Becoming Normal

By David Week

> Yes, I may go to coast this summer. I just missed you in that bar last summer when I sat that little cat on my lap all night... I had a ball that summer time, but overdid it & went a little schizo. (I thought I was being 'poisoned by The Subud Cult')! —Jack Kerouac, Letters <http://www.informatik.uni-freiburg.de/~fleig/kerouac.html>
>
> …the inspiration for me to begin moving out on my own spiritual journey, outside the confines of the constrictive belief system that infuses Subud these days… —M., email to author

Subud and the "c" word

Who wants to join a cult? Anyone? Raise your hands please!

Subud is not a cult, Subud is a cult, Subud is not a cult but sometimes looks like a cult, Subud is not supposed to be a cult but is turning into a cult…. This debate has been going on within Subud, rising and falling in waves, in a variety of forms.

At the 1989 Sydney Congress, Michael Rogge produced a paper, 'Subud at the Crossroads'. In it, he analysed Subud's problems—many of them the same today, many of them highlighted in the articles published by Subud Vision, unresolved. He said of these problems: 'All the above aspects may be traced back to Subud's past and its roots in Javanese religious culture. Subud outside Indonesia has failed to adapt itself to people of other ways of living and thought. It has still the appearance common to Javanese mystical movements.' The paper was not accepted for discussion on the Congress floor.

At the 2001 Bali Congress Damiri Renard facilitated two workshops of thirty to forty people each, on the topic of 'Do we in Subud behave like a cult or sect?' The proceedings of the workshops opened with the acknowledgement that: "In many countries, Subud is considered a sect or cult." The recommendations of these workshops were put to the Congress, who referred them to the International Helpers for further action. As far as I know, no further action was taken.

Finally, in the 2005 Innsbruck Congress, five major themes were discussed. One of these was 'Presenting Subud in the World: the Image of Subud'. The report on the workshop on this topic opened with the line: 'In order for Subud to operate in the world with credibility, it needs to get out of its "spiritual egocentrism" and isolationism and start facing a world that tends to consider spiritual movements with great skepticism and prejudice.'

I think that the one thing that the majority of members can and do agree on is that is it of no benefit to Subud to either be, or appear to be, a cult. However, the articles published by Subud Vision, and the efforts at the various Congresses, suggest that this problem is persistent. As long as it persists, people will view us in the same category as they do Sai Baba, Amma, Heaven's Gate and Scientology. Constantly I see members adopting strategies to hide from the public their association with Subud. This ranges from agitating to have secure websites to ensure that no one can find out that they are an officer of Subud, to living under two names: a 'Subud' name that they use at the hall, and another name that they use elsewhere. None of the above suggests a membership who is comfortable with Subud's image in the world.

What makes us look like a cult?

Technically, a cult is 'a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister'—in other words: a small religion. (Tom Wolfe put it this way: 'A cult is a religion without political power.')

A sect, on the other hand, is 'a group of people with somewhat different religious beliefs from those of a larger group to which they belong'—in other words: an offshoot from an established religion.

What makes Subud look like a cult is the presence of 'strange religious beliefs'. 'Strange' is a relative word: what looks like a strange belief to a European might not look strange to a Javanese. In fact, beliefs that in Java belong to a large and widely acknowledged—if shrinking—religion, Kejawen, when imported piecemeal into other countries, would appear to be a cult. Thus, I've heard that the Javanese see nothing unusual or strange in Subud, but the governments of France and Italy have classed it as a cult.

Given the degree to which Subud beliefs are descended from the religion of Java—Kejawen, or Agama Jawa—one could also call Subud a Javanese sect, rather than a cult.

