

## Being Fair To New Religious Movements: Virtue Ethics and Social Research

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**Abstract.** New religious movements, sometimes referred to pejoratively as cults, have become a subject of academic interest and a focus of societal and government concern. Accounts of some new religious movements have appeared in the media and in academic books and journals that are distinctly at odds with the self-portrayals of new religious movements and may also be deemed unfair by them and by scholars. A case study of Susila Budhi Dharma (Subud), a new religious movement originating in Indonesia is presented to show how the unfair treatment of an NRM can be carried out in the context of an apparently scholarly study. It is suggested that there is a need for researchers on new religious movements to adopt virtue ethics rather than simply comply with an institutional code of research ethics.

### 1. Introduction

Accounts of cults or new religious movements have appeared in the media and in academic books and journals that are often at odds with how these cults and NRMs portray themselves and may also be judged unfair by them and by some sociologists of NRMs. This paper argues that researchers conducting research on cults or NRMs need to commit themselves to being fair to them at all stages of the research cycle. A case study of the NRM Subud is presented to show how an unfair characterization can emerge from an ostensibly scholarly study.

Barker [1] makes the points that an NRM may have access to sources denied to non-members and may thus be able to give a fuller picture, but that members may lack objectivity to see unflattering things that non-members might be more sensitive to. She also acknowledges that some members of NRMs, “as *social scientists*, have done excellent work on their own NRMs.” (p. 15) As a member of Subud for over thirty years I acknowledge Barker’s first two points and, as a social scientist, I would hope that my commitment to Subud does not disqualify me from making a useful contribution to the academic study of NRMs, including Subud.

### 2. Conceptualizing cults and new religious movements

Not all sociologists of religion will agree on how religions, cults, sects and new religious movements are each to be conceptualized and indeed may not even view these as essentially different collectivities. Beckford [2], for example, emphasizes the continuum between cults and

“normal” religions. Some conceptualization, although arbitrary, is generally thought to be necessary for sense-making and communication [3]. Sects are generally seen as arising from a schism within an established or traditional religion such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, with the schismatic sect maintaining many of the beliefs and practices of the established religion. Cults are seen as spontaneous formations around innovations in beliefs and practices and often arise when the influence of traditional religions is in decline [4]. The term cult has fallen out of favour with sociologists of religion because of the negative connotations largely fostered by a sensationalist mass media and a vigorous anti-cult movement. In the media and in the pronouncements of the anti-cult movement, all groups identified as cults are invariably linked with a variety of destructive or illegal behaviours such as brainwashing, child abuse, tax fraud, murder and suicide and therefore a threat to individual and social wellbeing. Barker [3] explains the “guilt by association” and notes the exceptional nature of the destructive or illegal behaviours as follows:

“Those who might wish to denigrate another [new] religion might not only refer to it as a cult, but might also draw attention to movements associated with criminal behavior such as the murders or mass suicides executed by the People’s Temple, the Solar Temple, or Aum Shinrikyo, despite the fact that the [new] religion in question bears little or no relation to these groups...The very fact that the comparison is drawn, however, implies that the [new] religion shares characteristics with such groups and is itself likely to indulge in criminal behavior, when, in fact, these examples represent exceptions rather than being typical of new religions or the so-called cults.” (p. 19)

Of course some cults, or at least some members of some cults, do engage in the crimes and destructive behaviours they are accused of, but it seems to be the consensus among sociologists that most cults and most members do not, and should not be characterized as such. According to Jones [5], during the Eighties Eileen Barker put forward a proposal to replace the term cult with the more value-neutral “new religions movements” (NRMs) and most scholars, even if they were uncertain about how the component parts of the new term should be interpreted, adopted it. However, “cults” continues to be the preferred term in the mass media and non-scholarly forums and may be used by some scholars too. In this paper the terms cult and NRM are used synonymously although it is recognized that “cult” might be used pejoratively by some authors; NRM is used as a value-neutral term here, as it is in the vast majority of scholarly writing.

