

# Subud: The Religion

By Jonathan Koontz

Many of my Subud friends seemed unable to accept Bapak's word that he had come to connect them directly to God, and that after that connection was made, God would be the teacher, not Bapak.

It became clear to me that I should write an open letter about religions and how they are formed, in the hope that I could help to stop some of the actions I saw leading toward religion-forming in Subud. My letter was greeted by the editor of the best USA Subud publication with enthusiasm. She promised immediate publication in the next issue. I asked that the entire letter be published, and she agreed. As was my custom, I had adopted a deliberately provocative viewpoint. I wanted to provoke discussion, but I did not expect the stormy time that followed.

When I wrote the letter I believed that most of the people in Subud were not busily creating a religion. I found out otherwise. The editor stood sturdily behind me, even though she was threatened with loss of her job. The storm grew so swiftly that people began to act irrationally. I received a telephone call from the chairman of Subud USA that started out with him saying, in a voice that clearly indicated an intention to belittle my efforts: "This is God calling. What new revelation do you have for me today?"

After I discovered who it was who spoke so irrationally, we talked a long time. Eventually he lost the disrespect he had for me, and we discovered that we had opposite views of what should happen in Subud. He believed that people were losing their interest in Subud because they did not know Bapak, and that reverence for him was the way to go. This would not do for me. I believed that all people in Subud were supposed to be worshipping God, and that worshipping Bapak would get in the way of clearing the channel to God which Bapak had given them. The chairman did not agree with me, and was determined to censor me in any way he could. At first it seemed that he had succeeded. The good editor resigned rather than being fired, but published a note in her last issue about the controversy. She said she would send my full article to anyone who asked her to e-mail it to them.

## **Famous *and* Infamous**

I had not thought about what might happen to me as a result of the letter. All my energy had gone into trying to say things in the right way. Suddenly, I was famous with some people, and infamous with others. I had hoped to unite Subud in a reawakened understanding of the latihan.

This hope was realized in some places. Other people seemed enraged by my words. I received e-mails and phone calls from all over the country, and later from all over the world. I had not united, I had divided.

When I started writing this essay, I did not plan to risk further division by saying again that Subud is in danger of becoming a religion. But it is. Therefore, you will find the full text of my famous/infamous article in the essay printed below:

## **How Do We Make a Religion out of Subud?**

The answer to that question is simple. We merely continue to do what we have been doing.

We are much more than half way toward that terrible goal, and every day, every month, every year, every Congress, we move closer to that inevitable day when Bapak becomes God, his words become His Words, He is declared to be the Only True Source, and those of us who still naively believe we have been given a way to contact God on our own will be banished.

Already we have a description of Bapak on a throne so high and lofty that the best of us cannot raise our eyes to view it. We have candidate helpers being questioned seriously about their ability to contact our Risen Lord, although we don't quite dare yet to call him by that name.

How long will it be before we have a rosary to Ibu? And which Ibu?

When that inevitable day arrives, we will still be proclaiming loudly and often that Subud is not a religion, and that Bapak gave only advice and not rules. That is what we will proclaim, but, in fact, we will have bound ourselves so securely that the freedom we were given by Bapak will have been taken away in Bapak's name.

The powerful idea of each person with his own clear pipeline to God with its fearful consequence that we are each our own center of authority will be so lost in a maze of regulation and interpretation that only the brave and foolhardy among us will still be really practicing the latihan.

God keeps trying, but we keep failing.

God keeps trying to tell us that we are all true human beings of noble character, and that He stands ready to help us in every conceivable way to reach our full potential. He gave Bapak a way to by-pass the action of the mind and heart—a simple technique which Bapak could pass on to others. When I first met him, that is exactly what Bapak was doing.

Across a courtyard in St. Petersburg Bapak looked at me, and I looked at him, and we recognized each other. I did not look up at him, and he did not look down at me. We looked across at each other. I had found a brother, and so had he. He seemed to me to be exactly what he said he was: an elder brother who had been on a journey he would help me take for myself.

In the talks he gave then, and for several years thereafter, he did not fail to make what was apparently an important point in those days: Bapak was a man, like other men, and we could do what he had done. His description of himself as the janitor who gets the schoolroom ready for the real teacher—God—is both poignant and persuasive.

All this was easy for me to accept. I had seen the same thing before.

