

**The Religious Significance of the Satir Model :
Philosophical, Ritual and Empirical Perspectives**

by

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To my mother,

Anna Maria, Pui Yin

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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.

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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.