Satir's workshops which functioned as vehicles of personal and social transformation. Finally, the theoretical perspectives are tested against quantitative empirical data collected on two scales developed for this purpose, the Congruence Scale and the Satir Experience Scale. Intrapsychic-Interpersonal, Spiritual, Creative and Communal factors emerge as four dimensions in the Congruence Scale. Participants' subscores on these factors indicate systemic interrelationships of the four dimensions. Two factors, the experience of Spiritual Significance and Human Significance, emerge from the Satir Experience Scale as dimensions experienced by participants in Satir workshops. Exposure to the Satir Model is found to be related to an increase in congruence and increase in the
experience of spiritual and human significance, providing initial indication of the
efficacy of the Satir Model. Synthesis of the theoretical and empirical findings
demonstrates that Satir’s vision articulates a holistic ontological framework with
an aim towards congruence that is facilitated through workshops functioning like
rites-of-passage. A case is made for typing Satir as a “prophet” figure according to
Max Weber’s sociological definition of a leader who, working outside of
mainstream institutions, introduces a new centre of revitalizing, rehumanizing
values and practices to a society in distress. In its coherent worldview, ritual
practice, and effectiveness in mobilizing a population toward congruence leading
to personal, social, communal and spiritual reconnectedness, the Satir Model finds
continuity with the transformative impulse of the prophetic strain of religion, and
yet is innovative in its contemporary cultural expression.