The beliefs in Subud come from Pak Subuh's talks. He was Javanese. His talks are—for the most part—teachings of Javanese beliefs. Consider, for instance, the following three paragraphs, the first from Pak Subuh, the others from expositions of Javanese religion:

1. Besides these forces that have become man's partners, the human being, by God's will, also has the desires (*nafsu*) he needs, to arouse in him the spirit to work and be active. The nest of these desires is in man's heart, that is, in the heart of man's will. There are four kinds of desire or passion. The first is called *aluamah*, the desire or wish to win; the second is *amarah*, the desire to become rich or acquire wealth for oneself; the third is *suplyah*, or the wish become, oneself, the most famous and well known; and the fourth is *mutmainah*, the nature of the heart that wishes oneself to be the most wise. Man needs to possess such desires so that he does not remain motionless like a material object, or like a plant, or an animal, or like a human being without learning. —Pak Subuh
   <http://www.subudlibrary.net/library/Bapak_English/BAPAK157.HTM>

2. Woodward (1989:190–91) notes, for example, that the Javanese he came to know in and around the Sultanate of Yogyakarta commonly speak of there being four different types of 'passion' (*nepsu* in Javanese): (1) *aluhama*, or greed, 'symbolized by the color black, represented as an animal, and located in the blood'; (2) *amarah*, or anger, 'symbolized by the color red, represented as a spirit, [and] located in muscle tissue'; (3) *mutmainah*, or desire for tranquility, 'symbolized by the color white, represented as a fish, [and] located in the breath'; and (4) *supiyah*, or the desire to destroy evil, 'symbolized by the color yellow, represented as a bird, [and] present in bone marrow'.
   <http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=ft4r29p0jz&chunk.id=
   d0e4732&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e4729&brand=eschol>

3. The *Serat Wirid* and *Serat Cabolek* [two court books recording details of the Javanese religion], for instance, mention the following types of *nafsu*:
   i. *Nafsu Amarah*—(Javanese; from Arabic, *al-ammarah*) anger, symbolized by the color red, represented as a spirit, located in muscle tissue.

ii. *Nafsu Aluhamah*—(Javanese; from Arabic, *al-lawwamah*) greedy desire, symbolized by the color black, represented as an animal, located in the blood.
iii. *Nafsu Supiyah*—(Javanese; from Arabic, *saffia*) the pure, good desire which wishes to destroy evil desire, symbolized by the color yellow, represented as a bird, present in bone marrow.
iv. *Nafsu Mutmainah*—(Javanese; from Arabic, *al-mutma'innah*) the calm, peaceful and upright desire or the desire for tranquility, symbolized by the color white, represented as a fish, located in the breath.

— Chuzaimah Batubara, *Islam and Mystical Movements in Post-Independence Indonesia: Susila Budhi Dharma (SUBUD) and Its Doctrines*, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 1999, p. 86

In the first excerpt, Pak Subuh is expounding on the Javanese theory of the *nafsu*. Readers who have adopted this as their own spiritual psychology, have indeed adopted aspects of the belief system of Java.

So not only do we push particular obscure religious beliefs, but through our information channels, we aggressively push them: ideas about about angels and demons, about Christianity and Islam, about religious symbols, about 'genuine' human souls, and others that are inferior to stones. For instance, a recent email from Subud USA advertised:

> *Brand New! Bapak's Talks Volume 16 Arrives in Late May!*
> The sixteenth volume of Bapak's Talks comprises fourteen talks given by Bapak in Madras, Calcutta, Johannesburg and London in March and April 1967.

It then gave a long list of topics covered, including:

> 'How you will know when you have reached the level of having a genuine human soul.'
>
> 'How some stones, plants and animals are considered to be of more value than human beings.'
>
> 'How not to be affected by demons.'
>
> 'What is necessary in order to reach God.'

[See Note 1 for a fuller list of the topics presented in the email.]

Most of the topics have have nothing to do with the formless, individual *latihan kejiwaan*, or the administration of Subud. They are religious instruction. They are particular religious cosmologies and theologies in keeping with Javanese religion, but often in direct contradiction to faiths and knowledge outside of Java.

