

Outside View

A Review of Bei Dawei's 'Baha'i and Subud Dissent: Developments in the 2000s'

By Sahlan Diver

Over the years, Subud institutions have formed committees to explore how to make the wider world aware of the existence of Subud, presumably with the dual aim of achieving good public relations and hopefully attracting new members. These efforts continue — I hear that external relations are now the remit of S.I.C.A. and that the recent Subud Britain congress held a discussion group on the subject. But I wonder, when we say 'external relations' does this just mean projecting a good image of ourselves to the outside world, or does it also include listening carefully to the outside world's current image of us?

In my Subud Vision article, 'The Subud Inspector', I drew parallels between one of my favourite TV programs, 'The Hotel Inspector', and the state of Subud. There was another episode on TV this evening. A lady owner of a guest-house horribly cluttered with a mass of ornaments, knick-knacks and claustrophobic furnishings wanted to know why her business was losing money. The answer was obvious to anyone, of course, except herself. The Hotel Inspector called in a typical cross-section of hotel guests: a businessman, a family, and a married couple, to tour the premises while their remarks were video-recorded. When the videotape was re-played, the guest house owner would have none of it: clearly these weren't people who appreciated quality; they weren't the sort of people you'd want as guests.

How many times have we heard an outsider's negative comments about Subud dismissed with remarks like: 'Clearly, it's not right for them,' or 'Not everyone is right for Subud.' Even when our own members make criticisms, a not uncommon rebuff is, 'Well, if you don't like it, you can always leave and form something else.' Implicit in these remarks is the assumption that Subud is as it is, and no change could possibly enhance its quality or popularity. Best not to join if you don't like it, or get out if you are already in it. Just like the lady guest-house owner in fact, we feel the fault is everyone else's for not appreciating what is on offer. We ourselves are doing nothing to spoil the offer, nor should we feel obliged to do anything to improve it.

So I suggest our external relations committees take a similar approach. Find some neutral volunteers and give them a tour of Subud, our web sites, a Subud group, our literature, and ask for their impressions.

And there is something else that can be done. Listen to outsiders who are already commenting on Subud. One such is Bei Dawei, who presented a paper entitled 'Baha'i and Subud Dissent' at a conference for the Center for the Study of New Religions, Aletheia University, Taiwan, in June of this year. http://bahai-library.com/dawai_bahai_subud_dissent

Bei Dawei has published material about Subud before. In fact, Subud Vision has published an article of his: 'Subud spoofed: Notes on a burlesque of the Subud *latihan* in John Quigley's *The Secret Soldier* (1966)' (*Subud Vision*, April 2011). <http://www.subudvision.org/bd/Parina.htm>

He can fairly be called a neutral observer, as on his own admission, he is sceptical

about the latihan, has no personal interest in it, and has never been opened.

I highly recommend his recent paper. Not only is it a good read but the author makes many interesting comparisons between the Baha'i religion and Subud; both the similarities and the differences are fascinating.

One thing the author complains about is the difficulty of getting good information about Subud relative to the mass of available material on the Baha'is. In this respect it is interesting that he says:

While Subud Vision is not an academic journal per se -- its editorial board is drawn from various fields, and the essays are equally diverse -- it is sufficiently rigorous and critical for academics to welcome it as a reliable source of information.

The Subud Vision editors are naturally gratified by this unsolicited approval, which we feel vindicates the standards we set for the venture at the outset. I e-mailed to ask Bei Dawei what other sources he found useful and he replied as follows:

Besides *Subud Vision*, the ones which I have found most helpful and would point newcomers to include Antoon Geels' *Subud and the Javanese Mystical Tradition* and Harry Armytage's *A Subud Survival Guide*...

Should it not be somewhat worrying for Subud that he mentions no official Subud source as being reliable? We can only speculate, but maybe this is a case of not seeing ourselves as others see us, of the lopsided, positive-thinking-only approach beloved of our current administration making us appear to outsiders like just another cult blowing its own trumpet, in other words, not sufficiently objective to be trustworthy.

