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A 'Catholic' Spirituality

texts translated and presented by

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Swami Svorupanondo is one of the greatest Indian gurus of our time. His disciples call him affectionately 'Babamoni'. He originates from East Bengal and is the founder of Benaras' Oyachok Ashram and of Pupunki's (near Danbad, in Bihar) Ashram and Multiversity. For many years he has spread his spirituality (the Okhondo spirituality) and gathered many disciples all over Bengal (East and West), Assam, Bihar and Orissa.

Babamoni's spiritual teaching is characterised by its broad catholicity. The following passages gathered under three headings are translations from *Okhondo Somhita*, a collection of Svorupanondo's spiritual exhortations and letters. They show some of the main traits of his broad spirituality. They are presented here with Babamoni's permission. I shall in the future examine more extensively and more deeply Babamoni's spiritual teaching and its relevance to our time. I shall reflect also on the attitude which a 'Catholic' Christian should adopt towards such a teaching and towards the religious practices which Babamoni invites his disciples to follow.

I. THE OKHONDO IDEAL

The Okhondo's Characteristic and Duty (I, p. 257)

Those who are united with Babamoni by the spiritual bond of *sadhon* call themselves Okhondo.¹ The reason for it is that they are not *bound* to accept any particular scripture, to adhere to any particular religion or philosophical system, to worship any particular deity or avatar, but that, according to the exhortations received, they perform the *sadhon* centred on the Name which most aptly designates God in his fulness (*okhondo nam*) and, in accordance with the experience they have acquired through the practice of their own *sadhon*, follow their own scriptures, religion and philosophy. As in religious matters Babamoni's votaries have such freedom, they do not in any way form a distinctive sect.

Babamoni writes: 'What is an Okhondo? Even though a person may be called an Okhondo, this name does not confer upon him any distinctive characteristic. As long as somebody cannot have a brotherly feeling towards the whole human family, as long as he cannot love all

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¹ The term 'Okhondo' means full, entire, unbroken, unseparated. In Svorupanondo's perspective it means universal, catholic.

without ever showing any contempt towards any religious group, as long as he cannot cast a pure look devoid of any hatred on all religions, ideologies, ways and methods of *sadhon*, he cannot really be called an Okhondo. An essential characteristic of the Okhondo is his ability to collaborate in a respectful way, without any feeling of envy, with any group, in the uplifting of the oppressed, in consoling and sustaining those who suffer, in raising those who have fallen.'

The Okhondo's Ideal (VII, p. 247)

Sri Omor Chakraborti asked: 'Very good, Babamoni, we are Okhondos, but what is our ideal?' Sri Obdul Ajj said: 'I was just going to ask the same question. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc., we have all become Babamoni's disciples, we have received *diksha* from him and acknowledged him as our guru, but what is our ideal, we do not know it clearly.'

Babamoni replied: 'The fulness of manhood is the Okhondo's ideal. The Okhondo is not a Hindu, not a Muslim, not a Christian not a Buddhist . . ., the Okhondo is *a man*. The Okhondo is a man who hates no other man, who considers no other man as a stranger, who does not immolate himself on the altar of any kind of sectarianism, who is constantly committed to discovering the way of bringing men together, who, without denying the value of the past, has the courage required to amend past errors, and lives the present with his eyes turned towards the future; who believes in the fundamental unity of all sects, who sees all persons as brothers, who sees every man in the very way he sees himself, who sees every nation as his own, who considers every tongue as a vehicle through which he can express the Name of God which appeals to him most; who sees every human group as an association which concerns him, who in every ideology and in every path acknowledges the presence of the truth contained in his own beliefs and in the path which he follows.'

The Characteristic of the Okhondo

Babamoni wrote the following to a young man of Rohimpur: 'Throughout life, each of my children must in each of his behaviours, in every circumstance, show one divine quality. Remember this for it is what will enable people to recognize you as "Okhondos". Your striving for perfection is a striving for the good of the world. Your redemption and the redemption of the world go together. You cannot desire to obtain salvation alone; you cannot wish to go to heaven alone. Be intent on your own salvation, but at the same time work for the salvation of the world; live for the good of the world, and at the same time promote your own good. You are men who realize the identity of their own good and the good of others, of the good to be achieved in the present, and of the supreme good—this is your characteristic.'

