

Genuinely Open

By Merin Nielsen

I'm presenting a theory about a big discrepancy between what Subud really *is* and its image as presented to most people—and why this presents a critical problem, at least in Australia. Frankly, I would like profound changes in both how Subud tends to be regarded by its own members and how the latihan is portrayed to the wider world.

A fundamental claim about Subud is that it is compatible with all major religions. I find this true in principle, but not in practice, due to the internal 'culture' of Subud. This displays many religious peculiarities, including: recommending Bapak's talks as inherently spiritually edifying; vigorously celebrating Bapak's birthday; referring to supposed prophecies of Bapak; attributing the status of 'holy person' to Bapak and Ibu Rahayu; treating Bapak as alive and/or present; prominently recognising Ramadan; prominently observing third, seventh, fortieth, hundredth and thousandth day selamatans; attributing mystical power to names; asserting the literal existence of spirits, jinns, levels of reality and of heaven; doing the latihan to 'cleanse' premises; doing the latihan for sick or dead people, especially one's ancestors; and modelling reality, non-allegorically, in terms of Javanese cosmology.

Above are just some of the activities involving powerfully religious themes and overtones in which members of Subud groups (including me) regularly indulge. These behaviours are guided by specific religious beliefs that are shared by relatively few people in the broader community. As religious perspectives are inclined to be exclusive, these Subud norms are generally just *not* compatible with the religious sensibilities of most non-Subud people. Although rarely given official endorsement by the Subud organisation, our common practices of this kind are obviously liable to be offensive to practising Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists and so on.

Such religious, 'spiritual' or cultural elements are almost always described by Subud members as non-compulsory and purely incidental to membership—emphatically labelled as completely voluntary. Nevertheless, a few customs that are traditionally regarded throughout Subud as spiritual in their basis, like appointing chairpersons through testing, are even officially endorsed. While most are indeed optional, the overall tolerance of these themes and overtones is so prevalent and pervasive that they are widely seen as *de rigueur*.

In my opinion, this is caused by peer pressure, combined with the desire to appear suitably respectful of the 'received wisdom'. Though religion *as such* is hardly ever discussed among Subud members, I have always noticed a strong bias in favour of collective piety. The peer pressure itself is natural, stemming from the human desire to belong to and be accepted by some sort of close community, but within Subud groups it tends to get mixed with the hope of being acknowledged as 'spiritual'—in other words, evidently pious and 'in tune' or spiritually well-informed. I recognise this kind of hope in myself all the time, but while it's a very normal human attitude, it is the basis of a serious difficulty for Subud.

To me it seems plainly impossible for any organisation to be open to all religions while itself resembling a religion. Since most people are fairly sensitive about the relevant differences, compatibility with all religions can exist only for an organisation that is culture-free in religious terms. Can Subud ever be free of seeming to be religious? I doubt it, unless Subud members far and wide can drop the emphasis upon Bapak's world-view and 'vision', which I would argue has been devoutly carried too far. However, I believe that a major issue of loyalty opposes any prospect of reversal: loyalty to the institution that provides many of us with a sense of identity and

direction—the father figure of Bapak.

I don't see myself as anti-Bapak. I continue to find his advice and explanations very valuable, but I have no problem with views that are contrary to his in various ways. I feel certain that Bapak's words (like anybody's, due to the very nature of language) are fallible and sometimes potentially misleading. Yet often in small talk among Subud members, for instance, there is an unwarranted assumption of shared reverence for Bapak's every statement.

Regardless of how each individual personally views Bapak, in the context of Subud activities and interactions between members, whether social or procedural, I believe that Bapak needs to be removed from the pedestal on which we have placed him. Then the peer pressure effect would diminish, the religious connotations of Subud group culture would eventually fall away, and we could *honestly* portray Subud as compatible with all major religions. Furthermore, there would surely be far fewer people who join Subud and subsequently leave because they cannot put up with all the peculiar religiosity that they discover.

This consideration may point to a highly significant factor in Subud's looming disappearance—the subtle but potent sense of dishonesty associated with declaring that Subud is non-religious. In thus describing Subud to the rest of the world, there is frequently, consciously or not, a certain accompanying twinge of embarrassment. This feeling exists because, despite our respective protestations, deep down we all know that sooner or later each Subud newcomer is bound to stumble across all the various religious oddities listed above. I believe we thus find ourselves often automatically inhibited about announcing the latihan's existence. I suspect this will remain the situation unless and until we cast off the incongruous baggage inherited from Bapak's culture, the Javanese complexion he imparted to Subud in founding it.

Accordingly, while Bapak's injunction against proselytising supplies an excuse for not shouting out loud that the latihan is freely available, a crucial reason for being so quiet about it, I suggest, is a subliminal fear of ridicule or disdain by our non-Subud fellow citizens. And perhaps rightly. As long as Subud is in the situation of likely being disdained for its extraneous religious elements, maybe we *should not* feel free to announce the latihan's existence! Perhaps it is inappropriate for the latihan to be heralded by an organisation that paints it largely in such a bizarre light.

