

Spiritual values in anti-nuclear protest

April 27, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

No one can predict the outcome of the hunger strike that former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chair Lin Yi-xiong began several days ago. It is hard to feel optimistic about what lies ahead. What we do know is that the personal narrative of this respected activist and anti-nuclear power protestor is replete with suffering and pathos, not to mention drama. This is not a man who takes on small issues or who makes decisions off the seat of his pants.

I would like to focus on what may appear to be merely a slender thread in this story. It is however a thread that means much to many of us. This thread is the type of spirituality Mr. Lin appears to be exhibiting.

First, however, a word on some of the politics at work here.

In theory, a referendum in time is indeed the best solution to the controversy surrounding the 4th Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City. Provide the public with information it needs to make a wise decision, let voices speak from all corners, and in the end allow the people to vote on nuclear power. This all sounds delicious. Is it as palatable as it sounds?

Should the threshold in the referendum be lowered? You know, this requirement that one half of the electorate must participate (9 million), and then over half of those voters having to say yes or no, and the winner takes all: is that the way to go? Regardless of the wording on the ballot, such a threshold is all but impossible to meet. In addition, the process appears fiendishly open to manipulation. I wish legislators could debate the national interest with freedom from their respective parties to follow their conscience. And I wish those folks would broaden the playing field. Can Taiwan, so sharply divided today along partisan lines, agree on a more flexible form of executing a referendum? We really need to try.

The KMT administration of course insists it will not agree to a change in the threshold. Is there no room at all for discussion, for negotiation? Why must so many political questions in Taiwan come down to this?

Mr. Lin and his supporters have long been calling for a halt to the construction of Plant 4. Their fidelity to their cause calls to mind the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist, true voices in the wilderness.

Reports of the president's promise to work for a referendum, once safety inspections are completed and the results made public, seem encouraging. A letter to Mr. Lin that his daughter published from the United States is likewise encouraging. She asked her 73 year-old Dad to show care for his health for the sake of his grandchildren. That may smack of sentimentality and appear as an effort to draw headlines. I see it as a sign of common sense and an act of affection for a loved one.

What impresses me about Mr. Lin's ideals, which seem spiritual (nearly biblical) to me, also troubles me. I generally feel little attraction to extreme measures in the pursuit of good. This may sound odd coming from someone with my calling. Let me share an example or two of religious behavior that make me uncomfortable. The examples are light, and obviously far less draconian than what we're seeing in the form of Mr. Lin.

Drawn-out religious services put me off. Dissertation-length sermons for me are forms of hectoring and posturing. Gatherings of many hundreds of worshippers do not enrich me spiritually. I am in favor of steady-as-you-go, faithful, sincere, passionate, quiet, and prayerful voices. When I think I see spiritual grandstanding, I turn away.

People of virtue may lack the ability to distinguish between an act of public witness that strengthens the faith of others, and an act that at bottom is self-centered. Like magnets and pieces of steel, those who make a public display of spiritual strength may in the end only draw attention to themselves and their personalities.

There are many ways to make a moral argument. Starving oneself to death for a cause is not it itself honorable or life-giving. Over a span of 2,000 years, a number of people in the world have come to believe the Messiah already came.

Many of us admire the values of Mr. Lin. We may not find it possible, however, to agree with his definition of a hero. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column talks of "a spirituality" behind the anti-nuclear protest - hunger strike of Lin Yi-Xiong. Mr. Lin's personal religious beliefs and association with the "Chang lao hui" are well known. When you consider Mr. Lin's hunger strike, do "spiritual beliefs" come to your mind?
2. The column argues that Mr. Lin is a man society should admire, but that he is making a mistake by going on a hunger strike in protest of Nuke 4. Do you approve of a hunger strike in this case?
3. If Taiwan does not rely on nuclear power, the cost of electricity may rise severely to discourage people from "over-use" of electricity. Does it seem important to you to "save electricity" at Fu da or in your personal life?

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