

# THE MATERIAL–SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE CONTINUUM CHART

2007

Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Chiloquin, Oregon

**We have to start by saying that the Material – Spiritual Perspective Continuum is strictly a heuristic tool, a way to gather together and display a lot of information so we can see how it is related. In addition, the chart is a conceptualization and does not pretend to capture reality or to represent a theory or individual or cultural worldview. And we need to realize that other terms besides “material” and “spiritual” could easily be substituted to represent the dynamic I am trying to discuss. If you prefer Objective – Subjective, or Explicate – Implicate, or Physical – Mystical, or some other similar pairing, substitute that to reveal the reference range I am considering. What is important is to pursue the idea and not to get hung up in the limitations of language.**

**The Material – Spiritual Perspective Continuum is intended to display the range of individual and cultural worldviews and the conception of reality that derives from them. For my purposes, it is Western, and especially American, culture with which I am concerned, but the continuum can be diagnostic for any culture, with different cultures being located at different average locations on the continuum as well as at different locations on the continuum with respect to individual associated institutions and variables. Most complex cultures contain within them different subcultures, which can differ broadly in their location on the continuum and with regard to the particular institutions and variables they stress in their own self-definition. Counter cultural movements/groups/subcultures are self-aware of the ways they differ from mainstream/dominant culture, and they intentionally offer a dynamic dialogue about worldview within such cultures. Other subcultures are less “confrontational,” choosing to separate themselves from the mainstream to differing degrees and simply live life on their own terms. So, complex cultures, like American culture, are not homogeneous as to how they are located on the Material – Spiritual Continuum. Indeed, every individual will show some differences in his or her personal worldview as compared to other individuals, even in the same subgroup of the same subculture. And this individual worldview is itself dynamic, changing over time, at a minimum as a function of sex and age and usually as a function of experience.**

In spite of the extent of variation, it is nevertheless the case that complex cultures do display mainstream or dominant general tendencies that can be revealed using the continuum. It is at this level that I am using the continuum to discuss the dominant tendencies of Western/American culture and to identify the choices each of us may make as we conduct our lives beneath this umbrella. As individuals, in many ways we are encouraged to dwell mostly in the mainstream, but if we are aware of the options, we may choose the worldview position of an alternative subculture or group, or we may operate independently and develop our own worldview. What is important is not what worldview position we adopt, but that we get there as a result of careful consideration and not just as a consequence of where we are pointed by our parents, our clan, our tribe, our ethnic/religious/class group, our nation, or our guru. An unexamined worldview, which is adopted from others without reflection, is weak at best and at worst dangerous to both ourselves and the destiny of humankind.

The Chart is a tool to summarize the full array of worldview options open to us as cultural beings. In two pages, the chart is a quick visual reference for the key options within the array of institutional variables. Moving horizontally across the page, we can see the range of choices within the variables of any one cultural institution. The different options correspond to what perspective we adopt, what position we take on the material – spiritual perspective continuum. Moving vertically we can see whether the choices selected in different institutions reflect a consistent perspective on the continuum or a varying, even oppositional, perspective. Most cultures and individuals are not consistent; indeed, they usually contain within them dynamic tension between perspectives in different institutions, and sometimes even within institutions themselves. This dynamic tension “stirs the pot” and tends to keep the culture or individual flexible, creative and adaptive. Cultures and individuals differ in how and where they display this internal dynamic perspective tension.

The Chart and the Continuum are linear and oppositional in nature. This is the only way I have come up with to discuss this complex conceptual challenge – reflecting the limitations of language and intellect. The Chart and Continuum are heuristic – to reflect and promote contemplation. They do not directly reflect reality, or “the way IT is.” It is particularly important to keep in mind that although it seems almost impossible, the extremes of the continuum are more complementary than truly oppositional in nature and have a way of wrapping to meet one another. This eventuality is best represented in two facts: in eastern mystical systems, the intellect [at the material end of the continuum], if pursued to its extreme, is recognized as one path to spiritual enlightenment/ecstasy [at the spiritual end of the continuum]. Secondly, extreme spirituality/enlightenment contains simultaneously the ecstasy and the void – the total fulfillment of the self as everything [spiritual] and the total loss of self as an individual [material]. This seeming paradox is symbolically represented in the universal yin/yang symbol of the circle/sphere containing a black and a white “side,” where the white side includes the black within it and where the black side includes the white within it. This is a symbolic way of recognizing that opposites not only attract, they contain one another within themselves – in short they are actually complements of one another. So, a linear continuum like the Material – Spiritual Continuum is only a way to display what I think is a key opposition in the way we conceive culture and reality. It is not reality itself. It is useful to the extent it helps us in employing the intellect as our tool to think about what defines cultures and individuals – their worldviews and ways of understanding reality.

The Institutional categories in the Chart are numbered, while the variables within these categories are identified with a letter. These numbers and corresponding letters are located in parentheses at relevant points in the Text of the following section of the document. Hopefully, these references make it relatively easy to move between Text and Chart in order to keep track of where readers are and what issue/variable is being discussed. The Chart serves as both an introduction and a summary of what constitutes the main section of this essay.