For example:

> *'How you will know when you have reached the level of having a genuine human soul.'* Unlike Kejawen, Christianity and Islam do not teach that there are 'levels' of soul. This is a Hindu import.
>
> *'How some stones, plants and animals are considered to be of more value than human beings.'* This belief is offensive to many faiths, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as to secular humanism.[2]

'How not to be affected by demons.' People of many religious persuasions—to speak nothing of secular ones—will find this question bizarre. Belief in demons is far more widespread in Java, than it is in the UK, the US or Australia.

'What is necessary in order to reach God.' Each religion has its own answer, which is what makes it a religion.

We say over and over, Subud is not a religion. We say that it is not incompatible with any religion. Yet within Subud, we promote a particular theology, from a particular religious background, and we promote it vigorously.

In other articles published by SubudVision, Helen Bailie has called this 'bait and switch' and Lilliana Gibbs has referred to it as 'a lack of integrity'. Certainly, to say one thing to people, on which basis they invest their time and sincerity, only to eventually discover that in Subud, there is very much religion, very much teaching, and very much guru—is unethical. In the literature that looks at cults, this dichotomy between what is presented to the outside world, and what insiders see, is considered one sign of a destructive cult. Shirley Harrison, in *Cults: The Battle for God*, calls this 'deceptive recruitment'.

We don't want to inhabit that space, or be anywhere near it. So what has happened? How have we got into this situation? Are we unethical? Are we deceptive? My view is: not deliberately so, but, inadvertently, yes. We have been carried here by two well-known mechanisms: the diffusion of culture, and the tragedy of the commons.

The diffusion of culture

The latihan is passed from person to person. This process is called diffusion.

But the same process also carries other practices, beliefs, ideas and influences. So with the latihan came a hundred different other influences, following the same diffusion path. A friend told me of an old Subud film. Pak Subuh visits Disneyland (dressed in a suit, no doubt!). Behind him come a number of faithful members, wearing *pecis* (black felt hats), *batik* shirts, and smoking *kreteks* (clove cigarettes). These affectations of dress seem to be largely gone now.

Then there was the diffusion of terminology: *nafsu*, *jiwa*, *sukma*, *wahyu*, *rasa*, *jasmani*, *rabbani*, *rohani*, *Nasut*, *Malakut*, *Jabarut*, *Lahut*, *Hahut*…. Certainly, the tide is shifting away from the continuation of such jargon.

But these are only visible influences. Beneath these surface influences lie the theological concepts that underpin these words. One can change the words, and still be under the influence of the Javanese theological world-view, in which there are various levels, all souls are not created equal, divine power flows around and between people and rests in objects, people are inhabited by a dormant divine spark which when awakened puts its house in order, and bodies are animated by 'life forces'. This complex cosmology was not invented by Pak Subuh. It's Javanese, with smatterings of Islam and Theosophy. So you can dispose of the batik shirt and the black felt cap; you can stop speaking in foreign words; but as long as you subscribe to the theology, you are being affected by the cultural diffusion that accompanied the diffusion of the latihan.

And beyond the theology, there are tacit cultural attitudes, like conflict avoidance, deference to *wahyu*-appointed authority, name-change, guided democracy, ancestoralism, harmony as a prime value, and others which are well documented in the literature on Javanese culture.

There is nothing wrong, in itself, with the religion or culture of Java. (Or rather, there may be—but that's up to the Javanese to sort out.) There is something wrong, however, when it is attached to the latihan—either consciously or unconsciously—as a necessary accompaniment.

First, it attaches a particular religious system to the latihan. This is something we have promised, very publicly, not to do.

Second, the Kejawen belief system conflicts with other religious systems. That pushes followers of those religions away. This is also something we have promised, very publicly, not to do.

The process of diffusion is assisted by two other factors. The first is Pak Subuh's role as the Charismatic Leader of the organisation. (The role of charismatic authority in the early stages of development of spiritual and religious communities is described in another article in this volume: 'History vs Myth'.) That authority meant that his religious background was given particular influence and force, over and above—for instance—the many Christian influences that existed among the early membership.

