

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8, Reformed Epistemology 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 8, Reformed Epistemology, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This philosophy lecture by Dr. Jim Spiegel introduces **Reformed Epistemology**, a significant 20th-century shift in understanding the rationality of religious belief, primarily associated with **Alvin Plantinga**. The lecture contrasts this approach with **Logical Positivism** and its **verification principle**, which deemed religious claims meaningless. Reformed Epistemology argues that belief in God can be **properly basic**, not requiring evidential justification, drawing parallels with our acceptance of other unproven basic beliefs. Spiegel discusses Plantinga's critique of **classical foundationalism** and addresses common objections to Reformed Epistemology, such as the arbitrariness of belief and the "Great Pumpkin" objection.

**2. 20 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8 – 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).**



**Spiegel_PhilRel_Ses
sion08.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8, Reformed Epistemology

Briefing Document: Reformed Epistemology

Overview:

This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented by Dr. Jim Spiegel in his lecture on Reformed Epistemology. The lecture traces the historical context leading to the development of this epistemological approach, primarily focusing on the work of Alvin Plantinga, and outlines its key tenets and responses to common objections. Reformed Epistemology offers a different perspective on the rationality of religious belief, arguing that belief in God can be "properly basic" and does not necessarily require evidential justification to be rationally respectable.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Historical Context: The Rise and Fall of Logical Positivism:

- Spiegel begins by outlining the influence of Logical Positivism, a school of thought aiming to ground philosophy in scientific verification.
- The **verification principle** stated that only statements verifiable through empirical confirmation or testing were cognitively meaningful.
- This principle led to the conclusion that beliefs about morality, beauty, the soul, and God were "completely meaningless without any cognitive value."
- However, Logical Positivism was ultimately dismissed because the verification principle itself "cannot be empirically proven or demonstrated," making it "self-refuted."
- Despite its eventual rejection, positivism significantly influenced intellectual thought, leading to increased skepticism towards religious claims and a "presumption of atheism" in philosophical circles, exemplified by Anthony Flew.
- The 1966 Time Magazine cover story "Is God Dead?" reflected this intellectual climate.

2. Alvin Plantinga and the Emergence of Reformed Epistemology:

- In response to this prevailing skepticism, Alvin Plantinga developed Reformed Epistemology, arguing that one does not need rigorous arguments and evidence to be warranted in believing in God.
- His seminal work, *God and Other Minds*, challenged the necessity of evidential justification for religious belief.
- Plantinga further elaborated on these ideas in his *Warrant Trilogy*, culminating in a comprehensive epistemological framework.

3. Critique of Natural Theology (Limited Usefulness):

- Reformed Epistemologists, including Plantinga, argue that traditional arguments for the existence of God (natural theology) have their limits.
- Drawing parallels with presuppositional apologetics, Spiegel mentions the idea that "human sin" can act as a "block" to being convinced by evidence for God.
- Plantinga advocates for a "more humble view on the prospects of natural theology."

4. Belief in God as Properly Basic:

- The central thesis of Reformed Epistemology is that "belief in God is actually properly basic."
- A "properly basic belief is one that is not accepted on the basis of other beliefs." This does not mean such beliefs are ungrounded; rather, they are "grounded in experience."
- Plantinga argues that belief in God is warranted by the "proper function of our cognitive faculties," particularly when these faculties have undergone a form of "cognitive redemption."
- He connects this to John Calvin's concept of the *sensus divinitatis*, or the natural sense of awareness of God, which is compromised by sin.

5. Critique of Classical Foundationalism:

- Plantinga's argument for properly basic belief in God stems from a critique of **classical foundationalism**, an epistemological theory about the structure of belief systems.