The Duty of Okhondos (XI, pp. 160-161)

'The duty of Okhondos is purely and simply the duty which man has as man. Okhondos are before all *men*. Your duty is the duty

which each one of you has towards his fellowmen. Even though mistakenly, Boishnobs consider their duty to be first of all toward Boishnobs, Shaktos towards Shaktos, Christians towards Christians Muslims towards Muslims, Hindus towards Hindus, Okhondos will consider their duty to be first of all towards men as men; concern for their own community will come after. The duty of the Okhondo family man and of the one who has retired from the world is fundamentally the same. Who is a family man and who is not, this is for you of little importance. Who is truly an Okhondo, this is the only thing which matters.

To spread love and to please God

This will be the ornament of the Okhondo's life.

Devotion to God brings about the salvation of the world.

The salvation of the world brings about the spiritualization of
man.

Surrender your desire for your personal happiness in favour of
the others' happiness.

Offer to the Lord the happiness of the whole world.

This is the Okhondo's only duty. Man alone is his duty.'

II. THE OKHONDO SPIRITUALITY

To What Religious Group Do Okhondos Belong? (II, pp. 76-77)

An inquirer: 'People say that the devotees of Shiva are men of knowledge (*jnanis*), the devotees of Kali men of action (*kormis*) and the devotees of Krishna are lovers. In what category do we fall?'

Babamoni: 'You are not enclosed within the limits of any group, you belong to all groups, you are everything. Try to become whatever you have to be in order to reach perfection. In your life there is nothing which prevents you from giving yourself either to meditation or to action or to love. Do in your life whatever you think to be the best. When you see that there is no separation between you and the Object of your worship, you lose yourself in meditation. When you experience the distinction which prevails between you and this Object, when you call Him Father, Mother, Friend or Spouse and find joy in worshipping Him, you become a lover. When you consider every action or undertaking as an act of worship addressed to God, when you perceive at the very heart of your actions the One who is Love and fills your heart with joy, you become a man of action. For all these reasons the Okhondo should not let himself be involved in intricacies and argumentations. Only through the power of the *sadhon* centred on the Name does he little by little become what he should be. As a result of a *sadhon* conformable to the demands of his particular religious experience his whole personality can express itself in a way which is authentic. At times he will concentrate on knowledge, at other times he will give himself to action or to loving devotion. However this modification of disposition and behaviour will never make him give up the practice of *sadhon*. When he meditates, it is through the meditation of the Name that he transforms himself into the Object of his

meditation; when he surrenders himself to love, it is through the same Name that he attains what his love aims at; when he gives himself to action, it is also the Name which makes his action fruitful. The Okhondo may undergo variations in his mental and psychological disposition; his path, however, remains unchanged.'

The Sadhon of the Okhondo and his Philosophy (II, pp. 77-79)

An inquirer: 'Many ask whether we are Shaktos or Boishnobs. What should we answer?'

Babamoni: 'Okhondos are all at once Shaktos, Shoibos, Boishnobs Sauros, Ganopotyos, Hindus, Muslims and Christians; Buddhists, Vedantins and Free-Thinkers; worshippers of God under some form or other, worshippers of God as formless and Theosophists. The Okhondos are a fellowship without any sectarianism.'

An inquirer: 'How can anybody be everything?'

Babamoni: 'Everybody, maybe, cannot achieve this universalism. However what has been proved to be possible cannot be declared to be impossible. Be concerned first of all with *sadhon*, philosophy will come after; perform first of all the service of the Name, forms will manifest themselves after. To perform the service of the Name you have not first of all to accept as true any particular philosophy, you have not first to adhere to any particular representation of God. Maybe all philosophies are false, maybe they are all true. Maybe all forms such as Kali, Krishna, etc., are truly forms of God, maybe no one of them represents God authentically. Such disputations are not your concern. Is Jesus or Mohammed infallible? Do not start arguing about this. Know only that by performing the service of the Name all truth will naturally manifest itself to you. When you are fit to grasp truth in whatever way it presents itself, this truth will take shape in you. For the Okhondo, the Name in all its fulness (*Okhondo Nam*) is the fundamental scripture; it is all at once the Vedas, the Koran and the Bible, their explanation and commentary. He grasps the various religions and philosophical doctrines which are mutually contradictory as multi-form interpretations of the Name. In his view, there is in the world no teaching which is completely fallacious, no religious interpretation which is nonsensical. As long as he is a mere child in the domain of *sadhon*, the Okhondo considers as truth the explanations which are suitable to children. When he grows old in the domain of *sadhon*, he accepts as truth the explanations which are suitable to old people. He does not consider any scripture as false or erroneous; he knows them to be relative truths. Thus, even though he does not belong to any particular religious group, he really belongs to all groups.'

