

# The responsibilities to Belief

**By: Michael Jones**

Picture in your mind an image of God.

This can mean a variety of things.

What is God?

If God is a being, what does it look like?

If God is an essence, what are the characteristics of an essence; an entity that one cannot see nor envision with images?

These are complex questions, and they do not have easy answers for those who confess to not knowing. Some people have ideas on how to answer these questions, and they are happy to share the contents of their imagination to any listener. Some people will whole-heartedly believe in God without ever knowing. Most religions seem to have ideas about having certain religious responsibilities to God; for instance, attending religious services (although, this can be interpreted loosely by the practitioner).

The question remains, if God exists, in whatever being or form, what is its responsibility to existence, and what is our responsibility to it? (assuming there is a responsibility) What does it mean to believe in God? Are there responsibilities that come with belief, and if so, do they possess significance?

I must address that in no way, shape, or form am I trying to prove or disprove the existence of God. My intentions are to question the meaning of belief and the responsibilities of belief, if there is any. In my exploration, I like to think creatively, and pose questions that ask 'what if?' These thoughts are not absolute, nor do they prove anything. They simply explore possibility while testing our definitions and understanding of things. Please do not be upset with me if I cannot answer your questions.

For the sake of this discussion, I am going to define the word belief as follows:

**A belief is a claim of truth, expressed internally or externally. Factual evidence is not always relevant to beliefs, but the key elements appear to be that one possesses confidence and trust that this claim is indeed true and/or real.**

A divide occurs when we begin to ask, what does a person require in order to believe? Some people feel that they need to understand something in its entirety in order for belief to occur; in

other words, "Seeing is Believing." Some people have to know for sure before they can honestly claim they believe.

Other people feel they are incapable of ever understanding, and so for them, understanding is not required for belief to occur.

This stems even greater questions:

Are we capable of understanding our beliefs?

If God exists, and we saw it, would we understand it?

What if we saw God, understood it, but the moment we try to describe it with words we become incapable of description; making God an impossible thing to share in words?

Are there ways to share God non-verbally?

My inspiration for this discussion comes from an occurrence at a friend's house. Before sharing a meal, we paused to thank Jesus for the opportunity of being together. I first found it difficult to thank a God I don't fully understand. Secondly, I asked myself what does Jesus get from my thank you? What does it mean to him? He's not sitting in our empty chair, and if he was, there wasn't enough food for another person. I'm not even going to touch on the 2 fish 5 loaves of bread story.

What I am questioning here is if the act of verbal thanks benefited God, or if it was instead an action that benefited the one expressing it.

We later discussed this thought, and it appeared we were in agreement that God does not get anything out of our prayers. I asked my companion why it was necessary that we say thank you to God. Surely, you may say that, 'it's simply a nice thing to do.' It would also then be an appropriate question to ask, if we are truly thankful, God already knows it, and the expression of such is truly unnecessary. One might also argue that there is nothing problematic with the expression of gratitude, unless it has become a scheduled requirement; in which the action can lose its integrity.

When I asked my friend why he felt it was necessary he responded, "I can't think of any other action that would be more appropriate." Although I understand his intention, this was not a matter of being appropriate, other than it was a matter of necessity.

Our discussion will now pose a new question of, "What is ritual, and what is its significance?"

For the sake of this discussion, I define ritual as such:

**Ritual is the expression of an intention. Examples include: prayer, dance, chanting, singing, praising, and so on. If you remove the intention, rituals are**

**only expressions. Rituals obtain their significance from the sincerity of the practitioner's intention. Rituals only contain meaning if the practitioner gives it meaning, which is created by the degree of their participation. Genuine participation implies that the practitioner has given themselves permission to experience their intention in it's pure state, be it beautiful or ugly, and that the ritual is the vehicle in which they access that experience.**

There is a further implication that within a genuine ritual the practitioner is 'feeling.' It means that focus within our experience is not centered on intellectual understanding of the object of our belief, but that we are participating by having the honest feelings inside of us. When I say honest feelings, I do indeed mean honest, from their beauty to their ugliness. This is complicated, as I am asking you to have and experience rather than know an experience.

Let's return to our 'what if' questions:

If I believe in God, is there a responsibility that comes with it?

Do I need to attend special services or say certain prayers?

We have already discussed that God does not benefit from my prayers or rituals, so why do I do them? Are they for God, or are they for me?

