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Sectarianism and Citizenship:
Church and State Debates in Nineteenth Century New York

Sean McGonigle

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Senior Thesis

When one thinks about what constitutes a citizen or citizenship, politics usually comes to mind. Typically, citizens can vote in elections or hold office, voice their opinions regarding matters affecting their country or state, and have access to certain basic rights. Citizens are also considered members of a broader community, one that includes people who, although they may differ in identity, are also allowed to share in those same basic rights. However, this notion of citizenship has not always held true in American history, particularly during the nineteenth century. There was then no doubt that America was a Protestant nation, and that American institutions therefore held a presupposed Protestant identity. This affiliation was steeped in sectarian Protestant doctrine, as the requirements for American citizenship were grounded in Protestant values. While among Protestants there were certainly religious squabbles, most denominations were nonetheless able to put aside their doctrinal differences for the sake of protecting American Protestantism. “Working from Protestantism as the model of religion implied that other practices must either conform to this model or suffer by comparison:”¹ this hegemonic vision of American citizenship ultimately doomed religious outsiders to second class citizenship for their nonconformity to the Protestant standards of national religion.

Immigrants and Catholics were two bodies that, for a variety of reasons, did not fit into this standard definition of American citizenship. Despite having the ability to vote, and the supposed protection of the free establishment clause in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution, Catholics and immigrants were often relegated to a lower level of citizenship. Yet as the Catholic population began to swell due to immigration in the first half of the nineteenth century, it became clearer that the established Protestant American institutions were going to have a difficult time

¹ Janet R. Jakobsen, “Religion,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: NYU, 2007), 202.

casting Catholics as un-American. This was especially true in New York, where a growing number of Irish Catholics were settling by the 1850's.

In this thesis, I will examine the origins of Catholic challenges to Protestant sectarian definitions of citizenship in New York, particularly by looking at reforms within schools and charities, which had been two of the fundamental institutions Protestants used to inculcate doctrines of a proper Christian America. Schools in nineteenth century New York were seen as the building blocks for educating Protestant American citizens. As such, these schools used the King James Bible, without additional commentary, to teach morality and ethics to the future leaders of the community. Catholics, who did not use the King James Bible, therefore felt they were being denied some of their rights as citizens. Protestant ideas about poverty - namely that financial distress was caused by poor morality, and that aiding those in need would encourage a reliance on handouts - dominated the social welfare scene, often leading to the conversions of the pestilent Catholic needy. Not only did Catholics challenge Protestant reliance upon the New York educational system to define American as Protestant, but the immigrant Catholic community also challenged the traditional Protestant association of American womanhood with the growing influence of celibate Catholic nuns within the previously Protestant realm of social work.

I will demonstrate that throughout nineteenth century New York, Catholics contested the dominance of institutions that helped defended Protestant conceptions of American identity, and in doing so, worked to expand the definition of citizenship by asserting themselves as Americans. Initiating these challenges against two of the central Protestant institutions which defined New York citizenship, Catholics transcended their role as a counter public and eventually positioned themselves to become part of the main public.

Protestant Problems with Catholic Citizenship in Early Nineteenth Century New York

The Catholic population in America increased rapidly during the nineteenth century, in large part due to immigration. With 1.7 million members by 1850 (compared to 35,000 in 1789), Catholics represented the largest religious denomination in the United States, followed closely by the Methodist Church.² The total white population in America in 1850 was counted at 14,195,805 people, and the Catholic contribution to this number stemmed largely from immigration.³ Despite this huge increase in numbers, America remained a Protestant country by nature, and Catholics faced a stiff resistance from native-born citizens to become an accepted group. As Timothy L. Smith notes, by the same 1850 benchmark, America's foremost citizens viewed Protestantism and American as synonymous; this correlation between religion and citizenry fostered xenophobia and hostile conditions for any immigrants entering the country, let alone those of distinct religious backgrounds.⁴ Catholics eventually became associated with one such group, albeit one that was also considered non-citizen. As each Irish and Catholic wave came to America, Protestants began to associate the two groups as one, subsuming the identities into each other so that if one was Irish, he or she was automatically assumed to be Catholic, and vice-versa.⁵ This association did not help change the position of Catholics as non-citizens.