(V, p. 207) 'The Okhondos are not enclosed within the limits of any religious group such as the Shaktos, Shoibos or Boishnobs. They serve the Name and with the help of the Name worship God under the form which appeals to them most. The Name is their supreme refuge; as they respect the Name, the Name teaches them what form

of God they should worship and who should be their *ishto*.² The Okhondo Name *OM* is not the name of Krishna, of Bishnu, of Kali, of Durga, etc. However, it contains all at once the names of Krishna, Bishnu, Kali, Durga, etc.; it contains all names. For this reason the Okhondos are neither Boishnobs, nor Shaktos, nor Sauros, nor Ganopotyos; yet they belong all at once to all religious groups. Putting your faith in the word of your guru, you are to perform only the *sadhon* of the Okhondo Name. Do not fall into error by thinking that you are in opposition to or in disagreement with any other religious group. All religious denominations should fuse into one fellowship named the catholic (Okhondo) fellowship. To be a catholic (Okhondo) means to remain entirely faithful to one's allegiance and to show full respect and understanding towards all.'

The Okhondo's Scripture (V, p. 371)

Babamoni: 'I went to Pheni. The philosophy professor of that college asked me what was our scripture. I answered: "The most holy Name of the Lord is my scripture. The experience which I make when repeating the Name is my philosophy. The scripture which I read is the one which increases my spiritual relish when I am at the service of the most sweet Name. The Lord exists and is present, this is my first article of faith. His Name is Truth, this is my second article. The service of the Name is man's supreme one, this is my third article. All the books in the world which are in conformity with these three beliefs, wherever they are, whoever be their authors, are my scripture.'"

The Supreme Atman is your Guru (VII, p. 54)

Babamoni: 'Guru-ism is nowadays so prevalent that the true Guru has been so to speak left aside. Sodasib says, "If you consider a man as your guru, you cannot reach salvation." The scriptures say, "Brohma is the Guru, Bishnu is the Guru, Mohesvor is the Guru, the Supreme Brohmo Himself is the Guru, etc." This means that the creative radiance of God is your Guru; his protective power is your Guru; the power he has of bringing everything to himself is your Guru; finally the universally benevolent and unique Poromatma, the One from whom everything proceeds, through whom everything subsists, and to whom everything returns, is your Guru.'

The Okhondo Considers the Symbol OM as the Purest of all the Representations of God (Khondorup) (VII, p. 55)

Babamoni: 'Unable to grasp with his small intellect the unlimited (*okhondo*), inexhaustible, eternal reality of the all-good Guru, the *sadhok* is forced to look after symbols which can represent or designate

² This term designates the name or form of God which appeals most to one. It must be noted that for Svorupanondo every image, form or name of God has its value in reference to the Name which designates God in the fulness of his Life and Being and finds its expression in the symbol *OM*, a symbol which, while it is plenitude of expressiveness, designates a Living Presence who transcends all expression.

him. Thus he devises images of God. There is no need for you to do so. You have only to meditate on the representation of the Guru constituted by the symbol *OM*. Its colour is white and brilliant, destroying darkness. The symbol *OM* is the purest limited form of the Unlimited.'

Our Sadhon (IX, p. 21)

'Our *sadhon* is a *sadhon* which harmonizes. Without knowledge there cannot be any love. Without love there cannot be any knowledge, without action there can be neither love nor knowledge. Our life is a life which is rooted in full love, knowledge and action. The path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of *bhokti* cannot be separated from one another. No doubt, according to the need of the moment, particular emphasis may at times be laid on one of them: however, this is something temporary. Our *sadhon* is a *sadhon* of supreme *bhokti* and of full knowledge through hard work. Following the requirements of his spiritual evolution, guided by his previous experience, in accordance also with the influence which his environment exerts upon him and with his mental disposition, the *sadhok* may at times give preference to one of the three ways, but even then he should not give up entirely the balance to be kept between the three.'