- Classical foundationalism posits that all justified beliefs ultimately rest on a foundation of **basic beliefs**, which are not based on other beliefs.
- However, it further claims that properly basic beliefs must be either "self-evident, or evident to the senses, or otherwise certain or incorrigible."
- Plantinga argues that this criterion is too restrictive and would exclude many beliefs we commonly and rationally hold, such as the belief that "physical objects endure even when we're not looking at them," the existence of other minds, and basic memory beliefs.
- He points out that "you cannot prove these things with any kind of evidence or argument," yet we take them to be basic.
- Furthermore, Plantinga argues that classical foundationalism is "self-refuting" because its own criteria for proper basicity ("not self-evident, not evident to the senses, and certainly not logically incorrigible") are not met by the theory itself.

6. Expanding the Scope of Properly Basic Beliefs:

- By rejecting the strict criteria of classical foundationalism, Reformed Epistemology allows for a "much more generous view on what may count as a properly basic belief."
- If beliefs like memory and the existence of other minds are considered properly basic (despite lacking conclusive proof), then, consistently, "we're also going to have to include, to be consistent, belief in God," especially since it is "grounded in so many human experiences."
- Plantinga argues that individuals are "within our intellectual rights to start with belief in God" without needing prior justification from other beliefs.
- This extends beyond the mere existence of God to include beliefs like "God is pleased with me," or feelings of divine conviction.
- Plantinga draws parallels between the properly basic belief in God and other fundamental beliefs like "the general reliability of sense perception, the existence of the external world, the law of causality, the uniformity of nature, and the existence of other minds."

7. The Analogy of "God and Other Minds":

- The title of Plantinga's first book on this topic, *God and Other Minds*, highlights a key analogy.

- Just as we are rationally justified in believing in the minds of other people in a properly basic way (even though we cannot definitively prove their existence), similarly, we are justified in believing in the "mind behind the universe" (God) in a properly basic way.
- "God is, you might say, just another mind about whom we have a properly basic belief, no different in one sense from the other human minds we encounter and have beliefs about."

8. Responses to Objections:

- **Arbitrariness Objection:** Critics argue that allowing properly basic beliefs without strict criteria opens the door to arbitrary and irresponsible belief. Plantinga responds that establishing such criteria has proven difficult for everyone, and the failure to do so doesn't mean "anything goes."
- **The Great Pumpkin Objection:** This objection asks why, if belief in God can be properly basic, couldn't belief in something obviously fictional like the Great Pumpkin also be properly basic? Plantinga argues that there is a crucial difference: "we have a natural tendency to believe in God" (*sensus divinitatis*), which is supported by the widespread historical and cultural prevalence of belief in a higher power. "There is no natural tendency to believe in the great pumpkin, the flying spaghetti monster, or any number of ideas that have been proposed to try to lampoon belief in God."

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel concludes that Reformed Epistemology is a "highly respected and much discussed" epistemological orientation that is "very helpful and encouraging for those of us who have religious beliefs." It provides a framework for understanding why individuals can be "perfectly within our intellectual rights to believe in God, even if we don't have arguments that we can offer to defend that belief." By challenging classical foundationalism and emphasizing the possibility of properly basic religious belief grounded in experience and the *sensus divinitatis*, Reformed Epistemology offers a significant alternative to purely evidentialist approaches to religious belief.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8, Reformed Epistemology

Reformed Epistemology: A Study Guide

Key Concepts and Figures:

- **Reformed Epistemology:** A school of thought in the philosophy of religion that argues belief in God can be rational even without evidential justification.
- **Alvin Plantinga:** The leading proponent of Reformed Epistemology.
- **Logical Positivism:** A 20th-century philosophical movement that asserted only statements verifiable through empirical observation or logical analysis are cognitively meaningful.
- **Verification Principle:** The central tenet of logical positivism, stating that a proposition is meaningful only if it can be empirically verified or is a tautology.
- **Presumption of Atheism:** The view, notably advocated by Anthony Flew, that atheism should be the default position in philosophical discussions about God's existence, placing the burden of proof on the theist.
- **Properly Basic Belief:** A belief that is rationally held without being based on or inferred from other beliefs. According to Plantinga, belief in God can be properly basic.
- **Classical Foundationalism:** An epistemological theory that holds all justified beliefs ultimately rest on a foundation of basic beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.
- **Noetic Structure:** An individual's system of beliefs and the relationships between them.
- **Sensus Divinitatis:** A term from John Calvin referring to an innate human sense or awareness of God.
- **Cognitive Redemption:** The idea that human cognitive faculties, damaged by sin, need divine help to function properly in recognizing and believing in God.
- **Great Pumpkin Objection:** A common criticism of Reformed Epistemology, asking why, if belief in God can be properly basic, other seemingly absurd beliefs (like belief in the Great Pumpkin) cannot also be properly basic.