The second is the influence of Coombe. Subud's first contact point in the West was at a Centre set up by John Bennett. The people at Coombe were there because they were attracted by what Bennett had to offer. That group was particularly open to—and even seeking for—a saviour. You can see the system of belief set out in the first two chapters of Bennett's book, *Concerning Subud*. By the end of Chapter 2, Bennett had more or less declared Pak Subuh the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.[3] Not all of Bennett's followers may have agreed with this assessment, but a very large core of the early membership consisted of people who had been gathered by Bennett, and therefore in one way or another had found his world-view attractive. From there, it spread to their friends in 'spiritual circles'—again, like-minded people. And Bennett's messianic interpretation of Pak Subuh and the latihan would have helped inculcate an attitude of uncritical acceptance of Pak Subuh's views and cosmology.

Once a particular influence is present in a founding group, then that influence will tend to replicate itself, because others of like mind will tend to be attracted to the explanations of the founding group, whereas those who are not of like mind are likely to be put off. This is a statistical tendency, not an absolute. We thus find Subud not only shaped by cultural diffusion from Java, but also by a set of very particular millennialist and messianic beliefs from England.

The tragedy of the commons

The 'tragedy of the commons' is a metaphor for a certain kind of community catastrophe. It refers to the old common fields around English villages, before the enclosures. Every villager would graze his or her animals on the common. Let's say each villager has five animals, and the common could sustainably support five hundred animals. One villager may think, 'If I graze six animals, nothing bad will happen.' And that's true, with one extra animal. But it's also true that if every villager thinks and acts that way, there will a hundred too many animals, the common will be overgrazed, and the village will suffer.

A real life example happens with modern national healthcare systems. Your grandmother is suffering from some rare condition, and the doctors say that if they apply a very expensive treatment, they can cure her, and she'll live a few more years. What do you say? Of course, you say yes. Everyone does, which is why healthcare has grown to consume thirty percent of the US GDP. Now, health and long life are good things, but—as with the commons—resources are finite. What happens is that health costs crowd out other common goods, like education, social welfare, and

public libraries. In fact, in places like Oregon, with high percentages of retired people, schools are seriously suffering as the ageing population votes again and again for more health, and less schools.

At some point, in these systems, people will be faced with very difficult decisions — either individually or collectively. Do I choose not to accept very expensive treatments late in life, because I am 'overgrazing' the commons? Do I put aside my own interests, in favour of the next generation? And most important: *what are other ways in which I can meet my needs, which do not have this impact when replicated by all my friends?*

In Subud, most members seek to tread an individual path. Not satisfied with conventional spiritual offerings, they chance upon the latihan. Now they start to practice. They have experiences. They're curious. Who do they turn to for answers? Of course: the founder, Pak Subuh. He tells them what he knows, and what he thinks. Now each person thinks they are acting individually. And they feel they are getting individual benefit. But what they do not see is the overall effect of this.

Let's examine a simple case: name-change. The wonderful Halimah Collingwood told me the story that one day at the Anugraha Congress, she turned up at a meeting, to find that the majority of the women there had the name 'Halimah'—or its variant, 'Halima'. They were bemused by this, and established a tradition, at every Congress, of the Halima(h) luncheon—all the Halima(h)s together. Now I think this is an incredibly warm, funny and adaptive response to a funny situation.

One result of this tradition is that at the Spokane Congress, a local reporter heard about this, and asked for an interview. As part of the interview, the reporter took a photo of all the Halima(h)s, with the caption: 'First row: Halima, Halimah, Halimah, Halima, etc. Second row: Halimah, Halima, Halimah, Halima…and so forth.'

So for an individual, it may make sense to change one's name as part of a process of personal transformation. It's also true that of all the different cultural tools for effecting personal transformation, name-change is much favoured in Java, and little-favoured in the West. It may also make sense for that person to ask for advice from someone to choose a name. But when many individuals all adopt a Javanese practice, asking the same person to name them (or their children), the result can look like just the opposite to an individual spiritual path: it can look like an Islamic cult or a Javanese sect.

