In 2012 the Bologna chapter of We Are Church, a group of lay liberal Catholics who lobby the Vatican to adopt a more progressive position on various issues, including homosexuality, sought to pursue a dialogue with the city’s LGBTQ community. The relative success of those conversations depended upon We Are Church persuading their anticlerical interlocutors, whose antipathy toward the Vatican runs deep, that they were an entirely different entity to the Catholic “hierarchy.” But in prevailing in this endeavor, they created a further obstacle for themselves: the more convincingly they distinguished themselves from orthodox Catholicism, the less convincing was their eponymous declaration of “We Are Church”; the further they traveled toward the positions held by their LGBTQ activist counterparts, the more likely they were to be dismissed as unrepresentative of Catholicism, and thus irrelevant. Thus in this case ethics across borders depends not only upon finding affinities and sustaining differences but also upon finding affinities over how to sustain differences. Similarly, I suggest that debates in anthropology surrounding radical difference may benefit from attending to the ways in which such difference itself can be the subject of agreement or disagreement.

Keywords: ethics, activism, sexuality, Catholicism, Italy, incommensurability

This article describes a set of ongoing conversations taking place between the LGBTQ activist community in Bologna, Italy, and a group of liberal Catholics. These conversations are in many ways ideal examples of what the editors of this collection call ethics across borders: they involve attempts both to discover affinities the parties are perceived to share, and to respect the differences that set them apart. As the case I present here makes clear, however, those two endeavors are mutually imbricated. Affinities and differences alone do not constitute sufficient grounds for such conversations to succeed: there must also be affinities about difference, or what I shall call “agreeing to disagree.”
Taking this perspective allows me also to suggest, as I will do in the concluding section of this article, that whilst recently anthropologists have devoted a great deal of attention to notions of “radical alterity” and incommensurability, relatively little work has been done on how these differences themselves may become objects of debate and discussion for people other than anthropologists. In other words, as well as simply being different or alike, people can be different or alike over the issues of difference and likeness themselves.

Padre Pio’s Pride

The 2012 Pride in Bologna stretched over the course of more than a week of seminars, parades, meetings, and, of course, celebrations. It included a wide range of LGBTQ groups with a diverse array of perspectives on what Pride ought to mean, and as such was a perfect opportunity for me to observe some of the internal differences (often indeed over the nature of difference itself) within Bologna’s LGBTQ activist community, the subject of my doctoral fieldwork.

Yet in spite of the array of differences on display during Pride, there was a strong sense in which the various participating groups possessed a certain “continuity of purpose” (Strathern 1987a) despite—or perhaps indeed because of, as I suggest below and argue elsewhere (Heywood 2015b)—their concern for producing difference from fixed identities. This uniformity was particularly visible on the day of the Pride Parade.

Visible also that day, however, were a group who appeared different in a yet further sense—and the precise question of how and if indeed they were different is the object of this article. Amidst scantily clad transgender activists, grandmothers demonstrating for rights for their gay grandchildren, and an army of “love soldiers” arrayed behind a giant pink velour tank, something a little odd—at least for that day—was taking place in one corner of the square from which the parade commenced. Standing alone and looking somewhat forlorn amongst a sea of rainbow banners was a statue of Padre Pio, a twentieth-century priest and saint of the Catholic Church. For several hours, groups of soon-to-be marchers had been draping themselves over him for photographs, or festooning him with anticlerical posters. At a certain point in the afternoon, however, a different set of banners appeared: “We Are Church,” these declared, held aloft by a small group of nervously smiling men and women, along with others that testified to the presence of gay and lesbian Christians that day. As the banners went up, there was a moment of tangible surprise from the surrounding crowd, punctuated by whispers and some giggling, but soon a smattering of applause broke out, and people began again to photograph Padre Pio, by now looking a little more dignified.

A global movement which originated in Austria in the late nineties in response to scandals surrounding sexual abuse carried out by members of the clergy and a subsequent cover-up, We Are Church have evolved into an advocacy group for lay Catholics who believe that the positions of the magisterium on issues such as women in the priesthood, celibacy, communion for divorcees, and sexuality need rethinking. Much of my research in Bologna focused on the unstable and somewhat paradoxical identity of queer activists that emerged from their common concern for the
production of difference from fixed identities. My interest was in how far and to what extent this “continuity of purpose” could itself constitute an “identity.” Setting the complexities of this question aside for the moment, in a fairly obvious sense the activists I worked with shared some beliefs and opinions that We Are Church did not, and vice versa. For various reasons, the church is viewed with hostility, suspicion, and occasionally outright hatred by many LGBTQ activists, who were thus unlikely to welcome its members, no matter how different they may have appeared to be from their brothers and sisters in faith. Equally, members of We Are Church obviously do not share the atheism and anticlericalism that unites most of the LGBTQ activist community, in no small part due to the Catholic Church’s vocal and vituperative opposition to gay and lesbian rights. We Are Church also set out with the explicit ambition of altering dynamics that exist within the church, with which they are often at odds. They thus exist, insofar as they seek to relate to what are commonly regarded as opposite poles of the political spectrum, in a state of ethical liminality of sorts, attempting, occasionally successfully, to initiate dialogue across what are often thought to be deeply entrenched barricades between putatively incommensurable worlds (Mair 2014; see also MacIntyre 1981, 1998; Povinelli 2001).

Such dialogues thus appear obvious candidates for an investigation of “ethics across borders.” Their basic and most fundamental problem appears to be how to find enough common ground in order not to be simply talking at cross-purposes to one another (cf. Strathern 1987b on feminism and anthropology), whilst not coming together closely enough that one partner’s identity collapses into that of the other. The problem with this formulation, though, is that it takes for granted the given nature of borders between identities; sometimes they take work to maintain as well as to break down.

