

# Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Religious Experience Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Religious Experience, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

**Dr. Jim Spiegel's lecture explores the significance of religious experience as a justification for belief in God.** He begins by defining religious experience, focusing on Rudolf Otto's concept of "numinous experience" as a personal encounter with a holy, awesome, and separate being. **The lecture then examines two main arguments:** the causal argument, which infers God's existence from life transformations following religious experiences, and the direct perception argument, which draws an analogy between perceiving God and sensory perception, as championed by William Alston. **Spiegel outlines criteria for authentic mystical perception based on Alston and Moreland's work, such as consistency and beneficial consequences.** Finally, he addresses objections to the parity between sensory and mystical perception raised by Keith Augustine and suggests that scripture can offer a basis for public investigation and evaluating different religious claims. The session ultimately considers the value and challenges of using religious experience to build a rational case for theism.

**2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).**



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### 3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Religious Experience

#### Briefing Document: The Relevance of Religious Experience for Theistic Belief

##### Overview:

This briefing document summarizes Dr. Jim Spiegel's lecture (Session 6 of his Philosophy of Religion course) focusing on the significance of religious experience as a justification for belief in God. Spiegel explores the nature of religious experience, particularly Rudolf Otto's concept of "numinous experience," and examines two primary arguments that attempt to reason from religious experience to the existence of God: the causal argument and the direct perception argument. He also addresses objections to these arguments and offers potential rebuttals.

##### Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

##### 1. The Nature of Religious Experience:

- **Definition is contingent on the conception of religion:** A broad definition could include feelings of oneness with nature or self-realization, while many religious believers characterize it as a "**personal encounter with God.**" (p. 1)
- **Rudolf Otto's "Numinous Experience":** Spiegel highlights Otto's definition as a "**direct apprehension of a personal being who is holy, good, awesome, separate from the subject, and one upon whom the subject depends for life and care.**" (p. 1) Key aspects include:
  - **Personal being:** Not merely a force or energy, but possessing consciousness, awareness, and concern.
  - **Holy and good:** Possessing a moral quality.
  - **Awesome:** Evoking a sense of greatness.
  - **Separate from the subject:** Not just an internal psychological phenomenon.
  - **Dependence:** The being is the source of existence and care.
- **William James's "The Varieties of Religious Experience":** Spiegel recommends James's work as the "**best scholarly inquiry into that subject all these decades later.**" (p. 2)

## 2. Arguments from Religious Experience to the Existence of God:

- **The Causal Argument:** This argument reasons from the *effects* of a person's religious experience, particularly dramatic life transformations, to God as the *cause*.
- Often implicit in testimonies of conversion and changed lives, where individuals attribute positive changes (e.g., abandoning vices, living virtuously) to their encounter with God.
- **Objection:** Psychological and sociological factors (e.g., new social circles, belief systems) can naturalize these accounts.
- **Rebuttals (drawing on J.P. Moreland):** Religious experiences do not exclude psychological and sociological factors; the question is whether these explain *all* changes.
- The plausibility of purely naturalistic explanations decreases with the increasing variety in the nature and scope of religious transformations across diverse contexts.
- Christian religious experience is often tied to "**objective events**" (p. 3) like the resurrection of Christ and the history of transformations within the church, providing an interpretive framework.
- Scripture provides a theological framework (e.g., sinful nature vs. empowerment by the Holy Spirit) that anticipates and explains such transformations.
- **The Direct Perception Argument:** This argument, championed by philosopher William Alston, draws an analogy between the spiritual perception of God and ordinary sensory perception.
- The claim is that numinous experience is sufficiently similar to seeing or touching physical objects, suggesting the former can also be authentic.
- **Key Features of Sensory Perception (used for analogy):** Subject needs to meet certain conditions (consciousness, attention, functioning sense organs).
- Directed to an object that exists independently of the perceiver.
- Has both public (object available to others) and private (unique individual experience) aspects.
- Admits of a part-whole distinction (one can perceive part of an object).