The Meaning of the Word 'Okhondo' (XIV, p. 101)

'The "Okhondos" are those who serve the *Okhondo-montro OM*. Suppose a number of people have not received this *montro* from me, suppose they have not received their *diksha* from my spiritual children or from their disciples, suppose even they do not attach any importance to the rite of *diksha*, have resolved and begun to perform the *sadhon* centred on the *OM* symbol according to rules which they have fixed themselves, you will acknowledge them as Okhondos. The Okhondos do not form a limited sect, they are a fellowship embracing the whole of mankind. If Svorupanondo is the first to say so, well let this little be considered as Svorupanondo's original contribution; however know this: Svorupanondo did not come to establish any new religious group, he has no desire to found any new sect, he does not in any way claim the glory of having brought to the world a new religion. The Okhondo *Dhormo* is the *Dhormo* of the whole of humanity; the Okhondo society is the universal human society; the Okhondo fellowship is a fellowship embracing the whole human family. You must never forget this, not a single day.'

The Meaning of the Okhondo-Montro (XIV, p. 102)

Babamoni wrote: "'*OM*'—what is the meaning of this *montro*? Its meaning is—"O Beloved, You are mine and I am Yours." Its meaning is—"Without You I am not, without me You are not." Its meaning is—"You and I are one, I and You are one." If a distinction persists between us, it is in order that my love for you may increase; if unity

prevails, it is in order that our love may become deeper, more intimate.”³ *OM* means—“Yes, Lord, yes, I want your will to be done in my life. I have no will of my own, I cannot make any personal claim. You have upon me a right which is eternal, embracing time in its three dimensions, universal.” *OM* means—“With regard to every concern—worldly and non-worldly—I surrender to you, O Lord, in total acceptance of your will, in complete obedience.”

The Life of the Okhondo Mondoli (I, pp. 258-259)

‘You must know that whatever be the Okhondo’s distinctive aim and ideal, what animates the Okhondo fellowship is neither the India of the past, nor even that of the present, but the India of the future. You are concerned neither with the reawakening of the past nor merely with the keeping of a clean account in so far as the present is concerned, but with the future to be created. As members of the Okhondo fellowship, your only desire and religion will be that all your thoughts and words may dispose you to act continually with a view to building the future. You will not deny the past, you will not neglect the present, but the future will be dearer to you, more intimately yours, than anything else. Reverence the past, live the present with discernment, but offer the whole of yourself to the future. Let your mind be concerned with the past, let the strength of your arms be at the service of the present, but let your life in its very endlessness be entirely directed towards the future.’

III. THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT OF THE OKHONDO MONDOLI Sectarianism (XIV, pp. 104-105)

Babamoni: ‘Nothing on earth has caused more evil and more turmoil than the group mentality. “All denominations are mine, I belong to all denominations.” As long as this word has not penetrated into your hearts, you will not be able to declare on oath that by your efforts to develop this or that group you are not engaged in throwing into the world new seeds of unrest for the future. If, when you gather for the *Somobeta Upasona*, the Boishnobs of the area get alarmed, the Shaktos are filled with apprehension, the followers of Ramakrishna show displeasure, the disciples of Jogobondhu feel envy, if all this is the result of your efforts for getting united among yourselves, you will acknowledge that you have failed to build an association devoid of the group mentality, that in the very name of ‘non-groupism’ you have founded a new potentially dangerous group, a group which openly or covertly will create disturbance among the other groups. To be sure,

³ The *OM-montra* contains whatever I can express of God through language, as such it expresses *me* in my relation to the Transcendent God, it expresses God as *immanent in me*—God-for-me, God-in-me, *God-as-me*. God as expressed by the *OM-montra* is *myself* as a relation to and participation in the Transcendent God, it is God as expressed in terms of *my existence and experience*. This is why I can say of God as thus expressed: ‘Without You I am not, without me You are not.’

if the members of a denomination become envious when they see you increase and multiply, this cannot be held against you—the one who dies of envy, dies of his own fault. But if those who are not envious by nature also feel alarm, apprehension, anxiety or unrest when they see you thrive, you will acknowledge that, unconsciously maybe, you have in some way turned away from the holy ideal which the refusal of sectarianism expresses and from the goal which this refusal has in view. Maybe, seeing that in their houses your neighbours perform with *éclat* the remembrance celebrations of the great men who have founded the religious groups to which they belong, you have tried to view with them in your own celebrations and, as a result, the members of other denominations have been hurt in their self-esteem. I cannot see anything truly religious in such behaviour. To my mind, all this constitutes a patent example of *rajosik*, group mentality.'