Using one's imagination, Is there a more creative way that a person can express gratitude to God? Can we thank God without words and spoken prayers, but by demonstrating gratitude through action? Assume God is present in all things:

If I brush my hand on your cheek, God feels that.

If I hold your hand, God feels that.

If I love you when you are gone, God knows that.

If ritual is an expression of our intentions, I think what is more significant is not the act of ritual, but the sincerity of our intentions and the degree in which we participate in them. In this way, life itself is an expression of gratitude.

Is there a responsibility that comes with belief? Is ritual a requirement? This is not a question that asks if ritual is appropriate.

My own response is that one should live honestly, confessing what they know to be true, while also admitting when they are uncertain or simply do not know. If you believe God exists, and

that there are indeed responsibilities that come with that belief, I would encourage you to ask yourself what those responsibilities are and their significance to God.

Another inspiration that motivated me to create this discussion came from attending mass at a local Catholic Church. The congregation was being asked by the priest to answer for ourselves the question of who do we say Jesus Christ is. I interpreted the priest's request as an effort to have the congregation reflect on their true beliefs and see if they really identified with the church's teachings. I asked myself what would it mean for me to identify Jesus as Christ, in the context that I understood it to mean. For that question, I had no answer, but personally, my attention to my honest feelings was giving me my response, "I don't know." This seemed to possess greater importance than claiming belief.

I can honestly confess, with great confidence, that I indeed know nothing for certain. I find myself unable to commit to beliefs that I do not understand. If religion possessed greater ambiguity, where it didn't center itself on absolute claims and beliefs, and instead attended to the investigation of truth, you might find me in a more willing position to participate in the services. I am concerned that traditional rituals are, or could become, distractions from the honest feelings of the practitioners, which I see to be of greater importance than one's personal responsibility to belief. I would describe the ideal religious practice in which authorities confess their uncertainties about truth, but as a community, pursue the investigation of truth together without polluting their beliefs with certainty. In this instance, the only responsibility one possesses towards beliefs is to be honest.

### **Discussion lead by current president Mark White:**

\*Please note.\* The following discussion was recorded on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011 between the hours of 10 and 11am. Some of the statements have been edited for organizational purposes, and the following statements may or may not be exactly as they were originally expressed, but have been printed to what was believed to be the original intentions of the speakers.-Michael Jones

Mark: As I listen to Michael speaking, and in the discussions that we have had leading up to this program, I know that these are some questions that he has been pondering for some time. I think part of the point of this, and the reason he has asked me to lead this discussion, is he really desires to hear other people's thoughts on these things, and to put them together with his own ideas to help obtain understanding. First I would like to ask the question that Michael began with, 'Is there a responsibility to Belief?' and to put it in the sense that he brought it up, as in terms of saying grace; giving thanks to God for a meal. I would suggest that we try to answer these questions from the perspective of someone who believes. I know that doesn't describe all of us. It may describe some of us previously, and maybe our views have changed over the years. It may describe someone who we know well, and we feel that we can understand what they are thinking as they do some of these practices. Let us try to come from that perspective, but I don't

think that it means we need to come from the perspective of a traditional old man with a white beard kind of God. It could be any view of what we might think of for what God is. Is it necessary to say grace before a meal and for what reason?

Angela: I had a broader response that I wanted to express. From my own perspective, I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church; Michael and I share a similar background. I realized I had lost the faith by the time I was 14 because it seemed like the rituals were there for people to show off to other people. It was to show other people that we believe. I was wondering then, who are we trying to convince; ourselves or other people? I wanted to address the broader base of all of Christianity, not just Catholicism itself: I would say that if your belief does not call you to good actions, then quite frankly in my view, your belief is worthless. In the bible Jesus discussed about how we should treat our fellow man more so than what he discussed about our relationship with God. Christianity seems to give a free pass to people: If you believe, if you ask God to come into your life, then you're going to heaven. It doesn't matter what you do here on this earth, you're forgiven, it's all okay. You can hurt anyone you want [you will be forgiven with belief]. That didn't work for me. Actions are important; A lot more important than belief. I recall what I think the physician Luke said, 'First do no harm.' I think that anybody with any belief; 'that' should be the very core of having belief: first do no harm.

Mark: I hear you saying in a sense, to the extent that is necessary to thank God; doing so [or saying grace] is not for God's benefit; it is not for our own benefit; it is for an impression on others. And, that a better way to thank God, or the ideal way, is by treating others well; not by going to church.

