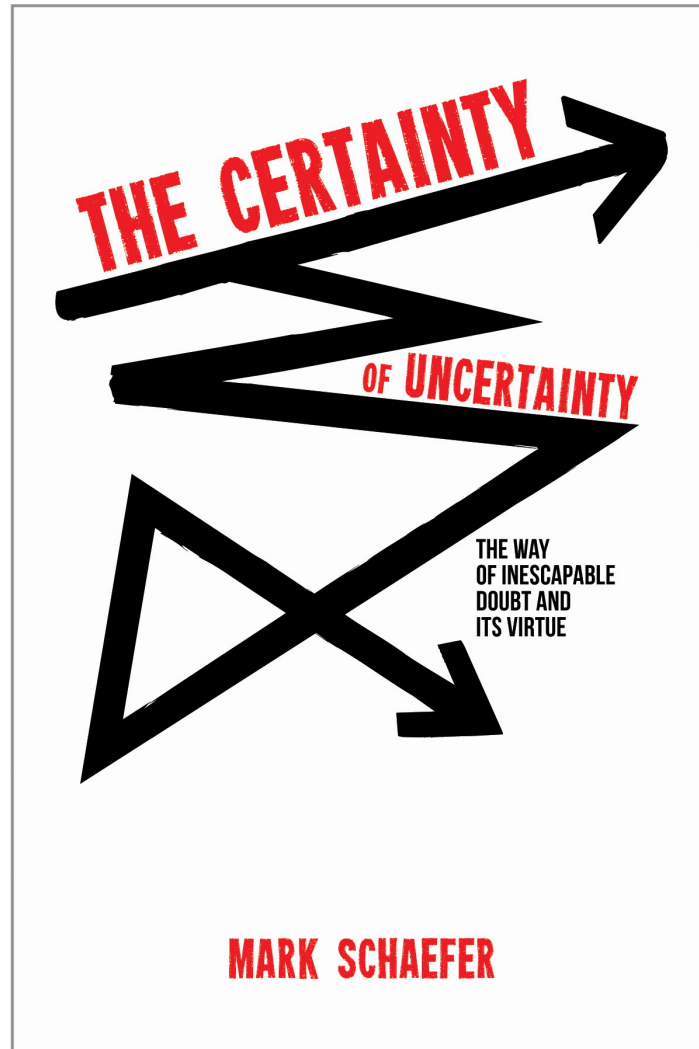


# Study Guide for



by Mark Schaefer

## About this Study Guide

This study guide is meant to be used in conjunction with *The Certainty of Uncertainty: The Way of Inescapable Doubt and Its Virtue* by Mark Schaefer.

The sections of this study guide have been arranged to follow the chapters of the book and each section consists of questions to guide individual or group reflection.

Each chapter has been afforded a separate page so that this study guide can be distributed as individual handouts for study group or book club usage.

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# Part I. The Quest for Certainty

## Chapter 1

# The One Thing Certain

*The first chapter of the book deals with the issue of why human beings crave certainty and why we're inclined toward being certain rather than uncertain.*

- Q: What do you think of Miguel de Unamuno's claim that our "resigned despair" leads us to create a world view that must be defended at all costs? Have you seen examples of this?
- Q: How much do you think our fear of death or awareness of our mortality plays into our desire to be certain about things?
- Q: Daniel Kahneman's exploration of the two "systems" in our brains—one that makes snap judgments and one that makes careful deliberation—reveals that we are far more often making snap judgments than we realize. How can an awareness of the way our mind works help us to avoid sliding into easy certainty?
- Q: How much of our own desire to be certain is based on the expectation of others that we're supposed to have the answers? (p. 6)
- Q: Consider this quote from page 9: "And many who find global changes terrifying feel powerless and out of control in their ability to stop them or at least to slow them to a comfortable pace. Being in command of the truth is at least being in command of *something*." How do you understand the relationship between certainty and control?