Back to the article. Bei Dawei is an academic, who is interested in the Baha'is and Subud as a field of study. For an outsider who has no personal interest in being opened, the author seems to have studied Subud in considerable detail. Also, regarding the Subud Vision project, he appears to have paid a lot more attention to what we are saying than many Subud members. A complaint we frequently get is that there is too much negativity on the site and not enough vision. No such comment from Bei Dawei, who singles out three authors and three articles on the common theme of a vision for a new type of Subud group, as well as mentioning the Solutions project, which is all about ideas for a new way forward. Perhaps the explanation for this outsider's different point of view is that he *is* an outsider and therefore is not blocked by any baggage of brainwashing, prejudice, spiritual pride, or maybe even anger.

Regarding the author's neutrality, one of our editors wondered 'if his possible motivation is that he wants to criticize the Baha'is and is using Subud and Subud Vision as a useful foil.' That is a fair question. However, the author seems as disinterested in the Baha'is as he is in Subud. He is not a member of the Baha'is, has never been, and states that he is not interested in joining them. His paper thus seems to be a genuine study of the similarities and differences between the two movements, and not some disguised attempt to take issue with one rather than the other.

However, it is clear from Bei Dawei's writing that he has missed a few facts about Subud. He contrasts the Baha'is inflated membership statistics, which he says do not reflect their high turnover of members, with Subud's stagnant membership numbers.

He is clearly unaware that Subud throughout its history has also had a high turnover of people. But we can hardly blame the author for missing that one, can we? Subud does not care to publish the figures, nor to analyse them, nor to attempt to determine, through informed research instead of opinionated speculation, the true reasons why so many are opened only to later leave.

Another parallel with the Baha'is missed by him is their belief that their prophet is the next in the line of divinely sent prophets after Christ and Muhammed. In Subud's case, of course, Bapak does not have quite the same status as a prophet — it is the latihan that is regarded by many as the successor to the prophets, following the hints in Bapak's talks along the lines of: 'Maybe it's no longer the time for teachings; in the modern age people need the direct experience.'

However, Bei Dawei does draw one parallel that Subud members would do well to take note of. He points out that members of both organisations believe that their particular organisation is intended to be the guiding light for a new golden age and that members should be prepared for that responsibility (in our case by doing latihan and more latihan, in the case of the Baha'is by studying workbooks, apparently).

This brings up some interesting alternative possibilities:

- a) Since a belief in being specially prepared to be at the centre of a new age to come is commonplace amongst cults, in this respect both Subud and the Baha'is are, like all the others, kidding themselves, allowing their enthusiasm for their movement to spill over into a overblown, self-aggrandizing fantasy of their place in the scheme of things.
- b) There will be a golden age, and both the Baha'is and Subud will be at the centre of it. Maybe many other organisations will be also. Therefore, Subud does not have the unique, essential part to play with the latihan that it imagines it has.
- c) There will be a golden age, but either the Baha'is or Subud are wrong. People will choose one in preference to the other. In my opinion they are unlikely to choose either, as both seem to have in common a claustrophobic emphasis on a rigid viewpoint that only a relative minority of the world's population could ever have any enthusiasm for.
- d) There won't be a golden spiritual age. That's all fantasy. There might be a golden secular age, however.

I once thought of joining the Baha'is. Then I found out that they did not admit Subud members. A lucky escape. From the descriptions in Bei Dawei's article, the religion seems most oppressive. Was it like that from the outset, I wonder, or did it, like Subud, have an earlier, freer, lighter stage? Is Subud going the same way, becoming more oppressive? I leave the reader to draw their own conclusions from Bei Dawei's fascinating comparative analysis.

Footnote:

Could I also highly recommend the long but highly entertaining fiction, 'The Strange Story of Max the Infallible Donkey', remarked on by Bei Dawei. It is a fable about the dangers of credulousness, collective acquiescence and circular logic.

You will find it by following this link:

http://bahaisonline.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=2