

## ST. AMBROSE ON VIOLENCE AND WAR

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Howsoever one assesses the development of early Christian attitudes on the morality of war,<sup>1</sup> few will deny the shift of emphasis which takes place after the reign of Constantine. The pacifist current running through writers like Tertullian, Origen, and Lactantius subsides,<sup>2</sup> and we get a greater articulation of the ambiguities involved in the issue of violence and coercion. To understand this change we might profit from examining the work of St. Ambrose who seems to have been the first to formulate a Christian ethic of war.<sup>3</sup> As a man who had himself occupied high civil office and who exercised considerable influence on matters of state as Bishop of Milan, we may see in him in a very special way conflicting ideals of patriotism and religious integrity as well as some incipient efforts at resolving the dilemma which violence created for the Christian conscience.

Ambrose follows Cicero in acknowledging the *jus belli*, and his views on the subject are to a considerable extent what one might

<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on the early Christian approach to war and related issues is extensive. For bibliography see most recently, S. Gero, "Miles Gloriosus: the Christian and Military Service according to Tertullian," *Church History* 39 (1970) 285 note 1 and R. Rordorf, "Tertullians Beurteilung des Soldatenstandes," *VC* 23 (1969) 105 note 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 37.5, *De Idolatria* 19.3, *De Corona* 11.2; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.30, 3.8, 8.73; Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 6.20. 15-16. Cf. R. H. Bainton, "The Early Church and War," *HTR* 39 (1946) 189-212 and H. von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church* (Philadelphia 1968) 160-70, where the complexities of the issue, as these early Christian writers saw it, are given due consideration. Von Campenhausen makes an important point when he insists that the Church "never insisted upon a dogmatic, absolute and anarchistic form of non-violence" (168). In this vein see E. A. Ryan, "The Rejection of Military Service by the Early Christians," *Theological Studies* 13 (1952) 1-32.

<sup>3</sup> See R. H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (New York 1960) 89-91.

expect from the Roman citizen of his day.<sup>4</sup> Though he reacted with horror to civil wars and wars of usurpation,<sup>5</sup> his reservations do not extend to campaigns against the barbarians. These latter were regarded as natural enemies, and war against them was considered legitimate.<sup>6</sup> What is more, victory over foreign peoples could at times be not only a means of protecting the Empire, but of safeguarding Christian orthodoxy as well. In the *De Fide*<sup>7</sup> Ambrose's remarks to Gratian as the latter was about to embark on an expedition in aid of Valens would seem to make the emperor God's chosen instrument for bringing the Arian Goths back into the fold.

Ambrose also follows the Roman tradition in spelling out the conditions that must govern the right to war. These include the provisions that every conflict be defensive in nature (*De Off. Min.* 1.27.129; cf. 35.176–77, 41.201), that agreements be honored (*ibid.* 2.7.33; cf. 3.14.86–87), that no unfair advantage be taken of the enemy (*ibid.* 1.29.139), and that mercy be exhibited to the defeated (*ibid.* 3.14.87; cf. *In Luc.* 5.76, *In Ps.* 38. 11). Within such limits war could be considered not only justifiable but praiseworthy. Unlike many Christian writers of an earlier day, Ambrose could speak very affir-

<sup>4</sup> Consult H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose* 2 (Oxford 1935) 538–39, J.-R. Palanque, *Saint Ambrose et l'empire romain* (Paris 1933) 330–35, J. Eppstein, *The Catholic Tradition of the Law of Nations* (London 1935) 57–62, and more recently C. Morino, *Church and State in the Teaching of St. Ambrose*, trans. M. Joseph Costello (Washington 1969) 55–57. In his *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy* 2 (Washington 1966) 672–83, 782–85, 791–92, F. Dvornik provides a very clear, concise and enlightening analysis of Ambrose's position vis-a-vis the ruling power.