What this way of seeing the problem risks missing, in other words, is that identity and difference are—certainly in the case of queer activism—two sides of the same relational coin, and that succeeding too well at the first problem of ethical conversations risks failure at the second. No matter how distinct two groups may look, if difference is only ever a construction, then work must be put in to making it. This process was the focus of much of my doctoral research. For many of the queer activists I worked with, their difference from any kind of fixed or grounded identity (in gender or sexuality, say) was a virtue, and one that had to be regularly reproduced (cf. van de Port 2012). Androgynous clothes or makeup and partners of either sex, for example, were choices to actively reject fixity. More complicated but similar choices were made with regard to political action: initiatives that seemed too rigidly defined by particular objectives or ideologies (such as being strictly pro- or anti-marriage) were also often rejected by groups that preferred to remain fluid and undetermined.

Yet it was precisely this rejection of fixed identities that was always on the verge of itself becoming an identity, as clear and easily identifiable as those that were being actively rejected. This active rejection is thus what often held these groups together (just as it set them apart).

Making a difference, in this sense, is what made many of the LGBTQ groups with whom I worked occasionally and in a very paradoxical sense the same: what they agreed upon was that and how they were different, difficult as this often was. This was their “continuity of purpose.”
Most of my research, in other words, was about a situation in which it is the very ubiquity of and agreement over difference that is forever on the verge of becoming its own identity. In this article, by contrast, I explore a situation in which a quest for affinities meets a brick wall in the form of a failure to agree upon difference, making the two groups in question thus appear, in other important respects, too much the same. What they could not do, I will suggest, is “agree to disagree,” not in the straightforward sense of the phrase, but in the sense that what they failed to build and maintain was not so much common ground as difference. As the editors make clear in their introduction (this collection, and see Mair 2014), differences and affinities are necessary for ethics across borders. What I add here is that such affinities must also include agreement over the nature of those differences.

**We Are Church**

We Are Church originated in Austria in 1995 following a scandal surrounding allegations of sexual misconduct by the then archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Hans Groër. Groër’s resignation and the perceived failure of the Vatican to properly investigate his behavior led five hundred thousand Catholics to sign the Austrian Church Referendum demanding greater transparency in the church, and to two million German Catholics signing a similar petition later the same year. These documents also called on the church, in the name of the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, to admit women to the priesthood, to abolish the requirement of celibacy for the clergy, to treat sexual orientation and reproductive choices as matters of personal conscience, and to focus its energies on issues such as peace and social justice.

These demands, collated by the nascent We Are Church organization into a letter entitled “an appeal from the people of God” (We Are Church 2006), were delivered directly to the Vatican in 1997 by an international delegation. Though a response from the pope was not forthcoming, We Are Church were born as a worldwide movement (International Movement We Are Church) that included national organizations in, for example, Austria, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Ireland, the United States, and Mexico. Since then the group have become a significant force within the broader global Catholic reform movement, championing causes such as Austrian priest Helmut Schueller’s “appeal to disobedience” and the recent gay marriage referendum in Ireland.

My involvement with it began when I met Domenico, a leader of the group’s Emilia Romagna branch, a few months into my fieldwork with LGBTQ activist groups in Bologna. A number of friends within such groups with longstanding connections to him had mentioned his name as someone I ought to speak to if I wanted to understand more about how activists related to the church. His participation in the Pride celebrations of 2008 in Bologna was spoken of with respect and admiration. This was in marked contrast to the ways in which my friends would usually speak of anyone associated with Catholicism.

Domenico and I first met in a little ice cream shop halfway between his apartment and mine, on a sunny afternoon in April. A journalist and blogger for a popular local daily newspaper, Domenico, in his mid-thirties and then engaged to be
married, had a brisk air of efficiency about him. He had founded We Are Church’s Emilia Romagna branch together with two others in 2005, one of whom was gay, and so from the very beginning the group concerned itself with sexuality in particular. Other We Are Church chapters occupied themselves with other issues: that in Rome, for example, with Vatican rent. Another respect in which the Emilia Romagna group was distinctive was in its emphasis on not being a Catholic association: that is, Domenico explained, they were an association of Catholics, rather than a group which put religion at the forefront of its identity (and also rather than being directly affiliated with the church, like other prominent lay Catholic groups such as Azione Cattolica and Communione Liberazione). They have, he said, no desire whatsoever to be officially recognized by the Vatican, and they try to avoid organizing events that presuppose faith on the part of participants, such as bible study groups or church services; they focus instead on meetings, presentations of books or films, and debates. At the 2012 Pride, in fact, they would be hosting two such events in cooperation with Cassero, the largest LGBTQ organization in the city, part of a longer history of engagement between the two groups extending back to the last occasion on which Bologna hosted Italy’s national Pride in 2008. Cassero, which is the name given to the Bologna chapter of Arcigay, Italy’s oldest and most established gay and lesbian rights organization, focuses its political activism on civil rights (such as marriage and adoption rights) and ending discrimination. Thus it often found itself in confrontation with the church. At the same time, as a well-established institution with local government funding, it had both a material and an ideological interest in being open to dialogue with other such institutions.

One event would be the screening of a documentary on the experiences of parents with gay children, followed by a discussion with the director, a participant, and two sympathetic priests, whilst another would be a discussion with a theologian and author of a recent book on Catholicism and homosexuality. On We Are Church’s position on homosexuality, Domenico was careful to begin by pointing out that the organization had not officially endorsed the idea of gay marriage, seeing this as a political issue for the state rather than a religious one. But they did take clear positions on ending discrimination within the church, arguing regularly against pronouncements from the Vatican condemning homosexuality as a sin.

