

## REL 512 Debates in Method and Theory

Tuesday 1:30-3:20 • Manly 210

Prof. Russell T. McCutcheon

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Office Hours: by appointment

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### Course Description

A debate that shows no signs of going away is how we define our object of study: religion. It spans those who argue that there is an essential trait shared by all religions, past and present, to those who maintain that it is an arbitrary word used to name and rank a variety of things in the world—even those who claim that it just can't be defined at all. Depending which approach one adopts, one will use different methods to study different items, for different purposes. This course tackles this debate head-on by reading not only the definitions offered by some of the field's leading writers but also their debates over the definitions that they employ. The course ends with each student writing a review essay on Edward Shiappa's *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*—doing so from the viewpoint of the academic study of religion. The seminar therefore challenges students to consider the gains that come from being careful and articulate in their work as well as the practical implications for how we go about defining our object of study.

### Readings

The manuscript for the main book in the course—to be published in 2021—will be distributed as a PDF after the first day of class. The only book students must purchase is therefore:

Edward Shiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (2003).

It is available in softcover at the campus supply store or online at a variety of vendors.

### COVID-19 Adjustments

Given numbers of new infections in the state and elsewhere in the country along with UA's response (e.g., mandated social distancing in all classrooms, thereby reducing each room's capacity by 80%) and concerns student have expressed regarding the risks associated with in-person meetings, we will begin this course in a remote fashion, using weekly Zoom videoconference sessions that will take place during the class's regularly scheduled time. All students are therefore required to have sufficient technological resources and competencies to participate fully in each weekly class. Should the risks of in-person meetings lessen sufficiently at a later point in the semester then we will discuss, as a class, whether to shift to in-person meetings.

### Requirements

1. Regular attendance, evidence of preparation, and active participation are prerequisites for success in this course; this is all worth **75%** of the course's final grade. As part of this portion of the course, each student will adopt 2 different sections/exchanges in the course's main book (each presentation will take place on a different day), coming to the seminar prepared to lead a substantial discussion on the issues in evidence in the exchange. As part of this, presenters will begin by introducing classmates to each of the authors and then move on to a summary of the arguments and conclusions made in both essays (a response and a reply) in their section of the book.

2. A final review essay is due on **Monday, Dec. 7 (by noon)**, on *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, in which students describe and then comment on the wider issues of relevance to being attentive to how scholars of religion define their object of study. This will be approx. 2,500 words in length and worth **25%** of the course's final grade. It will be discussed in great length in class, well in advance of the due date. Students are advised to begin reading the book by no later than the middle of the semester.

### Grading Scale

A	90-100	D	60-69
B	80-89	F	below 60
C	70-79		

### General Comments

1. Plagiarism is a serious scholarly offence and amounts to using the intellectual labor of another author without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If the instructors suspect that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a peer, classmate, or published author), the case will immediately be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.
2. No grades of "I" (Incomplete) will be assigned in this course. Please speak with the Instructors well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you anticipate your absence from class becoming routine. Although we cannot guarantee that reasonable accommodations can be made for all occasions that may arise, speaking with us before a problem arises will greatly enhance our ability to address the situation in a way that is both fair to your classmates and beneficial to you.
3. Students with documented physical and/or learning disabilities should contact the Instructors outside of class time (i.e., make an appointment), as soon as possible, to provide copies of their documentation and to discuss the reasonable accommodation(s) that can be made to meet their needs. However, prior to contacting the Instructors, ensure that you contact the Office of Disability Services.
4. All University faculty, staff, and students are expected to maintain a commitment to the health and safety of our campus community. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, specific health and safety standards are in place to minimize exposure and community spread on campus. In the interest of your health and safety and that of all UA students, faculty and staff, the University reserves the right to change the mode of instruction or schedule of instruction at any time, based upon prevailing public health and other guidance. While the method of delivery may change, educational instruction and opportunities will continue. As such, the University will not provide a refund of tuition, in whole or in-part, based on any such changes. Detailed information on changes in format or schedule can be found at <https://studentaccounts.ua.edu/> and <https://financialaid.ua.edu/>.
5. All students must be familiar with and abide by the requirements outlined in the UA Return Plan | UA System Comprehensive Health and Safety Plan. Students must (1) wear a mask or face covering at all times while participating in face-to-face class; (2) adhere to social distancing standards; and (3) comply with all other health and safety restrictions. If a student refuses to comply with the requirements, the student will be asked to leave the class and reported for a conduct violation. Unless a student has an exemption from the requirement to wear a face covering, (more information can be found at <http://ods.ua.edu/covid-19-disability/>), the student will be reported to Student Life for further disciplinary action. More information on these requirements and UA Healthcheck system and screening can be found at [healthinfo.ua.edu/returnplan](http://healthinfo.ua.edu/returnplan). You are expected to visit the site and comply with all noted requirements related to in-person class attendance.

## Tentative Schedule

Aug 25	Introduction to the course (Come to class ready to share your own "Religion is..." sentence, no longer than a brief paragraph and in writing)
Sept 1	Religion is...: Preface/Introduction & the Statements
Sept 8	Religion is...: 1 & 2 _____
Sept 15	Religion is...: 3 & 4 _____
Sept 22	Religion is...: 5 & 6 _____
Sept 29	Religion is...: 7 & 8 _____
Oct 6	Religion is...: 9 & 10 _____
Oct 13	Religion is...: 11 & 12 _____
Oct 20	Religion is...: 13 & 14 _____
Oct 27	Religion is...: 15 & 16 _____
Nov 3	Religion is ...: 17 _____
Nov 10	Religion is...: Afterword
Nov 17	Discuss Final Assignment
Nov 24	Thanksgiving break – no class
Dec 1	No class – work on final review essays
Dec 7	<b>Final review essays due by email to the professor as PDFs (by noon)</b>

**There is not final exam in this course.**



*"It all depends on how you define 'chop.'"*