Quiz:

1. Briefly explain the central argument of Reformed Epistemology regarding the rationality of religious belief.
2. What was the verification principle of logical positivism, and why did Reformed Epistemology emerge in part as a response to this movement?
3. According to Plantinga, what are "properly basic beliefs," and what is his key claim about belief in God in relation to this concept?
4. Describe the core tenets of classical foundationalism and explain Plantinga's primary criticisms of this epistemological theory.
5. Why does Plantinga argue that beliefs like the existence of other minds and the reliability of memory are analogous to belief in God?
6. What is the "sensus divinitatis," and how does it factor into the Reformed Epistemological understanding of belief in God?
7. Explain the role of "cognitive redemption" in Plantinga's view of how humans come to a proper cognitive orientation towards God.
8. What is the "Great Pumpkin Objection" to Reformed Epistemology?
9. How does Plantinga respond to the objection that allowing belief in God to be properly basic opens the door to arbitrary or irrational beliefs?
10. In what way does Reformed Epistemology offer a different perspective on the intellectual obligations of religious believers compared to traditional natural theology?

Answer Key:

1. Reformed Epistemology argues that belief in God can be rationally justified even without relying on traditional arguments or empirical evidence. It posits that belief in God can be "properly basic," meaning it can be rationally held without being inferred from other beliefs.
2. The verification principle stated that a statement is only meaningful if it can be empirically verified or is a logical tautology. Reformed Epistemology arose partly as a reaction to logical positivism because the verification principle dismissed religious and metaphysical claims as meaningless, which proponents of Reformed Epistemology sought to challenge.

3. Properly basic beliefs, according to Plantinga, are beliefs that are rationally accepted without being based on other beliefs. His key claim is that belief in God can be a properly basic belief, grounded in experience but not necessarily inferred from other propositions.
4. Classical foundationalism claims that all justified beliefs ultimately rest on a foundation of basic beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Plantinga critiques this view by arguing that many beliefs we rationally hold (like belief in other minds) do not meet these strict criteria for basicity, and furthermore, classical foundationalism itself fails its own test.
5. Plantinga argues that our belief in the existence of other minds and the reliability of memory are basic beliefs that we accept without conclusive proof or inference from other beliefs. He suggests that belief in God can be analogous – a properly basic belief grounded in experience, similar to our intuitive acceptance of other minds.
6. The "sensus divinitatis," according to John Calvin, is an innate human sense or awareness of God. In Reformed Epistemology, it is seen as a natural ground for belief in God, explaining the widespread human tendency towards religious belief, even if this sense has been compromised by sin.
7. "Cognitive redemption" refers to the idea that human cognitive faculties, affected by sin, need God's grace to function properly in recognizing and believing in him. This divine assistance helps restore the sensus divinitatis and enables a correct orientation towards God.
8. The "Great Pumpkin Objection" is a satirical argument that if belief in God can be properly basic, then seemingly absurd beliefs, like belief in the Great Pumpkin (from the Peanuts comic strip), could also be considered properly basic without rational justification.
9. Plantinga responds to this objection by arguing that there are relevant differences between belief in God and belief in entities like the Great Pumpkin. He highlights the natural human tendency towards belief in God (sensus divinitatis) and the lack of such a tendency for nonsensical beliefs.
10. Reformed Epistemology suggests that religious believers do not necessarily need to provide arguments or evidence to rationally justify their belief in God. It argues that belief in God can be a starting point, intellectually respectable even without

