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## BOOK IN REVIEW

### **The Value of Doubt: Why Unanswered Questions, Not Unquestioned Answers, Build Faith**

Bill Tammeus

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Reviewed by Michelle Sumption

In a sermon I preached a few years ago on John 20:24-29, I chose to add “confessing” as a descriptor to Thomas, rather than the popular “doubting.” I referred to him as “Confessing Thomas” because I wanted to highlight the importance of his vulnerable questioning apart from the negativity often associated with doubt. Perhaps this deliberate decision reveals that the definition of doubt I’ve gravitated to is a label filled with shame – one even considered sinful. However, in light of the reflections provoked by Bill Tammeus in “The Value of Doubt,” I better understand the positive and affirming value of questioning, seeking answers and wrestling with doubt.

Tammeus becomes a wise and caring mentor for the reader, encouraging thoughtful, prayerful questioning and reflection – a practice he models and exemplifies by gently and vulnerably offering his own experiences, faith journey, Presbyterian background and, of course, doubts. Together, Tammeus and the reader explore commonly unquestioned answers of the faith, including faith and doubt, spirituality and religion, death and uncertainty.

The author establishes the conversation by asserting in the introduction, “All words – even those in sacred writ – are metaphors, pointing beyond themselves to some condition, thing, person, or action.” With this argument that a vibrant faith must embrace the reality of “metaphor, myth, and allegory,” Tammeus establishes his invitation to give the reader permission to explore faith afresh. This way of thinking offers space to navigate the role of doubt in the journey of faith, and helps the reader understand what a healthy faith could look like. This particular process of exploring doubts, seeking to articulate, being vulnerable and becoming comfortable with ambiguity is how Tammeus feels we can move towards building and enriching an authentic faith.

At some points, this book felt like Tammeus’ own statement of faith, yet I never felt like he was telling me to believe one thing or not believe another. Instead, this was another aspect of his vulnerability and openness informing his work, which therefore encouraged me to seriously consider my own theology and personal understanding of faith. The conversations Tammeus facilitated through this book were also aided by his succinct clarifications of his own definitions, including faith and doubt (which I found helpful). An especially bright gem in this book is his sermon he shared on the Trinity.

The book’s format lends itself to careful discernment while it is read. Tammeus has written shorter, succinct chapters that each focus on one particular question or topic, and each ends with discussion questions. Wrestling with these topics would perhaps be best facilitated in a small group format, though this lively challenging and questioning can be just as provocative studied on one’s own, accompanied by the Holy Spirit. In one’s journey of faith, I see “The Value of Doubt” as a helpful resource, and in the context of church ministry, I see it as a useful resource for confirmation, adult education and other myriad forms of small group discussion and study.

I recommend this book for its invitation to a hopeful, courageous exploration of faith and doubt.

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