A little more complex case: harmony. Few of us enjoy conflict. Surely, any spiritual path should offer a reduction of conflict.[4] Once again, it makes sense in seeking a solution to take the lead from the founder. The anthropological texts on Javanese culture tell us that harmony is the prime Javanese mystical value, and that this translates into the Javanese approach to governance. So from Pak Subuh's perspective, he's giving good advice—as he knows it, within his cultural frame. Again, when many individuals take the lead from one person, they will start to manifest similarities. As a result 'harmony' becomes a frequently manifested Subud value.

There are several problems with pulling 'harmony' out of its Javanese context, and inserting it into a Western context:

The Javanese mystical and political philosophy of harmony works when combined with other components of Javanese culture, including (a) childhood training to be self-effacing and non-confrontational in interpersonal dealings, (b) strongly hierarchical social relations, with deference 'upwards', and (c) a practice of consensus-building under strong patriarchal leadership. These do not

necessarily exist in the Western cultural context.

It involves a turning away from the equally profound, equally deep, and—more important, far more accessible and culturally appropriate—Western cultural tools for minimising, managing and alleviating the consequences of conflict. I personally believe that much of the entrenched conflict I see in Subud could have been resolved years ago if people had availed themselves of what is readily available. I also see that those individuals in Subud who use those Western techniques (psychologists and management consultants) are indeed as adept at conflict management within Subud, as they are outside of it.

Again, the source of the problem lies in the mechanics of the tragedy of the commons: what makes sense for an individual, may have unintended side-effects when multiplied. In setting up a Subud group, or Subud governance, it's perfectly natural for those doing the setting up to seek advice. It's also natural for them to turn to the founder for advice. And finally, it's perfectly sensible for that founder to give advice, in accordance with his best knowledge and experience.

But when we step back and look at the whole, what we see is thousands of individual members going to one person for advice, and that one person comes from a different culture. The effect of that larger pattern of interactions is to imbue Subud governance with the concept of 'harmony'—a concept that is very Javanese in tenor, and which cannot necessarily be made to work well in a Western cultural context.

Where to from here?

If we want to leave behind any image of Subud as a cult, then:

We need to be both aware and wary of the processes of cultural diffusion, the charismatic authority, and the influences of our own history. We have to become, in fact, what we always claim that Subud is (but in fact is not yet): a spiritual exercise open to all comers, free of dogma, teaching, and religious conflict.

We need to avoid the tragedy of the commons, and follow our individual paths not only with reference to 'Does this work for me?' but also to 'Does what I am doing work for my community, if thousands do what I do?'

Dealing with cultural diffusion and charismatic authority

We are caught in a number of double binds, in which our stated values are in conflict with our history: our Javanese history, and our Coombe history. It seems to me that we need to simply acknowledge these histories openly, and deal with them openly. As long as they remain covert, they will cause us trouble, and lead us to look like (and maybe even be) a cult.

On the one hand, we have labelled Subud, so publicly and so often, 'not a religion' and 'not a teaching', that it's very difficult to know what to do with Pak Subuh's talks, which are certainly religious and certainly teachings. It doesn't take much investigation to discover that the experiences, world-view, advice, values, theology and cosmology which inform the talks are—unsurprisingly—very Javanese. All we need to do is overtly acknowledge that these are the explanations of the founder, framed within his Javanese religious world-view.

Once we acknowledge this, all kinds of problems melt away:

Such an acknowledgement clarifies why some people find parts of the talks alien or

offensive. Why would they not? If you understand Pak Subuh's talks as imbued with the world-view of another culture, then of course there are aspects of that culture which will not agree with your own. Big deal. What else would you expect?

Such an acknowledgement would make it clear both why the founder's talks might be of interest (they are, after all, the founder's point of view!) but also why they are in no way binding, nor constitute a dogma. In fact, because they are framed within a particular religion, they cannot be Subud dogma, because Subud is not a religion, and is open to all.

