

A Question for the WSA

By Marius Kahan

Is Subud a religion?

Or is it an association of free-thinkers, some of whom may follow one religion or another?

And which would you like it to be?

I ask because it seems to me that Subud is at a crossroads, and how it proceeds may well determine whether it ever attains the status to which it has laid claim since its inception.

My view is that there should be a referendum to take the pulse of the wider membership on this issue, although I doubt that the will exists to hold one. All the same, it is high time to decide how Subud is to be officially represented in the future, and the chosen path must be followed without compromise. This may mean facing up to some tough realities, but resolute action is required – to do nothing is to let Subud down.

Why?

Because the association as it stands today presents a self-contradictory image to the world: it claims not to be a religion yet the commonly recognised pillars of any religion are highly visible in Subud – notably:

- A leader believed to have attained perfection and to be a messenger of God
- Said leader being idolised as an example to be emulated as far as possible
- A set of teachings
- A priesthood – in the helpers – that is accorded divine authority (for example, by being asked to test resolutions at congresses and other meetings)

Unarguably, the religious aspects of Subud are rising to the surface and it is showing signs of morphing into a full-blown religion. Now more than ever, the claim that Subud is not a religion seems at best an empty assertion, at worst an embarrassment. The same applies to the oft-quoted statements that guidance is to be found through our personal experience of the latihan, and that we shouldn't believe anything Bapak said unless we receive it to be true for ourselves.

Further explicit religious overtones are found in both the name and symbol of Subud, yet these are so institutionalised that, despite the above paragraph, they are rarely questioned. But I should point out that, even though I would welcome a change should it occur, for me these latter points don't particularly rankle. I see the name and symbol as historical facts of Subud, and put them in a similar category to Alfa Romeo's logo (which effectively celebrates the Crusades) in that they both come from a time

before the widespread scepticism that seems to characterise the Zeitgeist. I think Alfa Romeo get away with it because they're not trying to sell anything spiritual (arguably at least – I'm far from the only owner to claim that Alfas can deliver a 'Zen' experience), but any explanation of the Subud name or symbol is liable to sound religious – so, in an ideal world, I guess they really ought to go.

However, I don't believe that there's the remotest possibility of Subud dropping either, even though, drawing as they do on some very specific beliefs, they can only serve to reinforce the association's apparent split-personality. I would even go so far as to suggest that even if they don't articulate their misgivings in so many words, one of the factors that drives away potential enquirers (not to mention existing members, including me) is the incongruity between what Subud says about itself and what it actually is.

More's the pity, as I'm unaware of any other organisation that offers a pure connection with 'the-power-of-whatever-you-want-to-call-it' in a group setting, complete with unbidden leaping about and jazzy, free-form vocal stylings.

Surely I can't be the only person to have noted how Subud mimics the core structure of Christianity with its foundations of Father (God), Son (Bapak) and Holy Spirit (the latihan). Please understand that I have nothing against Bapak and in fact hold him in high regard – but I do not believe that he was a prophet, in contrast to the view apparently held (even if stated only in hushed terms) by the Church of Latter Day Bapak within Subud.

Yet Bapak claimed to consider himself merely an ordinary man (peculiar abstruse hints about Adam and Mohammed notwithstanding). So if he claimed *not* to be a prophet, why do people idolise him? By his own words we should be in Subud to experience and learn from the latihan, not from him, yet Subud as a whole seems incapable of accepting this.

A small example of this adulation is the photo of Bapak that many Subud members display in their homes when, if anything, they *should* have a photo of God. Okay, I'm being deliberately flippant, but in truth even the apparently innocuous photo of Bapak on the dresser hints at idolatry. I'm not suggesting that people burn their photos, only that they examine honestly what they represent – because no matter what their motive (be it to find their true self, to connect with a higher consciousness, to find a cure for an illness, or – to employ the obsequious language of religion – to 'worship' God) I'm pretty sure that nobody joined Subud to adulate Bapak. And this raises a question: how and why do Bapakists choose to make that detour? (For the record, in my thirty-four years as a Subud member it never once occurred to me to keep a photo of Bapak.)

Paradoxically, those who seem determined to set Bapak up as a prophet – thus laying the foundations for turning Subud into a religion – wouldn't do this if their reverence for Bapak were consistent, because it's the polar opposite of what he himself suggested.