<sup>5</sup> *Apol. Proph. David* 6.27; cf. *De Obitu Theod.* 39. Except where noted references are to Migne's edition throughout.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the clearest statement of this view is to be found in the *De Tobia* 15, 51 (PL 14.816–17) where Ambrose discusses the morality of usury. Commenting on the passage from Deuteronomy 23.19–20 (*Fratri tuo non foenerabis ad usuram, sed alienigenam exiges*) he goes on to justify usury that is exacted from foreign peoples by linking it with the *jus belli*: *quis erat tunc alienigena, nisi Amalech, nisi Amorphaeus, nisi hostes? Ibi, inquit, usuram exige. Cui merito nocere desideras, cui jure inferuntur arma, huic legitime indicantur usurae. Quem bello non potes facile vincere, de hoc cito potes centesima vindicare te. Ab hoc usuram exige quem non sit crimen occidere. Sine ferro dimicat qui usuram flagitat; sine gladio se de hoste ulciscitur, qui fuerit usurarius exactor inimici. Ergo ubi jus belli, ibi etiam jus usurae.* What is meant by *frater* in the injunction of Deuteronomy is made clear from what follows: *Frater autem tuus omnis, fidei, primum, deinde Romani juris est populus. . . .* Against fellow Romans or fellow believers usury and war are to be eschewed; against others they are permitted.

<sup>7</sup> 2.14.136–43. See Dvornik (above, note 4) 681–83.

matively of the *fortitudinem bellicam, in qua non mediocris honesti ac decori forma est; quod mortem servituti praeferat ac turpitudini* (*De Off. Min.* 1.41.201 [PL 16.89]), and could extol the man who defends his country, at personal risk to himself: *gloriosum unicuique ducatur si periculis propriis quaerat universorum tranquillitatem; multo sibi unusquisque arbitretur gratius excidia patriae repulisse, quam propria pericula . . .* (*De Off. Min.* 3.3.23 [PL 16.160]).<sup>8</sup>

This endorsement of the use of force is carried a step further when the bishop insists that even in the private sphere the Christian is not only vindicated in defending another, but actually has a serious obligation in this matter: *qui enim non repellit a socio injuriam, si potest, tam est in vitio quam qui facit* (*De Off. Min.* 1.36.178 [PL 16.81]). Thus, Moses' slaying of the Egyptian is not simply to be condoned, but to be regarded as an act of virtue. Precisely here, of course, we have a new problem in that violent action is not merely permitted, but in certain circumstances actually demanded on moral grounds.

If these views are clear and demonstrable, they cannot stand alone. By stressing too much Ambrose's continuity with the Roman as distinct from the Christian views of an earlier age, we run the risk of oversimplifying his approach. If he expresses a typically Roman contempt for the barbarians, he also gives voice to the Stoic concept of man's being a *kosmopolitēs*,<sup>9</sup> and speaks pointedly of the essential unity of all men sprung from the same womb of nature and bound by a single tie of blood.<sup>10</sup> Superimposed on this natural affinity is the universal aspect of the Church which recognizes no distinction of race or nation.<sup>11</sup> These views are difficult if not impossible to integrate with Ambrose's attitude toward non-Romans in the practical sphere. But they should make us wary of any facile generalizations about his endorsement of the legitimacy of wars against the barbarians.

A similar situation obtains in the matter of employing force to

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *De Off. Min.* 1.27.129 (PL 16.66): *Siquidem et fortitudo quae vel in bello tuetur a barbaris patriam, vel domi defendit infirmos, vel a latronibus socios, plena sit justitiae.*

<sup>9</sup> *De Off. Min.* 2.14.66; *Epist.* 45.16. On this point see Palanque (above, note 4) 327–28 and Dvornik (above, note 4) 680–81.

<sup>10</sup> *De Noe* 26.94 (PL 14.426): *Eadem enim natura omnium mater est hominum; et ideo fratres sumus omnes, una atque eadem matre generati, cognationisque eodem jure devincti.*

<sup>11</sup> For some of the many references to this commonplace see Palanque (above, note 4) 326 note 6.