Such an acknowledgement would also defuse the conflict with religion that has messed things up for a number of members. We can say that we are publishing these talks not because we are trying to promote the religious ideas they contain (which is the assumption, for instance, of two State Governments in Malaysia), but merely to make available the views of the founder, without endorsing in any way his religious ideas, nor indeed those of any person or religion.

In making clear the distinction between the religious views of the founder (you can find them in the talks) and the religious views of Subud (none, thank you very much), we also start to dispel what Lilliana has called an absence of integrity, and Helen the 'bait and switch'.

At the same time, we need to address the messianism that comes out of the Coombe history. This is a little more complicated, because on the one hand, everyone has their own religious beliefs. On the other, within Subud, everyone also has the right not to have someone else's religion imposed upon them, either overtly, or unconsciously, or through the Subud organisation. To abide by our own published values, we need to maintain a situation where all religious beliefs are treated with equal respect, and none are allowed to dominate.

The conflicts arise as follows:

Some members believe that Pak Subuh was sent by God, or was the recipient or possessor of some kind of higher knowledge. These beliefs in effect make him a messenger (a role which he seemed to struggle with in his talks, at times affirming and at other times denying it), and ipso facto constitute the establishment of a new religion. From this perspective, all of what I previously said about dealing with the Javanese historical influence makes no sense, because what we are hearing in the talks is not Javanese religion, but divine inspiration.

Other members believe no such thing, and feel directly the ongoing impact of the 'bait and switch'. They were attracted to Subud in part at least because it claims not to be a religion, but they find instead a religion complete with prophet, scriptures, and injunctions prefaced by 'Bapak says…'. They cannot honestly promote Subud, because of the 'bait and switch'. The problem for newcomers is the same: they are not told what they are buying into. If they have a religion, then likely the teachings they find promoted within Subud will be in conflict. They will be members of an organisation that is constantly investing money in the promotion of theological and cosmological teachings to which they may take strong exception.

I think we need to discuss this situation openly. If we can resolve it, I believe it will have a profoundly liberating effect on the possibilities for Subud in the world. I believe the outcome of such a dialogue could have significant implications for the way we

operate, with benefits for all.

Dealing with the tragedy of the commons

> Do you drink the coffee,
> or does the coffee drink you? —Joke once current among Subud members
>
> Copying from one person: that's plagiarism; copying from many: that's research. —Joke still current among university students

In editing earlier drafts of this paper, my fellow editors kept on at me: 'Isn't the point that you can hold any belief you want; just don't pressure others to agree with you?' and 'It's not about getting individuals to give up their beliefs; it's about getting the organisation to stop promoting them, while at the same time preserving the historical record for those who want it.'

But this section is very much about giving up beliefs. The way that the tragedy of the commons works is that as long as seventy percent of Subud members (say) believe in seven heavens, or life forces, or that everything is divided into inner and outer, then Subud will continue to take on the tenor of a Javanese sect, because knowingly or not, for better or worse, that is where such beliefs come from.

The question then becomes: 'Is it good for Subud to look like that? Is it in accordance with its stated aims and ideals?'

If the answer to that is 'no', then the next question is: 'How can we change that?' I believe that the answer to that is: 'We can only change that if each of us starts to change our beliefs.' As long as each villager overgrazes his or her bit of the commons, the commons will suffer. In Subud, overgrazing means to draw one's beliefs from the same source, thus creating an imbalance in the set of beliefs current within Subud: too reflective of one Indonesian island; not reflective enough of the full spectrum of the world's beliefs; too alienated (in most countries) from the particular society in which Subud is operating.

Since beliefs are not lightly arrived at, what could this possibly mean, in practice? To answer that, let me sketch a process.

1. I assume at the beginning that you acquired your beliefs through a considered and responsible process, and not just because The Boss (as Mardiyah Tarantino called him) told you to. You accepted certain beliefs because they made sense in terms of your own experience, and helped you on your way.