## MATERIAL - SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE CONTINUUM

### A. MATERIAL PERSPECTIVE ----- MIXED/OVERLAPPING PERSPECTIVES ----- SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

#### 1) Associated Mental Processes and Faculties

- |   |                |                  |                                  |
|---|----------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. Logic–Calculation–Contemplation/Plan–Everyday Activities–Daydream–Art/Invent–Dream–PSI/ESP–Meditation–Fusion/Ecstasy |                |                  |                                  |
| b. Reason   | -- Thought     | -- Contemplation | -- Imagination                   |
| c. Think/Analyze  | -- Contemplate | --               | -- Synthesize/Pray/Meditate Be   |
| d. Conscious  | --             | Subconscious     | -- Unconscious                   |
| e. Intellect  | --             | --               | Intuition                        |
| f. Verbal/Language  | --             | Visual/Image     | -- Visualization/Kinetic Imagery |

#### 2) Concept of the Physical World

- |                               |                                |                                    |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a. Constant and Fixed         | -- Flexible/Fluid              | -- Infinite and Interchangeable    |
| b. Matter/Particle            | -- Energy/Field/Wave/Frequency | Quantum Fluctuations               |
| c. Concrete/Separate Things   | -- Relations                   | -- Simultaneous Nothing/Everything |
| d. Cause and Effect/Free Will | -- Network/System Change       | -- Fate/Determinism                |
|                               |                                | -- Infinite Vibration              |

#### 3) Concept of Space

- |  |                      |                                |
|--|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. Constant and Fixed                        | -- Flexible/Variable | -- Infinite without Separation |
| b. Definite Here and There/Measured Distance | --                   | Everywhere At Once             |

#### 4) Concept of Time

- |                                      |                              |                                 |                          |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Linear Time/Past, Present, Future | -- Circular/Repeatable Time  | -- Reversible Time              | -- Timeless/Eternal Now  |
| b. Rapid – Fixed                     | -- Natural – Flexible        | -- Reversible – Variable        | -- Flow – Indeterminate  |
| c. Anticipate/Plan/Progress          | -- Participate/Engage/Change | --                              | Endless, Infinite Change |
| d. Workweek/Everyday                 | -- Weekend                   | -- Vacation-Party-Festival-Arts | -- Ritual                |
|                                      |                              |                                 | -- Ascetic Time-Out      |

#### 5) General Associations

- |                            |                              |    |              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|----|--------------|
| a. Part/Entity/Thing       | -- Relations                 | -- | Whole/All    |
| b. Do/Act                  | -- Participate               | -- | Be           |
| c. Divide/Separate/Analyze | -- Connect/Relate/Synthesize | -- | Unite        |
| d. Take/Consume            | -- Share/Nurture             | -- | Give/Love    |
| e. Focused/Fixed/Constant  | -- Flexible/Change           | -- | Diffuse/Flow |

#### 6) Associated View of the Natural World

Defeat -- Overcome -- Control -- Battle -- Utilize -- Conserve -- Respect -- Protect -- Honor -- Sanctify

7) Associated Social Perspective and Attitude

- a. Individual -- Family/Clan/Tribe -- Community -- Nation -- Multi-nation -- Gaia/Worldwide
- b. Me/Self – Other/Stranger/Foreigner Us -- We -- Everyone/Universal We
- c. Egocentric/Biological Imperative -- Socio-centric/Social Imperative -- Human-centric -- Universal Imperative
- d. Competition/Struggle/Overcome/Win -- Cooperation/Coordination -- Altruism/Brotherly Love -- Universal Love
- e. Pragmatics -- Ethics -- Morality

8) Associated Gender Role Male -- Female

9) Associated Economic System

- Free Enterprise -- Regulated Capitalism -- Socialism -- Communism

10) Associated Measures of Success

- Personal Power, Fame, & Wealth -- Community Benefit, Health & Welfare -- Creative Expression -- Spiritual Fulfillment

11) Associated Political System

- Kingship, Dictatorship, Theocracy -- Representative Democracy -- Democracy -- Consensus/Communalism

12) Associated American Political Party and Ideology

- a. Libertarian -- Republican -- Democrat -- Socialist -- Communist
- b. Conservative -- Liberal

13) Associated Philosophy

- Positivism/Pragmatism -- Realism -- Existentialism -- Dynamic Humanism -- Idealism -- Mysticism

14) Associated Value in Mainstream Western Culture

- Essential -- Important -- Serious -- Enjoyable -- Entertaining -- Frivolous -- Fanciful -- Foolish

15) Associated Belief System

- a. Objective/Secular/Profane -- Subjective -- Sacred
- b. Science -- Religion/Religiosity -- Spirituality
- c. Fact/Data -- Information -- Knowledge -- Wisdom -- Awareness

16) Associated Religious View

- Nihilism/Atheism -- Secular Humanism -- Agnosticism -- Religious Mainstream -- Fundamentalism -- Animism/New Age -- Mysticism

17) Associated Mode of Art

- Photo/Literal Image-Word -- Representation -- Figurative/Impression -- Metaphor -- Symbol -- Abstraction