### **3. The negative stereotyping of cults and NRMs and response**

The negative stereotyping of NRMs, according to Saliba [6], generally highlights perceived threats to the individual, the family and the wider society. With respect to the first, Saliba notes: “That a communal, disciplined lifestyle could create psychological and intellectual problems for some people is possible. But accusations that membership in any of the new religions is detrimental to every member’s health cannot be sustained by the data at our disposal.” (p. 33) Lilliston and Shepherd [7] reiterate this view. Saliba [6] also suggests that although new religious movements may in some cases put pressure on family relationships, blaming them for destroying the family is unwarranted as it fails to take into account the changes that have taken place in the institution since the middle of the twentieth century. One only has to look at the very high divorce rates, the high number of single-parent families and the high incidence of family violence to see that blaming new religious movements is unlikely to lead to satisfactory solutions for the range of ills besetting modern families. Saliba [6] is equally skeptical with respect to the accusation that NRMs pose a threat to society, especially with acts of violence. He notes, “While... several cults have definitely shown signs of violent behavior towards themselves and others, it must be stressed that that they represent a very small minority of the many hundreds of cults that have emerged in the past forty years.” (p. 35)

Saliba [6] also notes that psychiatrists have accepted that membership of an NRM has led many people to end their addiction to drugs and alcohol and sustain an independent lifestyle. Membership of an NRM may even support conventional psychiatric care. Also on the positive side, to those who are dissatisfied with modern society, NRMs appear to offer an alternative to a society that is

obsessed with materialism and egoistic pursuits to the detriment of spiritual values. Moreover, many members claim their membership of a NRM offers them access to genuine spiritual experiences which they cannot find in the established religions. Gibson, Morgan, Wooley and Powis [8], refer to a review of NRM research by Richardson, who concluded that “there is no evidence to suggest that members of these groups [NRMs] have more mental health problems than others and that there are likely to be psychological benefits that continue after a member leaves.” (p. 41) On an even more positive note, Lilliston and Shepherd [7] cited a number of studies that found “a high level of mental health among members [of the Rajneeshpuram movement], including very positive self-concepts, lower feelings of personal distress and anxiety, and greater feelings of personal autonomy and independence of thought.” (p. 128) Other studies with equally positive results are cited in the same article.

A number of sociologists have addressed the issue of why NRMs are stereotyped as dangerous and destructive. Beckford’s [2] somewhat Weberian analysis identifies three major characteristics of advanced industrial societies that can be used to explain the intensity of the negative stereotyping of new religious movements. First, as religion’s influence in society declines, and where this is accepted as a positive change, those prioritizing religious values in their lives and expressing them publicly come to be seen as abnormal and are treated with animosity. Second, those rejecting socially approved and “commodified” lifestyles are seen as directly challenging the status quo (with its “permissible individualization”) and this again leads to animosity. Third, the ubiquity of rapid and efficient communication and surveillance systems, which enable NRMs to reach and potentially influence a global audience (and, according to the anti-cult movement, pose a global threat), at the same time enable opponents to rapidly gather global data on NRMs and to disseminate globally their negative interpretations of the data.

Individuals not associated with the anti-cult movement may be influenced by or may even reinforce the negative stereotypes. This is likely in cases involving, for example, leaving the NRM after becoming disillusioned with it, breaking up with a partner who is a member of the NRM (attacking the NRM may be a substitute for attacking the ex-partner, or in cases involving a child custody dispute, attacking the cult may be a strategy engaged in to argue that giving sole custody to the parent who is a member of an NRM would be tantamount to placing the child in danger). Moreover, a family member joining an NRM and making alterations in his/her lifestyle (spending the majority of her time on NRM activities, changing his/her name) may cause pain and confusion for his/her family of origin who may hit out at the NRM without really understanding it.

#### **4. Subud and the spiritual exercise (*latihan kedjiwaan*)**

Subud, short for Susila Budhi Dharma, which means right living according to the Will of God received in one’s inner self as a result of one’s surrender to the Power of God, is a spiritual association founded by Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwijoyo, a Javanese Muslim, in the 1920s in Indonesia. It has since spread to over seventy countries although its membership is only between 10 and 15 thousand. Muhammad Subuh encouraged Subud associations to register themselves according to the national and local laws wherever it became established. The chief functions of the associations are to ensure that local groups have suitable places to do the *latihan kedjiwaan* or spiritual exercise, look after the needs of the existing members (for example doing the *latihan* with sick members who cannot leave their homes to attend the usual twice weekly group *latihan*) and to initiate new members.

