

This Silly Poor Gospel

by John Elwyn Kimber

'Passions I allow and loves I approve, only I would wish that men would alter their object and better their intent'

-St Robert Southwell

The October 2012 edition of Subud Voice features a debate of sorts over the decline of Subud. This is epitomised by a thoughtful and considered article by Reynold Feldman, whose reputation within Subud is hardly that of a revolutionary madman.

But as so often in Subud, the last word is given to an opinion which is intended to close down further debate. When I was young Bapak was often selectively quoted for this purpose, but here we have Ibu Rahayu uttering opinions which could hardly be bettered by someone who actually wanted to see Subud and the Latihan disappear into oblivion. We are told that if Subud is declining it is our fault for lack of enough spiritual progress to turn us into sufficiently shiny shining examples of the process. In virtually the same breath, we are told, as ever, that all is in the hands of God, and there is nothing we can do about it if Subud is declining. So is it our fault or not?

If it is our fault that we fail to make progress, obviously it cannot have anything to do with the Kejiwaan, since according to Ibu Rahayu this is all in the hands of God. So, presumably, this can only be because we have failed to act in the sphere in which we are able to act, the world, thus maintaining a positive feedback-loop between inner and outer.

But in order to effect more positive change in the world, we need to create the circumstances in which we can do so. Logically, this must include attracting more people to the Latihan, encouraging them to remain by making them feel welcome, and thus inspiring them to wish spontaneously to express their ideals in the world at large. This creates a pool of committed people numerous and gifted enough to get things done. This is what the educationalists and agriculturists of the Anthroposophical movement have done, for example, and it is the essential basis for the high esteem which Rudolf Steiner's work now enjoys. And nobody can say that Bapak did not want the membership to 'prove God's love' by proving the worth of Subud.

But Ibu Rahayu does not seem to set much store by the wise old Muslim proverb 'Trust in God and tie your camel'. The tying of the camel is to be left in the hands of the Divine, which rather ignores the fact that in this world the Divine relies on human hands to get anything done. This is called 'incarnational theology' in Christian and Hindu tradition: in this world, the Divine has to manifest in the Human. In certain strains of quietist Muslim thought, unfortunately, it is called arrogance or presumption or something. No wonder Subud is on its last legs!

It is no kind of argument to say that Subud should decline into oblivion if - and by implication because - we are not worthy of anything better. There would be no great religions or worthy spiritual movements in the world if the Divine had had to wait for perfect human beings before they were founded or disseminated. Had the British said 'trust in God and don't build Spitfires' in 1939, Hitler would have conquered all of Europe unopposed, and inflicted unimaginable suffering on far more people even than the ten to eleven million whom he managed to sacrifice to the archdemons who controlled him.

The young Hurricane and Spitfire pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain were not required to be saints; they just had to be able to shoot down the German air force at a rate of four to one. Even in a more spiritual milieu, we are not required to be perfect in order to transmit what we have all received. We need to be good-humoured and honest about our imperfections, yet wholehearted in our commitment to furthering the influence of the Divine Life Force. As the Sufis say, 'Sincerity can compensate for a great deal of inadequacy - use, live it!'

Meanwhile, there are millions of people who could benefit even from the early stages of Latihan, and the spiritual state of the Human Race would be immeasurably improved even by so imperfect a sacrifice of the lower to the higher. The great seventeenth century Quaker pioneer Margaret Fell once famously criticised her fellow Quakers for having succumbed to a mood of puritanical paranoia. She said:

"Christ Jesus saith that we must take no thought what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or what we shall put on: bids us consider the lilies, how they grow in more royalty than Solomon. But contrary to this, we (are told we) must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them, nor wear them; but we must be all in one dress and one colour; this is a silly poor Gospel. It is more fit for us, to be covered with God's Eternal Spirit, and clothed with his Eternal Light, which leads us and guides us into Righteousness."

In Subud, the puritanical paranoia is fixated on those wicked twin goblins the heart and the mind. Fear of being influenced by either or both leads all too many Subud members into the 'all in one dress and one colour' of a mindless passivity. But it is a Silly Poor Gospel to preach the wisdom of terminal retreat into oblivion for fear we may be somehow impure or unworthy. Yet again we hear the echo of Bapak's voice saying 'surrender, anything else is no use' applied not to the Latihan but to Subud's dealings with the world at large. Those other remarks to the effect that 'you need the Nafsu to live in this world' have never been understood properly and don't appear to be understood by Ibu Rahayu either.

Life in this world is imperfect and messy, and if it were otherwise the world as we know it would not exist. There would be no need for lifelines like the Latihan. Imperfection is no excuse for inaction. The time to accept the Silly Poor Gospel of Ibu Rahayu is when we have actually done everything we can to disseminate the Latihan and the numbers are STILL declining. Until then, it is a counsel of despair, and it ought to be decisively ignored.