With this increase in immigration came amplified fears of the growing presence of Catholicism in America, particularly in cities like New York, where the Great Awakening of the

² Jose Casanova, "Roman and Catholic and American: The Transformation of Catholicism in the United States." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn, 1992), 76. <http://www.jstor.org>

³ Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., "Public Patriotism and Private Politics: The Tradition of American Catholicism," *U.S. Catholic Historian*. Vol. 4, No. 1, American Catholics: Patriotism and Dissent in War and Peace (1984), 5. <http://www.jstor.org>

⁴ Timothy L. Smith, "Protestant Schooling and American Nationality, 1800-1850," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Mar., 1967), 680. <http://www.jstor.org>

⁵ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans, A History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 62.

1820's and 30's sought to make America a Christian nation; for American Protestants, Christian did not include Catholic.⁶ Fr. George Paul Jacoby even goes so far as to say that the “proselytizing bore the nature of a crusade” aimed at “stamping out Catholicism,” especially in areas like New York, because the Catholic Church, with its mass of parishioners controlled by priests, was seen as a “threat to the American way of life.”⁷ These supposed threats to American society posed by the Catholic Church made Protestant America unwilling to accept Catholics as citizens, as Catholicism was seen as incompatible with American citizenship.

It now becomes necessary to examine how Catholicism could be ill-suited with notions of Protestant American citizenship. Fear of the Roman Catholic pope and priests was common in nineteenth century America, particularly in areas where a large number of Catholics settled. This proved to be the first barrier that Catholics faced to enjoy their status as citizens. With Catholic churches and dioceses emerging throughout the country, some Protestants worried about a Popish plot in which Catholics would come to dominate and subvert American institutions and Protestant Christianity.⁸ Protestants feared this would be done in an effort to extend the pope's reach to America.⁹ At the outset of the nineteenth century, in order to prevent this supposed plot, New York voters were required to take an oath, promising to “give up allegiance to any foreign power in civil or religious matters.”¹⁰ These types of restrictions on new immigrants made it harder for them to become a part of the American fold. In being forced to renounce their papal allegiance, Catholics were faced with a choice: give up one's religion to become citizens or remain outsiders.

⁶ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 60.

⁷ Rev. George Paul Jacoby, “Catholic Childcare in Nineteenth Century New York With a Correlated Summary of Public and Protestant Child Welfare.” (Washington D.C.: Catholic University, 1941). Pg. 57.

⁸ Vincent P. Lannie, “Alienation in America: The Immigrant Catholic and Public Education in Pre-Civil War America,” *The Review of Politics*. Vol. 32, No. 4 (Oct., 1970), 506. www.jstor.org

⁹ Jacoby, “Catholic Childcare,” 20.

¹⁰ Maureen Fitzgerald, *Irish Catholic Nuns and the Development of New York City's Welfare System, 1840-1900*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1995). 171.

Some of these suspicions regarding colonization were grounded in Catholics' supposed tendency to act like a dangerous rabble. A political cartoon in 1844 depicted New York's bishop, John Hughes, coming under attack from Editor James Gordon Bennett; Hughes is protected by Catholics, depicted as mob-like and unruly.¹¹ This fear of a religious mob dovetailed with the common derision of Tammany Hall and the Democratic Party, which many newly immigrated Catholic Irish joined. The Democratic Party worked to get Irishmen jobs and registered them to vote, in an effort to harness the political influence of this ever-expanding group, and it worked; Jay Dolan suggests that the Democrats were so successful in garnering Irish support that the new immigrants served as "foot soldiers" for the party.¹² This overwhelming support furthered the notion of Irish Catholics as a dangerous political mass, and did nothing to help the perception of the immigrant group. Yet another political cartoon of the era shows an Irish and German immigrant carrying off the ballot box as a brawl ensues in the background, charging immigrants with stealing something distinctly American: the vote.¹³ As such, voting did not appear to be a requirement for acceptance into Protestant American society, even though it supposedly qualified one to be an American citizen.