- Has public checks or tests for confirmation.
- **Parallel Features in Mystical Perception (following Alston and Moreland):** Subject needs religious/spiritual awareness and perhaps a willingness to seek and recognize God.
- Directed to God as the object.
- Has both public (others can experience God) and private (unique individual experience) aspects. **"God is, as it were, publicly available to be experienced by human beings. But each human being has a unique approach or perspective on God."** (p. 6)
- Admits of a part-whole distinction, as God is infinitely great and cannot be exhaustively perceived. The example of Moses seeing God's "backward parts" illustrates a limited but genuine encounter.
- Has public tests for genuineness, including:
  - **Logical consistency:** Claims about the experience should not be contradictory.
  - **Similarity to exemplars:** Aligning with the experiences of respected figures in religious traditions (e.g., Moses, Ezekiel, Isaiah and their experience of humbling). **"There's a kind of extreme humbling. And many would argue, I think plausibly, in terms of a direct encounter of God, that that is one of the hallmarks of a genuine direct perception of God."** (p. 7)
  - **Frequency:** Expectation of similar experiences in oneself and others.
  - **Beneficial consequences:** Positive moral and personal impact on the subject and others. **"The consequences of such experiences should be good for the subject as well as for other people... All the virtues should at least increase in a person's life."** (p. 8)
- **Coherence with scripture:** The experience should align with established religious revelation.

### 3. Objections to the Direct Perception Argument and Spiegel's Replies:

- **Keith Augustine's Objection 1: Lack of publicly deployable investigative methods to establish the nature of the divine being.** **Spiegel's Reply:** Scripture (special revelation) provides opportunities for public investigation regarding God's nature. The biblical conception can be compared to claims made about mystical experiences.

- **Keith Augustine's Objection 2: Tremendous diversity of beliefs about God, massively incompatible mystical practices, and lack of independent reasons to favor one mystical practice over another.** **Spiegel's Reply:** This issue can also be addressed by appealing to special revelation. The key question then becomes which alleged special revelation is the most reliable. This leads to the field of comparative religion and the evaluation of sacred texts (e.g., Bible, Koran, Book of Mormon). **"The question is, which alleged special revelation is the most reliable one? This takes us into a discussion of a separate but vital issue, and that is comparative religion..."** (p. 9)

### **Conclusion:**

Dr. Spiegel concludes by noting that Alston and Moreland argue for an **"epistemic parity between the sensory perception of physical objects and the mystical perception of God."** (p. 8) If sensory perception is considered a reliable belief-forming practice, then mystical perception might also be. However, objections regarding the verifiability and diversity of religious experiences need to be addressed, often leading to considerations of special revelation and comparative religion, which lie beyond the immediate scope of this session.

## **4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Religious Experience**

### **Religious Experience and Theistic Belief**

#### **Study Guide**

##### **I. Introduction to Religious Experience**

- Define "religious experience" as discussed in the source. How does this definition vary depending on one's conception of religion?
- What is Rudolf Otto's concept of "numinous experience"? Identify and explain its key characteristics.
- Why does the source highlight the personal nature of the being encountered in a numinous experience?

##### **II. Arguments from Religious Experience**

- Identify the two main forms of arguments that attempt to reason from religious experience to the existence of God. Briefly describe each.

##### **III. The Causal Argument**

- Explain how the causal argument from religious experience works. What kind of evidence is often cited in this argument?
- What are the psychological and sociological objections to the causal argument?
- How does J.P. Moreland address these objections? What three points does he make?
- Explain the role of Christian theology (sinful nature, Holy Spirit) in supporting the causal argument, according to the source.

##### **IV. The Direct Perception Argument**

- Explain the analogy at the heart of the direct perception argument. Whose work is central to this argument?
- Identify and describe the five features of ordinary sensory perception outlined in the source.

- How do Alston and Moreland argue that these five features are also applicable to mystical perception? Provide specific examples for each feature in the context of mystical experience.
- What biblical example is used to illustrate the part-whole distinction in mystical perception? Explain this example.
- What are the five "public tests" for genuine mystical perception discussed in the source? Explain each test.

