



SCHOOL OF THE HUMANITIES

The mission of Messiah College is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society. One means of doing so is through allowing students to engage important scholars and public figures who are invited to campus for public lectures. Such public lectures can, however, be a source of controversy as speakers may hold positions that seem to be in tension with or even contrary to other fundamental commitments. This has certainly been the case with the invitation to Dr. Frances Fox Piven to be the speaker for this year's American Democracy Lecture on October 11. [A letter from Dr. Peter Kerry Powers, Dean of the School of the Humanities](#), provides an overview of the role of invited speakers in our educational programming and particularly of the invitation extended to Dr. Piven. The following FAQ is designed to provide supplemental information for interested parties who may have concerns about Messiah College hosting this particular event.

What is the role and history of the American Democracy Lecture at Messiah College?

As its name suggests, the American Democracy Lecture is designed to encourage students, faculty and the general public to reflect upon serious questions concerning the nature of our democracy. Since 1987 when this lecture series began the American Democracy Lecture has been co-sponsored in alternate years by the History and Politics departments, and is currently a public enrichment program supported by the Messiah College Center for Public Humanities. Previous distinguished speakers have included James McPherson, Peter Onuf, Patrick Allitt, Harry S. Stout, Darrel Bigham, Wilma King, Wilfred McClay, E. J. Dionne, Larry Diamond, John J. Dilulio, Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain, Louis Fisher, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Seymour Martin Lipset, Byron Shafer, and Theda Skocpol. It is important to note that Dr. Piven's lecture is not mandatory for students; it is a voluntary opportunity for anyone who is interested in hearing and responding to the topic of the presentation.

How are speakers selected for the American Democracy Lecture?

In alternating years the Department of History and the Department of Politics research potential speakers and make a recommendation to the Director of the Center for the Public Humanities. This recommendation is vetted and approved by the Steering Committee for the Center. The recommendation is made to the Dean of the School of the Humanities who gives final approval. Criteria for selection are that the speaker must be a scholar or public figure of some national reputation who can speak to issues of historical or contemporary significance relative to our understanding of democracy in the United States. Information regarding Dr. Piven's qualifications in this regard may be derived from [the Dean's statement available at the website of the School of the Humanities](#).

Why would Messiah College invite Dr. Piven given her reputation in the national media?

It is very clearly the case that Dr. Piven has been the subject of a great deal of controversy over the past year to year and a half, a significant portion of that controversy deriving from the opinions of news commentator Glenn Beck and others in the blogosphere. The College has no official position on the interpretation of Dr. Piven's work by either her supporters or her detractors. The College does, however, attempt to bring a measure of critical reflection to the substantive ideas of many different speakers, critical reflection not always evident in media reporting on political and cultural issues. Those involved in the vetting process did believe that the media controversy obscured Dr. Piven's 40-year career and extensive scholarly credentials, both of which suggest that her talk can be the opportunity for serious conversation and political engagement for our students and by the general public.

Dr. Piven's lecture is just one part of a broader campus conversation this fall exploring capitalism and its role in American society. On November 9, the Messiah College Honors Program is sponsoring a debate examining the

INTELLECT · CHARACTER · CHRISTIAN FAITH

question “Is Capitalism Moral?” between Jim Wallis, founder and president of Sojourners, and Arthur Brooks, president of the American Free Enterprise Institute. Collaboratively these events and the question-and-answer sessions that follow provide students with the opportunity to hear a broad range of perspectives on the interplay of democracy and capitalism in our society—and equip them to ask critical questions, form their own perspectives and express counter viewpoints in respectful, effective ways.

Does Messiah College endorse Dr. Piven’s political views? Given that some of her views do not mesh well with the values of the College focused on peacemaking and reconciliation, why would she be invited?

Messiah College does not typically endorse or refute the views of invited speakers. Rather, speakers are invited if we believe they can play a role in helping us achieve our educational mission. Unlike faculty members or students, speakers are not expected to sign statements of faith or other documents associated with the Messiah College community of educators, employees, and students. Thus, invited speakers may often, but do not always, reflect the foundational commitments of the college. Speakers are often chosen because they can provide new and different points of view that our students would not typically engage in the day to day life of the college. With specific attention to the question of peacemaking, it is clearly the case that Dr. Piven is not a pacifist, and indeed she makes no claim to being a person of faith. The same could be equally said of other speakers invited to campus in recent years. The goal of engagement with such speakers is that the maturity of students’ intellect, character, and Christian faith would be enhanced as they work together with faculty and staff to respond to difficult questions that such speakers may raise.

Why did the college not invite another speaker who could counteract Dr. Piven’s views?

Although it is sometimes the case that the College will set up events that allow for point-counter-point debates between major speakers, this practice is usually not possible given the difficulties of logistics. It has never been the case that the American Democracy Lecture has used this format for an event. Instead those running the lecture have attempted to choose speakers over the years that represent a variety of points of view so that students can engage with speakers from all points on the political spectrum. In addition, we always provide a talkback session wherein a panel of faculty members is invited to provide critiques and other reflections on the speaker’s lecture for students. This year’s talkback session will occur on Wednesday, October 12, from 4-5 p.m. in Boyer 131.

Updated 17 October 2011