Catholics also faced criticism for their religious beliefs, which were unsuited for American society. Protestants saw Catholicism as a superstitious religion that exposed backwards values. Most critiques came in the form of novels, the most prototypical arguably being Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, written in 1836.¹⁴ The book, which was the second bestseller in America after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, detailed salacious deeds in

¹¹ Fogarty, "Public Patriotism and Private Politics." 6.

¹² Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 55.

¹³ "Crooked Voting by Immigrants." <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/96817567/Hulton-Archive>

¹⁴ Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. Vol., 9, No. 1 (Winter, 1999), 99. <http://www.jstor.org>

a convent, where priests and nuns, who were supposed to take vows of celibacy, committed sexual and violent acts upon each other and unsuspecting young girls.¹⁵ Despite the discovery that Maria Monk and her co-conspiring author, Protestant minister J.J. Slocum, were revealed to be frauds, the book's popularity continued because it drew upon "every latent Protestant, suspicion of Catholics."¹⁶

The famous political cartoonist Thomas Nast also reinforced stereotypes about Catholic spirituality, emphasizing the dangers that Catholics brought to the shores of America. In "The American River Ganges," crocodile bishops emerge from the mystical River Ganges to feast upon innocent school children, protected by a teacher carrying a Bible; the bishops arrive from the Vatican to attack an American institution – the Public School – and with the help of Tammany Hall (represented by the thugs on the top of the cliff), were threatening the bedrock of American society.¹⁷ The image of crocodiles coming from the Vatican across the Ganges was meant to play upon Protestant xenophobia and fears of Catholic superstition.¹⁸ In reinforcing these stereotypes, literary works and political cartoons provided examples of the perpetuation of anti-Catholicism in popular nineteenth century culture.

This idea that Catholicism could not adapt to, and was in fact hostile to, American values, reinforced in novels and political cartoons, was subsequently realized in the nativist movement. The political wing of the nativist movement was the Know-Nothing Party. The Know-Nothings first organized in the 1850's in opposition to the influence of Catholicism and immigration, epitomizing the ideology that the American identity presupposed Protestant affiliation.¹⁹ Thus, in

¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 274.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Shelley, *The Bicentennial History of the Archdiocese of New York 1808-2008*. Editions du Signe. 2007. Pg. 201-102.

¹⁷ "The American River Ganges," Thomas Nast, May 8, 1875. Harper's Weekly <http://www.harpweek.com/09cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=May&Date=8>.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 97.

order to protect Protestant dominance in American society, keeping Catholic foreigners from obtaining elected office became one of the chief tenets of their political platform.²⁰ This sentiment was best reflected in their motto: “Americans must rule America!”²¹ Slogans like this demonstrate that even if Catholics had in fact become voting citizens, they still had not become Americans in the eyes of nativist Protestants.

If these challenges posed by Protestants were not difficult enough for Catholics to overcome, the immigrants also contributed to their sectarian handicap in America. The Catholic reaction to the sectarianism they had experienced in Ireland was the first of these self-imposed limitations to cultivating an American identity. Ireland, with a predominantly Catholic populace, was controlled by Anglican Great Britain. Irish organizations in America like the Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society and the Ancient Order of Hibernians catered to the lower classes of Catholic Irish, who had participated in European sectarian conflict, and transferred those political and religious conflicts from Ireland to America.²² Newspapers also contributed to the transferring of sectarianism. By covering more Irish political news than American, *The Truth Teller*, which claimed to have been started in order to oppose the Protestant Whig party, became the leading paper of Irish Catholics.²³ This connection back to Ireland was also seen in the priesthood, as Catholic priests in America, many of whom were Irish, had dealt with sectarian conflict in Europe and were prepared to fight it rather than adapt to American society.²⁴ Bishop Hughes himself fostered old-world sectarianism by comparing the public school system in New York to the one run by the Kildare Society back in Ireland, also known for its indoctrination of

²⁰ Jacoby, “Catholic Childcare,” 20.