# Part I. The Quest for Certainty

## Chapter 2

# Faith and Certainty

*The second chapter explores the different conceptions of religion that are often presented to us and the ways that each of them promotes the need to be certain.*

- Q: The author relates an experience with a student struggling with his understanding of LGBTQ+ issues and his traditional faith as one in which the need for certainty played a part. Where have you seen a need for certainty play a role in someone's exploration of faith?
- Q: Is current day religion really marketed the way Peter Rollins argues? Is God really just another product to cure all of our problems?
- Q: What is the role of question in faith? Should religious faith be considered a source of answers?
- Q: Prior to your reading of this book, what was your understanding of the relationship between faith and doubt?
- Q: Think about a time you struggled with believing a particular religious teaching. How did that experience make you feel about your religious faith?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Religion

### Chapter 3 Faith and Uncertainty

*The third chapter looks at whether the word faith should be understood as belief or whether it is more properly understood as trust.*

- Q: What do you make of the uncertainties present in religious texts? Does it surprise you to learn that many of our translations smooth over the problems that exist in the original texts?
- Q: How does understanding *faith* as *trust* rather than *belief* change how you encounter certain aspects of religious faith?
- Q: Of the two—*trust* or *belief*—which one do you feel requires more certainty? Which permits uncertainty?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty *...in Our Religion*

### Chapter 4 Faith and Metaphor

*The fourth chapter looks at the prevalence of metaphor in religious language and the implications of those metaphors for what their presences says about the role of uncertainty in religious faith.*

- Q: What is your experience with religious language? Is it easy to relate to? Easy to understand? What images and feelings are evoked when you hear religious language?
- Q: Consider the story of St. Augustine on pages 28 and 29. In what ways is language useful in trying to capture the divine reality? In what ways does it fail?
- Q: Statements like “The Lord is my shepherd” are obviously metaphors, but what does it mean to say that statements like “God spoke to Jeremiah” or “God created the heavens and the earth” are metaphorical?
- Q: Think about the language used in religious ritual or in hymns. What are some of the most common metaphors you have encountered? What metaphors strike you as particularly powerful? Particularly problematic?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Religion

### Chapter 5

# The Metaphors of Faith Explored

*The fifth chapter takes an in-depth look at some of the more commonly encountered metaphors in religion: GOD IS A KING, GOD IS A FATHER, JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD, JESUS IS THE WORD OF GOD, JESUS IS A LAMB, JESUS IS A SAVIOR, PROPHECY IS SEEING/THE PROPHET IS A MESSENGER, HOLY, HEAVEN AND HELL, FAITH IS A ROAD, and GOD.*

- Q: What are some of the ways that you have encountered the metaphor GOD IS A KING? Is this metaphor a positive one or problematic for you?
- Q: What does the metaphor GOD IS A FATHER mean to you? What is your prior experience with this metaphor?
- Q: If you are a Christian, which of the metaphors for Jesus do you find the most meaningful? The most difficult to understand? If you are not a Christian, which of the metaphors is the most intriguing? The most problematic?
- Q: If you are a Christian: which of the models of salvation in the metaphor JESUS IS A SAVIOR do you find the most meaningful? Prior to your reading of this book, how had you thought about these models?
- Q: Which meaning of HOLY speaks the most powerfully to you? Which understanding of holiness is closest to your own understanding?
- Q: What does the prevalence of the metaphor FAITH IS A ROAD say about the ways that different traditions have understood their own encounters with the divine? How do you see this metaphor at work in your own understanding of faith?
- Q: What does it mean to claim that GOD is a metaphor?
- Q: Reflecting on this chapter and the one previous, what main takeaway do you get from these explorations of the role of metaphor in religious language?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty *...in Our Religion*

### Chapter 6 Faith as Metaphor

*The sixth chapter explores the idea that it is not just the language of religious faith that is metaphorical, but the entirety of the religious enterprise that is.*

- Q: Reflect on Abraham Joshua Heschel's statement on page 66—"As a report about revelation, the Bible itself is a *midrash*." How do you understand Heschel's statement? If the Bible is a midrash, what is it a midrash of?
- Q: Page 69 lists a number of rituals in religious traditions that are metaphorical. What are some others that might have been included?
- Q: How does metaphor allow us to simultaneously talk about God and admit that we cannot describe God?



## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty *...in Our Religion*

### Chapter 7 The Poetry of Faith

*The seventh chapter looks at the presence of poetry in religious faith and the poetic nature of that faith itself.*

- Q: Reflect on the thought experiment of the “panel of experts” on pages 73–75. Why do you think people have such a hard time recognizing religious language as poetry?
- Q: How do you understand the creation accounts found in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 as poems? What kind of poems are they?
- Q: The two creation accounts contain some irreconcilable details. Does your understanding of these accounts as poetry change the problem posed by those details?
- Q: Reflect on St. Ephrem the Syrian’s ideas about Greek philosophical categories (page 83). In your experience, has religious tradition followed Ephrem’s position or that of those who use Greek philosophical categories?
- Q: How do you understand the author’s opening and closing statement: “Religion is poetry; the great abuse of religion is that so many should treat it like prose”?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Religion

### Chapter 8

# Pointing Beyond the Metaphor

*The eighth chapter examines the phenomenon of mistaking the metaphors of faith for the objects they're pointing toward.*

- Q: Reflect on the author's statement: "We frequently get trapped in our own language about God. Language that was intended as a model, to help our understanding by analogy, becomes a prison in which our theological imagination and creativity become confined." How do you understand this statement? Have you ever seen any evidence supporting this claim?
- Q: Reflect on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (pages 92–93) and the way its shocking metaphor has been softened over time. What are some other examples of shocking metaphors that have been dulled over time?
- Q: Doug Paggitt argues that literalizing models about God "hamstrings God" (page 94). What are some other examples of literalizing language in ways that limit an understanding of God?
- Q: In your thinking, why do both militant atheists and religious fundamentalists share the same appraisal of religious faith and religious language? (See, pages 96–99)
- Q: Why do you think people have such a hard time accepting religious metaphors *as* metaphors? Why are we so inclined to take literally or as the end point in the journey something that was meant figuratively or as a signpost along the way? What do you think of the reason Paul Tillich gives for this phenomenon?
- Q: The Buddhist saying "Do not mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon" is a reminder to look past the symbol to the reality it's pointing toward. What are some of the ways in contemporary religious faith that we mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Language

### Chapter 9

# Mathematics and the Language of God

*The ninth chapter investigates whether it is possible to describe the nature of reality with precision and certainty. In the end, we discover that even were mathematics capable of doing so, our ability to communicate that reality is limited.*

- Q: Does the ability of mathematics to describe the natural world with great precision make you feel more or less certain?
- Q: Does understanding the universe as a three-dimensional sphere or as an 11-dimensional system help you to find meaning for the universe?
- Q: How do you understand Dirac's statement "If there is a God, he is a great mathematician" and Galileo's statement that "Mathematics is the alphabet in which God has written the universe"? What do they say about God? About the universe?
- Q: In the end, is mathematics a language we can use to communicate to one another about the nature of reality? Why or why not?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Language

### Chapter 10

# The Slipperiness of Language


*Chapter ten looks at all the ways that communication through language can be frustrated and the many reasons that the enterprise of language is full of uncertainty.*

- Q: Look back at the discussion of the meaning of the word *word* in chapter 5 (pages 46–48). What are the implications of the fact that the Hebrew word דָּבָר *davar* can be translated as *speech, word, message, report, advice, counsel, request, promise, decision, theme, story, saying, title, name, matter, affair, business, occupation, act, deed, event, thing, cause, case, something, anything, way, manner, or reason*?
- Q: Have you ever had a problem being understood in a foreign language when you thought you were being clear? Being understood in your *native* language?
- Q: We often think of words as having set meanings—even the word *definition* suggests that the meaning of a word can be precisely *defined*. Is this really true? Do words have a fixed, precise meaning?
- Q: How comfortable are you with ambiguity? What role do you think a person’s comfort with ambiguity plays in their desire for certainty?
- Q: The question of context in understanding the meanings of statements has particular relevance for the enterprise of religion. What are some of the ways that context really matters for discerning religious meaning?
- Q: Having read the chapter, what are your thoughts about the opening quote from George Bernard Shaw that “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty ...in Our Language

### Chapter 11 Language and Metaphor

*This chapter explores the deeply metaphorical nature of language as another indicator of the uncertainty found in communication.*

-  Turn to the person next to you and take turns describing something that happened during your day that provoked an emotional response (good or bad). As you listen to one another, take note of the metaphors each of you uses to tell your story. Share these observations with one another and reflect on whether it would have been possible to tell the story *without* using metaphors.
- Q: So much of our language is built on metaphor. Even the phrase *built on metaphor* is a metaphor! Is it possible to communicate about complex or abstract thoughts without resorting to metaphors?
- Q: Reflect on the discussion of “metaphors we live by” (pages 138–40) and Lakoff and Johnson’s exploration of the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. Are you able to conceive of a different way we might think about arguments other than through the lens of warfare? What does it say that the way we’re used to thinking about an argument is shaped by a conceptual model that few of us ever even think about?
- Q: Given how symbolic human beings are and how our language and our abilities to draw analogies are so closely related, would a character like Drax the Destroyer, who was entirely literal, even be possible? Does the ability to think and reason require some level of abstraction and analogy? That is, can we be thinking creatures and *not* use metaphor in some way?
- Q: If metaphor is truly unavoidable in language, does that mean that our language is unavoidably uncertain only, or does it mean that our *thinking* itself will always be uncertain?


## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty

*...in Our Senses*

### Chapter 12

## Through a Mirror Dimly

*Chapter twelve looks at the question of how we know something through our senses and all the ways that our senses can be misled.*

- Q: Reflect on the number of different positions that philosophers have taken about what can be relied on as certain. Which philosopher's opinion do you find the most convincing? The most reassuring? The most troubling?
-  In your group, share with one another what color you saw "The Dress" to be when you first saw the photo. Describe how it felt to learn that other people saw the dress differently.
- Q: Have you ever had an experience where your perception of something turned out to be completely wrong? Have you ever looked at or heard something and understood it to be one thing only to learn later that it was something entirely different?
- Q: How does it make you feel to know that your brain frequently prioritizes its inputs' "making sense" and being coherent over being accurate?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty *...in Our Science*

### Chapter 13

## Science to the Rescue! Or Not.

*The thirteenth chapter walks us through the scientific method, exposing the uncertainties that abound in science.*

- Q: Prior to your reading of this chapter, what was your familiarity with science? What assumptions did you make about it?
- Q: Reflect on the walk through of a scientific experiment in this chapter (pages 160–65). What does it mean to you that the entire scientific method relies on statistics and probabilities? Does that make science unreliable or merely uncertain?
- Q: How can we reconcile uncertainty and reliability in science? Are you ready to jump off a cliff on the notion that the theory of gravity *might* be wrong?
- Q: Reflect on the following quote from the chapter:

In fact, too much certainty—in the form of bias or unquestioned presumptions—can interfere with science’s ultimate task: to seek greater understanding through observation and experimentation, a task for which uncertainty, not certainty, is essential.

Can you think of other arenas in which this observation also holds true?

## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty

*...in Our World*

### Chapter 14

## The World Knocked Off Its Foundations

*In this chapter, we explore the growing understanding of our world from some of the most ancient models to the most contemporary and what such evolving understandings say about our ability to be certain.*

- Q: Reflect on the ancient Babylonian and Hebrew conceptions of the universe. What are your impressions about the ways the ancients understood the cosmos to be?
- Q: Was the change from understanding the earth to be the center of the universe to understanding the sun to be the center a change in our understanding of physics and astronomy only? In what other ways was it a change for us?
- Q: Why do you think there was such resistance to the ideas of Galileo and Copernicus?
- Q: What role do you think the sheer incomprehensible vastness of the universe plays in our human desire for certainty, if any?



## Part II. The Inescapable Uncertainty

...in Our World

### Chapter 15

## A Warped and Uncertain Cosmos

*In this chapter, we explore the strange universe revealed to us through Relativity and Quantum Physics and wonder whether uncertainty might be written into the universe itself.*

- Q: Do you agree with young Alvy Singer that the expanding universe is troubling? Why or why not?
- Q: What do you make of the idea that the concept of the Big Bang was first proposed by a scientist who was also a priest?
- Q: Consider Einstein's thought experiment about the moving trains. How does it make you feel to know that something as ordinary as light behaves according to laws that are so counterintuitive?
- Q: The Theory of Relativity had effects well beyond physics. As noted on page 185, it was not simply time, space, and simultaneity that came to be seen as relative, but *everything*. What are some of the ways you've encountered these broader understandings of relativity? How does it make you feel to think that morality, culture, values, and religion might all just be relative?
- Q: Quantum physics is even weirder than relativity and even harder to understand. But what does it say that on a fundamental level the universe is unpredictable and uncertain? Or does it not matter for our everyday lives at all?