Subud members and organizations characterize themselves as a spiritual association of people who practice the *latihan* and not as a cult, a sect or a religion [9]. For most Subud members, sects and cults have a pejorative ring to them and a religion means one of the major World religions, thus a new religion would appear to be setting itself up as an alternative to these. Subud is generally understood by its members as complementing the major religions and indeed Muhammad Subuh advised Subud members to continue to practice their religion. He also stated that Subud would help them understand the true meaning of their religion. [10]

According to Wallis [11], Subud is a “world-accommodating” type of new religious movement – “members are firmly integrated into the prevailing social order...are not entirely unhappy with it but seek nonetheless some experiential reassurance of their general spiritual values.... [Their] religious activities tend to be regular and frequent but none the less leisure time commitments.” (p. 55) Subud members see it as normal and desirable to have good relations with one’s family, co-workers and community members whether they are Subud members or not. In fact Muhammad Subuh once stated in a talk that the surest indication of spiritual progress is that you feel love for your fellow humans and they feel love towards you [12].

The core practice of Subud and indeed its *raison d’être* is the spiritual exercise or *latihan kedjiwaan*, which is practiced for approximately thirty minutes in a group, men and women in separate groups, twice weekly. Only those who have been initiated, which Subud members refer to as being “opened”, by other Subud members, can practice the *latihan*. This is a spontaneous receiving of movements and sounds, which can include crying, laughing, making animal sounds, singing, chanting, praying, and sometimes seeing images. All of these are said to be part of the process of purifying the inner self or soul that is initiated by the Greater Life Force or the Power of God. The *latihan* can also engender in the practitioner a deep sense of peace experienced in silence and full awareness. In the *latihan* one surrenders or lets go of thoughts, emotions and desires so that the *latihan* can be experienced clearly and strongly. The inner self when purified to a certain extent is seen as being able to access or receive knowledge that is not generally available to rational thought and many Subud members believe it is possible for them to receive indications of their spiritual condition and evidence that the *latihan* is improving it.

One feature of the *latihan* that those who have not experienced it frequently fail to report is that during the half-hour or so when members are in a *latihan* state they are completely conscious and can stop it at any time. The *latihan* is not a trance state [13].

## 5. Being unfair to Subud

Lewis [14] has noted that “harsh critiques” of a new religious movement by scholars may result from the negative stereotyping of such movements by society in general. He goes on to say that “popular prejudice against minority religions has served to make many scholars ‘tone-deaf’ to an author’s biases against such religious groups.” (p. 5) Indeed scholars may say things about NRMs that they would automatically refrain from saying about the major World religions largely because of the different statuses accorded to these by society. Such “harsh critiques” of NRMs may be seen as an invitation to look on NRMs as “the other” [3], to portray them as a threat and to marginalize them, which I believe is the thrust of the scholarly article discussed below.

Urlich’s article in the American Psychological Association journal *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice*, titled “Evaluating the charismatic group Subud: Javanese mysticism in the West” [15] is a good example, I believe, of the scholarly bias highlighted by Lewis and of the social construction of “the other” discussed by Barker [3]. A full critique of Urlich’s paper is beyond the scope of this paper and only a few examples of its shortcomings are addressed.

Urlich finds sociological approaches to new religious movements too positive and declares them to be deficient because they do not discuss psychiatric evidence of adverse impacts of the NRMs on their members. He appears not to understand that many sociological studies of NRMs are at least in part responding to the tendency of other studies to overgeneralize about NRMs. He claims he is offering a more holistic analysis of Subud but it is hard to find any real evidence of him having given full weight to significant sociological findings in this field and he did not make any attempt to ascertain the views of Subud members about his interpretations or to obtain their accounts of their experiences. Urlich, when commenting on the motivations of those who founded NRMs, goes on to offer the kind of generalization that sociologists have done so much to counter. He states that, “the motivation of those who start new religious movements or cults is probably either narcissistic and delusional or premeditated and cynical, or it may be a combination of these motives, including seeking status.” (P. 162) Clearly this is meant to include Muhammad Subuh, the founder of Subud,

whom he goes on to portray only in negative terms.