²¹ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 97.

²² Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 41.

²³ Henry J. Browne, “Public Support of Catholic Education in New York, 1825-1842: Some New Aspects.” *The Catholic Historical Review*. Vol. 39, No. 1 (Apr., 1953), 12. <http://www.jstor.org>

²⁴ Lannie, “Alienation,” 507.

Protestantism within Catholic youth.²⁵ This final sectarian push by the clergy was crucial in delaying the American Catholic battle for citizenship. Since the Catholic masses took their cues from the clergy, having leadership that was prepared to clash with sectarian institutions rather than work within them, also made it harder for Catholics to become accepted as citizens.

The Irish who immigrated to America also suffered from extreme poverty. The voyage from Ireland to America was long and dangerous, and people often died or arrived too sick to care for themselves, meaning those who were orphaned or plagued with illness put a strain on the Protestant welfare system.²⁶ Surviving immigrants had often used most of their funds to purchase transatlantic tickets, and came to America without money;²⁷ as a result, they could not afford to leave New York, and were forced to stay in an increasingly overcrowded city to try and find work.²⁸

Irish Catholic immigrants in New York faced an uncomfortable situation by the 1850's. Despite being officially American, they were not accepted into Protestant American society. Protestants, uncomfortable with the increasing number of Catholics, reinforced the counter-public status of Catholics through institutions like schools and charities. Yet it was precisely through these institutions that Catholics began to assert their role as citizens.

Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and School Reform

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," Louis Althusser discusses how a hegemonic group can continue to further its ideology. He notes that "the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery

²⁵ Joseph J. McCadden, "Bishop Hughes versus the Public School Society of New York," *The Catholic Historical Review*. Vol. 50, No. 2 (Jul., 1964), 202. <http://www.jstor.org>

²⁶ Jacoby, "Catholic Childcare," 19.

²⁷ Dolan, *The Irish Americans* pg. 78.

²⁸ Jacoby, "Catholic Childcare," 19.

of its 'practice'."²⁹ Lauren Berlant specifies Althusser's claim by commenting that American citizenship was "often engendered...through churches, schools, and other institutions."³⁰ The Public School Society, the dominating force in the New York educational system for the first half of the nineteenth century, epitomizes the validity of these theories. The educational system in New York was organized in order to indoctrinate the city's youth with dominant Protestant values, intending to produce citizens who would continue to keep America a Christian, or Protestant, nation.

Catholicism was not a part of this hegemonic ideology. "The average Protestant American of the 1850's had been trained from birth to hate Catholicism."³¹ The founding fathers had recognized the importance education played in the maintenance of a republic, and Protestant ministers and laypeople used the educational system to shape American citizenry.³² Catholics picked up on this sentiment and realized the need to create and staff their own institutions, as Protestant institutions wished to convert Catholics, and sectarianism was too entrenched in state government for Catholics to affect any change here, either.³³ Hence, the close association of Protestantism and state institutions made it difficult for any direct Catholic dispute about their sectarian nature to succeed.

The state's Report of the Committee on Colleges, Academies, and Common Schools in 1838 emphasized the role of the Bible in education in order to develop the future citizens of Protestant America. The report, answering a petition by Catholics claiming that public schools

²⁹ Louis Althusser, "'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. Monthly Review Press, New York. 1971. Pg. 133.

³⁰ Lauren Berlant, "Citizenship," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. (New York: NYU, 2007), 41.

³¹ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 60.

³² Smith, "Protestant Schooling and American Nationality," 697-680.

³³ Jay P. Dolan, "A Critical Period in American Catholicism," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Oct., 1973), pp. 523-536. Pg. 535. Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics. <http://www.jstor.org>

were sectarian, states that the predominant purpose of education is to prepare children to be leading figures in New York's political future.³⁴ It concludes that the best way to form a good citizenry is through morality taught by the Bible; so long as the schools only taught Christian morality, and not religion, the use of the Bible should be allowed.³⁵ The goal of a public school education, in particular, required "principles of morality and reverence," in order to produce a good citizenry.³⁶ This Christianity was seen to be non-denominational Protestantism.