safeguard orthodoxy. We have already considered Ambrose's understanding of Gratian's role as a kind of defender of the faith whose armies were in the service of God against the Arians. A more troublesome example of violence in a religious context is the burning of the synagogue at Callinicum in A.D. 388.<sup>12</sup> When Theodosius prescribed that the Christians allegedly responsible for this crime be punished and that the synagogue be rebuilt at the expense of the local bishop who had instigated the riot, Ambrose's reaction was quick and unyielding. In a long letter that is filled with rhetorical exaggeration, he warns the emperor of the scandal in having anything to do with rebuilding "an abode of unbelief, a house of impiety, a shelter of madness under the damnation of God himself" (*Epist.* 40.14).<sup>13</sup> Ambrose cites many similar crimes, including some against orthodox Christians, that went unpunished, and he cautions against giving the Jews a triumph over God's Church. If Theodosius' action were a matter exercising public discipline, the bishop answers rather bluntly: "The maintenance of civil law should be secondary to religion" (*ibid.* 40.11). In short, Ambrose seems to approve, at least *ex post facto*, the spread of orthodoxy by violent means.

But even here we can oversimplify. If religious enthusiasm or blindness here crippled Ambrose's sense of justice, it is only fair to add that his letter also indicates that he was opposed not to the principle, but to the nature of the punishment involved. In his closing remarks he advises Theodosius to consult other bishops about what needs to be done without inflicting injury on the faith. In fact, Ambrose never called for the use of physical force against heterodoxy as such,<sup>14</sup> and he abjured the principle of violent coercion in religious matters by dissociating himself from the orthodox bishops responsible for the

<sup>12</sup> This incident, described in *Epist.* 40 and 41, has been the subject of considerable comment. See, for example, Dudden (above, note 4) 371-79, H. von Campenhausen *Ambrosius von Mailand als Kirchenpolitiker* (Leipzig 1929) 274-78 and M. Simon, *Verus Israel* 2nd ed. (Paris 1964) 264-74. A chapel belonging to the Valentinians was also destroyed at this time by a group of orthodox monks. Most of Ambrose's attention is focused on the synagogue, but, quite obviously, the gist of his argument applies to both cases.

<sup>13</sup> I follow the translation of Sr. M. Melchior Beyenka O. P. in the *Fathers of the Church* 26 (New York 1954) 12.

<sup>14</sup> It is true, nonetheless, that he at least tacitly approved of legislative measures against heretics and non-believers. See Morino (above, note 4) 100-2, 108-21.

execution of the heretical Priscillian.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is impossible to reduce Ambrose's views about physical coercion in religious affairs to any simple unified whole. We must recognize the ambiguities for what they are and accept them as such.

The same approach must be used in regard to violence in the private sphere. If the use of physical force was thought compatible with Christian love in the matter of preventing injury to another, such was not the case with self-defense. In this area Ambrose was a pacifist: *non videtur quod vir Christianus et justus et sapiens quaerere sibi vitam aliena morte debeat; utpote qui etiam si latronem armatum incidat, ferientem referre non possit ne dum salutem defendit, pietatem contaminet* (*De Off. Min.* 3.4.27 [PL 16.161]). This is a remarkable statement in that it denies to an individual in his own case a right which he *must* exercise in behalf of another. The evil of self-defense—as distinct from defense of another—lies in the fact that it *necessarily* destroys *pietas*—elsewhere called *caritas* (*In Luc.* 5.77)—which establishes a man's spiritual relationship with God and which is the foundation of all virtue.<sup>16</sup> In short, resisting an attacker amounts to preferring the human to the divine. By destroying the interior disposition of love it vitiates the natural good of preserving one's own life.

Similar pacifist principles govern participation in violent acts on the part of the official Church and its ministers. "The thought of warlike matters seems to be foreign to the duty of our office", Ambrose says to his priests; "... it is not our business to look to arms, but rather to the forces of peace" (*De Off.* 1.35.175).<sup>17</sup> The bishop's own passive resistance to imperial troops in the famous incident of the basilica at Milan bears out this point, and his position is adequately summed up in his remark, *tradere basilicam non possum, sed pugnare non debeo* (*Epist.* 20.22 [PL 16.1043]).<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in a quite different context he gives us a more formal and somewhat more abstract statement concerning the

<sup>15</sup> He sums up his position on this issue with the remark: *cum reus occiditur, persona magis quam culpa punitur; ubi vero culpa deponitur, absolutio personae est poena peccati* (*Epist.* 26.20 [PL 16.1090]).

