

Chapter Two

Idealism and Spirituality

Human Perfection and Spirituality

I would not describe the perfections you describe in your letter, fine though they are, as spiritual in the proper sense of the word — for they lack the essential condition of spirituality. Perfection of all kinds is indeed good, as it is the sign of the pressure of the consciousness in the material world towards full self-expression in this or that limit, on this or that level. In a certain sense it is an urge of the Divine itself hidden in forms that tends in the lesser degrees of consciousness towards its own increasing self-revelation. Perfection of an object or a scene in inanimate Nature, animate perfection of strength, speed, physical beauty, courage or animal fidelity, affection, intelligence, perfection of art, music, poetry, literature, — perfection of the intellect in any kind of mental activity, the perfect statesman, warrior, artist, craftsman, — perfection in vital force and capacity, perfection in ethical qualities, character, temperament, — all have their high value, their place as rungs in the ladder of evolution, the seried steps of the spirit's emergence. If one likes to call that spiritual because of this hidden urge behind it one can do so; it can at least be regarded as a preparation for the secret spirit's emergence. But thought and knowledge can only proceed by making the necessary distinctions. Much confusion is created by neglecting them. This mental idealism, ethical development, religious piety and fervour, occult powers and feats have all been taken as spirituality and the spiritual evolution kept tied to the moorings of the planes of lesser consciousness which do indeed prepare the soul by experience for the spiritual consciousness but are not themselves that. For perfection can only become truly spiritual when it is founded on the awakened spiritual consciousness and takes on its peculiar essence. We are told by Europeans that the lined and ravaged face of the Greek bust of Homer is

far more spiritual than the empty ecstatic smile of the Buddha. We are told often nowadays that to earn for one's family and carry out our domestic duties, to be a good and moral man, a perfect citizen, patriot, worker for the country, is far more spiritual than to sit in idle meditation seeking for a remote and invisible Deity. Philanthropy, altruism, service to mankind are represented as the true spiritual things. Mental idealisms, ethical strivings, aesthetic finenesses are put forward by the modern mind as things spiritual. All this is represented as the best and highest we can achieve — though an increasing disillusionment, dissatisfaction, feeling of emptiness in them is also growing at the same time. All this has had its use, for everything has its own value in its own place and those who are satisfied with them are entitled to give them their full value and hold them as the great good and the thing to be done, *kartavyam karma*. But spirituality stands on its own basis and does not depend on these things nor does it even include them so long as they are based on some other than the spiritual consciousness and not transformed on the inner spiritual basis. So also people speak of religious men as spiritual, but one may be a very religious man yet not spiritual. The popular idea confuses great feats of occult power, ascetic feats, miracles, astonishing performances like those of your Jewel Sannyasi as the works of a spiritual achievement and the signs of a great Yogi. But one may be a powerful occultist or do marvels of asceticism and yet be not spiritual at all — for in any true sense of the word, in its proper and native significance it means one who has attained to the spiritual consciousness, the realisation of the inner or higher Self, the contact or union with the Divine or that which is eternal or is striving after and approaching these things. Spiritual perfection can only come by a life based on that search and that achievement.¹

The Collapse of Twentieth-Century Idealism

Tagore, of course, belonged to an age which had faith in its

¹ *This is the draft of a letter reproduced in a thoroughly rewritten form on pages 424–27. — Ed.*

ideas and whose very denials were creative affirmations. That makes an immense difference. Your strictures on his later development may or may not be correct, but this mixture even was the note of the day and it expressed a tangible hope of a fusion into something new and true — therefore it could create. Now all that idealism has been smashed to pieces by the immense adverse Event and everybody is busy exposing its weakness, but nobody knows what to put in its place. A mixture of scepticism and slogans, “Heil Hitler” and the Fascist salute and Five-Year Plan and the beating of everybody into one amorphous shape, a disabused denial of all ideals on one side and on the other a blind shut-my-eyes and shut-everybody’s-eyes plunge into the bog in the hope of finding some firm foundation there, will not carry us very far. And what else is there? Until new spiritual values are discovered, no great enduring creation is possible.

*

It is queer these intellectuals go on talking of creation while all they stand for is collapsing into the *Néant* without their being able to raise a finger to save it. What the devil are they going to create and from what material? and of what use if a Hitler with his cudgel or a Mussolini with his castor oil can come and wash it out or beat it into dust in a moment?

*

If there are such great spiritual men in Europe [*as a book reviewer claimed*], they seem to have the gift of invisibility. Or perhaps he means intellectuals like Romain Rolland or else Roman Catholic priests and cardinals or the Reverend Holmes or pacifists like Lord Robert Cecil or in the past Tolstoy who spent his whole life trying in vain to live according to his ideals. Idealising intellectualism and religionism are all that is left of spirituality in Europe.