

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Pinatubo and the Politics of Lahar, by Rodolfo

Review Author: Salvacion P. Angtuaco

Philippine Studies vol. 45, no. 1 (1997): 137–139

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Yet, the passion for intellectual excellence must be accompanied by an equally zealous living of the truths that are crucial to one's formation as a human person. Authentic human existence requires that intellectual excellence culminate in moral and spiritual growth. Thus, the author sees the university people, including its graduates, as having a vocation to live ethically and be of special service to the poor in society. The latter task is a mandate of a Christian university. In fact, there are Christian universities that have institutionalized the immersion of their students with the urban and the rural poor and have set up centers for social development as an integral part of their service to the nation. There are even instances that in speaking out the truth, in serving as the voice of the oppressed and the weak against unjust regimes, the university suffers tragedy with the ruthless killing of its members.

Finally, the author is convinced that there is a certain link between intellectual excellence and holiness. In other words, an authentic and sincere yearning for learning can be conducive to the promotion of a religious mode of life in the university. If the passion for academic excellence involves a universal outlook or an openness of the mind to the totality of reality, and especially to the pursuit of the highest truths, then this can lead to a knowledge of God in things of the world and especially in people. "Living the life of seeking the important truth is already a preparation for holiness and in some cases, it is a part of genuine holiness" (p. 110).

Whether by design or by coincidence, this book on university education and the pursuit of academic excellence has come up at the time when the School of Arts and Sciences of the Ateneo de Manila University is agitated by the controversy on the reduction of the core curriculum units that could possibly undermine the tradition of liberal education in this university. This book appears to be a reminder and a call that the formative character of Ateneo education could be jeopardized by this radical change in the core curriculum. This is because the more important knowledge and truths that are vital to the formation of the human person are found in the core curriculum courses. Thus, the relevance of this book cannot be overlooked.

*Tomas G. Rosario, Jr.
Philosophy Department
Ateneo de Manila University*

Pinatubo and the Politics of Lahar. By Kelvin S. Rodolfo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995. 340 pages.

If the eruption of Mt. Pelee (in Lesser Antilles) in 1902 inspired an opera, *The Violins of St. Jacques*, Mt. Pinatubo's eruption inspired the writing of several books, among which are *Pinatubo: The Eruption of the Century*, by Castro (1991), and *Mt. Pinatubo: 500 years after*, by Dacanay (1991). The eruption also

gave birth to the inclusion of a new word, "lahar," in every Filipino's vocabulary. This book by Kelvin S. Rodolfo is the latest on Mt. Pinatubo.

Rodolfo set out to write a story about the June 1991 eruption and the subsequent lahars of Mount Pinatubo. This eruption has changed—and still continues to change—not only the lives of the people around the area, but also the climate around the world. A lowering of the global climate by 0.5°C has been recorded since the eruption.

The story is fascinating, filled with drama, and is highly informative. Now I know the difference between lahar and mudflow, between tephraflow and pyroclastic flow. I have also learned that different forms of lahar (dilute and viscous) produce different kinds of damage.

It is fascinating to know that dilute lahars tend to move rapidly sideways and eat away the riverbanks. Viscous lahars, on the other hand, move along straight lines. However, their great densities and speed give them so much energy that they can carry boulders, trucks, and other large masses, then slam these on anything along their paths. Signals for oncoming dilute lahar and viscous lahar also differ. Still, these two kinds of lahar may transform into each other as they move down their paths. Because of this transformation, active lahars can "cut sideways at the same time that they are cutting downwards. The buried bases or footings of a dike built for flood water are easily undermined, and when the dike collapses in pieces, the pieces themselves become boulders carried along by the lahars" (p. 121).

Rodolfo's passion for lahar manifests itself clearly throughout the book. He and his group have formed the Pinatubo Lahar Hazards Task Force (PLHT) and in the process, they learned something new about lahar as they closely followed and monitored its movement and activity. They saw first-hand how the lahars could transform from dilute to viscous and change the landscape in a matter of minutes. They witnessed how this transformation is affected by the amount as well as the rate of rainfall in the Pinatubo slopes. They even "urged [without much success] the engineers to study active lahars with them so they can design containment structures accordingly" (p. 120).

Rodolfo's chronicle of events pictured drama at high gear. The team even risked life and limb to find answers to their questions, and gather data so as to come up with a lahar map that can protect the lives of people henceforth. Well, if only our engineers tried to "understand the beast" (Chapter 8) as much as Rodolfo and his group had done, then they would not have built those ineffective dikes. Millions of pesos would then have been saved and our people would have been spared from unnecessary anguish and frustration.

The story is also a gripping account of how our lives are strongly intertwined with media and politics; how little appreciated field scientists are; how they are not supposed to say anything to the media; and how they are usually the last to know of any announcements or directives.

In his introduction, Rodolfo says, "All your science and all your truths are subordinate to political realities, so learn about politics and politicians and how to live with them as you go about your work" (p. xxv). He sadly admits that politics and media had caused his conflict with Rey Punongbayan, the PHILVOLCS director.

Politics and media also distorted their recommendations regarding platforms, sandbags, and dikes. He bewailed the fact that "even some of these sympathizers [the media people], however, propagated mistaken perceptions of my views: that I am categorically against the building of structures to contain lahars" (p. 183).

Moreover, Rodolfo skillfully weaves a personal story with one of the most powerful eruptions of the century. Reading his book was like watching an adventure movie and knowing at the same time what was happening behind the scenes. However, two chapters in the book made me a little uncomfortable: chapters 2 and 7. The feeling of adventure was put to a halt by these two chapters. I felt that the tracing of Rodolfo's roots in chapter 2 was a little prolonged and even unnecessary, except for the part on page 28 where he opened with "My fate has been tied to Pinatubo from the beginning."

The tone of the book was as a dramatic chronicle, an adventure story, yet I felt rather disconcerted to be suddenly confronted with a lecture on plate tectonics in chapter 7. It felt like riding on a ferris wheel which, upon reaching the top, suddenly stops because of some technical problems. Sure, Rodolfo advised at the beginning of the chapter that the reader might want to skip it. My reaction: why place it here if it can be skipped in the first place? Why not just put it in the appendix instead?

Perhaps Rodolfo deliberately placed this chapter here to duplicate or mirror the way politics and bureaucracy delay, bog down or even disregard important suggestions and solutions to the lahar problem. If this is his purpose, then he certainly succeeded. As I read the chapter, I felt unceremoniously brought back to the ground as I plodded through the lecture portion impatiently. Perhaps this was really his purpose, to give us a taste of how politics and the bureaucracy had delayed or derailed even life- and property-saving suggestions.

Despite this slight flaw, I highly recommend the book. Anyone and everyone interested in knowing the story behind all the chaos, frustrations, fears, and heroism during and after the Pinatubo eruption will enjoy the book. It is also an enthralling experience to pick up lessons about volcanoes and lahars, definitely much better than reading dry technical books. Chapter 8 is a must reading for our engineers at DPWH and our politicians, who still insist in putting up dikes at all the illogical places.

*Salvacion P. Angtuaco
Department of Biology
Ateneo de Manila University*