2. The Subud saying 'Do you drink the coffee, or does the coffee drink you?' means: 'Who's in charge here, you or your desire for the coffee? Who's running your life?' If we take this into the realm of belief, we might ask, 'Do you hold the belief, or does the belief hold you?' One way to find out is to ask: 'Are you able to let go of the belief?'

3. Beliefs have positive value. They can help us make sense of our experience. They can help us to grow in ways that otherwise might be difficult. The question then isn't letting go of a belief in favour of no belief. (To my knowledge, no human has no beliefs: to be human is to believe.) Rather, the question is: is there another belief that might serve this same purpose for me; to make sense of my experience, and help me grow?

4. Where will we find such related beliefs? One of the nice things about the

religion of Java is that it is syncretic—it is a mish-mash (harmonious, no doubt!) of other religions: animist, Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Islamic. Thus, one can find in Kejawen and in Pak Subuh's talks the threads of other traditions. By following these threads, one can find a deeper understanding of the concepts to which Pak Subuh alludes. I give two examples in Note [5].

5. By turning from the reliance on a single source (plagiarism, as the joke goes), to many sources (research, so the joke goes), one can not only understand better the tradition from which Pak Subuh is speaking, and thereby the meaning of his words, but one also starts to connect to the broader traditions of mankind, and in so doing, focus less on one man, and more on the broad river of human insight as embodied in many religions.

This section is in essence a request to go past Pak Subuh's talks to the traditions to which those talks allude. By going further, you not only help yourself, and expand upon what has been helpful to you; you also help Subud, by broadening it away from Bapak-centrism, to a real connection with the religious, spiritual and mystical traditions of 'all of humankind'.

Becoming ordinary

In Bennett's book, one thing that impressed him about Pak Subuh was his 'ordinariness'. I think ordinariness has merit. If spiritual growth has to do with *susila budhi dharma*—then it is not necessary to encumber oneself with alien clothes, alien words, alien theologies, or alien value systems. An American Subud member who has really 'got it' might be distinguished solely by her being an American with the qualities '*susila'*, '*budhi'*, and '*dharma'* (or should we say 'of good character, refined insight, and attuned to the way the universe works', whether you attribute that to God or not). No baggage.

Similarly a truly American Subud might also appear very ordinary—but at the same time very excellent. There are, for instance, an amazing array of democratic forms of governance in the United States. I was in Massachusetts recently, and was introduced to the 'town hall' meeting, and the strengths, weaknesses and history of that particular form. It seems to me that an American Subud serves Subud very well when it takes American forms and invests them with quality. (I'm thinking just now of a hamburger I had in Skymont in 1970—possibly the best hamburger I ever had.) An American Subud that exemplifies the best in American culture, but done with exceptional quality, would lead observers to say 'Man, this is how things should be done in America!' In other words, Americans might see in Subud how to be an exemplary human being without in any way ceasing to be an American or having to become a faux Javanese in either form or belief.

We will never to get to this if we keep on copying the forms of another culture. Learning from other cultures is great. But the difference between plagiarism and research is: are we learning from just one source, or from many?

Notes

1. A broader range of topics sampled in the Subud USA circular on Pak Subuh's talks:

   The story of the seven heavens and the angels, and why God created God's will within human beings • Why people are unable to find one path to God for all humankind • … • Why God created angels • How the will of God was placed in all things—including human beings—and what stops you from being able to experience it • How the one human race became divided into many, and the

need to reunite them within ourselves • The reason why God has given us the latihan now • How the form of God's gift changed in keeping with the ages • What the letter alif and the sign of the cross symbolise • Where Islam and Christianity came from • … • How what happens as a baby grows up affects that person's belief in God, heaven and the angels • The reason why, in the latihan, we learn everything again • How some stones, plants and animals are considered to be of more value than human beings • … • How not to be affected by demons • … • Why human beings were placed in this world, and what happens when they leave it • The story of God creating the seven heavens, the angels, and why God placed God's will in everything He created • What is necessary in order to reach God • How you will know when you have reached the level of having a genuine human soul • How you can know if counsel is coming from God • … • The story of the angels and why God's will was manifested in human beings • … • Why the angels could not go with the prophets on their journey to God • How surrendering, being cleaned by and following God's will affects a person's reaction to illness and sadness • Why the latihan is easy to receive, and why it is wrong to do strange things to try to get to know God's power • What the latihan will give us in our work • Why people sing in church and the mosque.