Much of the theological justification that We Are Church employ for their positions is based on a distinction between dogma—articles of faith which are immutable, such as the immaculacy of Mary’s conception, declared ex cathedra, and thus infallibly, by Pope Pius IX—and positions taken by the church which may be subject to discussion. This sounds simple, and in some cases it is: the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is what Domenico called a “foundation of faith”: because it was made “from the chair” (ex cathedra), it is an example of an infallible statement by a pope. It is, however, one of only two such statements, and debate rages over the infallibility of other kinds of pronouncements: John Paul II’s declaration of 1994 (John Paul II 1994) which sought to end debate on the question of women priests was not made ex cathedra, and therefore We Are Church (and many other Catholics) do not consider it to constitute church dogma; the position of the church, however, is that in issuing the statement, he was simply confirming a truth upheld by tradition (the history of the church) and by the magisterium (the pope
and bishops) and thus making as infallible a statement as that made by Pius IX on
the Immaculate Conception.

The church, Domenico explained using an Italian expression, thinks it has the
truth in its pocket. This puts it in confrontation with others: it believes homo-
sexuality to be objectively, intrinsically wrong, and the LGBTQ community reacts
(unsurprisingly) badly to this kind of condemnation. If, on the other hand, the
historic Catholic injunction against homosexuality is seen not as dogma but simply
a contingent dictum of the church hierarchy, a space for dialogue opens up; and for
Domenico, dogmatic principles of faith ought to include only those questions upon
which the church as a whole could agree.

Jonathan Mair (2014) describes a similar practice of distinguishing between
fundamental universal truths and local and contingent means of arriving at them
in the case of Fo Guang Shan Buddhism. Fo Guang Shan’s practitioners empha-
size the objective and universal validity of certain truths and virtues, such as those
of compassion and wisdom, and indeed seek to evangelize them (72). However,
they combine this emphasis with the recognition that such virtues are always real-
ized in particular forms, and conditioned by historical and cultural circumstances
(73). What this allows them to do is to reject a straightforwardly relativist approach
to values in favor of a pluralist stance in which universal values become concrete
in diverse ways and in diverse conditions. Similarly, whenever Domenico spoke
about Catholic values—the universality of which he evidently believed in, he would
speak of abstract principles (such as love, or tolerance, as I will describe below)
that he might reasonably assume most of his interlocutors would share a belief in.
For Domenico, whether one loved someone of the same or the opposite sex was
an irrelevance in terms of the actual virtue that such love embodied, a contingent
realization of an abstract universal. Where the Vatican was mistaken, in his view,
was in elevating the condemnation of homosexuality to be found in, for example,
the Old Testament to a similarly universal status, akin to dogma such as “love thy
neighbor”; to the contrary, he argued, the church’s current position is a contingent
dictum, the product of certain circumstances, and thus subject to change and to
dialogue.

Another theological basis for We Are Church’s understanding of Catholicism is
the legacy of the Second Vatican Council. Convened by Pope John XXIII (known
often as “Papa buono,” or “the good pope,” in Italy, and a hero to Domenico and
many liberal Catholics) with the famously stated intention to “let some fresh air
into the church,” Vatican II reformed the Catholic liturgy by introducing masses
in the vernacular, placed a higher emphasis on ecumenism and interfaith dialogue
than had hitherto existed, and—importantly for Domenico—attempted to realign
the church’s relationship to the world, from a vision of Rome as a bulwark of faith
in an essentially sinful and evil environment, to a more positive engagement with
matters temporal. As Domenico put it to me, before Vatican II the church was the
enemy of the world; after, it was supposed to be a part of it.

As his “supposed to” suggests, however, the legacy of Vatican II remains in
dispute; for Domenico its promise went unfulfilled. John XXIII died before the
Council finished its work, and his successor, Paul VI, reframed its purpose from
“updating” to “renewing” the Church. Anticipated reform of the curia did not oc-
cur, with power becoming ever more centralized in the hands of the pope and his
Agreeing to disagree

ministers; furthermore, the new pope ignored the liberal majority on the council and took unilateral action on the issues of contraception and priestly celibacy, issuing encyclicals which enshrined the church's current positions.

We Are Church's position on Vatican II is distinct not only from that of the church itself, but also from many other Italian Catholics who view the few reforms it did succeed in achieving as having distorted the church's traditional positions. Although Bologna is not a natural home for conservative Catholics, one does occasionally encounter such viewpoints. Drinking coffee in my local bar one Sunday afternoon, I met two of my neighbors, both observant Catholics, although in quite different ways: Simone was a retired lawyer in his sixties, quiet and dignified in his speech, whilst Alfredo was a construction worker in his late fifties, whom I had first met in our local barbershop, where his fervent views on religion often made him the butt of jokes. Both men having returned that day from church, I decided to tell them a bit about my experiences with We Are Church to see how they would react to their ideas: Simone was diplomatically noncommittal on the subject of LGBTQ Catholics, but viewed positively the ambition of reforming the church's positions on divorce and celibacy; Alfredo, on the other hand, saw the group as the epitome of all that was wrong with post-Vatican II Catholicism. Unknowingly exemplifying Domenico's critique of the church, he said that the truth is the truth and nothing can change that; Vatican II, he argued, had made no doctrinal pronouncements, and left everything it addressed more confused than it had been before. Homosexuality and divorce were sins, he insisted, and not even the pope could change that.

Dialogues in action (1)

The position that We Are Church take with regard to the LGBTQ community is thus one that puts them at odds with more conservative understandings of Catholicism than that espoused in Vatican II, as well as with the official stance of the church. A more pertinent question for this article, however, is the precise nature of their relationship with the LGBTQ community itself. In order to explore this, I will describe the two events that We Are Church organized in conjunction with Cassero, as each exemplifies a unique problem with regard to the kinds of moral dialogues with which this collection is concerned.

The subject of the first event I will describe was a recently published book, Omosessualità, by a respected Catholic theologian, Gianino Piana, in which he details some of the history of the relationship between homosexuality and Catholicism, and argues for an ethics in which the “authenticity” of a romantic partnership is what is important, rather than the gender or orientation of the persons comprising it (Piana 2010). The structure of the evening was a live interview with Piana, a bespectacled academic complete with tweed jacket, conducted onstage by Domenico, and followed by a question-and-answer session.

