

W(h)ither Subud?

by Marius Kahan

How it has always been:

Since time immemorial a spiritual force has been flooding the world — pure, unstoppable, like an uncapped gusher. And for just as long, mankind has been trying to define it, capture it, control it; fashioning a makeshift conduit to contain this energy — a mass of plates and ducting engraved with a cryptic text that purports to tell what is hidden within.

This inscription is called religion.

Although claiming to represent the highest virtues, architects of the great religions have tinkered with the truth and scrawled their graffiti of misinformation and gobbledygook on an ugly pipeline that traverses history like a wonky drainpipe. Jets of spiritual energy escape here and there, tapped into by the few who recognise them for what they are, but a majority prefer to trust the clichéd facsimile of inner-truth displayed on the exterior.

How it is today:

A spiritual force is flooding the world — pure, unstoppable, like an uncapped gusher. And, as far as I am aware, the only manifestation of this power as yet unencumbered by *official* teaching is the latihan of Subud, which offers a shot at spiritual development based on direct experience.

But the Subud mainstream is trying to define it, capture it, control it — to fabricate a new section of pipeline engraved with a revised, Subud version of The Script. In response, a small but determined resistance group has emerged, bent on preventing this madness. Even as they are being decried as heretical, Subud's numbers are dwindling. But these people are not cynical malcontents; they see that this codification is driving people away.

To my eyes, those who consider Subud Vision to be negative, misguided and a waste of time are really not so very different from adherents of traditional religions who claim that theirs is 'the only true way to God'. And what drives me nuts is that Subud Vision is simply saying *let's practice what we preach*. Is it really that hard to grasp? No dogma, no teaching, no leader, no hierarchy. Since that's what's on the label, shouldn't that be what's in the tin?

The chap who introduced me to Subud told me that I would find a lot of talk about God which he found 'a bit off-putting at first' but not to let it worry me. It was said so casually that I wasn't put off in the least. But that was before the internet. Today, any visitor to Subud's official home-page is just a couple of clicks away from statements like:

Susila Budhi Dharma (Subud) means to follow the Will of God with the help of the Divine Power that works both within us and without, by the way of surrendering oneself to the Will of Almighty God.

Talk of 'surrender' to the 'will' of 'Almighty God' is scrawl on the pipeline. There are many other examples likely to alienate seekers uncertain about the existence of a creator God

— they would certainly have driven me away.

The latihan will take care of people's beliefs, so let's not ram preconceived ideas down potential enquirers' throats; the official Subud web-site in particular should be wary of contradicting core values such as:

- There are no fixed beliefs in Subud (*so let's drop the overtly religious language*).
- Spiritual development in Subud comes via direct experience (*no more, no less*).
- Anyone is welcome to join Subud (*including gay Buddhists*).
- Bapak was an ordinary man, not a leader, teacher or guru (*so let's not deify him*).

Most non-Subud members seem to assume that Subud is either a religion or some form of meditation — and if we're to be tarred with a brush, I'd rather it was the latter as it does at least make us non-denominational. But it rather looks as if lazy acceptance has allowed the classic elements of religion to infiltrate the association, even if not in name: Bapak as prophet, the talks as holy writ, the helpers as priesthood and a general reverence for the status quo, all of which is tolerated and even condoned by Ibu Rahayu. By contrast I always had the distinct impression that Bapak actively discouraged this kind of thing* — yet many seem oblivious to Subud's subtle change in tack and its potential long-term significance.

When I consider the powerful transformation the latihan has wrought in my life and then look at the way Subud presents itself I feel disappointed. The latihan has made me very clearly aware that we are all part of a greater whole — something that, for me, goes against the typically Abrahamic religious idea that we are individual souls in need of saving. By adopting language and attitudes redolent of religions that preach judgement and salvation, I feel that Subud has let the latihan down.

This gradual morphing into a religion *is* occurring. Numbers *are* dwindling. And how we present Subud *right now* will likely determine whether or not it can evolve and grow. There have been many religions, most of which have failed — and if Subud continues to wither into a quasi-religious fringe peopled only by those who embrace the *de facto* dogma, it seems only too likely that it will join their number.

* For example, in *A Memoir of Subud* Varindra Vittachi recounts how, when asked by a delegation of European helpers whether they should codify the 'Subud Rules', Bapak replied (via an impromptu parable) that rules were 'for children'. Vittachi comments elsewhere that Bapak's refusal to characterise himself as a teacher or guru was a source of tremendous frustration to J. G. Bennett. True believers take note!