Nine years earlier, in mid-1950, I had been greeted as a fellow explorer into the unknown by the founder of a movement that is now a world-wide religion with several times the membership of Subud. The man with whom I exchanged many earnest ideas about the future of mankind in an all-night diner in Elizabeth, New Jersey, was then a well-known science fiction writer with a runaway best seller on his hands: Dianetics, the Modern Science of Mental Health.

We had just come from one of the first meetings of the Dianetic Research Foundation. I had been telling L. Ron Hubbard that man was really much more than the mind. I told him that as great as his discoveries were, much more would be needed for a real impact on the world.

“I know,” he said to me. “The universe is made up of a lot of different colored components. The strictly scientific ones are white, and that is all I used in Dianetics. But there are blue components and golden ones, and I’m not prepared to go that way now.”

“You mean like religions,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said with a little flip of his head that was the equivalent of a grin, “but psychology is going to be tough enough. We’ll stick with that.”

Yet this man, L. Ron Hubbard, is now revered, well-nigh worshipped, and officially declared the Only Source by millions of followers of a strange religion called Scientology. I have never been a member of that religion. When Ron stopped being a man, I stopped being his friend.

It was not that way in the beginning. He was a man like us. Maybe a little more entertaining. A little more dynamic. A lot more charismatic. But still, like us.

Does this not sound familiar? Bapak, too, kept insisting for months, even for years, that he was a man—like us. Bapak’s early message was clear. Use the latihan to make your own channel. You will have the answer to everything you need to know.

All this was easy for me to accept. I knew he was just what he said he was.

But many of my Subud brothers and sisters found it impossible to accept the enormous consequences of having a direct pipeline to the Source of All. They could not believe they had immediate access to God, but were pretty sure Bapak did. So they started asking Bapak all sorts of questions and his answers were wise and wonderful.

Soon, terribly soon, we began making more than a man out of Bapak. Stories of Bapak’s healing exploits, of his ability to see into a soul, of his knowledge of the future, of the strange occurrences in nature when he was around quickly eroded the picture of himself that Bapak kept trying to convey.

Soon Bapak was not a man like us—he was something more than man. We asked him for answers instead of asking God in the latihan. The admiration we all felt for Bapak too often gave way to blind adulation. His willingness to help us was transformed into dependence.

I remember a discussion during those early years with a Subud brother in Miami about learning to trust your own receiving. He said that no matter how much he learned about his own receiving, he would never believe his own receiving if it was contrary to something Bapak had said. I was astonished and saddened. The urge to enslave ourselves to someone we perceive as brighter, higher and better than we think we are is astonishingly strong.

During that Miami discussion, my Subud brother said to me in astonishment: “But how can you know that your receiving is truly from God?”

It is a good question, and the answer, given to us over and over by Bapak, is simple. Test your receiving in life, and see how it works. If it brings love, and joy, and peace and happiness it is from God. If it does not, it’s from someplace else—maybe your own imagination.

True receiving is always practical. You may not be able at first to see that it is practical, but when you try it out, it works. In my experience, God is never theoretical.

He gives you ideas and attitudes you can test immediately—and they work.

## **Keeping It Pure**

I do not wish to press the linkage between Bapak and L. Ron Hubbard much longer, but I do believe that the first major step toward Godhood by each man was made fairly early in the game, and proceeded from a laudable motive. Each wished to preserve the work they had started and to maintain the inspiration they had received in its pure state.

Hubbard made it perfectly clear that he was ruling out the work of a man named Ron House, who had gained some fame, but was using strange methods. Hubbard said people may have been helped by Ron House, but it was not Dianetics.

There is a good parallel here with Bapak and Rofé.

Husein Rofé wrote a book in 1959, a copy of which is on my desk at this moment. It is called *The Path of Subud* and the book and its author were extremely important in Subud's first introduction to the western world. Rofé preceded John Bennett to Indonesia, and introduced Subud to many parts of the world before Bapak began his travels.

My understanding is that Rofé stressed the healing power of Subud, and sometimes introduced Subud as a new way of healing. Bapak did not wish healing to be the primary emphasis of Subud, and did not approve of this and some other practices instituted by Rofé.

Bapak used his authority to oust Rofé from being an official spokesman for Subud in a kind and respectful way. He made it clear he was not condemning what Rofé was doing—it was, however, not Subud.

Subud was not greatly harmed by this first effort to keep the message clear, but it was almost irreparably harmed by what followed.

In the early days the *Pewarta* was the most interesting publication I have ever read. We waited for each new issue. Many of the giants around Bapak were contributing, and each of these elder brothers had a unique slant to offer on what was happening to all of us in Subud.