Domenico opened the discussion by asking why Piana describes homosexuality as a “complex” in the book. Piana began by clarifying that the views he describes in the book are his own, and are not those of the magisterium, before responding that the word “complex” was necessary because homosexuality is a “complex problem,” composed of a variety of biological and psychocultural causes. Domenico
then moved directly on to homosexuality’s relationship to religion, asking about scriptural references to it and the church’s traditional teaching on the issue. Piana responded by noting that although the Old Testament condemns it, what it refers to is very different to the contemporary understanding of the word, and that in the New Testament it is barely mentioned. Church tradition, he argued, has condemned it because of the generally poor view in which sex for any purpose other than procreation has always been held, citing Augustine as an exemplar. Vatican II, he continued, following Domenico’s line of argument to me, attempted to broaden the definition of the family so as to make it more than simply “a baby factory,” and the increased importance of love laid open the possibility that a loving couple composed of members of the same sex might someday fall within the church’s approved categorization. After Vatican II, however, came the turn back to tradition, with homosexuality once again clearly defined as a sin. Finally, Domenico concluded the interview by asking about his subject’s views on gay marriage: Piana responded that he was not personally against it—although he found common ground with some of the more radical activists I knew in querying why marriage, an institution undergoing such a crisis, should be so desirable.

Upon my arrival at the debate I had recognized a number of faces in the audience as members of Cassero, and their presence was made more evident during the question-and–answer session, as a number of them prefixed their queries with statements such as, “I’m not a believer”; indeed, despite his efforts both to clarify that his views were not those of the magisterium, and to attempt a (for him and for Domenico, at least) sympathetic reading of homosexuality through Catholicism, Piana’s visit soon became an opportunity for a number of Cassero’s members to air some long-held grievances against the church, and he thus often found himself having either to explain beliefs that he clearly did not hold, or simply to agree with the questioner, becoming a stand-in for the church as a whole. Most queries did not focus on him or on the substance of his presentation. He was repeatedly confronted about why the Vatican is so obsessed with matters of sexuality (“Shouldn’t they care more about murder and genocide?”) and why the church’s message of Christian love did not extend to the LGBTQ community (“Jesus didn’t condemn women and gay people, did he?”), and he looked increasingly bemused as he seemingly struggled between the professorial inclination to explain the complexity of such issues to a lay audience, and a reluctance to appear to be defending views that were not his own and were unlikely ever to be well taken in this particular context. The evening concluded on a relatively positive note, however, as Domenico intervened to ask a final question about Piana’s views on Pride and We Are Church’s participation: Piana eagerly took the opportunity to say that he believed Pride to be a very necessary thing, and that he was pleased that a Catholic group would be there in solidarity.

I lost Domenico amongst the audience that night, but when I caught up with him again a couple of weeks later he revealed his disappointment at the reception the speaker had received. People in the LGBTQ community, Domenico felt, sometimes treated members of We Are Church simply as representatives of Catholicism, rather than as individuals with their own views. The problem was that members of Cassero equated the church with the Vatican, and, understandably, they hate the Vatican; but this, he added, only helps you fight, it does not help you dialogue. He,
instead, tries to find points of convergence, rather than differences, in values such as equality and respect.

This was also evident on the day of the Pride march itself. At the parade, the hostility of many in the LGBTQ community to Catholicism was on full display. As I described in the introduction to this article, the statue of Padre Pio in the square in which the parade commenced was gleefully festooned with rainbow flags, banners, and posters bearing anticlerical slogans. Shortly before the procession was due to depart, Domenico and some of his colleagues from We Are Church arrived, taking up a position in front of the statue, and proudly, although with a hint of defiance, unfurling banners decorated with the group’s name and slogans in support of gay Christian men and women. The crowd of young people around them whispered and tittered to one another, but soon began applauding and taking photographs. I saw them again later in the day marching with their banners held up in front of them, and with the same air of pride tinged with self-consciousness, an island of faith in the midst of a world that had largely rejected it. A group nearby marched with a sign on which was painted, “Yesterday the Inquisition, today homophobia.”

So Domenico had a problem, namely that his attempts at dialogue were foun-dering because his LGBTQ interlocutors were identifying him and his group too closely with the Vatican. Instead of seeing the affinities he was trying to highlight—such as a respect for “authentic” relationships, or a belief in love, which I will discuss with regard to the second event—they were focusing on their differences with an institution from which he himself differed.

At the time, I was convinced by Domenico’s understanding of the problem. But later I came to think that perhaps we had both misunderstood it. What I came to realize after the second event is that whilst finding affinities is undoubtedly a crucial problem in a conversation involving two groups with quite distinct values, those affinities cannot solely concern things about which they agree: paradoxically, they must also find and sustain affinities over exactly what it is that makes them different (to incommensurate, as well as commensurate, their values, in the language of the editors’ introduction). In other words, what they had to do was to agree to disagree.

What we tend to signal when we use that phrase is the conclusion of a conver-sation in the face of insuperable difficulties. One agrees to disagree with a person when one recognizes that certain differences of opinion will never be overcome. In this case, by contrast, I suggest that it functions as the precondition, rather than conclusion, of the kind of conversation with which this article is concerned. Without agreement on how exactly it is that the parties in question differ, the conversation becomes of a different nature to that which we have so far been describing, and, as I show below, of a great deal less interest to one of those parties. In describing this as “agreeing to disagree,” my intention is to emphasize the—to my view important—point that just as common ground cannot always be found but must be built, so the same is true of difference (especially in the context of LGBTQ activism, in which the production of difference is of such crucial importance). Conversations across borders, in other words, must also be conversations about borders, to the extent that the borders involved are rarely if ever found objects in the world but are instead precisely outcomes of the conversation in question.
Dialogues in action (2)

The second of the Pride events was the presentation of a short documentary on gay Catholic parents, followed by a question-and-answer session. Around thirty people were present, and the crowd was substantially different from the kinds of faces I usually saw in Cassero’s main event room (which was also their disco): there were few people under thirty present, and instead of being a sea of t-shirts and jeans, the room was filled with smartly attired men and women in dresses or shirts and trousers, many of whom looked to be over fifty.

