

Watch Your Language

By Marcus Bolt

'Everything is in Almighty God's hands and my future is simply to obey His will.'

Who said that — a WSA Chair, an International Helper, someone in your group, you, or me?

Well, all of us at some time, probably. But the above is actually a quote from a recent speech by Sarah Palin — the woman who believes gays can and should be cured, that Israel is justified in expanding into Palestine, that America should wage a pre-emptive war on Iran and who prays daily that God will remove Obama. 'We need a commander-in-chief, not professor of law,' she said in the same speech.

My guess is that few Subud members would vote for her should she ever run for President, yet we have in Subud an overlap between her language and ours that, to the public at large, could mistakenly identify us as being in the same camp as fundamentalist evangelicals and hard-line Hawks, people to whom Palin's language most definitely appeals.

Paradoxically, Palin's public language also puts her in bed with the fundamentalist Muslims she deems her enemies, those who also claim to be 'obeying His Will' (and unless there are two Gods, how can this be?). I doubt very much she or any of the aforementioned would be interested in joining Subud though, despite the apparent similarity in language of our individual mission statements. But, more worryingly, neither would the billions of atheists, liberals and adherents of non-Abrahamic religions in the world today, because it's exactly the kind of language that is wholly unacceptable to at least three billion people on this planet (yes, only a half of the world's population 'belong' to the Abrahamic religions — check it out).

The incoming WSA Chair is quoted in the April edition of *Subud Voice* as saying, 'The whole purpose of the organisation is to be a vehicle for the latihan to come into the world.' This is a laudable statement, and an aim I support wholeheartedly, but I suggest he is, and we are, seriously hobbled in achieving such an outcome by the kind of public Abrahamic-religionist language that has crept into our literature, our websites, and our culture.

Now I have no beef whatsoever with anyone's personal belief system, but I think it does matter hugely what kind of language we use publicly on our websites and in our literature, and particularly when speaking to enquirers and applicants, at least until we find out, face-to-face, the kind of language they are individually comfortable with.

I am simply calling for a more neutral-sounding Subud where certain loaded terms, such as 'Almighty God', 'surrender', 'God's will' and 'worship', are not part of our public presentation. When such terms are used frequently and in combination, they give the false impression of a belief system accepted by all Subud members. Shouldn't such focussed terminology be left up to the individual's belief system and not attached to a description of the latihan, particularly if we also state that it's 'for all mankind'?

I am well aware that various World Subud Association committees have, over recent years, become aware of this problem and that some effort has been made to be more widely inclusive. The main Subud Website, www.subud.org, now states on its public pages:

Many people feel a sense of calm and a deepening of the natural connection with wisdom, one's higher self, the divine, or God, depending on one's preferred terminology...

— which I would have found perfectly acceptable when I joined Subud over forty years ago — and which would not, I suggest, immediately put off half of the world's population.

However, on the next page it continues:

The ten aims of the World Subud Association are:

1) To facilitate the worship of Almighty God through the Latihan Kejiwaan of Subud....

Now that's pretty specific and has brought the focus sharply back into the Abrahamic religious core belief structure again. Delving deeper into the site, on yet another page, entitled 'An Introduction to Subud', we read:

(Subud)... is an acknowledgement of the Power of God, which fills and controls the whole universe... There is no dogma in Subud, no creed and no priesthood...

In actual fact, the writer has just stated here both a dogma and a creed, and continues:

Neither is there a leader other than the One Almighty God.... All that is required of us is that we should, in patience and sincerity, surrender and submit our own will to the Will of God...one humanity facing One Almighty God...the Grace of God bestowed upon human beings according to His Will.... It does not arise through any human action...but simply by the Will and Grace of God...an inner attitude of sincere submission of one's own will to the Will of God.... The latihan is thus unadulterated worship of God through surrender to God's Will...

And so on, continuing to imply that Subud is not really for Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, Shintoists, Agnostics and Atheists — to name but a few.

You may think that I'm splitting hairs, that it's not important, but being an advertising copywriter by profession, I am acutely aware of the importance of precise language when attempting to communicate with a given target audience, and over the years I have seen clients make two mistakes over and over again.

The first is to fail to talk to the target audience in relevant language. For example, I've just written two ads for a new, hi-tech pedal box designed for racing cars. Initially the client only wanted one advertisement aimed at both engineers and drivers, but I convinced them that we should feature only the product's super-fast response in racing driver magazines, because shaving tenths of a second off lap times is all a driver lives for, whereas in engineering journals we should discuss the product's 'low hysteresis ball bearings' and other hi-tech improvements, because understanding how the technology works and its practical application is the engineer's bag.

And we make exactly the same mistake by using only Abrahamic religious language to describe the latihan process, thereby not only failing to communicate with the thousands of seekers from non-Abrahamic religious backgrounds and those with no religion at all, but also the many liberals with a Christian or Islamic upbringing who are turned off by the evangelical movements, fundamentalists and sectarianism

attempting to dominate their religious world.

The second mistake made by many companies is to make claims that are confusingly unclear and not quite true. As an example, I recently saw an ad for a product I was interested in offering a 'free one month's trial', but when I investigated, it turned out that you only got a free month if you signed up for a year's contract. The negative effect this 'sleight of hand' had on me means I will now look to their competitors instead.

We make a similar mistake when we state publicly that the latihan is for all, regardless of 'race, gender and creed' and that we have no belief system, while in the small print it says, 'But we do believe in the Abrahamic religious construct of a universal, ruling Almighty God with a Will for all.' Not only is our product not quite what it says it is on the tin, but also the label is off-putting to many potential 'buyers'.

Our use of traditional Biblical/Koranic language, so similar to that of the ultra-religious right, is, therefore, erecting barriers and denying many potential members the opportunity to even read about the liberating gift we have all benefited from.