Urlich claims that Muhammad Subuh permitted Subud members to lie and deceive when carrying out their businesses as long as Subud benefited. In fact Subuh was making a distinction between spiritual (*kejiwaan*) behavior and ordinary behavior and advising Subud members to carry out business in the way that is customary in their societies rather than be too spiritual about it [16]. This is from the same reference cited by Urlich:

“In the *kejiwaan* there is no place for dissimulation or untruth: whatever you receive you express. But in business, that is not the way. In business if you want to sell something, you don’t have to tell the person what it cost you. In other words, in business you are allowed to tell lies. But in the *kejiwaan* there is no place for lying (para 1)...In the *kejiwaan*, certainly we feel the needs of the people and we do what we feel, we follow the needs of the people in front of us . But when we do business we have to do it in the way people do business. But the difference is that we are in the middle. In our calculation we don’t overdo it...we make a profit but we don’t take advantage. The influence of the *kejiwaan* in our business is that there is a limit, a boundary beyond which we do not go in the amount of profit we make.” (para 7)

Urlich, apparently completely unaware of Javanese or Indonesian social customs, claims that Muhammad Subuh “insisted” (p.169) that Subud members refer to him as “Bapak” (Indonesian for Father). The fact that this is the customary honorific for older persons used in Indonesia and would certainly have been used, according to custom, by Muhammad Subuh and the original Indonesian Subud members, seems to have escaped Urlich. To say that Muhammad Subuh “insisted” on being called “Bapak” makes no sense.

Urlich refers to the “apparent suicide” of Muhammad Subuh’s son, Haryadi, which he finds “makes for disturbing reading” (p.169). It is a surprising interpretation of a passage in Istimah Week’s memoir given that Muhammad Subuh and his family were Muslims and in Islam suicide is strictly prohibited. Moreover, Muhammad Subuh has on numerous occasions stated that suicide is “forbidden and completely opposed by God”. [17] The relevant passage in Istimah Week’s book [18] cited by Urlich is as follows:

“[In 1954] Haryadi ... had an experience of leaving this world and when he returned, he told Bapak that he did not wish to continue to live here [in this world]. Bapak said that he needed him. A year later, Haryadi told Bapak that he had received an indication from God that he was free to choose between continuing his life on earth, or passing over to the other side. He had decided to leave. Bapak agreed, but asked Haryadi to stay a few more days...One morning while the family was having breakfast, Haryadi asked Bapak, ‘Is it alright now?’ Bapak said, ‘Yes.’ Haryadi went upstairs and they could hear him splashing in the bathroom. After a while there was silence. Bapak went upstairs and then called the family. Haryadi was seated against the wall, dead.” (pp. 37-38)

In response to my query about this passage, Raymond van Sommers, who is described in Istimah Week’s book as co-author, replied:

“The general understanding was that Haryadi had the choice to leave this world in the way he had done a year earlier. It was not suicide. As for him being ill at the time, there is a reference in History of Subud, Book One, pages 192-193, where Ibu Mudijono says she was treating Haryadi with massage (*kerok*) for a chill up until the day before he died. This [chill] would certainly not have caused his death. My feeling is that knowing the time of his passing was imminent (the decision was made) the beginning of withdrawal of his energy from his body could have precipitated such a chill. I agree with your interpretation of the “splashing in the bathroom” was Haryadi doing *wudu* [the Islamic ritual ablution].” [19]

When referring to Subud members’ relation to God, Urlich frequently refers to “their deity” or “Subud’s deity” or “his [Muhammad Subuh’s] deity” – this seems another part of a pattern of constructing Subud as “the other” – something totally outside of the major religious traditions – whereas in fact he must know that the founder of Subud being a Muslim believed that there was only one God – the God of all the major religions being the same – and if Urlich met with Subud members, as he claims he did, he would have found this to be a commonplace belief among them.

He refers to the group *latihan* as a “group frenzy”, suggesting, according to Webster’s New World Dictionary [20], wild, delirious activity, a kind of insanity. The group *latihan* is not uniform and even in the same half hour it is practiced, members may start off being somewhat raucous and move on to serene chanting, praying or even a profound period of quiet. Many secondary published accounts refer to that. Moreover, as stated earlier, the *latihan* is done in a completely conscious state and can be stopped at any time.