On the stage, Domenico and some technicians from Cassero had set up a projector screen and five chairs: two of them were occupied by men in the familiar black suits and white collars of priests, and two others by middle-aged women, one the director of the documentary, and the other one of the two parents featured in it. Of the two priests, the first was Don Claudio, an elderly man in charge of a parish very close to Cassero; kindly and genial, he had been present earlier that evening for a discussion I had with Domenico and a friend of his, Daniela, spending much of it playing with Daniela’s baby. (When it refused to look at him, he joked that it had already turned anticlerical.) In previous years he had run a service of remembrance for victims of homophobic violence in his church, and also hosted the city’s only all-gay choir, to the ire of his immediate superiors; his defenses of such actions were a (somewhat mischievous-sounding) denial that they constituted him taking a different position to the church (on the remembrance service: “All I did was listen to a prayer”; on the choir: “I just offered them a room. They’re gay, it doesn’t mean they sing differently”) and an insistence that he did not require the curia’s permission to do what he wanted in his own parish (Scheggia 2009). The other priest, Don Romano, was a younger man, in his late forties, and from Foggia, where he worked closely with an LGBTQ rights group in that region; he had also won plaudits from many liberal Catholics by criticizing the church’s standing on priestly celibacy and homosexuality in an open letter to his bishop.

The short film was titled (echoing Piana’s thesis) Authentic Love and was made up of a series of interviews with two mothers of gay sons, one of whom had recently died following a struggle with AIDS. Its purpose, as the director, Irene, subsequently explained, was to bring out into the open something long regarded as “secret”: the coincidence of faith and homosexuality. The two mothers interviewed were Catholic, and spoke of their initial guilt over whether any aspect of their parenting might have been indirectly responsible for their children’s homosexuality; this feeling, however, was soon superseded by the eponymous “authentic love” that they held for their children, resulting in both deciding to be as open as possible about their children’s sexuality, and to treat it with pride, rather than shame. As one of the women put it, the church hierarchy had “traduced” Jesus’s message of love for all, and as the director subsequently claimed in the discussion which followed, “guilt comes from the church hierarchy—but the church and its hierarchy are not the same thing: God loves everyone.” A particularly striking aspect of the film was its concluding interview with an elderly (now deceased) Livornese priest, who declared the church to be misogynist and sexophobic; sexuality, he argued forcefully, was a gift from God and there could be no immorality in it. “Do we really believe Jesus would condemn a homosexual if he met one?” he asked rhetorically, before
concluding that the material of the marriage sacrament is love, and that where there is love, no one has the power to withhold marriage.

A brief discussion between those on the stage followed, in which the director and the mother who had appeared in the film explained the purpose behind it, arguing that religious parents of gay children have no voice in contemporary Italy. Don Romano described how an encounter with a young boy in his parish, whose distress at being told that his desires were “against nature” resulted in an eating disorder, had led him to rethink what he had learnt at his seminary. But the church as a whole, he argued, is too large an entity to change quickly: in an interestingly sociological justification for its attitudes to homosexuality, he suggested that it must cater to opinions that range from those to be found in Bologna to those in a Papua New Guinean village, and that at the moment the majority of the world’s Catholics were not yet as enlightened as those at the meeting that night.

The first two questioners (an elderly man and a woman of the same age) asked the priests about their positions on gay marriage and reproductive rights, giving approving nods when both refused to support it explicitly. The third question came from Daniela, sat directly behind me, and unsettled the apparent affinity with the LGBTQ community that We Are Church were trying to elicit from the idea of “love.” Didn’t the speakers think, she asked, that the gay community needed to promote fidelity more than it did (especially in light of the risks to health involved); love, she said, is not the same as sex, which is what some in the community seem to think. By the time she had concluded, I was squirming uncomfortably in my seat and awaiting what I assumed would be a chorus of disapproval from other audience members: though many members of Cassero—as opposed to more radical groups—are promarriage rights, many of them also do not share the view Daniela was expounding regarding the benefits of monogamy over a more liberal understanding of love; at the same time, neither do they appreciate the promulgation of the stereotype that gay men and women are more promiscuous than their straight counterparts.

The backlash I awaited did not materialize however; the reason for this surprising passivity became obvious when I looked around myself properly and realized that almost everyone in the audience was in their fifties or sixties, well dressed, and indeed looking nothing like the kinds of people I usually met in Cassero. Nor did I recognize any faces. There were, in fact, almost no LGBTQ activists present; and if there is one thing that constitutes a definitive obstacle to a conversation, it is the absence of one of the parties. Cassero and We Are Church, as I have mentioned, had been in dialogue with one another for several years, and the former’s agreement to host two We Are Church events during Pride had given Domenico hope that that dialogue would bear some fruit. The absence of Cassero members from their own base, during Pride week, was thus a particular blow.

The reason for this was suggested to me after the event, when I bumped into Rocco, a friendly bald man in his forties who ran Cassero’s health section, and was also an acquaintance of Domenico. Though usually hesitant when beginning conversations, once they were started it was almost impossible to get Rocco to stop talking, and I found myself, half an hour later, still standing in the evening heat outside the building, as he updated me on his life and on his impressions of We Are Church. He had attended the debate with Piana, and I asked him why he thought that almost nobody from Cassero had come to this event. Look, he said,
I like Domenico and I’m really glad about what he’s trying to do, but this is just a band-aid. We Are Church are a tiny minority, and even some of their members don’t share Domenico’s openness. (This impression would have no doubt been reinforced had he heard Daniela’s question.) They’re not representative enough to make a difference.