The primary governing body of education in New York was the Public School Society. The society grew out of the Free School Society, which was established in order to educate those who did not receive schooling from their religious denominations, or were too poor to afford it; the change in name also led to a change in structure, as all children were eventually allowed to enroll as students.³⁷ The society also tried to bring more children under their reach by starting committees and backing laws which denied welfare to those whose children did not attend public school.³⁸ This allowed the Public School Society's ideology to reach a greater number of children.

The Society's influence did not go unchallenged, however. The first test regarding the sectarian nature of the schools actually came from within Protestantism in the form of the Bethel Free School. Up until 1824, a fund was available for schools to draw from in order to pay teachers, but as the Free School Society drew more and more money, smaller denominational schools made an appeal to have the same privilege.³⁹ In 1825, a special committee decided that

³⁴ 1838 Report of the Committee on Colleges, Academies, and Common Schools. No. 5, pg. 7. January 23, 1938.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ John W. Pratt, "Religious Conflict in the Development of the New York City Public School System," *History of Education Quarterly* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jun. 1965), 115. <http://www.jstor.org>

³⁷ McCadden, "Bishop Hughes," Pg. 188-189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁹ Rev. Edward M. Connors, *Church-State Relationships in Education in the State of New York*. (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1951), xvii.

the fund was “purely of a civil character,” and could not be used by religious organizations.⁴⁰

This decision largely settled the question of sectarianism between Protestant denominations and granted the society fifteen more years of educational dominance.⁴¹ However, this decision did not focus on Catholicism’s relationship to public education.

A growing number of Catholics in New York provided a different sort of challenge for the state’s established definition of sectarianism. With the surge of Catholic immigrants came an increase of Catholic children requiring education. However, many did not find the educational system in New York amenable to their beliefs. Some saw the curriculum in school as unwelcoming since Catholics felt the King James Version of the Bible was the “very symbol of anti-Catholicism.”⁴² For others, the entire experience was biased; *New York’s Freeman’s Journal* best summarizes this Catholic stance on the method of teaching, and, implicitly, how Catholicism and American citizenship seemed incompatible. “The Catholic Church tells her children that they must be taught their religion by AUTHORITY – the [Protestant] Sects say, read the Bible, judge for yourselves. The Bible is read in the public schools, and the children are allowed to judge for themselves. The Protestant principle is therefore acted upon, slyly inculcated, and the Schools are Sectarian.”⁴³ Catholics, who felt the Bible should be supplemented by approved commentary, did not feel comfortable with this seemingly personal interpretation of the scriptures, and were thus hesitant to send their children to public schools.⁴⁴ This fundamental difference between Catholic and Protestant theologies proved to be an important new distinction regarding sectarianism in America.

⁴⁰ Ibid, xviii.

⁴¹ Smith, “Protestant Schooling,” 687.

⁴² John Webb Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity, The Church-State Theme in New York History* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1967), 171.

⁴³ Lannie, “Alienation in America,” 509.

⁴⁴ McCadden, “Bishop Hughes,” 189.

With his Catholic flock struggling to cope with the bias from the Public School Society, Bishop Hughes sought to improve the educational prospects for Catholic children. Hughes wished to protect the Catholic faith in Christian America and make the new immigrant group “separate but equal,” in this predominantly Protestant country.⁴⁵ At first, Hughes wanted public money to support Catholic education so children could receive a “biased-free” instruction, which he claimed the Public School Society could not provide, and was able to bring his case before a city council.⁴⁶ He ultimately lost this round, but was far from through in his efforts to protect Catholic education in America.