Association Without Group Mentality (XIV, p. 105)

Babamoni: 'The Okhondos must constitute a fellowship devoid of any sectarian spirit. I shall love him who honours me in the same way as the one who does not honour me. The Okhondo regards in the same way Konso and the enemy of Konso; the Okhondo loves in the same way Rabon and the enemy of Rabon. Apparently the difference between 'Khondo' and 'Okhondo' is merely one letter; in fact, there is a world of difference between the two. A Boishnob can bear ill-will against a non-Boishnob; an Okhondo, however, must love a non-Okhondo. A Shakto may despise a non-Shakto, an Okhondo must respect a non-Okhondo.'

The Way of Getting Rid of the Group Mentality (XIV, pp. 105-106)

'To be sure, there is for the true Boishnob or the true Shakto no question of feeling envy or contempt towards anybody. But they belong to old well-established religious sects. As a result, they may fall into such aberrations on account of the sense of ancientness which they have as members of their fellowship.

You are a new fellowship. You are going neither to condemn those elder brothers of yours for their faults, nor to imitate them. Elders may commit errors and blunders, you must overlook their faults and imitate their virtues. Learn from the Boishnobs single-minded devotion, unconditioned obedience, self-surrender free from arguments or discussion; learn from the Shaktos the practice of *sadhon* without fear of death, constant courage and indomitable endurance; learn from the Shoibos that magnanimity which transcends race, caste and sex, faith in the immortality of the self. Seek constantly what you can learn from others—the group mentality should never be allowed to penetrate among you. In what resides the greatness of Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, the excellence of Jains, Sikhs, Brahmos, try to find that out; sectarianism is a deadly poison; it will destroy you in no time if you absorb it. Why should you wish that a religious association called "Okhondo" should remain perpetually alive in the world? Let every man become a *sadhok*, plunging into the sea of *sadhon*, let

every man and woman try to reach the bottom of the unfathomable ocean—what has to be, let it be; what has not to be, let it not be. In-so far as the Okhondo “association” is concerned, do not make any resolve and do not give way to any doubt.’

The Non-Sectarian Character of the Okhondo Mondoli (XIV, p. 179)

Babamoni wrote to a devotee: ‘Do not be anxious if you see that in your area the number of persons having received *diksha* is small. Make the appointed spiritual readings with other people and try to celebrate regularly the *Somobeto Upasona*. You are establishing an Okhondo *mondoli*. Excellent, but there is nothing which obliges you to do it only with Okhondos or with spiritual sons of mine. Your mental disposition must be one of full catholicity. When members of other denominations will come and attend your readings, *kirtons* or *upasonas*, you will receive them as your own people and your fellow *sadhoks*. You will not in any way consider them as outsiders. When other people come to attend your functions, you will not in any way entertain in your minds the damnable notion—rooted in the spirit of rivalry—that you have been able to extend your influence on people belonging to other religious groups. Remember continually that the group mentality is totally foreign to me.’

What is Catholicism (Osamprodayikota)? (X, pp. 264-265)

Babamoni: ‘Is it not possible that one day all the religious associations which we find in the world will become a single big association? The people who entertain such an idea show a good amount of rashness. In religious matters it will always be impossible to eliminate from the world diversity. Unity pertains to the religion of the spirit, diversity to a religion having its source in material nature. The spirit, which by itself is transcendent to any worldly phenomena and cannot be destroyed, will remain one for ever. But this world which originated one day and will one day come to an end will perpetually be subject to diversity. Philosophers say that the *Puruṣa* is not subject to change, but that the multiform *Prakṛti* is continually frolicsome. If we destroy nature (*prokṛiti*) we cannot live in this world. Those who are in need of belonging to some particular denomination are all dependent on nature. Thus in the world there will always be a diversity of religious groups. If somebody through a kind of spell manages to gather everybody within one denomination, this denomination will soon split into ten other denominations. If somebody through the power of the sword forces everybody to join a particular association, after two days this association will break down and divide into a hundred associations. Thus the only way is to acknowledge that according to the spirit all are one, even though according to the flesh each one should follow his particular avocation. This is what I call catholicism. It is impossible to destroy completely the walls which separate the various denominations, but there is a road open to all: we can lower down the arrogant height of those walls; the members of one denomination and those of another