In other words, the fact that this event constituted a breakdown in an ongoing conversation, and not simply the failed beginnings of one, is important theoretically as well as ethnographically. Domenico had organized the event in order to pursue a dialogue with Cassero, a dialogue which faltered not for inconsequential reasons but because for people like Rocco, that dialogue had, in a sense, been too successful: Domenico’s “openness,” his efforts to commensurate his values with those of the LGBTQ community (see the introduction to this collection), meant that he had neglected the other side of such conversations: difference. He no longer appeared sufficiently similar to the church that his organization sought, with its name, to represent. Thus equally he no longer looked sufficiently different to the activists with whom he sought to dialogue.

Are “we” church?

How successful were Domenico and We Are Church in communicating across the ethical boundaries of the LGBTQ community and the church (MacIntyre 1981; Mair 2014)? Did they succeed in “making a difference” by finding the “points of convergence” that Domenico highlighted?

One issue with points of convergence is that they may not be as straightforward as they appear: the events described above could be counterproductive in terms of building bridges, because they could potentially reveal deep-seated differences in ethical outlooks as well as or instead of convergences. Daniela’s comment about the difference between love and sex underscored how distinct are the perspectives of a liberal (but observant) Catholic and polyamorists, as many in the LGBTQ community were; there is more to Catholic morality than how it accounts for homosexuality, and many in “Red” Bologna’s LGBTQ community take exception to other aspects of it as well.

Other responses, however, were more positive: Marina, for example, a prominent advocate of adoption and fertility rights for LGBTQ couples in the city who spoke at the 2012 Pride, held We Are Church in high esteem, and would often cite their members as exemplars of notable successes of the LGBTQ movement. “It’s true that very anticlerical people don’t trust them, but I do, and admire them very much,” she told me. They represent exemplars, she explained, in the sense that they embody the values of equality and respect that the church and the LGBTQ community should have in common. This is particularly true, she said, because they are not an LGBTQ group themselves, and defend the rights of the community not out of self-interest but on the basis of Christian principles like love and tolerance: “They demonstrate that the Church is not just an institution.”

Caroline Humphrey and, more recently, Joel Robbins have both discussed the notion of the exemplar as an alternative to moral systems in which hard-and-fast rules form the basis of ethical judgments (Humphrey 1997; Robbins forthcoming).
As Robbins puts it in his description of Humphrey’s argument about exemplars in Mongolia, “Having long been subject to the play of shifting political powers that each define and enforce the rules in their own way, Mongols also evidence an informed cynicism about the worth of such rules as guides for life . . . [and] instead pin their moral hopes on finding exemplary teachers” (forthcoming: 2).

J. E. Tiles (2000), in his work on cross-cultural ethics, has identified the sharing of exemplary models as one way in which ethical dialogues between different communities may take place. This is particularly apposite in the case of LGBTQ activists and the church. Behaviors in relation to rules amongst LGBTQ activists are ambivalent, to say the least (Heywood 2015a), and the case of We Are Church’s interaction with activists suggests that coming together around shared exemplary values is far more likely to be successful than doing so through a set of rules: in addition to a prevailing antinomianism, the fact that there exist so many differences within and between LGBTQ activist groups over values makes a reliance on rules as difficult as it is in Humphrey’s Mongolian context. This becomes only more true when dealing with the Catholic Church. The church’s tendency toward making absolutist and universal moral judgments of behaviors makes it a frequent target of accusations of hypocrisy; it is also the most obvious obstacle to conciliation with LGBTQ groups, both because of its form (in opposition to their suspicion of absolutism and universals) and, of course, because of its content (because some of those absolute rules are injunctions against homosexuality). As I have described, Domenico and We Are Church go to some lengths to avoid sounding like this. His refusal to use the word “truth” and their insistence that the church’s condemnation of LGBTQ lifestyles is a matter of historical circumstance rather than moral dogma are both instances, I argue, of an attempt to shift the nature of their dialogue with the community from one over the existence or nonexistence of certain moral codes to one in which they can embody certain values that are at least in principle shared (respect, love, tolerance). Indeed, the very act of attempting to initiate dialogue on an equal footing is exemplary of these values in a way in which most church engagements with the community are not, as, unlike them, We Are Church’s actions do not consist of condemnation from the pulpit.

Thus, I suggest, insofar as We Are Church succeed in “making a difference,” it is through attempting to bridge the gap between is and ought that many perceive to exist when it comes to church teachings: many in the LGBTQ community are not at all unsympathetic to the spiritual aspects of Christianity, and Domenico, We Are Church, and people such as the mothers depicted in Irene’s documentary are all evidence for the fact that there are Catholics who believe that the church’s attitude toward homosexuality contradicts its core teachings. We Are Church, I argue, seek to narrow the distinction between facts and values: as with accusations of doppia morale (Heywood 2015a), Catholics such as Irene’s interview subjects attach their loyalties to the ideals of the religion, rather than the actual manner in which they are (not) instantiated by what they refer to as “the hierarchy.” We Are Church seek to put these ideals into practice, and in doing so, exemplify a shared ethical model. This distinction between “hierarchy” and faith maps neatly on to that delineated between dogma and dictum, with the former representing the (to We Are Church, unfounded) condemnation of homosexuality by the official church, and the latter standing for Catholicism’s true precepts of love and tolerance, embodied by the laity.
But succeeding in making a difference in this sense leads to the most serious obstacle to We Are Church “making a difference” in a broader sense: indifference. The second event that We Are Church organized, in particular, was sparsely attended even by their hosts, Cassero, to say nothing of the wider LGBTQ community. When I tried to describe the group to friends and interlocutors from other, more radical, LGBTQ groups, the most common response would be raised eyebrows and mirth at the idea of their naïvety in thinking it could change either the church or the LGBTQ community’s attitude to it. There was certainly no widespread inclination to engage with the group, as many people felt (understandably) that a church that regularly condemned their lifestyles from the pulpit deserved no such goodwill.