## Part III. The Uncertain Way Forward

### Chapter 16

# Theology in a Time of Metaphor

*In the third part of the book, we explore the implications of the inescapable uncertainties we saw demonstrated in our religion, language, senses, science, and world. Here in the sixteenth chapter, we look at the implications for theology.*

- Q: What are some of the ways you can think of that embracing the role of metaphor in religion can enhance religious faith?
- Q: Consider the conversations presented at the bottom of page 198 about the question of whether Jesus actually walked on water. How does embracing the role of metaphor in religious faith change the way we encounter our sacred texts?
- Q: How do you understand theologian John Hick's claim that a metaphorical understanding of religious faith is helpful in engaging with those outside the church who are drawn to religion through a deep spiritual hunger but who find the church's pat answers to spiritual questions unsatisfying?
- Q: How does the use of metaphor help us to walk that middle ground between those who insist that there is an objective truth that can be described and those who argue that there is no objective truth outside of our own perceptions and subjective interpretations?
- Q: Does embracing a theology of metaphor mean we will have to give up making judgments about whether a particular theology is right or wrong?
- Q: What are the advantages to evaluating theological claims on their usefulness? What are the disadvantages?
- Q: How does the story of Job help to illustrate the lessons of a theology shaped by metaphor?
- Q: Is the claim that mystery is at the heart of faith a cop out? Or is it an essential admission for a healthy religious life?
- Q: Consider this passage from the Tao: "I do not know its name/ A name for it is "Way"/ Pressed for designation/ I call it Great." How does this verse illustrate the dilemma of the mystic? What role does metaphor play in addressing this dilemma?


## Part III. The Uncertain Way Forward

### Chapter 17

# On the Necessity of Doubt

*This chapter explores the relationship between faith and doubt and argues that the two are not antitheses but are bound up in relationship.*

Q: Prior to reading this book, how did you understand the relationship between faith and doubt?

 Pair off in small groups of two or three. Discuss a time when you experienced doubt in the context of a faith community. What feelings did you have about your doubt? How did other members of the faith community react to the idea of having doubt?

Q: Reflect on this dialogue:

“How do you know you can trust me?”

“I don’t; that’s what trust is.”

What does this exchange say about the nature of faith and the role of doubt in faith?

Q: Consider the passage from Matthew’s gospel (page 219). What do you make of the presence of doubt among the disciples at this point in the story?

Q: Reflect on the story of Doubting Thomas (pages 219–21). How does this story illustrate the role does or does not play in a life of faith?


Q: Thomas doubts before he’s seen the risen Jesus. The disciples in Matthew doubt *after* they’ve encountered him. With which example do you more readily identify? Why?

## Part III. The Uncertain Way Forward

### Chapter 18

# Drinking of One Wine

*Chapter eighteen explores the ways that embracing uncertainty and doubt allows us to build bridges across religious and philosophical divides.*

- Q: What do you make of al-Ghazali's assertion that to believe something is figurative rather than literal is still to believe it *in some way*? How could this understanding reconcile different ways of approaching religion?
-  Gather in pairs or small groups. Reflect on Reza Aslan's quote on page 225. To the extent you are comfortable sharing, how much of your own religious faith is determined by the reality that its metaphors make the most sense to you? That it "works for you?"
- Q: Do you agree with Rumi that so much of the world's conflicts are over "some disagreement about *names*"? Can you think of cases where you have seen this kind of disagreement take place?
- Q: What do you think the "one wine" is that is referenced in Coleman Barks' translation of the Rumi poem? What is the deeper essence lying beyond the names?

## Part III. The Uncertain Way Forward

### *Ending*

# The Certainty of Uncertainty

*This concluding chapter reflects on inescapable nature of uncertainty and identifies some of the benefits of embracing the certainty of uncertainty.*

- Q: Do you agree with the author's assertion that the "more meaningful and significant something is, the less, it seems, we can be certain about it"?
- Q: How do you reconcile your own desire to know with the reality that some things may never be known?
- Q: What are some of the ways that *not* knowing something can prove to be more advantageous than *knowing* something?
- Q: How do you understand Miguel de Unamuno's claim that a faith built on uncertainty is "more robust"? How does the story of Mother Teresa factor into your understanding of this claim?
- Q: Do you agree that love is not something measured or reckoned but *relied* on? How does uncertainty factor into your understanding of love?
- Q: The author makes the claim that a faith claimed amidst doubt and uncertainty is fearless. How do you understand this claim? Do you agree with the assertion? Why or why not?
- Q: How do you understand the closing statement that a faith that embraces the certainty of uncertainty "can change the world"?

THE CERTAINTY OF UNCERTAINTY  
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