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New Title from Mark Schaefer
*The Certainty of Uncertainty: The Way of Inescapable Doubt and Its Virtue*

The world is full of people who are very certain—in politics, in religion, in all manner of things. In addition, political, religious, and social organizations are marketing certainty as a cure-all to all life’s problems. But is such certainty possible? Or even good?

*The Certainty of Uncertainty* explores the question of certainty by looking at the reasons human beings crave certainty and the religious responses we frequently fashion to help meet that need. The book takes an in-depth view of religion, language, our senses, our science, and our world to explore the inescapable uncertainties they reveal. We find that the certainty we crave does not exist.

As we reflect on the unavoidable uncertainties in our world, we come to understand that letting go of certainty is not only necessary, it’s beneficial. For, in embracing doubt and uncertainty, we find a more meaningful and courageous religious faith, a deeper encounter with mystery, and a way to build strong relationships across religious and philosophical lines. In *The Certainty of Uncertainty*, we see that embracing our belief systems with humility and uncertainty can be transformative for ourselves and for our world.

Mark Schaefer is the University Chaplain at American University (AU) in Washington, DC, and Director of AU’s Kay Spiritual Life Center, one of the oldest interfaith centers in the United States. With degrees in language and law, and with nearly two decades serving in young adult campus ministry, he also serves as an Adjunct Professorial Lecturer at AU and Wesley Theological Seminary, teaching courses in Religion, New Testament, and Biblical Greek.
Q: Why did you write this book?

I wrote this book because in my years serving in campus ministry, I’d noticed how many of my students struggled with doubt and uncertainty. Many of them felt that doubt was a sign of a weak faith and were troubled by unknowing. I’d seen the way that trying to cling to untenable certainties or trying to shut out doubt was causing spiritual anxiety and harm. And it’s not just college students who experience this—a lot of people do. I wanted to address that problem and to speak to a kind of faith that is robust and willing to embrace uncertainty and doubt.

Q: Do you have a sense that this is a message people are looking to hear?

Absolutely. One year, I did a sermon series consisting of the most commonly asked questions in our annual “faith questions” Q&A sermon. One of the recurring questions was: “Am I lost if I have doubt?” I know that this is a question on people’s minds and moreover, whenever I preach on the topic, the response is really positive. People are longing to hear how they can admit doubt and uncertainty and still be faithful.

Q: How do you see the relationship between faith and doubt?

I see faith and doubt as bound up in relationship like a yin and a yang. Faith isn’t actually about knowing, or about believing; it’s about trusting. And trust does not require certainty; in some ways, it requires uncertainty. The act of faith, of trust, is not in having all the answers, it’s in setting forth boldly in spite of unknowing. For example, when we make a commitment in a loving relationship, we cannot know that everything will work out, but we trust that it will and so we make the commitment in faith. There’s a real power to such an act and I maintain that a faith that embraces uncertainty is more powerful than a faith that clings to rigid certainties.

Q: Where do you see this position supported in the religious traditions?

Everywhere. Religion is full of uncertainty. From the uncertainty of our translations of sacred texts to the writings of the mystics to the fact that so much religious language is steeped in metaphor. Our religious language relies almost exclusively on metaphor; it really has no other option. What literal word could, for example, possibly convey the entirety of God? Religious language makes extensive use of metaphor and metaphors are not literal definitions; they’re sign posts, pointing you in the direction of truth. But they are not the truth itself. Even in our religious language, the abundance of metaphor is a clue that our religions are full of uncertainty and that that’s okay. The mystics use metaphor exclusively and are very comfortable in admitting their unknowing.
Q: You say that religious language is metaphorical. Does that mean that religious claims are untrue?

Not at all. If I were to describe a person with a larger than life personality and regal bearing as a “lion of a man” that would be true even if the person weren’t a literal lion. A metaphor simultaneously is and is not the thing it points toward. It’s true, but it’s not the whole truth. That truth still lies beyond. When we describe God as a “king,” for example, we’re using a metaphor to describe God’s power and authority. That’s true. But does that mean that God is sitting on a literal throne? No. The truth lies beyond that image.

Q: If religious language is so metaphorical, are you saying that people shouldn’t believe anything to be literal truth in religion?

What I’m saying is that because of the uncertainty embedded in religion, when we believe something, we should believe it with a measure of humility. If someone wants to believe that Jesus, say, literally walked on water, they should believe that; but they should believe it with some humility, accepting that they have chosen to do so as an act of faith, rather than acknowledging a self-evident fact. My purpose is not to talk anyone out of their beliefs; it’s to help them understand that they need not be certain in those beliefs for their beliefs to be meaningful.

Q: Is religion the only area of human experience with this level of uncertainty?