But the problem was not simply indifference in the straightforward sense of the word. In fact, I suggest, the indifference to We Are Church, in the obvious sense, of much of Bologna’s LGBTQ community was a consequence of another kind of indifference—sameness.

Of course, demonstrating the affinities the two groups may (or may not) have shared over love or authenticity was an important part of their moral dialogue, as was We Are Church’s distancing themselves from Vatican homophobia. But the better they accomplished this, the less they actually looked like they possessed a distinct identity. The more that people like Rocco felt that We Are Church’s positions on issues like homosexuality were closer to his own than that of the church (as he understood that word), the less they appeared to be interesting conversation partners and the more they seemed like a fringe group that was unrepresentative of the institution of which they claimed to be a part.

But, of course, We Are Church claimed to be more than a part of that institution. Their very name, indeed, points to this: “We Are Church” should be understood, I argue, as an attempt at a performative statement, literally seeking to “make a difference” between the idea of the church as “hierarchy,” magisterium, the Vatican, and that of the church as a community of lay believers with differing views on a number of key issues. Because in an important sense it is not their views on subjects such as homosexuality that are the object of ethical communication with the LGBTQ community: the meetings that they organize and their presence at Pride make no secret of their position on this issue; and, of course, most LGBTQ activists find it neither surprising nor shocking—nor indeed particularly worthy of praise—that people should acknowledge their lifestyles as acceptable ways of being. What they do need convincing of, however, as evidenced by the discussions above, is that Domenico and We Are Church are anything other than a minority opinion in an otherwise highly centralized and dogmatic religious institution. They need convincing, in other words, that “church” does not only refer to the orthodoxy of the Vatican, but can also encompass more liberal interpretations of Catholic theology such as that of the “We” in “We Are Church”; and it was upon this claim—that We Are Church have both affinities and significant enough differences with the LGBTQ community to constitute interesting conversation partners—that their attempt to start a moral dialogue faltered. In other words, by “making a difference” through finding common ground, they failed to “make a difference” precisely by “making difference” between themselves and their interlocutors.

Domenico himself suggested this to me when he and his friends took me for a coffee just before the Pride march; there he told me that not only was he happy to
be present that day, but he felt that it was his duty to come and make a statement. When I asked about how the multitude of anti-Catholic banners made him feel, he told me that they made him sad, as a lot of what they said about the homophobia of the Vatican was true; what they did not understand was that the church was more than the Vatican—as his group’s name suggested, the real church was the people, people like him, who were there to support Pride.

**Conclusion: Differing over difference**

The central problem of this collection, ethics across borders, suggests certain further questions, particularly concerning the parties to such a conversation. In the case I have examined, for example, I have left open the question of how far LGBTQ activism constitutes an “identity,” one that is capable of being a conversational partner to Catholicism (which is, of course, a fragmented identity itself). It is evidently an analytical sleight of hand to present queer activism as if it is homogeneous, even more so given its constitutive concern for difference.

I have left this question open partly because I address it at length elsewhere (Heywood 2015b), but more importantly because I would like to suggest that a focus on the construction of identity can sometimes come at the cost of a focus on the construction of difference. Indeed, that insight, only reversed, is a central argument of my doctoral thesis on queer activism: that its anti-identitarian concern for the production of difference becomes simultaneously its constructed identity.

The case study presented in this article, by contrast, demonstrates the inverse of this point: We Are Church’s efforts to build common ground and to find affinities or identities with their LGBTQ activist interlocutors were well intentioned and important; they were also successful. But We Are Church were too successful, in fact, because what they eclipsed was the importance to this kind of conversation of not only constructing identity but also of constructing difference. We Are Church sought to demonstrate an essentially ambiguous and partial relationship to the Church: on the one hand, they distance themselves from its dogmatism and intransigence; on the other, they try to represent it, to exemplify a way of being part of the church without suffering from these problems. But of course the danger of succeeding at the first is failing at the second: the more that they convinced their interlocutors of their only partial fidelity to Catholicism, the more they risked the latter perceiving them as irrelevant and marginal to the church as a whole. As far as their LGBTQ activist interlocutors were concerned, in other words, they were not different enough from them to constitute valuable conversation partners. What the conversation lacked was not affinity alone, but affinity over difference, or, as I have called it, “agreeing to disagree.”

As a coda, it is worth pointing out that these events took place prior to the thaw in relations between the church and the LGBTQ community heralded by the election of Pope Francis. In 2013 he became the first pope to respond directly to a letter from a group of gay Catholics who resemble We Are Church. A number of well-publicized statements he has made suggest that his views are far closer to those of Domenico than his predecessor. The (forthcoming at time of writing)
Synod on the Family could herald further change. We Are Church may yet live up to their name.¹

To do so, they need not, as I have been suggesting, erase any and all distinctions between their positions and those of their LGBTQ interlocutors. Whether or not Pope Francis is interested in or capable of achieving substantive change in the Vatican’s position on homosexuality remains to be seen. Either way, it is unlikely that the Catholic Church will change in all of the ways in which activists of many stripes might wish it to. Yet—as long as it is dialogue, and not orthodoxy (as it were) that interests us—this may be no bad thing. We may lament the pragmatic reasons for which such radical change would be impossible. But if it is difference we are interested in sustaining, then it is worth recognizing that the source of such differences will often lie in identity. Agreeing about what makes the Catholic Church the Catholic Church will be as important as agreeing about which doctrines it can dispense with.

Furthermore, the ways in which what it means to be an activist or a Catholic is defined and redefined through their relationship with one another are of particular salience in Italy, a country in which such identities have historically been determinate of people’s life-choices more broadly (see, e.g., Kertzer 1980). Yet, as David Kertzer’s now classic ethnography of Communist and Catholic worlds in Bologna makes clear, it is also a country in which such identities can become remarkably blurred (in the figure of the “Catholic Communist,” for example). Indeed, elsewhere I explore how such apparently homogeneous identities may function in fact to articulate deeper political differences: arguing over what it “really” means to be left wing, for example, is often the idiom through which people in Bologna express radically contrasting stances on issues like homosexuality and immigration (Heywood in press).