Angela: Exactly!

Sue: I think if we have a belief, it places claims on what we do and how we behave. For some, that is fulfilled by engaging in certain religious formalities: 'If I do this, if I go to church, then I have taken care of that.' I was also raised Roman Catholic, and I had met people who were Catholic workers who gave up everything; lived in poverty to do things like run a soup kitchen. For some people, they take that claim quite seriously. They believe that God calls them to be poor, serve the poor, and abandon everything. These claims can be pretty powerful. They are not just crossing a T, 'I went to church. I have taken care of everything.' I think it's important to understand that for most people, our beliefs shift and shape over time. Our understanding of what is true grows and develops. This claim of a belief I no longer hold, well, that disappears. As we have new beliefs, as we have a better understanding of what is true; then there are new claims.

Joan: I think the church has really messed up the whole intent of ritual and prayer. I think that initially the purpose of ritual is for us to reconnect with life. If I say a prayer of thanks before I eat, it is not because I'm saying, 'Thank you God for this meal. I don't deserve it. I am a horrible person.' It is more about entering a spirit of gratitude for what I have. When I go to church, I don't go because I have to worship this God who is demanding my worship and praise, as in an

egocentric way. It gives me a time to take a break from all the hustle and bustle of the world and re-center with myself in spirit. Unfortunately, the church has made it more of an obligation, like in Catholicism and other religions. They have made it feel as though if you don't go to church, and you don't say your prayers, then you're not a 'Christian,' and you are a bad person.

Mark: So it is a responsibility, not to God, but to the church?

Joan: Yes! They have made it into a responsibility more to the church. It is a responsibility to care for ourselves spiritually. These rituals are more like guidance to help us mentally and spiritually; to stay centered within ourselves, and not be swept away by other stuff going on.

Mark: So, you would see it as a responsibility for yourself, but the church has turned it into a responsibility for the church.

Joan: Yes. The church claims that it is for God, but really it is for them to be controlling.

Peter: I do believe in God though describing it is something foreign to me. In my belief, there is no necessity and responsibility to prayer and thanking God through gratitude. There is action. If you're going to pray, understand that you are saying this for yourself, and well as those whom you are saying it to or about; not to God. I understand that if I am praying, even if I am praying to God, it is 'my' thoughts going to them [the person or object of our prayer]; it is 'my' connection. It is not a connection to a higher being that is doing this form.

Art: Michael captured some of my own beliefs. When he was speaking, what rang through for me was something Shakespeare had said, 'To thy own self be true.' For me, when you are doing ritual it has to be something that is coming from your heart; that as you are doing it, it makes sense to you; that it is something you can believe in. If I am involved in a ritual in church, I think like Michael: my view is, 'I don't know', and my view also is, 'They don't know.' When they are telling me, 'do it this way,' I am also saying to myself, 'You don't know, and you're telling me to do it this way, but I don't think you have any corner on the knowledge beyond what I know.' When I get involved in that, I say, "If there is some super natural, higher power; or if there is something greater than what I know; there is a person who is sick, would you/can they be helped? Can this societal problem be solved?" I am open to the fact that there is something more there, but I don't necessarily click into whatever the ritual is telling me to do exactly.

Liz: I grew up Evangelical, and I have noticed over the years that as I have grown agnostic, some of my friends became Catholic. I find that very interesting. I think it is the ritual, and the sacredness of the space, that spoke to them. I think some people engage when it speaks to them, and it doesn't for others. It can speak to you for a period of time, and then not.

Mark: I have heard that from other people as well. Sometimes when you are going through a difficult time, it can be helpful to have that ritual. To know that this is what is going to happen: 'I am going to go here, I am going to go through these steps and it is all laid out for me. I don't

have to think about it. That's the way it will work, and I will move forward in that way.' The Catholic Church is very ritualistic in its approach, so it might explain some of that [desire or need for ritual].

Ben: Back to the topic of [saying] grace: I'd be willing to bet, that those who do it regularly would spend less in groceries; they get involved in driving to work in a hurry, eating a couple of cheese burgers; they don't know how many. Whereas being at home, and you have a thoughtful meal, you cook it and you are thankful; I'd bet that your body would assimilate it better if you are aware of what you eat.