But what about 'a set of teachings'? Well, 'Bapak-Said' syndrome – where a certain type of Subud true believer frames their entire reality in terms of quotes from Bapak

– has led to accusations that Bapak was out to indoctrinate the membership, but I'm not so sure. The explicit exhortation not to believe anything he said unless we received it to be true for ourselves was, I'm convinced, much more than a mere politically correct disclaimer. Bapak must surely have known, as many of us have come to discover, that receivings come from a realm beyond the intellectual and are therefore subject to misinterpretation by the rational mind. Take the oft-banded tale of Bapak receiving that he would build a great ship, which, as popular belief would have it, turned out to be the PTS Widjojo building with its distinctly ship-like appearance. I've had this cited to me ad nauseam by true believers – but if they can not only acknowledge, but more or less celebrate this 'charming misunderstanding' between 'their prophet' and 'his creator', why do they insist that virtually everything else he said was to be taken 100% literally?

Bapak's talks often included fanciful ideas rooted in Javanese mythology as well as factual and scientific inaccuracies – but perhaps the flaws and contradictions could be characterised as serving to generate ambiguity and thereby circumvent members' constant demands to provide certainty through rules and beliefs.

To suggest that the driver behind these inconsistencies was God is to open myself up to accusations of intellectual weakness, although I am quite comfortable with the idea that uncertainty is the very basis of our universe and that, as such, any 'factual' statement about the nature of things is simply begging to be trumped by some alternative view. But whichever way we look at it, the outcome is the same: in a world where logic and consistency are perhaps more highly valued than they were in the past, discrepancies in Bapak's talks make it impossible to create a teaching based around them – at least, they do if Subud wants to be perceived as wholly reasonable and rational by the world at large. A clear example can be found in Bapak's comments about angels: he said that God sent angels to the far reaches of the universe to report on the quality of Creation; yet he also maintained that God was omniscient – which would surely have rendered these angelic investigations superfluous. He added that an angel travelling at 1,000 times the speed of light would take fifty years to get to the edge of the universe whereas, even at that unlikely speed, fifty years would scarcely get you from one side of our galaxy to the other.

So why did he keep coming and giving talks? Well, he didn't really have much choice, did he? The Subud UK pioneers actively sought him out, and from this Subud started to spread throughout the world. Once the ball was rolling, the membership's unquenchable thirst for information never let up throughout Bapak's life, and I suspect that he felt an obligation to shepherd this flourishing movement because collectively the membership asked him to.

But I digress. We're dealing with a troubling legacy here: the talks have become the basis of a teaching and Ibu Rahayu is aggressively promoting Bapak as a spiritual leader when he often – albeit not exclusively – referred to himself as 'the chairman of Subud' (which seems somewhat more consistent with his 'ordinary man' stance). In addition, under cover of 'officialising' Bapak's suggestions and talks, she has set herself up as *de facto* leader and seems to feel at liberty to issue edicts, all of which not only go completely unchallenged but are enthusiastically adopted, regardless of whether they merit consideration.

And who's going to argue with the initiative to archive Bapak's talks for the long term? Well actually I am, because we know, to an absolute certainty, that some of Bapak's talks contained inaccuracies. Like many people, I find that he said things I later received to be true for myself, but equally there are other assertions to which the opposite applies. This leaves room for only one conclusion: that which I need to know I will likely receive in latihan anyway – while looking to Bapak's talks for guidance is liable to result in my taking on board at least some misinformation. But archiving the talks is important if we are to preserve for posterity what Bapak said and did – as long as the crucial distinction between record-keeping and automatic acceptance of the content of his talks is made clear.

The latihan gives us a chance to stand on our own feet, spiritually speaking, and hanging on the every word of an authority figure is not the way to do that. We may protest that we make our own choices about which bits to believe and which to ignore, but choosing from a selection of someone else's views is not the same as receiving for oneself.

However, this archiving is a far more serious issue when it comes to Ibu Rahayu's pronouncements. Her talks are being archived too, yet to be candid, many of them seem to go against Subud's ideals while claiming to reinforce them. Consider the following quotes from a talk last year (10 SRG 1 - 5 Mar 2010), described as 'another must-read' by the person distributing it, yet full of problematic statements:

It is through giving explanations that you have an opportunity to guide and direct members who want to practise the spiritual training of Subud. However, **I insist** [my emphasis] that the explanations you give should be accurate; they should be like the original. By original I mean this was all set out when Bapak first received the latihan.

So, Subud *does* have rules then?

[I]f you explain Subud according to your wishes, according to what you want it to be, you have deviated from Subud and it is not Subud anymore.

So receiving for yourself is fine – unless you tell someone else about it?

[N]either reading talks but not doing latihan, nor doing latihan continually and never reading or listening to Bapak's talks, will suffice.

Ah, so there *is* a teaching in Subud after all....

No one can progress or experience the spiritual if they never do latihan, because they will not have been trained.

Well, thanks for clearing that up – as it turns out, Subud *is* the only way to God.