No, it is not. In the book, I look not only at religion, but also at language, our senses, our science, and the physical world to explore the unavoidable uncertainties found in them. What I show is that human experience is full of inescapable uncertainty. Our language is full of pitfalls of miscommunication, uncertain translation, vague meaning, and metaphor. Our senses are susceptible to misdirection and our brains’ habit of making coherent interpretations of our environment that don’t always agree with what we’re actually sensing. Our science is an incredibly useful tool, but it nevertheless relies on statistics and uncertainty, and revels in questioning the accepted status quo. And finally, our world has been shown to be a world of relativity and quantum mechanics, denying us an absolute frame of reference and reminding us that uncertainty is written into the very fabric of the universe.

Q: You spend a fair amount of time addressing these other domains of human experience beyond religion. Why?

I wanted to show that the problem of uncertainty and doubt is not just a problem for religious folks or even a subset of religious folks. It’s a problem everyone struggles with. In addition, I didn’t want to write a religious book for religious people using religious language. I wanted to write a book for everyone who struggles with doubt and uncertainty, or everyone who feels trapped by the need to be certain. By looking at all of these realms of human experience, I make the case that uncertainty is inescapable. And that’s a good thing.
Q: How is it a good thing?

Embracing uncertainty and doubt helps us to look deeper into our religious faith rather than to get focused on the literal surface claims. It allows us to look beyond the metaphor for the deeper meaning it points toward. It also helps us to adopt a faith that is more humble and more comfortable with mystery. And in a powerful way, embracing the uncertainty and the metaphors in our own religious traditions helps us to engage with different religions not as competing truth claims, but as alternate metaphors for the same underlying mystery. We no longer need to declare other religions false in order to lift up the truth in our own. Two different metaphors can be equally valid, even if different. Embracing uncertainty and doubt allows us to make meaningful encounters across religious and philosophical lines.

Q: What is the main message you want readers to understand?

My main message is two-fold. First, if you’re a person struggling to maintain rigid certainties out of a fear that doubt will cause the whole house of cards to collapse, let go. A meaningful faith is powerful enough to weather uncertainty and doubt, and, in many ways is stronger because of them. It’ll be okay. Second, if you’re a person who admits their own doubt, but feels that this makes you an unfaithful person—a bad Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.—let go of that anxiety. Embracing doubt is essential to a robust, vibrant, and meaningful faith. You’re okay in your doubt and you are in the exact right place for a truly meaningful experience of faith.
Faith and Certainty

There comes a point in our lives when we have to face the mystery of our existence: Why are we here? What is my life for? What does it all mean? Often in this encounter, we develop a sense that there is something beyond ourselves. This is the “numinous” experience—a feeling of “creatureliness,” of something outside us, a consciousness of the other, the Great Mystery. Some may refer to this Great Mystery as fate, others as the universe, others as the void, and others as God. All we can really be sure of as a result of this experience is that there is an ineffable something that lies beyond us.

Religion is one of the ways we have responded to this encounter with mystery. It, like the arts, is an effort to make sense of this mystery and to find meaning for our existence. Religion is not deterred because the questions we ask like What is the meaning of life? cannot readily be answered. Indeed, religion exists to ask questions that cannot be answered.

That doesn’t mean that religion hasn’t tried to answer those questions. In fact, religion has very often moved from wrestling with the mystery of the ineffable to attempting to provide certainty. And far too often religion has been yet another mechanism by which people attempt to obtain certainty or to exercise a measure of control over their world and each other. This impulse toward certainty has become one of the bigger problems in religion today.

Rather than embrace mystery and wonder, wrestle with doubt, and try to discern meaning, so many people of faith simply propagate rules, declare absolutes, and close their eyes to reality when it intrudes upon the certainties they have derived from religion. Because they think that faith is about providing certainty, they find themselves trapped in a prison that limits their ability to think creatively and critically, that eschews mystery and doubt, and that forces them to adopt an almost willful ignorance of the world around them.

In my own work, I have seen the consequences of this understanding of religion. I have had students who struggled to admit any doubt for fear that doing so would be tantamount to admitting to a weak faith. Instead, they will often resort to projecting overconfidence about what they believe so as to prevent anyone from learning their deep, dark secret: they’re unsure.

I have also seen the need for certainty act as an obstacle to those who are trying to grow in understanding their faith. Some years ago, my students and I were having a discussion on campus about the issue of full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the life of the church. One student felt his heart pulling him in a different direction than that of the traditional teachings he’d been given. He knew, worked with, studied with, and had deep loving friendships with LGBTQ+ individuals. He felt that everyone should be welcomed in the church, but when it came to the question of whether these identities were intrinsically sinful, he had a harder time. When I asked him why, he said, “It’s because it’s in the Bible. If this verse can be reinterpreted then . . .” He trailed off. “I just need to know something is certain.”

He is not alone.

There are many who fear uncertainty in their religious faith precisely because they look to their faith for certainty.
“In this important book, Mark Schaefer demonstrates that we cannot be certain about anything that matters. And yet, through metaphor we are drawn toward deeper understanding of both religious and scientific reality. Schaefer demonstrates broad knowledge, great insight, and humility in a book that will help overcome the unfounded fanaticisms of our age. I hope it will be widely recognized and read.”

—J. Philip Wogaman, Wesley Theological Seminary