Emmie: I would agree that at times ritual makes you feel safe. For some people, as in my own instance, they come to a point where the safety wasn't required anymore; I didn't feel it was a necessity. However, I have created something that worked just for me. My rituals have changed, but they are mind and they are private. For me they work. I know that as a human I can't wrap my brain around if there is a God. I can't wrap my brain around something that enormous. However, my personal belief is that we are all part of that; we are all part of that unity. We are one little spark of that entire entity, whatever it is. By honoring myself, honoring others, trying to treat them well, and myself well, I am honoring that whole, that unity.

Nancy: [Related to the topic of rituals]...as for the people I see, and Catholics seem to come to my mind; people who have very specific things that they do; sometimes I will think sarcastically, saying to myself, 'That's sad who they are, showing off to one another.' I also think that for some of my friends, 'That is the best idea they have.' Then, I think about myself, and my own attempts [using ritual to express relationship with God] are so inadequate. I was imagining myself in space, and we were contemplating God, and I was floating around the earth, looking at the hugeness of just our one little planet, and that's just earth. I don't know what to do with that. I wish I was more drawn to ritual so that I would have some clue as to how to express.

Charlie: I am Jewish, and thoroughly aware. I participate big in all the rituals that Judaism offers. I am comforted by it. I am also familiar with the universal spirit, which is why I am comforted when I come here. People were given their religions, they were born into it. When people deny their religion, which is their own choice and there is nothing wrong with that, it would be the same as refusing to do the ritual of putting your hand on your heart when the star spangled banner is played, standing up for a judge when he walks into an American court room, or any of the other rituals that we have that we are comforted with. It's not wrong because anyone can do whatever they want, this is America, but I find comfort in the fact that I have these things that were given to me by God, in my opinion, and I was given the choice. I chose this: to be part of my Unitarian fellowship and the Jewish congregation. If the Buddhists scream loud enough, maybe I'll go over there too. My roots are in Judaism, and everything else embellishes it.

Michael: I would like to refresh on one of my intentions for this discussion: it wasn't intended in this discussion to argue for the elimination of ritual. My intention was to bring awareness to what is ritual's significance, and if you participate in it, to know what you are doing.

Susan: Back in August when Barnaby [Our present minister] came to meet with us, several of us had lunch and dinner with him. I don't remember what he had said, but at the dinner he stopped and said something that was like a grace. I was shocked by it. It took me a little bit to recover, and afterwards I found it to be nice. I spoke to him later, and we discussed his feelings about when people are eating together. I understand that he sees it as 'fellowship', which is why he might have found it appropriate to say a few words. I have never been to any Unitarian function where I have heard anyone say something that sounded like a grace. In the scheme of things, it was nice. I like the rituals that we have here. People who visit might say that we have so few rituals. Growing up in a home where my father was Jewish and mother Protestant, who somewhat rejected the religions they were brought up in, we had very few rituals. I think the rituals we have here are comforting and good. I think it's a matter of respect; if people can respect the rituals of other religions, and not put them down for their rituals, or lack of, that might be our own responsibility.

Susan: I am wondering if the tendency to gravitate towards specific religions and rituals is an attempt to cope with, in a finite way, what is perhaps infinite; countering our existential angst of feeling alone, by having a way to feel connected.

Angela: My mom goes to an Evangelical church. She came here once and won't come again because she said she felt nothing here; that we are spiritually dead; and it has a lot to do with our apparent lack of rituals. I think that a lot of people are comforted by a clear cut right and wrong, black and white, no shades of gray, being given all the answers. I think we Unitarians are nourished by the questions in the same way others are nourished by the answers.

Gloria: Everyone has a right to his or her own ritual. I think at times it can be escapism. I think it can be a way of not doing the work of attempting to get to 'that place'. I can remember a friend saying to me around thanks giving, "Why do we pray? Why do we say thank you? Why do we have thanksgiving? Why don't we do just what we need to do to make what is good for us and to make what is good for others?" We're not always going to feel good, and we shouldn't always feel good, because the situation isn't such as it should be. We may need to escape; we may need to get away. The ritual I will not deny, yet I prefer being a monk and admirer. Whether or not I feel good, in many instances I think it can hurt to get involved in ritual rather than getting involved in the 'doing'.

Mark: I think there is clearly a divide, and always has been, throughout Christianity at least, between the ideas of: is it faith, going to church, saying grace, and giving money that puts you in good graces with God, or is it doing good works, treating others kindly, and obeying the commandments or ideas that have been set out about how we ought to behave?