evidential support, contrasting with the traditional apologetic emphasis on proving God's existence through natural theology.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the epistemological framework of classical foundationalism with that of Reformed Epistemology. In what ways does Plantinga's critique of foundationalism pave the way for his understanding of properly basic religious beliefs?
2. Analyze the role of the "sensus divinitatis" and "cognitive redemption" in Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. How do these concepts explain the rationality of religious belief in the absence of traditional arguments?
3. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the "properly basic belief" concept as it applies to belief in God. Consider potential criticisms, such as the Great Pumpkin Objection, and Plantinga's responses.
4. Discuss the historical context of Reformed Epistemology, particularly its relationship to logical positivism and the presumption of atheism. How did these intellectual movements influence the development of Plantinga's ideas?
5. Explore the implications of Reformed Epistemology for the practice of apologetics and the nature of religious discourse. How does this perspective shift the focus of defending religious belief?

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Agnosticism:** The view that the existence or nature of God or the supernatural is unknown or unknowable.
- **Atheism:** Disbelief in the existence of God or gods.
- **Empirical:** Based on or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or logic.
- **Epistemology:** The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its justification, and the reliability of claims to knowledge.
- **Incorrigible:** Not able to be corrected, improved, or refuted. In epistemology, it often refers to beliefs that are impossible for the believer to be mistaken about (e.g., immediate sensory experiences).
- **Metaphysical Idealism:** A philosophical view asserting that reality is fundamentally mental or spiritual in nature.
- **Natural Theology:** The attempt to acquire knowledge of God's existence and attributes through reason and observation of the natural world, without relying on divine revelation.
- **Noetic:** Relating to the intellect or the process of knowing.
- **Presuppositional Apologetics:** An approach to defending the Christian faith that begins by assuming the truth of Christianity and arguing from that basis.
- **Rational Justification:** Reasons or evidence that support a belief, making it reasonable to hold that belief.
- **Self-evident:** Clearly true and requiring no proof or explanation.
- **Theism:** Belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in one God as creator and ruler of the universe.
- **Warrant:** In Plantinga's epistemology, a property that, when sufficiently present, turns a true belief into knowledge. Proper function of cognitive faculties is key to warrant.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8, Reformed Epistemology, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: Reformed Epistemology

1. What is Reformed Epistemology and what historical context led to its development?

Reformed Epistemology is a school of thought in the philosophy of religion that offers a different perspective on the rationality of religious belief. It emerged in the 20th century, largely spearheaded by Alvin Plantinga, as a response to the intellectual climate influenced by Logical Positivism. Logical Positivism, which gained prominence in the early to mid-20th century, asserted the Verification Principle: that a statement or belief is meaningful only if it can be empirically verified. This principle led to the conclusion that beliefs about God, morality, and other non-empirical matters were cognitively meaningless. While Positivism eventually declined due to its self-refuting nature (the Verification Principle itself cannot be empirically verified), its influence fostered skepticism towards religious claims, leading to a "presumption of atheism" in some philosophical circles. Reformed Epistemology directly challenges the notion that belief in God requires empirical evidence or rigorous arguments to be considered rationally respectable.

2. What was the core problem that Reformed Epistemology sought to address regarding religious belief?

The central problem Reformed Epistemology addressed was the widespread assumption, stemming from positivist influences, that belief in God is irrational or intellectually irresponsible without sufficient evidence or logical proof. Philosophers with a positivist mindset often argued that the burden of proof lay with the theist to provide compelling arguments for God's existence. Reformed Epistemologists, particularly Plantinga, questioned this assumption, arguing that believers in God do not necessarily need to offer such proofs to be warranted in their belief and to satisfy their intellectual obligations.

3. What is the central tenet of Reformed Epistemology regarding belief in God?

The most crucial tenet of Reformed Epistemology is that belief in God can be "properly basic." A properly basic belief is one that is not accepted on the basis of other beliefs. This does not mean that such beliefs are unfounded or arbitrary; rather, they are grounded in experience but do not require inference from other propositions to be rationally held. Reformed Epistemologists argue that just as we hold other basic beliefs

(like the existence of the external world or other minds) without needing to prove them through argument, belief in God can similarly be a starting point in one's noetic structure.