Likewise, the analytical temptation in engaging with a topic such as “ethics across borders” is to deconstruct the identities of the parties involved, to be “anti-essentialist” with regard to, say, LGBTQ activism, or Catholicism, and in this way reveal their underlying similarities. What such an analytical strategy would miss, however, is that the borders within such conversations are as much a product of construction as the parties involved. Incommensuration, as well as commensuration, is a necessary part of these kinds of dialogues, as the editors of this collection make clear. To construct such borders through conversation will of course involve a degree of essentialism (“they” are different from “us” in certain ways), but such essentialism is itself essential, as it were, to the conversations’ stability.

As Naisargi Dave (2011: 662) eloquently argues with reference to a comparable case: “Containment does momentarily halt variation, but it is precisely those points . . . closure that provide the limits against which previously unimaginable forms of possibility are continually invented and played.” “Agreeing to disagree,” or finding affinities over difference—constructing the border in question, in other words—is a crucial aspect of ethics across borders.

As a final theoretical aside, examining the question of agreement and disagreement over difference may also allow us to address some broader anthropological

¹ Though prospects were not helped by Francis’ excommunication of one of We Are Church’s Austrian founders, Martha Heizer, for celebrating mass without a priest.
problems from a different perspective. “Radical alterity,” “ontological difference,” and “incommensurability” have been much discussed in anthropology over the last few years (see, e.g., Heywood 2012; Holbraad 2012; Laidlaw 2012; Pedersen 2012; Laidlaw and Heywood 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2015). It is largely unnecessary to re-state the central insight that has stimulated much of this debate, namely that despite the fact that since its inception anthropology has been fundamentally concerned with “difference,” the way in which we have traditionally understood the nature of such “difference” has been rather familiar—as cultural, or epistemological, as a matter of worldviews, rather than of worlds themselves. Neither, I think, is it necessary to clarify—as proponents of this perspective have done often (e.g., Pedersen 2012; Salmond 2014 pace, e.g., Bessire and Bond 2014)—that conceiving of difference in this way does not negate the possibility of translation and communication—or at least of equivocation (Viveiros de Castro 2004; though also cf. Lloyd 2014). “Radical alterity” does not index the other side of an insuperable divide; it is the outcome of a failure of our own descriptive technologies, manifested—for example—in ascriptions of nonsensical beliefs, such as divinatory statements that are both representational and indubitable (Holbraad 2012).

It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that amidst these debates relatively little ethnographic attention has been paid to the question of how people communicate with one another about difference itself, of how to conceptualize the differences between themselves such that dialogue is possible, or not, as I describe here. As Amiria Salmond (2014) has recently pointed out, often the ethnographer simply assumes authority for such dialogue. Another alternative might be to import whole the model for dialogue that emerges from the ethnography, as when Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (2004) concept of “equivocation” both describes Amerindian translation and is proposed as the methodological solution to the problem of how to put Amerindian translation into dialogue with our own ideas about it.

But note that my concern is not that we have failed to investigate different ideas about “difference”; it is that perhaps we have not sufficiently attended to ethnographic ideas about agreement (or disagreement) over difference. This is a question not so much of translation as of metatranslation: How do people dialogue about the conditions that enable, or hinder, such dialogue? This would perhaps be the ethnographic equivalent of Michael Lambek’s (2008)—sophisticated and thought-provoking theoretical proposition that sacrifice may be a site at which metavalue—a relationship between economic value determined by choice and ethical virtue determined by judgment—may be articulated. Instead of only asking about incommensurability or commensurability, this would entail asking how people make the incommensurable commensurate, not by erasing difference but by agreeing that things are different and how.

In the somewhat mundane case I have described here, a failure to do just this renders a dialogue unsuccessful. But it is hard to imagine a reason why cases of “radical alterity” cannot be examined in a similar manner: why stop at establishing that something is “radically alter” from something else, and not ask also whether it is capable of recognizing this difference itself, and if not why not? When we as anthropologists recognize such alterity as alter, we laud ourselves for our openness to difference and our appreciation of the challenges involved in speaking across this difference. Yet surely we are not the only ones capable of doing so.
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References


Agreeing to disagree


Accord sur désaccord: l’activisme LGBTQ et l’église en Italie

Résumé : En 2012, l’antenne de Bologne de Nous Sommes l’Eglise, un groupe de catholiques laïcs et libéraux qui font du lobbying au Vatican en faveur de l’adoption d’une position plus progressive de l’Église sur divers sujets, notamment l’homo-sexualité, a tenté d’établir un dialogue avec la communauté LGBTQ de la ville. Afin de garantir le succès de ces discussions, Nous Sommes l’Eglise devait persuader ses interlocuteurs anticléricals, qui nourrissent une forte antipathie à l’égard du Vatican, qu’il constituait une entité entièrement différente de la « hiérarchie » catholique. Mais en adoptant cette position, le groupe créa un obstacle à sa propre démarche : plus il se distinguait efficacement du catholicisme orthodoxe, plus il s’éloignait du sens de sa déclaration éponyme « Nous sommes l’Eglise » ; plus il se rapprochait des positions des activistes LGBTQ, plus son projet risquait d’être dis-credité pour son manque de rapport avec le catholicisme et d’être jugé sans importance. Ainsi, dans ce cas, l’éthique par-delà les frontières dépend non seulement des affinités soulignées et des différences maintenues entre deux groupes, mais également de la recherche d’affinités au sujet du maintien des différences. De la même manière, je suggère que les débats en anthropologie au sujet de la différence radicale gagneraient à s’instruire des façons dont la différence elle-même peut être le sujet d’accord et de désaccord.

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