But Bapak decided that he alone would be the author of all that appeared in the *Pewarta*. This was the official voice of Subud, and only he could be that source.

With that one action he took the life out of the publication and started Subud down the path all religions have followed.

All religions begin with a breakthrough into a greater reality by one person. The new vision is shared with others, and, for a time, everyone who is attracted into this new movement is a part of its creativity. Then somebody lays claim to this new truth. That simple action changes everything.

Truth cannot be copyrighted. God cannot be chained.

Immediately, a division is formed in the nascent movement. There are those who really participate in the original inspiration, and those who depend on the originator.

In time, the first group practices the new breakthroughs and the second group makes rules, and creates a sacred scripture from the teachings of the originator. The

second group soon comes to outnumber the first. Since it is dedicated to the building of organizations and their governance, the second group soon becomes very powerful.

Those in the second group, as Keepers of the Word, reach hungrily toward the point where they can define who is really following the Word, and soon we have war in the name of the Prince of Peace.

Religions are wonderful in that they contain some of the breakthrough insights of the founder. They are terrible when these truths have been woven into a self-reinforcing circle which continually builds in strength and stupidity.

Most religions have one person designated as the Only True Source. In Subud we already have One True Source, but he is not yet the Only True Source. This is being written in the hope that we will not change One to Only.

The road to religion led by an Only True Source was taken early on in Scientology.

I had severed all relationships with Dianetics/Scientology when Ron Hubbard decided to turn Scientology into a religion, and I was certainly not there when he began to enjoy the prophet-like status he achieved. I did read enough about Scientology to know that Ron had gone way off the deep end in allowing his persona as a naval officer and his ever-present paranoia to issue far too many orders.

It is clear that in his last years Ron encouraged his followers to think of him as more than human, and allowed servitude and obeisance that would have been impossible for any of us who made up the first Foundation. But Ron should not be blamed for his fall from grace.

Better men than he, far better men, have fallen into the same trap.

I do not mean to suggest here that Bapak ever encouraged servitude and obeisance from Subud members. I do believe that he became accustomed to attitudes very close to worship from many Subud members. Perhaps he grew tired of trying to get us to find our own way when we were always trying to get him to do our work for us.

There came a time, fairly late in his life, when I had been delegated to lead Bapak from his car to a meeting hall in New York. Bapak did not look across at me, he looked down at me. Since I would not look up at him, our eyes never met. It hurt. It did not invalidate anything that had gone before, and it does not hurt any longer. But at the time, it hurt.

When a leader declares himself to be the Only Source, as Bapak did when he said that no one else could speak for Subud, he has announced that he is at least as high as Moses on the mountain top. Followers will quickly take care of elevating him even higher. Now, instead of being God's Only Messenger, such a leader is in grave danger of being the person who is worshipped.

It is clear that Bapak came to believe himself to be in the class of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and maybe a couple of others. There is nothing wrong with this belief. I know that Bapak was selected to carry out his special mission from God.

There is nothing wrong with a claim of being a prophet of God. All of us are. All of us have a special mission from God. We are here to discover what it is, and to carry it out.

There is likewise nothing wrong with a claim that you are God. You are.

And so am I.

What is wrong is to take away from anyone the possibility of struggling, working, climbing toward God's homeland (a place you once lived in). And when you say that anyone, even Bapak, is so high that you cannot hope to get that far, you have committed a terrible wrong against yourself. You have taken away any real possibility that you can climb to God.

Bapak's information about the vegetable, animal, human and superhuman levels of being is interesting and informative, but I have come to believe that it is a serious error to place yourself at any level on this or any other scale of being.

It is an even more serious error, an error of karmic stature, to place another person on such a scale—and especially to convince him or her that they belong there.

It is enough to know that all things great and small are working their way from where they are toward God, from whence they came. We, in Subud, have a wonderful gift from God through Bapak. We have the tools, we have an example, we have all that it takes to make that journey decisive and swift. On that journey we cannot be followers. We must all be leaders. Leaders of ourselves—not of anyone else. Each journey is unique, as is each person.

God does not make carbon copies. Carbon non-copies, maybe, since we are composed to a large extent of carbon, but not exact replicas.

If enough of us can summon the courage to find our own unique path, Subud will never become a religion. It will be a movement that gives life to all religions.

And that, I am sure, is what Bapak gave his life to achieve.