The circumstances need not be this way, though. There are simpler ways of looking at the latihan. It can be regarded as just an exercise that might be spiritually healthy. Practising the latihan would then be analogous to attending the gym for the benefit of one's physical health, our human faculties representing the equipment with which the 'soul' exercises. Of course, certain precautions should be taken—just as at the gym where certain pieces of equipment could cause injury if used incorrectly. Yet there is no expectation of needing to adjust one's world-view or embellish one's culture merely for the sake of getting some exercise.

There are several other similarities between doing the latihan and attending the gym. First, it's usually optimal to practise both kinds of exercise in sessions according to a schedule. Second, although the 'fitness' results are proportional to input, calling for some sense of discipline, exercising can be overdone. (Whereas the physical input involves determination and calories, the latihan input is along the lines of trust, patience and sincerity.) Third, for each person, the most suitable regimen is uniquely distinct, and indeed, working-out is simply not for everybody. Fourth, working-out with a group is more motivating and better regulated. Fifth, the exercise has no ranking of competence, so no-one can ever be counted as 'better at it' than anyone else. Lastly, attending the gym is never an end in itself. The idea is essentially just to maintain a state of fitness from which benefits might follow for one's life outside the

gym. No guarantees—simply whatever blessings subsequently fall into place.

If the latihan is seen in this light, as an exercise that helps to maintain spiritual health, then it's a pity that billions of people never hear about it. It doesn't matter how many people ultimately join Subud—the pity exists only if people never get the chance to consider joining. Moreover, if we mention the latihan only to people whom we meet in our daily lives, then the number who hear about it will remain small. So I believe we should do more. I think we definitely should not *promote* the latihan or Subud by attaching any persuasive claims to them, but we should freely mention them in various, suitable public forums. The latihan could be very valuable to many, many people. Therefore its availability deserves to be proclaimed deliberately and openly in places that are widely accessible. Otherwise we are unnecessarily increasing the pity.

Here's a metaphor. Imagine this village half way up a mountain, where each day everybody makes a one-hour journey to collect water from the valley. Then one fellow—named Fred—discovers a wonderful spring in a cave just five minutes' walk away. Should Fred inform only his family members or his neighbours or his workmates, or only the villagers who notice that he no longer goes down to the valley? No. Fred should tell everybody in the village.

Some villagers might prefer not to enter the cave and would continue to collect water from the valley. But many would take advantage of the spring in the cave, if only they were to hear about it. If Fred tells everybody, then at least they can all choose. If Fred tells only a few people, then the others never get the chance to choose. And that is unnecessary. Fred has no personal motive for promoting the spring in the cave, since he does not own it, he can't sell it, and he should not take credit for it. But he could, for example, put a notice on the local notice-board, thereby mentioning it to the whole village.

People might accuse Fred of spoiling village tradition, or they might try the water from the cave, but say the valley water is superior, calling Fred a fool for wasting their time. If I were Fred, though, I would feel better if more people could enjoy the spring, should they decide to try it and find it beneficial.

To make this story apply to Subud, however, I must add that our Fred simply cannot bring himself to tell the whole village about the spring in the cave! This is because he has an odd secret that people going there are bound to notice. In short, Fred has dressed up the cave in ritual symbols, and treats it as having magical glamour—a belief which he knows is quite likely to be mocked. Hence he feels reticent to tell everyone about the spring!

Likewise, Subud inadvertently imposes an awkward requirement upon its members: they must either endure or embrace Subud's internal culture, introduced and reinforced by peer pressure, with its undue emphasis on Bapak and sundry Javanese religious notions and habits. Our niggling awareness of this fact makes us altogether shy about Subud.

In reality, as most Subud members appear to understand anyway, it does not make sense to care about the growth of Subud for the sake of the organisation, whereas it is legitimate to care about making the latihan more available. These are entirely different. Without the latihan, Subud would be nothing, but without Subud, the latihan would still be wonderful. Thus we should focus on the spring water (the latihan), not on the magical glamour (the cultural baggage).

In summary, I'm afraid that if Subud is to survive, then it simply cannot continue to harbour all those practices and presuppositions indicated above. A possible answer

would be to split Subud into two organisations—one that is willing to entertain the religious themes and overtones, and one that is not willing. These organisations could remain together in principle, but be physically distinct in terms of practising the latihan separately (while perhaps using the same premises). If this were to happen, then in my opinion, the first would almost certainly dwindle away, while the second one just might flourish.

That prospect, however, represents much pain, sorrow and confusion. Is there another way to help the world take seriously our claim of having no belief system? A different response would be for Subud members as a whole to confront the internal culture of well-intended but detrimental religiosity, and officially undertake to subdue it. This course also comes with significant turmoil, but if a consensus were established, then the inevitable anguish might be temporary. The probable alternative is Subud's demise and the latihan eventually being forgotten—until some future society perhaps appreciates it for the natural, unencumbered source of well-being that it really is.