## **V. Objections to the Direct Perception Argument and Replies**

- What are the two main objections to Alston's parity argument raised by Keith Augustine? Explain each objection.
- How does the source (Dr. Spiegel) reply to Augustine's first objection regarding the lack of publicly deployable investigative methods?
- How does the source reply to Augustine's second objection concerning the diversity of religious beliefs and mystical practices? What larger issue does this point to?

## **VI. Conclusion**

- Summarize the overall discussion regarding the relevance of religious experience for theistic belief. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented?

## **Quiz**

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. According to the source, what is a common reason why many people hold religious beliefs? How does this raise a question about the justification of such beliefs?
2. Describe two key characteristics of Rudolf Otto's concept of a numinous experience, as outlined in the lecture.
3. What is the basic premise of the causal argument from religious experience? Provide an example of the type of evidence used to support this argument.
4. What are two ways in which psychological or sociological factors might be used to explain away dramatic life changes following a religious experience?

5. Explain the analogy between sensory perception and mystical perception that forms the basis of the direct perception argument.
6. Describe two of the five features of ordinary sensory perception that Alston and Moreland apply to mystical perception.
7. According to the source, in what way does the experience of Moses encountering God illustrate the part-whole distinction in mystical perception?
8. Identify and briefly explain two of the public tests for genuine mystical perception discussed in the lecture.
9. What is one of Keith Augustine's main objections to the parity argument between sensory and mystical perception?
10. How does the source suggest that the issue of diverse religious beliefs and practices might be addressed when considering the reliability of mystical experiences?

### **Quiz Answer Key**

1. Many people believe in God due to personal experiences. This raises the question of whether these subjective experiences can provide a rational justification for theistic belief.
2. A numinous experience involves a direct apprehension of a personal being who is holy, good, and awesome, and who is separate from and depended upon by the subject.
3. The causal argument reasons from the effects of a person's religious experience, such as dramatic life transformation, to God as the ultimate cause of that change. Testimonies of changed lives and the abandonment of negative habits are often cited.
4. Psychological explanations might attribute changes to the psychological impact of new beliefs and moral obligations. Sociological explanations could point to the influence of a new religious community and social interactions.
5. The direct perception argument claims that the way we perceive God in religious experience is analogous to how we perceive physical objects through our senses, suggesting that both can be veridical forms of perception.
6. Sensory perception is directed at an object independent of the perceiver, and mystical perception is argued to be directed at God as an independent object.



Also, both have a public and private aspect; many can perceive a physical object, but each has a unique perspective, just as individuals have unique experiences of God.

7. Moses' brief glimpse of God's "backward parts" illustrates that one can have a genuine, albeit limited, encounter with God without fully comprehending His infinite being, demonstrating a part-whole distinction.
8. Consistency requires that claims about a genuine mystical experience should not be logically contradictory. Beneficial consequences suggest that a genuine experience of God should lead to positive moral and personal development in the subject.
9. Augustine argues that the Alston parity argument fails due to a lack of publicly deployable investigative methods to independently verify the nature of the divine being encountered in mystical experiences.
10. The source suggests that the reliability of different mystical practices might be assessed by examining alleged special revelations (sacred texts) and evaluating which, if any, provide a trustworthy account of the divine.

### **Essay Format Questions**

1. Critically evaluate the causal argument from religious experience as a justification for theistic belief. Consider both its strengths and the challenges posed by psychological and sociological explanations.
2. Analyze the direct perception argument for the existence of God. How effectively does the analogy between sensory perception and mystical perception address skepticism about religious experience?
3. Discuss the significance of Rudolf Otto's concept of the "numinous" for understanding religious experience. How does this concept inform the debate about the validity of religious experience as evidence for theism?
4. Explore the public tests for genuine mystical perception proposed in the source. To what extent can these tests provide objective criteria for evaluating the authenticity of religious experiences?
5. Considering the objections raised by Keith Augustine, assess the overall success of arguments from religious experience in providing rational grounds for belief in God.

## 5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Religious Experience, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: The Relevance of Religious Experience for Theistic Belief

**1. Why is religious experience considered relevant to belief in God?** Many religious individuals base their belief in God on personal experiences rather than philosophical arguments. This raises the question of whether these experiences can provide rational justification for theistic belief. The discussion explores the potential value and limitations of religious experience in building a case for Christianity or theism.

