

Bridging the Divide

by Rosalind Priestley

Some years ago, in fact not long before 9/11, I read a book called *The Battle for God*, by Karen Armstrong, an ex-nun turned historian of religion who also wrote the best-seller, *A History of God*. *The Battle for God* talks about the clash between traditional religion and the modern rational and secular ethos. One doesn't have to agree with all of Armstrong's arguments, but it seems clear that the fear of being steamrolled by modernism was an important factor in the development of fundamentalism. Conversely, removing that fear would be an important first step towards resolving the tensions. This highlighted for me once again the disastrous and polarizing influence fear exerts in many aspects of our lives, not just the political realm. As often happens, I found myself drawing a parallel with my Subud life.

Back in 1966 when my husband and I were opened (here in Toronto), Subud was a rather different kind of experience. People were reading Bennett's account of the latihan and getting excited about the possibility of attaining enlightenment within three years. Bapak was very much in the background; some members had never even heard of him. All that changed quickly when Bapak started touring the Subud world and giving talks. Members eagerly anticipated meeting our new "Spiritual Guide" in the flesh and lapped up his predictions about the important role Subud would one day play on the world stage.

That was the beginning of what I have come to see as a Subud Divide. As a non-religious, independent-minded person who was most definitely not looking for a father figure or a teacher, I viewed with suspicion the growing tendency to turn Bapak into a guru and the latihan into a kind of religion. Although it may be an oversimplification, I tend to think in terms of two basic types of Subud members: those primarily excited by the possibility of a spiritual experience without an intermediary or a teaching, in a neutral context radically different from that of any religion; and those primarily attracted by the authority and charisma of the leader of a new religious movement. Those in the second category have shown a natural tendency, over the years, to turn Bapak into a kind of Subud Pope or prophet, and his words into holy scripture. As a result, many in the first category concluded that the Subud claim to be free of teaching, dogma and authority was a hollow one, and subsequently dropped out. Of those who remained, some were gradually won over, in whole or in part, by the prevailing mystique, and the rest stayed because of the latihan but never totally lost their misgivings. My husband and I belong to this latter group.

It still seems to me that Subud holds an enormous potential for those who want a spiritual experience but without disavowing the good side of the modern ethos, its rationality and pragmatism, its tolerance and inclusiveness. At one time Subud seemed tailor-made for skeptical people like me, a religious experience without the baggage of doctrine and belief (and the superstition and prejudices that often accompany them). Unfortunately, Subud quickly acquired its own set of baggage, most of it derived from traditional Sufi and Javanese beliefs. For many members this is now part of the identity of Subud, and they feel threatened when some of us don't accept this aspect of Subud culture.

We non-believers are (I believe) a minority and when we dare to give expression to our own views and attitudes in a Subud context, I feel we are often looked upon as ungrateful children too dense or too stubborn to recognize the wisdom in Bapak's

teachings. Sometimes it is even suggested to us that we should leave Subud and look elsewhere for a spiritual path. This is unfortunate because it seems unlikely that Subud has much future as the Cult of Bapak; cults rarely survive very long after the death of the founder. If Subud is to grow I should think there are far more potential applicants among skeptics and humanists than among guru-seekers or those who already belong to a religion.

My feeling is: if Subud is to survive, we need to find ways for people on both sides of this Divide to co-exist comfortably. We need to disengage from and defuse the conflict, such as it is, and I believe that can only be accomplished by reducing or eliminating the fears on both sides. Those who feel threatened by dissenting opinions need to be reassured that their right to their own views will always be respected and honoured, and that no one wishes them to relinquish or devalue their deeply-held beliefs and treasured experiences. On the other side, people like me very much need reassurance that there *is* a place for us in the organization, that Subud is not a movement that promotes a system of thought, or discourages independent expression, or requires us to all see things in the same way. We have in common a belief in the value of the latihan. If we are wide enough in our feelings to make this the *only* condition for belonging to Subud, we might clear the way for many more people to join and to feel comfortable continuing.