



The First and the Last: The Claim of Jesus Christ and the Claims of Other Religious Traditions

George R. Sumner

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As Christians become more engaged with the reality of religious pluralism, many find themselves torn between two worthy goals: to be faithful to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and to be open generously to possible truths found in other religions. "The First and the Last" offers a constructive way forward, showing how Christian theology can bring these two goals together. This is a challenging and important book. At stake in the current debate over religious pluralism is the issue, not only of evangelism and mission, but also of the Christian claim to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. George Sumner leads readers through both the challenges and possibilities raised by this debate, and he outlines a distinctive new method for assessing from a Christian standpoint the claims and practices of neighboring faiths. The crux of Sumner's approach is a position he calls *final primacy*, a position that (1) sets non-Christian religions in relation to the unique mediating role of Jesus Christ, and (2) relates their truth claims to the overall scheme of grace. Sumner shows the effectiveness of this position in practical terms, using *final primacy* as a frame of reference for a number of twentieth-century theologies, namely those of Barth, Rahner, and Pannenberg, and as a way of examining both Indian and African theologies against their respective backgrounds of Hinduism and tribal practices. Additionally, the book serves as an excellent introduction to the history of interfaith thought. Sumner surveys the ways religious pluralism has been handled in the past, including its treatment in the Enlightenment period in the work of figures like Schleiermacher, Lessing, Smart, and Konstantine. Sumner ends his work by facing head on the difficult question of dialogue. *Final primacy*, he says, redefines the mean of dialogue even as it promotes it, and he tells how in most thought-provoking terms. Both provocative and stimulating, "The First and the Last" provides valuable reading for anyone interested in theology, interfaith dialogue, and missions.



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