



Wide Angle View, by Huston Smith

The final reason for understanding another is intrinsic -- to enjoy the wider angle the vision affords. I am, of course, speaking metaphorically of vision and view, but an analogue from ocular sight fits perfectly. Without two eyes -- binocular vision -- there is no awareness of space's third dimension. Until sight converges from more than one angle, the world looks as flat as a postcard. The rewards of having two eyes are practical; they keep us from bumping into chairs and enable us to judge the speed of approaching cars. But the final reward is the deepened view of the world itself -- the panoramas that unroll before us, the vistas that extend from our feet. It is the same with "the eyes of the soul," as Plato called it. "What do they know of England, who only England know?" I have acknowledged that the practical gains that come from being able to look at the world through others' eyes are major. They enable corporations to do business with China, and diplomats to stumble less often. But the greatest gains need no tally. To glimpse what belonging means to the Japanese; to sense with a Burmese grandmother what passes in life and what endures;

to understand how Hindus can regard their personalities as masks that overlay the Infinite within; to crack the paradox of a Zen monk who assures you that everything is holy but scrupulously refrains from certain acts -- to swing such things into view is to add dimensions to the glance of spirit. It is to have another world to live in. The only thing that is good without qualification is not (as Kant argued) the good will, for a will can mean well in cramped quarters. The only thing that is unqualifiedly good is extended vision, the enlargement of one's understanding of the ultimate nature of things. --Huston Smith, in Introduction to "The World's Religions"