2. See for example: http://www.unification.net/ws/theme036.htm

3. An extract from Chapter 2 of *Concerning Subud*:

   In the present chapter, I shall give an account of the experiences that led me by the end of 1955 to expect that in the near future an important event connected with the New Epoch was to occur in England, and that this event would be heralded by the arrival from the East of a man endowed with special powers…. In one of her later books, *The Reappearance of the Christ*, published in 1948, Alice Bailey declared boldly that throughout the world preparations were being made for the Second Coming of Christ who would appear, not alone, but with helpers with different degrees of spiritual power…. The second coming is imminent and, from the lips of disciples, mystics, aspirants, spiritually-minded people and enlightened men and women, the cry goes up, 'Let light and love and power and death fulfil the purpose of the Coming One.'…When we bring together the various threads, we can see that the human race is about to enter a new Epoch, and that people are looking for an inward change rather than for some reform of the outer life…. The prediction embodied in this passage was to be fulfilled within ten years—much sooner than I myself dared to expect…. Finally, in September 1956, I met Rofé himself, and was confronted with the question whether or not his Master or Guide, Muhammad Subuh, was the one whose coming Gurdjieff and others had prophesied.

4. Personally, I'm not so sure that seeking conflict-reduction in itself is a worthwhile end. The lives of the Abrahamic prophets were full of highly dramatic conflict, without which the stories of their lives would have been less significant. The Hindu Mahabharata is the story of conflict, its centrepiece a war, and the centre of the war a dialogue on human duty in the face of conflict. In the modern science of post-conflict peace-building, conflict is understood as a necessary and unavoidable aspect of human life. The emphasis is away from conflict-avoidance, and even from conflict-resolution (some conflicts cannot be resolved), and towards ensuring that (a) the nature of the conflict is understood, and (b) it is worked through in a way in which no harm is done.

5. Two examples of following Pak Subuh's allusions to their source:

(a) Emptiness

Some of Pak Subuh's talks concern 'emptiness'.

Pak Subuh's engagement with emptiness is not a casual one. Long before Subud was called Subud, it was called Ilmu Kasunyatan. The '*sunyata*' in the second word is a Sanskrit word, and means emptiness. It is a central concept of Mahayana Buddhism. In Mahayana Buddhism, the central truth is to realise that all phenomena are empty of inherent meaning, or of permanence. Realising this allows one to let them go, and thereby cease to be controlled by an attachment to the ten thousand things.

What one gets from Pak Subuh's explanations of emptiness, one might also get in great depth from Buddhist texts on *sunyata*. From *sunyata*, one can be led to other understandings present in Buddhism which shine a unique light on 'emptiness' but in fact are not touched upon by Pak Subuh because he was, after all, just one human.

(b) Providence

Pak Subuh also makes allusions in a number of place to the notion that God will take care of you. A narrow interpretation of this is that God will take care of some people. A broader interpretation of this is found in Christianity, in the concept of 'providence'. Perhaps the most famous and lyrical expression of this is in the Sermon on the Mount:

> So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Here we see too a Christian expression of surrender, which is free of that awful English connotation of 'passivity' or 'giving up', but which focuses instead on freedom from fear, on trust, and understanding the world as gift.

If we confine ourselves to Pak Subuh's attempts to explain these deep spiritual truths, we remain disconnected from the broad river of human understanding which is available to us. When we reconnect with that river, we can tap into Buddhism, to Christianity, and to many other pools of understanding. Doing that not only helps us each individually. It helps Subud move away from cultish parochialism, towards inter-religious dialogue.