**2. How does Dr. Spiegel define "religious experience" in this context?** Dr. Spiegel acknowledges that the definition of religious experience varies depending on one's conception of religion. However, for many religious believers, a truly religious experience is characterized as a personal encounter with God. This aligns with Rudolf Otto's concept of a "numinous experience," which involves a direct apprehension of a personal being who is holy, good, awesome, separate from the individual, and upon whom the individual depends. Key aspects of this include the experience being of a personal being with consciousness and moral qualities, distinct from the individual, and the source of dependence for the individual.

**3. What are the two main forms of arguments from religious experience discussed, and how do they differ?** The discussion focuses on two types of arguments: the causal argument and the direct perception argument. The causal argument reasons from the effects of a person's religious experience, particularly dramatic life transformations, to God as the ultimate cause. Testimonies of conversion involving the abandonment of negative behaviors and the adoption of virtuous living, attributed to God's influence, exemplify this argument. The direct perception argument, on the other hand, draws an analogy between one's perception of God and the sensory perception of physical objects, suggesting that just as we directly perceive the physical world, we can also directly (spiritually) perceive God.

**4. What are some objections raised against the causal argument from religious experience, and how are they addressed?**

One common objection is that life changes following a religious experience can be explained through psychological and sociological factors, such as new social circles and the psychological impact of adopting new beliefs and moral obligations. In response, it's argued that while psychological and sociological factors may play a role, they may not fully account for all aspects of a person's transformation. The plausibility of purely naturalistic explanations decreases when similar dramatic transformations occur across a wide variety of social, economic, cultural, and psychological contexts. Furthermore, Christian religious experience is often linked to objective historical events (like the resurrection) and is understood within a theological framework (like the concept of conversion and the Holy Spirit), providing a broader interpretive lens.

**5. How does the direct perception argument draw parallels between sensory perception and mystical perception?**

The direct perception argument, drawing on the work of William Alston and J.P. Moreland, highlights several analogous features between sensory perception and mystical (or numinous) perception. These include: the need for certain conditions to be met by the subject (e.g., consciousness, attention, proper functioning of faculties or spiritual awareness); the directedness of perception towards an object (physical objects or God); the presence of both public (the object is available to multiple perceivers) and private (each individual's experience is unique) aspects; the admissibility of a part-whole distinction (one can perceive part of an object or only a limited aspect of God); and the existence of public checks or tests for verifying the authenticity of the perception.

**6. What kinds of "public tests" are suggested for validating the authenticity of mystical or numinous perceptions?**

Several tests are proposed for evaluating the genuineness of mystical experiences. These include logical consistency (claims about the experience should not be self-contradictory), similarity to exemplars (aligning with the experiences of recognized figures in religious traditions), frequency (expecting similar experiences to recur in one's life and be reported by others), beneficial consequences (the experience should lead to positive moral and social outcomes), and coherence with scripture (the experience should align with the teachings and narratives of religious texts).

**7. What are some objections to the direct perception argument, as raised by Keith Augustine?** Keith Augustine critiques the parity between sensory and mystical perception, arguing for a lack of publicly deployable investigative methods to establish the nature of the divine being. Unlike physical objects, we cannot manipulate or predictably reproduce experiences of God. Augustine also points to the vast diversity of beliefs about God and the existence of incompatible mystical practices across different religions, without any independent basis for deeming one practice more reliable than others.

**8. How does Dr. Spiegel respond to Augustine's objections regarding the direct perception argument?** In response to the lack of publicly deployable investigative methods, Dr. Spiegel suggests that scripture (special revelation) can provide a basis for public investigation into the nature of God, offering a robust, though limited, understanding. This allows for comparing claims from mystical experiences with a biblical conception of God. Regarding the diversity of mystical practices and beliefs, Dr. Spiegel argues that this can be addressed by appealing to special revelation as well. The key then becomes evaluating the reliability of different alleged special revelations (e.g., the Bible, the Quran) through comparative religious analysis to determine which, if any, are divinely inspired.