

Commonality and Interdependence

WITH A NEW STAR TREK MOVIE doing huge box office this summer, I suppose it is just fortuitous timing that our cover story is on the internationalization of astronomical sciences. After all, when we decided to do this article nearly a year ago we didn't even know that 2009 would be declared the International Year of Astronomy. Sometimes, as they say, it is better to be lucky than good.

The study of the stars and planets has eternally fascinated mankind. From the earliest civilizations developing the very first calendars based on the regular movements of the stars in the night sky, to today's radio telescopes, all peoples have been enthralled by the vast firmament, and have tried to learn its secrets. In *The Republic*, Plato noted that, "Astronomy compels the soul to

look upward, and leads us from this world to another." Any one of us who has managed to escape the light-polluted city sky to a remote mountain top can appreciate the sentiment that Plato expresses.

Yet, one of the most interestingly universal observations that has been made by those few privileged individuals who have been lucky enough to actually leave our planet onboard a spacecraft has been that it is their perspective on Earth that has been most altered. Saudi Arabia's Sultan bin Salman Al-Saud, who participated in a space shuttle mission with American and French colleagues noted, "The first day or so we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were aware of only one Earth."

Perspective is the true gift of astronomy to the world. It encourages those who practice it here on earth to search out colleagues in far distant parts of the globe because of their different but complementary views of the sky. And for all of us, it helps us see how small, fragile, and important to us all, this little planet we share really is. As astronaut and astrophysicist John-David Bartoe said of his experience in space, "As I looked down, I saw a large river meandering slowly along for miles, passing from one country to another without stopping. I also saw huge forests, extending along several borders. And I watched the extent of one ocean touch the shores of separate continents. Two words leaped to mind as I looked down on all this: commonality and interdependence. We are one world." **IE**

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1307 New York Avenue, NW
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