<sup>16</sup> See *Expos. Ps.* 118. 18.45; cf. *In Ps.* 36. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Bainton's translation (above, note 3) 90. Bainton sees the prohibition against clerics' participation in combat as one of the two contributions Ambrose made to the development of a Christian theory of war (*ibid.* 91).

<sup>18</sup> For Ambrose's description of this incident see the whole of *Epist.* 20 and the accompanying *Sermo contra Auxentium* (PL 16.1036-45).

### Church's participation in war:

Ecclesia autem non armis saecularibus vincit adversarias potestates, sed armis spiritualibus quae sunt fortia Deo ad destruendas munitiones, et altitudinem nequitiae spiritualis. . . . Arma Ecclesiae fides, arma Ecclesiae oratio est, quae adversarium vincit. (*De Viduis* 8.49 [PL 16.262])

Here Ambrose must be speaking of the Church in the institutional sense because, as we have seen, the use of force by individual Christians in both the public and private spheres is deemed legitimate under certain conditions.

Underlying all these considerations is the more fundamental problem of what to do with the evangelical precepts of forgiveness and long-suffering, precepts which have a universal application and which Ambrose spent no little time discussing. In contrasting the Old Law with the New he says; *Lex vicissitudinem imperat ultionis, evangelium inimicitiis caritatem, benignitatem odiis, vota maledictis, subsidia persequentibus, patientiam esurientibus et gratiam remunerationis impertit* (*In Luc.* 5.73).<sup>19</sup> Quite naturally he follows the same tack in commenting on the scriptural passage about turning the other cheek (*In Luc.* 5.76), and he expresses the Christian ideal quite succinctly in his commentary on Psalm 118: *Christiano etiam inimicos non licet non amare* (*Expos. Ps.* 118. 12.51).<sup>20</sup> The personal moral problems created by these precepts will be considered shortly. Here we should note that the attention afforded these injunctions would seem to demand that they be an integral part of any assessment of Ambrose's position regarding justifiable coercion.

In sum, it should be clear that Ambrose's opposition to violence in the matter of self-defense, his comments on the evangelical principle of turning the other cheek, and his concept of the brotherhood of man despite national or religious differences all militate against any simple baptizing of the Roman tradition of the just war or any wholesale endorsement of Roman nationalistic principles. If the realities of political and social development prevented Christians from maintaining the pacifist emphases of earlier centuries, pacifist arguments retained much of their old vigor, and the dilemma of Christian violence and love remained to a considerable extent unresolved.

<sup>19</sup> Ed. G. Tissot, O.S.B., SC 45 (Paris 1956) 209.

<sup>20</sup> Ed. M. Petschenig, CSEL 62 (Vienna 1913) 280.

Ambrose's sensitivity to the dilemma and his attempts to wrestle with it are revealed in a long passage in his *Expositio Psalmi 118* (15.15–22 [CSEL 62 338–42]). The passage has to do with David's words in verse 113 of the Psalm, *Iniquos odio habui et legem tuam dilexi* (15.15 [CSEL 62 338]), and the obvious question is how to reconcile this sentiment with the Christian obligation to love one's enemies. David's own restraint with respect to Saul and Absalom is proof enough, as Ambrose points out, that the text is not to be taken literally. Thus we must look for another meaning, and the stages by which Ambrose arrives at that end are instructive.

He attacks the problem by posing another dilemma, i.e., how to reconcile the injunction to love one's enemies with Christ's statement that only he who hates his loved ones can be a worthy disciple. His answer to this difficulty is put into the mouth of Christ who says,

Sed non legisti, 'Tempus amandi, et tempus odio habendi, et tempus belli et tempus pacis'? de quo hoc dicit Ecclesiastes? Nonne de eo quod ratione temporis fiat, ut aliquos pie et amare et odisse possimus, ut quos dilexeris odisse et quos oderis amare conveniat? (15.17 [CSEL 62 339])

The thrust of this passage, as Ambrose goes on to explain, is not to promote *necessitudinum intestina bella* (15.18 [CSEL 62 339]) or to supplant the natural love that binds men together. Hatred here actually amounts to putting limits on human love and attachments, to establishing a priority of values that places the *lex divina* above the *lex naturae*.<sup>21</sup> Those human attachments which hinder a total commitment to the divine must give way before the claims of God's love.