denomination can clasp each other in an embrace of love This. is catholicism (*osamprodayikota*). Remain in your group, but never think of another person as your enemy, acknowledge him as your kin. This is catholicism.'

The Establishing of an Okhondo Mondoli—Aim and Method (XIV, pp. 180-184)

Babamoni wrote to another devotee: 'To establish an Okhondo *mondoli* you must first have a place where the symbol *OM* in white colour will be enthroned and worshipped. In that place, no other image of gods and goddesses will be set for worship; *OM* is the unique origin from which all deities and *montros* proceed and the end to which they return. The work of the *mondoli* will be based on the acceptance of *OM* as the supreme symbol of a Reality which is one and without a second.

'If possible, the founders of the *mondoli* will secure for the *mondoli* a piece of land where, besides cultivating flowers, they will erect a building with a library where people can come and read religious books and a section where various kinds of social service can be rendered. If various types of service are undertaken by the male and female members of the *mondoli*, the male workers will engage themselves in social activities different from those performed by the female workers. In all this, discernment must be kept.

'Alive or dead, I shall remain the president of the *mondoli*. Among the local people known for their benevolence, a zealous and respected person will be selected as vice-president. He will try to attend most of the weekly meetings of the *mondoli*. A secretary will be appointed who will enjoin all the members of the *mondoli* to attend the weekly celebrations and will continually try to increase the field of work and the quality of the work of the *mondoli*. If necessary, one or two assistant secretaries will be appointed who will take upon themselves a part of the secretary's burden and will show great diligence in the task entrusted to them even though it entails, for the furtherance of the common aim, a good amount of self-denial. To establish a *mondoli* you will receive as members as many persons as possible who accept the symbol *OM* as the original and most important *montro* and believe that by worshipping this symbol, they worship all possible *montros*. Such persons may belong to any denomination. The various duties of the *mondoli* will be (1) to proclaim *Hori OM* (God is present, God is everything) through the performing of *kirtons* in the city and thus asserting the right of all—from 'outcasts' to Brahmins—to worship *OM* (the hidden Name of the Lord), (2) to celebrate the *Somobeto Upasona* once a week and (3) to foster the regular reading of religious books promoting the spirituality of the *mondoli*. Every village *mondoli* will be wholly independent of any other village or city *mondoli*—no advantage or benefit can arise from interference by one *mondoli* in the affairs of another *mondoli*, or from efforts by one *mondoli* to control another *mondoli*. Each *mondoli* will cover her expenses with money coming from the

earnings of her members or from voluntary donations. The members will have no compulsory fees to pay.

‘I have mentioned in my books the various aims which the *mondolis* have to pursue. Doing away with any kind of clan-spirit, you will undertake with zeal works which aim at the general uplift of the village. If in the village there exist other religious groups engaged in various types of work you will avoid obstructing their activity in any way and eschew any unpleasant spirit of rivalry. You will with a deep sincerity carry on the work of the Okhondo *mondoli*.

‘In order to drive away from your lives dulness and laziness (*tomo*), you can at times indulge in some external display of energy (*rojo*). However you will never forget that authentic spirituality (*sattvikota*) is your aim. You will diligently drive away from your lives such sins as arrogance, pride, conceit, boasting, egoism, excessive self-praise, the tendency to parade yourselves, empty bragging, quarrelling, slander, censure of your preceptors, irreligion, excessive self-promotion, selfishness, clan-spirit, whispering habits, crookedness, meanness, ill-feeling, propensity to attribute to yourselves the honour due to others, envy, jealousy at seeing the success of your co-workers or the respect shown to them, the tendency to consider yourselves greater than *dhormo*, *guru* and *monro*.’

We regret to report the death of Fr. Winckelmans while this article was in the press. It is particularly sad that he did not live to carry out the programme to which he referred in his introduction.