New York’s governor, William Seward, had also wanted to improve the state of education in New York. In an 1842 speech, Seward claimed that 20,000 children were unable to receive schooling because of the nature of the Public School Society, critiquing the society’s position that “society must conform itself to the public schools, instead of the public schools adapting themselves to the exigencies of society.”⁴⁷ The Secretary of State, John C. Spencer, also admonished the Public School Society for the type of education it provided. He said that the Society was, in fact, sectarian, and that the public education in New York City should be left to each ward, not a private organization.⁴⁸ The contributions of these two government officials helped to bring the matter before the legislature.

The matter was brought during an election year, and would not be voted on until after elections.⁴⁹ In an attempt to secure the passage of the Maclay Act, a bill which would follow Spencer’s suggestions and place the control of public education in each ward, Hughes

⁴⁵ Casanova, “Roman and Catholic and American,” 84.

⁴⁶ McCadden, “Bishop Hughes,” 201.

⁴⁷ Connors, *Church-State*, 40.

⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools, No. 12, In assembly, January 6, 1842. Pg. 138

⁴⁹ Connors, *Church-State*, 34.

encouraged Catholics to back any politician, Whig or Democrat, who would back his cause.⁵⁰ The results of the election showed the tremendous influence Irish Catholic voters could have, as enough Catholic-backed politicians were elected and secured the passage of the Maclay Act.⁵¹ The act did not pass unblemished, however. An amendment tacked on to the bill said that any school hoping to receive public money could not profess “sectarian doctrine;” this meant that the entire publicly funded New York City educational system was on its way towards secularization, effectively ending any Catholic hopes of receiving funding for Catholic schools.⁵² There was still some uncertainty as to what constituted sectarian, however. In 1844, the legislature further edited the Maclay Act to define what constituted sectarian doctrine, stating that the Bible would be a permissible tool in the education of the city’s youth.⁵³ Although it would take some time to progress from sectarianism to complete secularization, the foundation had been laid for the removal of teaching Protestant morality in schools.

Despite the loss of future funding for Catholic schools and the uncertainty of the use of the Bible in public school classrooms, Hughes was able to accomplish one of his major goals. As ward schools became more and more popular, the boards governing them began to take on trustees of the Public School Society, eventually leading to the society’s complete dissipation.⁵⁴ In the immediate aftermath of the school controversy, violence escalated as Hughes’ residency was stoned.⁵⁵ Walt Whitman was critical of the Maclay Act, calling it “a statute for the fostering and teaching of Catholic superstition,” and said that he would not have been upset had Hughes been in his residence the night it was stoned.⁵⁶ Comments like Whitman’s show that Protestant

⁵⁰ Shelley, *A Bicentennial History*, 122.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 123.

⁵² Connors, *Church-State*, 42.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 59-60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

⁵⁵ Connors, *Church-State*, 43.

⁵⁶ Dolan, *Irish Americans*, 49.

Americans still felt that Catholic “superstition” was a danger to America, and that Catholics were still not welcome.

Hughes opposition to Protestant sectarian education led to a gradual decline in religion in public schools.⁵⁷ This decrease in sectarianism made it much easier for Catholic children to receive public education and allowed them to feel more comfortable in schools. Granting Catholics greater access to what had traditionally been a bastion of Protestant Christianity not only whittled away at the hegemonic culture of the time, but allowed Catholics to eventually become part of the larger group of New Yorkers, rather than outsiders of the citizenry.

Nuns, Charities, and American Women

While schools were one way of defining citizenship in Protestant New York, the welfare system proved to be another way in which it was characterized. Charities, welfare organizations, and schools all played similar roles in indoctrinating Protestant Christian culture, specifically within nineteenth century New York, but also within America at large. Schools molded the minds of young children to be productive citizens in society, while many charities were set up to convert or reform those members of society who had fallen astray of its values. The Catholic response to the sectarian nature of charities differs in several ways from its response to the school controversy, and thus merits investigation and analysis.

