

"A HELLUVA GOOD TIME"
PENNSYLVANIA GAZETTE, 1990

The Philomathean Society, which used to advertise itself as the organization that allowed Penn students to raise Hell with their brains, gave new meaning to that old slogan at a special event a few Saturdays back. The event was a philosophical debate between Philo and its Princeton University counterpart, the American Whig-Clisophic Society. The topic: "Should there be a Hell?" The winner: Philo, in a one-sided decision. The loser: All of us (Philo argued the affirmative).

The formal order of exercises for the debate, held in in Philo's meeting room on the fourth floor of College Hall, was elaborate and fun, in an eccentric kind of way. There was a visit from a "papal emissary," three Muses dropped in, one judge punned his way through the proceedings and the other failed to appear. A marble bust of Benjamin Franklin cast its shadow over the assembly and a Princeton-appointed deity, a hand-puppet named Tigger, stood watch. In addition to being filled with the strains of Penn and Princeton songs, the Philomathean chambers rang with three choruses of a 17th-century doomsday hymn. there were also cheers, from time to time, for the home team, both in English ("Give 'em Hell" and "Go, Hell!") and in Latin ("Philo -- Ray! Philo -- Rah! Sic Itur Ad Astra," which means "This is the way to the stars"; the line has special meaning for Philo member because their quarters have for years been on the top floor of one building or another).

A silly special message from the Vatican was read at the beginning of the proceedings by the ... berobed emissary. It began with "Dear Academics of Penn State and Brooke Shields Universities:" and ended with "Good luck, Godspeed, and see you in Church tomorrow"; it was signed "Pope John Paul II."

Simon Glinky, '84 W, the moderator of the Philomathean Society, responded, "Thank you very much, Mr. Pope." Then he faced the audience of about 75 jammed into the room and said: "I'd like to encourage everybody to think of all the catcalls and insults that you can and dump 'em out when you feel it's appropriate -- or inappropriate, as the case may be."

Glinky also introduced the judge, Nichlolas D. Constan, Jr., '64 L, adjunct associate professor of legal studies and associate director of the Wharton Graduate Division (as well as our Pennsylvanias). Then he introduced Dr. E. Digby Batzell, '39 W, the professor of sociology whom he said, would serve as "moderator or English judge or something"; Batzell was wearing a curled paper wig. The introductions done, Glinky ordered, "Let the maelstrom begin." Then the Muses entered the room in the dark, wearing strings of tiny white lights. They were joined by a kind of Every debater who noted that "my tongue is but a spastic marionette" before appealing to the Muses in doggerel for inspiration and eloquence for the Philo debaters (there were four debaters on each side). Rather than appeal to the Muses, Whig-Clio chose to sing a paean to Tigger.

Princeton lost the toss of a coin, and Penn took the affirmative argument. Baltzell pointed out that neither team had known which side of the argument they would be on when they came to the debate -- and that, he observed, "sounds like some politicians I know."

Philo began, arguing that there is a system of cause and effect in our natural world and we need a spiritual equivalent and that the punishment of Hell would thus validate our thought processes and establish an aesthetically satisfying order that Hell would help people and nations be good. ("It's not just that we should have a Hell," one Philo debater argued with a gusto, "We need a Hell!").

Whig-Clio countered that Hell is a spiritual narcotic that renders Earthly life insignificant because our ultimate existence is then elsewhere and that China and India do not have a Hell and that people can be educated to know what is good here without a Hell.

Then there were rebuttals and cross-examinations. In all of this, we especially liked the fire-and-brimstone posture of a Whig-Clio debater in summation and the arguments of two other debaters. One argument, on the Princeton side, went: "It's been argued that only with a Hell can we distinguish what's good and evil. No! Hell is an enforcement mechanism. We already know what's good and what's evil. That's why it's so much more fun to do evil things: because we recognize it as we do it."

But our very favorite argument came from the Penn side: "I really think my opponents are overlooking the obvious tourism value of Hell. People pay lots of money to do see things like The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre -- imagine what you could charge to go look at Hell. Nobody goes to see happy movies. If we have a Hell, we could charge very high fees for getting in, and we could completely eliminate the tithe."

And the judge's decision, announced by Constan: "I'd like to commend Princeton, which was more flamboyant; Penn, for being more logically persuasive; Princeton, for being better prepared; Penn, for not using notes. On balance, ... there was balance. However, Princeton didn't bring a judge. Pennsylvania did. So, therefore, I have the following suggestion: That Pennsylvania win ... but it must share its hoagies with the Princeton team or suffer eternal damnation."

"We had a very lively debate," Baltzell chimed in, adding, "The two teams were very typical of the two [universities] -- one urban and one sub-urban."