Ulrich accuses a number of writers of “taking Subud literature at face value” and failing to reference a series of letters in the *Lancet* [21, 22, 23, 24, 25] referring to adverse psychological states experienced by practitioners of the *latihan*, and a study of psychiatric problems of three Subud members [26]. But the letters were published more than fifty years ago and refer to a small number of cases only. Moreover, one of the letters [21] is merely seeking clarification about Subud members being grossly disturbed after participating in the *latihan*, another [23] simply conveys a brief negative impression of the *latihan*, and a third [25] defends Subud against the accusations made in an earlier letter. Perhaps even more telling is that the Kiev and Francis study [26] (itself almost fifty years old) concluded that the three patients studied practiced the *latihan* immoderately and it was likely that existing psychological conflicts were aggravated by their immoderate practice of the *latihan* (p. 77). In fact Subud members responsible for initiating others are advised that people suffering from a mental illness should not practice the *latihan*.

Lastly, two points regarding research ethics. First, Ulrich mentions his observations of Subud members in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1995 and 1996 but does not say these were part of his study. In fact he claims his study is based only on a review of non-Subud and Subud literature. If so, then his study actually began in 1999. I think it is legitimate to ask in what context did he make his observations and if the context had any bearing on his subsequent study of Subud. He is silent on that matter. Second, Ulrich nowhere explains why he, a non-Subud member, felt justified in making use of materials that are intended for Subud members only, i.e. private, but not secret, and indeed available only on a password-protected Web site. Moreover, he does not explain how he got hold of a password.

## 6. The need for virtue ethics

Institutional codes of research ethics, although desirable, often play only a minor role in shaping the responses of researchers to the ethical issues that arise during the research cycle – from field study to writing up the results for publication. As Macfarlane [27] noted, they rarely provide researchers with the guidance they are likely to need as they negotiate their way through the complexities and ambiguities of research, whether in the field or at their desks. Thus there is a need for a virtue ethics approach to research that is rooted in individual conscience.

Most institutional research codes are derived from the ethics of biomedical research with the chief concerns being respect for persons, voluntary informed consent, avoidance of harm, confidentiality, benefit to society etc. Virtue ethics frames these concerns differently focusing on the virtues required by researchers. Macfarlane discusses six virtues, namely courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity (p. 42). When applied in the context of research the six virtues to some extent overlap and cover aspects of research that are not germane to the topic of fairness, which this paper addresses. I will therefore briefly mention the importance of two: respect for persons or what Macfarlane calls “respectfulness”, and sincerity. According to Macfarlane, respectfulness includes respect for the culture of the research subjects. In research on NRMs this should encompass respect for the ontologies and epistemologies of NRMs. This does not mean refraining from asking questions about or commenting on perceived harms or crimes of NRMs. But it seems obvious that without respect for ontologies or epistemologies different from those of the researcher it is unlikely that the researcher will devote the time and effort required to understand them fully and the tendency to misrepresent them is increased. Respectfulness could also include being sensitive about the effects of one’s research on the research participants or, in the case of NRMs, on others that are members of the NRM being studied but not directly involved in the

research.

The second virtue, sincerity, highlights the need for researchers to do their best to ensure that their interpretations and claims are accurate and not contaminated by omission or exaggeration. Here Macfarlane notes, the concern is with “authentic representations of what the researcher has found out or, at least, *believes* to be true.” (p. 91) Perhaps the most obvious thing researchers can do to express sincerity is to solicit comments on their interpretations and claims from their research subjects and to take these comments seriously. This is not to suggest that researchers should shape their findings to comply with their research subjects’ wishes, but that they should be willing to test sincerely their interpretations and claims against potentially rival interpretations and claims before disseminating them. Another aspect of sincerity in research on NRMs is being honest with oneself and others about potential conflicts of interest as a result of one’s values or prior experience with the research subjects or the NRM being researched. “Living out these virtues in practice” (p. 45) on a daily basis is the challenge researchers face in the pursuit of truth, whether they believe it is objective or socially constructed. To accept the challenge is to accept the limitations of institutional research ethics codes and to commit oneself to fashioning something better.

Whatever one’s beliefs about NRMs or a specific NRM, it must be acknowledged that their members have a human right “to manifest his [*sic*] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” (UDHR, Article 18) Without the moral virtues of respect for persons and sincerity being lived out in practice by researchers, research on NRMs can contribute to the marginalization of members of NRMs, support discrimination against them, and in extreme cases result in the infringement of members’ human rights. Institutional research ethics codes are unlikely to make a difference in these cases, but virtue ethics might.

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