Welfare organizations in New York were based on Protestant notions of poverty and morality, and as such, functioned to eradicate paucity within a sectarian context. As mentioned earlier, many of the Irish Catholics who immigrated to New York did not have much money upon arrival, which made it difficult to climb out of poverty. To prevent dependency on any charity that was offered, and to keep those who did not truly need aid off of it, state welfare

⁵⁷ Shelley, *A Bicentennial History*, 125.

organizations were typically ascetic.⁵⁸ The hope was that, having to face tough circumstances on their own, the poor would be able to help themselves out of poverty.⁵⁹ This ideology typified the Protestant belief that it was the role of the individual, not the group, that mattered in American society. As more poor immigrants arrived, the need for expanded welfare grew, but seeing an abundance of these poor Catholics, Protestants felt that this poverty had naturally resulted from the immigrants' poor moral training, and Protestants were thus unwilling to consider meeting Catholic needs to be a non-sectarian American venture. Protestants saw an abundance of these poor Catholics, and, since Protestant notions of poverty were dictated by morality, felt that Catholics' poor moral training led to such poverty.⁶⁰ Jay Dolan comments that as there was an increase in immigration of poor Irish Catholics, these newcomers were looked down upon as the dregs of society, and that their Catholic background made it almost impossible for them to become American.⁶¹ Since the cause of this un-Americanness appeared to be religion, Protestant charities took on a sectarian tinge.

Many Protestant welfare societies operated in the same fashion as the Public School Society in an attempt to try and dodge any complaints of sectarianism. Charities were orchestrated across denominational lines, took on non-religious names, and tried to downplay the role of religion in the aid offered.⁶² Charities regarding children were especially sensitive topics, as the type of aid offered to poor immigrant children played a role in how these boys and girls were assimilated.⁶³ Orphanages were one such Protestant welfare organization which took on some of the characteristics of the Public School Society. Despite claiming to be nonsectarian, the

⁵⁸ Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity*, pg. 205.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Poor*, 16.

⁶⁰ Fitzgerald, *Nuns* 34.

⁶¹ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 62.

⁶² Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 23.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 24.

goal of the orphanages was to help these children learn about and prepare them for life in Christian America, and teaching took on a Protestant nature.⁶⁴ These orphanages and reform houses, despite having sectarian characteristics, still received public aid.⁶⁵

The sending-out organizations differed in nature from these other Protestant organizations and thus warrants more elucidation. Institutions like the Children's Aid Society would take "roving 'street children'" from the city and bring them to western farms in the hopes of instilling individual discipline and Protestant morality.⁶⁶ The idea was that by relocating to Protestant-morality-based homes, the children could better become citizens by learning "rural and middle class" Christian values.⁶⁷ By 1875, 40,000 children, mostly poor Catholics, had been sent to Midwestern homes by the Children's Aid Society, alone.⁶⁸ Staggering numbers of this nature reveal the effectiveness of Protestant charitable institutions in perpetuating their hegemonic ideals of a Christian America.

Catholics were particularly up in arms about this child removal policy. Many claimed that it forcefully converted thousands of young Catholic children.⁶⁹ People felt that their rights were being violated in a "Protestant dominated state."⁷⁰ Particularly, Catholics felt that a parent's right to care for their own child was being assailed.⁷¹ Catholics therefore bonded together over the need for institutions that would enable them "to take care of their own" and counterbalance Protestant influence.⁷² In doing so, Catholic charities had the opportunity to keep Catholic children Catholic.

⁶⁴ Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity*, 206-207.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 207.

⁶⁶ Brown, *Poor*, 16.

⁶⁷ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 415.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Poor*, 17.

⁷⁰ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 26.

⁷¹ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 39.

⁷² Brown, *Poor*, 15.