This point is borne out by Ambrose's later comments about the meaning of the passage from Ecclesiastes:

'Tempus' igitur 'amandi tempus odio habendi', hoc est tempus martyrii, quando ea quae divina sunt omni caritati necessitudinum praeferrenda sunt. 'Tempus belli' quo etiam bellum pro Christi nomine perfidis pignoribus inferamus . . . (15.20 [CSEL 62 340])

What is striking here is that the motivation behind such disparate

<sup>21</sup> See 15.17 (CSEL 62 339) where Ambrose discusses the relationship between these two orders: *amare patribus filios lex naturae est, maritis conjuges lex divina est, quae coniugii caritatem in naturam vertit, ut fiat una caro et unus spiritus. diligere fratribus fratres naturae praerogativa est quae eodem domicilio diu fotos adsuefecit ad gratiam caritatis.*

actions as martyrdom and warfare is the same, i.e. a preference for the divine order over the human. A response to divine love can at times actually call for the use of force *pro Christi nomine*.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the conflict created at the personal level by love and violence cannot be resolved simply by appealing to an ulterior motive, as Ambrose himself seems to recognize. Emphasizing David's own restraint and lack of ill will toward his enemies, the bishop proposes another interpretation of the words of the psalm: *ergo non iniquos homines, sed iniquos sermones* (David) *oderat*, i.e., David's hatred was directed not at his enemies, but at their deeds, not at the evildoers, but at the evil they had done. It is precisely in these terms, of course, that the Israelite king was a precursor of the Christian ideal, as we see from Ambrose's remarks summarizing his interpretation of the verse:

quomodo excusaretur iste vir secundum evangelicam vivens disciplinam, si iniquos homines odisset, nisi intellegas quod iniquitatem odio habuit, non eos qui, etsi operarentur iniquitatem, possent tamen evangelica praedicatione converti? aut certe nisi ita accipimus, accipiamus quia sicut ille qui non honorat patrem iniquus est, idem tamen secundum illud exosus patrem, quod scriptum est: 'Qui non odit patrem aut matrem . . . non potest meus esse discipulus,' etiam laudabilis habetur, sic iste iniquos odio habuit, eodem modo et eos oderat quo patrem praevaricantem aut animam suam praefereNS videlicet vitae huius suavitati gratiam Christi (15.22 [CSEL 62 341-42]).

"Hatred," Ambrose is saying, may amount simply to preferring a greater good to a lesser one (the *gratiam Christi* to the *suavitati vitae huius*). On the other hand, if it has its usual meaning, hatred must be directed at the wrong rather than the wrongdoer who is always subject to a change of heart. The conclusion must be that involvement in violent action against malefactors, as was David's lot, need not alter one's interior disposition of love toward all men.<sup>23</sup>

It may seem that too much attention has been paid to a rather obvious distinction between person and act, a distinction which takes us only a

<sup>22</sup> This hierarchy of values is employed elsewhere by Ambrose (*Epist.* 66.1) in defense of violent action; and, as we have seen, it also works in the opposite direction. It is precisely this hierarchy which prohibits the use of force in the matter of self-defense.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Apol. Proph. David* 6.29 and *Expos. Ps.* 118. 10.4.



limited way in resolving the problem of love and violence. No apology is necessary, I think, if we keep several points in mind. In explaining the Christian approach to war and violence as articulated by Ambrose, scholars have been inclined to emphasize the more public issues of Church-state relations. Thus the bishop's concern for the spread of orthodoxy, his views on the interdependence of Church and State and his own Roman background receive the most attention in dealing with this problem. Although none of these factors can be neglected or minimized, they should hardly stand alone. For Ambrose found it necessary to go beyond general policies of state or abstract principles of warfare and to deal with the internal personal problems of love that are endemic to violence in a Christian context. It is here, as writers like Tertullian, Origen and Lactantius recognized, that the critical issue is joined and must ultimately be solved.