4. How does Reformed Epistemology critique Classical Foundationalism, and why is this critique important?

Classical Foundationalism is an epistemological theory that posits a hierarchical structure of belief, where all non-basic beliefs are ultimately justified by a foundation of basic beliefs. Classical Foundationalists further claim that properly basic beliefs must be either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible (logically impossible to be false). Plantinga critiques this view on two main grounds. First, it excludes many beliefs that we intuitively and rationally hold to be basic, such as memory beliefs, the belief in other minds, and the belief that the physical world has existed for more than a few moments. These beliefs are basic in that we don't typically infer them from other beliefs, but they don't meet the strict criteria of being self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Second, Classical Foundationalism is self-refuting because the principle itself (that properly basic beliefs must be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible) is not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. By undermining Classical Foundationalism, Reformed Epistemology opens the door for a more generous view of what can count as properly basic, including belief in God.

5. What does it mean for belief in God to be "grounded in experience" within the framework of Reformed Epistemology?

When Reformed Epistemologists say that belief in God is grounded in experience, they don't mean that it is inferred from sensory data in the way traditional arguments for God's existence often attempt. Instead, they suggest that certain experiences can directly give rise to a warranted belief in God. These experiences might include a sense of God's presence, feelings of gratitude or guilt in relation to a perceived divine being, or a deep conviction of God's love or displeasure. Plantinga also draws on John Calvin's concept of the *sensus divinitatis*, a natural sense or awareness of God that humans possess. While sin may obscure or compromise this innate awareness, these experiences provide a basis, rather than a premise in an argument, for the properly basic belief in God.

6. How does Reformed Epistemology address the concern that allowing properly basic beliefs opens the door to arbitrary or irrational beliefs, such as belief in the "Great Pumpkin"?

Reformed Epistemologists address the "Great Pumpkin objection" by arguing that there are relevant differences between belief in God and belief in fanciful entities. Plantinga points out that there is a natural human tendency to believe in some form of higher power, evidenced by the widespread historical and contemporary belief in God or gods across cultures. This natural inclination aligns with the concept of the *sensus divinitatis*. In contrast, there is no such natural inclination to believe in the Great Pumpkin or similar arbitrary entities. Furthermore, Reformed Epistemology suggests that properly basic beliefs arise from properly functioning cognitive faculties in appropriate circumstances. While it may be difficult to articulate precise criteria for proper basicity, the lack of a natural inclination and grounding experiences distinguishes belief in God from clearly irrational beliefs.

7. What role does the concept of "warrant" play in Reformed Epistemology, and how does it relate to belief in God?

In Reformed Epistemology, "warrant" is the property that distinguishes true belief from knowledge. A belief is warranted if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in an appropriate environment, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth, and if there is a high probability that a belief produced under such conditions is true. Reformed Epistemologists argue that belief in God can be warranted if our cognitive faculties, including the *sensus divinitatis*, are functioning as they were designed to, particularly after a kind of "cognitive redemption" to overcome the effects of sin. When these conditions are met, belief in God can be considered knowledge, even if it is held as a properly basic belief without reliance on traditional arguments.

8. What are some of the implications and significance of Reformed Epistemology for religious believers?

Reformed Epistemology has significant implications for religious believers. It offers a philosophical framework that validates the rationality of their faith even in the absence of demonstrative proofs for God's existence. It suggests that believers are within their intellectual rights to begin with a belief in God, grounded in their experiences and the proper function of their cognitive faculties, without needing to first establish that belief through argument. This can be encouraging for those whose faith is not primarily based on intellectual arguments but on a sense of God's presence or other forms of religious experience. It also shifts the focus away from the perceived need to "prove" God's existence to engage in meaningful intellectual discourse about religious belief.