And indeed, Subud is not a religion; one can simply call it a technique.

All evidence in the preceding four extracts to the contrary.

Come on, people, Subud is being turned into a religion before your very eyes, but instead of taking a stand and railing against this, the association is absolutely complicitous in the process. And this is only the thin edge of the wedge. If Subud adopts this kind of belief-system now, where do you imagine (if anywhere) it will be in two hundred years' time?

In the aftermath of Bapak's passing I witnessed a variety of reactions among the membership, but perhaps the two that I found most notable were at opposite ends of the spectrum. At one extreme I was surprised by how many people suddenly seemed to feel liberated to pursue activities that might previously have been characterised as 'mixing' (funny how that term seems to have dropped from common Subud usage), while, at the other, a mind-set emerged that was characterised by a determination to follow Bapak's guidance even more rigidly (to the point of excluding rational thinking), as if seeking the kind of certainty people had felt from just having him around.

I would contend that this latter attitude was the genesis of a sort of fundamentalism that has now grown so institutionalised that, retrospectively, I can't help feeling that Subud never stood a chance after Bapak died. And because Ibu has been broadly accepted as figurehead, she feels free to set out rules based on 'Bapak's vision' from which she 'insists' people must not deviate – and the Subud faithful have fallen in like an obedient regiment of Lilliputians. Yet inconsistencies remain: for example, Bapak founded a brotherhood; Subud has become an association. I'm all for that of course, but it does rather suggest that, contrary to Ibu's imperative not to change anything Bapak laid down, it's okay to amend things when politically expedient to do so.

One could argue though, that all the elements of a religion were there in Subud from the outset, and from the cosy perspective of hindsight I wouldn't disagree – but it was a different world back then, which, I would guess, is why nobody picked up on this. In the Fifties, something with no official teaching and manifesting as this crazy, avant-garde practice imported from the exotic East must have looked just about as far from religion – that is to say as far from the contemporary Western religious norm of going to church – as it possibly could. People are more sceptical today and scrutiny is applied more thoroughly to any spiritual group, thanks to the numerous rip-offs, cults and just plain duds that appeared throughout the Seventies and Eighties.

In addition, tales of the extraordinary experiences people had around Bapak are legion (along with rational explanations that, while not exactly legion, are certainly squadron). But as one who had a couple of such moments, I can honestly say that they defy rational analysis and I can't conceive of any explanation that fits, other than that Bapak was indeed some kind of spiritual lightning rod – and I would speculate that such experiences were another reason that the religious paradigms already in place didn't seem particularly noticeable or alarming at the time.

But what if the early association/brotherhood was merely a bud, something that had the potential to flower into a new, global, spiritual force? What if Subud was the blue touch-paper, but the latihan is the firework? Because, sad to relate, I no longer believe that Subud can avoid collapsing into a religious black hole – but it's not too late for the light, the latihan, to escape the event horizon.

Could it be that this amazing gift, this phenomenon, this connection with the divine,

was going to burst through into the world regardless, to be made freely available to anyone who asked for it, unfettered by the lore of Subud or any other organisation? What if the membrane between the material and spiritual worlds was weaker in early 20th Century Indonesia than elsewhere (and 'elsewhen') and it was able to break through? I'm speaking metaphorically of course, before anyone jumps on me. But now that it's here, it may suffice simply to explain to those who express an interest that it exists. After all, does anyone really think that we open people? Surely it is 'the-power-of-whatever-you-want-to-call-it' that does the opening. Perhaps we just need to let people know that it's available and help them to accept that this force can flow through them unencumbered.

If Subud came clean and called itself a religion then that would at least be consistent with its current form. But I think one can argue convincingly that as Subud has always claimed not to be a religion, the only way to be true to Bapak's vision is to excise all systemic religious attitudes and behaviour from the Association, and that if Bapak and Ibu's talks are to be archived, any statements that manifestly undermine the claim to have no leader, no teaching and no dogma have no place in them and must either be clearly annotated as such or edited out – an argument that, for some, rests on the dodgy foundations of circular logic, although I consider it perfectly sound and rational.

Root and branch reform of Subud and its literature are the tough realities I referred to at the outset, but I rather doubt that anyone in a position to initiate such radical action would be prepared to countenance it, let alone follow it through. To which I can only say – what a waste. Subud had such potential and to have watched this fantastic opportunity degenerate into an insipid parody of its former self has been one of my greatest disappointments.

My hope today is that those who love the latihan but question Subud will find a way to carry this gift of receiving into the wider world, even if – as I fear – Subud itself is destined to crash and burn. Or rather, perhaps, to go out with a whimper.