Furthermore, it is precisely here in the individual conscience that Augustine was later to deal with the problem:

The precept, 'Resist not evil', was given to prevent us from taking pleasure in revenge, in which the mind is gratified by the sufferings of others, but not to make us neglect the duty of restraining men from sin.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the principle of turning the other cheek pertains more properly to the inward disposition of the heart than to outward actions (*Epist.* 138.2.13). Patience and benevolence are not impossible, indeed they are obligatory, when one is employing force for another's good. The problem of *how* to reconcile one's internal disposition with his outward act is no easy one, but the point is that the interior problem of love that is created by all forms of violence was as real to Augustine as it was to those Christian writers who expressed pacifist views.

Ambrose never came to grips with the issue of violence and one's internal disposition in the same specific way that Augustine did. Yet he is clearly moving in the same direction in his comments above concerning hatred. By arguing that martial courage and the interior spirit of love are not mutually exclusive, Ambrose could move quite far from the pacifist tendencies of earlier centuries while still insisting

<sup>24</sup> *Epist.* 47.5 as cited in H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York 1963) 168. Deane's whole discussion (154-71) of Augustine's ideas on war is clear and helpful.

on the precepts of the Gospel.<sup>25</sup> Thus, among Latin writers, at least, his position marks a transition from the dominant attitudes of the ante-Nicene period to the more developed ideas of Augustine on justifiable war and coercion.

Ambrose's awareness of the psychological and moral difficulties that characterize all forms of violent coercion is obvious in his response to a Roman magistrate who had problems of conscience concerning the legitimacy of inflicting the death penalty (*Epist.* 25). The bishop begins his remarks by citing the passage in *Romans* 13 in which St. Paul defends the use of coercion by a state official. The magistrate, then, is justified even in taking such extreme measures, and he should not be excluded from the sacraments when he does so. Nonetheless, those who refrain from exacting this penalty deserve praise, and Ambrose devotes the major part of his letter to an appeal for mercy on the grounds that there is always the hope of repentance on the part of the wrongdoer. Thus, although the legitimacy of capital punishment is acknowledged, the employment of it seems dissonant—for magistrate and criminal alike—with what is most Christian.

The ambiguities and limitations in Ambrose's approach to the problem of violence are apparent. Nonetheless, he makes no small contribution to the development of Christian thought in this area. While defending the legitimacy of physical coercion, he stresses the Christian spirit of forgiveness and longsuffering and takes steps toward balancing the conflicting demands of justice and mercy. Most importantly, he deals at least in an incipient way with the personal moral problems involved in accepting and endorsing violence and war. Embedded in this latter issue is a much more fundamental conflict which preoccupies a good deal of his thought. This is the *grave certamen . . . quod est intra hominem ut secum ipse confligat cum suis cupiditatibus proelietur* (*Expos. Ps. 118.* 20.46 [CSEL 62 467]). It is only peace in this conflict, a peace *quae corporaliū passionum excludit illecebras, perturbationesque mitigat* (*De Jacob* 2.6.29 [PL 14.656]), that will produce

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *In Ps. 118.* 21.17 (CSEL 62 484) where Ambrose talks about the purpose of military courage: *virtutis totius hic finis et corporeae ipsius fortitudinis ut confecto bello, pacem reformet. Paci ergo et ipsa plerumque militat fortitudo bellandi; nemo ergo pacificum turbet.* This statement is not unlike that of Augustine, *Epist.* 189.6 (CSEL 57 135): *Esto ergo etiam bellando pacificus, ut eos quos expugnas ad pacis utilitatem vincendo perducas.*

harmony among men and make the issue of violence purely academic.<sup>26</sup> In the end such a peace is a gift from above (*In Ps. 36.22*) drying up the wellsprings of war that presently make external peace a thing hoped for but scarcely realized.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *In Luc.* 5.58 (SC 45 204): *Sed nisi tu prius interiora tua vacuefeceris ab omni labe peccati, ne dissensiones contentionesque ex adfectu tuo prodeant, non potes aliis ferre medicinam. A te igitur pacem incipe, ut, cum fueris ipse pacificus, pacem aliis feras; quomodo enim potes aliorum corda mundare, nisi tua ante mundaveris?*

<sup>27</sup> A version of this paper was read at the APA Convention in New York City in December 1970. The author wishes to thank the anonymous referee of *TAPA* for his helpful suggestions.