The state recognized Catholic complaints, while also preparing for the additional boatloads of immigrants they expected to venture across the Atlantic. Fearful of the mass number of poor youths hitting New York City, the state was willing to help fund the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum, the Church's version of the New York Orphan Asylum, in 1833.⁷³ Now that Catholics had an answer to Protestant charities, the state began to fund both types of organizations, since their existence meant the government did not need to perform those services.⁷⁴ This worked to put both sects of children's charities on equal footing with one another, and started a war over the future citizenship for the state. Maureen Fitzgerald says the battle for charities in New York became a matter of "cultural reproduction:" indeed, "central to the struggles between Catholic nuns and Protestant women was the question of who would have control over cultural reproduction in the emerging welfare state, and thereby which culture would be reproduced – the Irish-Catholic community, or the native-born, middle-class Protestant community."⁷⁵ This shows that, more than just a battle for bragging rights, the success of each religion's charities had a tangible effect of the future of citizenship in New York.

In order to help win the battle to preserve Catholicism in New York, the bishops brought in religious sisters, or nuns, to staff charities and schools. The Sisters of Charity arrived in New York in 1817 and were eventually joined by the French Sacred Heart sisters and the Sisters of Mercy, all of whom helped to staff schools and orphanages.⁷⁶ Catholic charities had a distinct advantage with nuns running them. These women took a vow of poverty, meaning that the costs of running Catholic charities was miniscule, and that Protestant charities could not financially

⁷³ Ibid, 15.

⁷⁴ Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity*, 208.

⁷⁵ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 16.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 245-246.

undercut these institutions.⁷⁷ Not only did Catholic nuns play a role in changing the way charities in New York were run, but they also influenced the main ideologies of those charities.

The work of nuns in New York helped to change what had been understood as the standard cause of poverty in Protestant America: morality. Nuns were not primarily concerned with the moral state of their charges, and instead worked to increase the amount of aid given, since, in the eyes of these religious sisters, more aid did not mean the poor would look to remain on the dole.⁷⁸ This fundamental difference in definitions of poverty allowed the nuns a greater access to New York's poor and delinquent, and these sisters were even able to gain the favor of the Protestant poor.⁷⁹ Irish nuns met with such success that by 1885, 80% of the disadvantaged children in New York were cared for by institutions associated with a convent.⁸⁰ This achievement goes to show the tremendous influence that Catholic nuns were able to exert over the system of welfare that perpetuated Protestant ideas of citizenship in New York.

The public presence of nuns in New York, while changing notions of Catholic citizenship, also started to change the perception of women in American society. Eithne Luibheid, when commenting on the role of American family norms, says that “the heterosexual family has long served as a model for nation-making that inscribes and naturalizes important hierarchies, including a patriarchal order that constructs women's sexualities as the property of males.”⁸¹ As a group that pledged celibacy, Nuns did not conform to this standard of the heterosexual family; rather, they pledged to live chaste and frugal lives in convents, a lifestyle that was attacked by Protestants for its difference from American social norms.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁹ Idem.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁸¹ Eithne Luibheid, “Immigration,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. (New York: NYU, 2007), 130.

This stance by Protestants did not change Catholics' beliefs about the importance of nuns, however. According to Catholic society, those who were called to be nuns were viewed with extreme veneration, and these women were often afforded opportunities that were closed off to many immigrant women, such as jobs as teachers and caretakers.⁸² Conversely, married Catholic women were not viewed as highly in Catholic society as nuns were.⁸³ This view differed with the expectations Protestant society had for its women throughout most of the nineteenth century. The "pure American woman" was meant to be a wife and a mother who raised children, not one who lived amongst other women in a convent.⁸⁴ It was also understood that a woman was meant to be associated with a man, and that any deviation from that norm, particularly women living communally, did not fit Protestant America's definition of womanhood.⁸⁵ The success of the Irish Catholic nuns in defying these standards of womanhood in nineteenth century New York, especially their role in "activist labor," helped provide a blueprint for Protestant women to use as a guide to increase their presence in public welfare.⁸⁶

The role of nuns, as well as Catholic charities, provided a fundamental shift in the way that the state government would care for its poor. Rather than trying to convert delinquent children through moral reform, or withholding aid in order to discourage people from seeking it, Catholic charities tried to focus on the root of the needy's problems while expanding aid to all those who sought it. Whereas Protestant charities in the nineteenth century were started expressly for the maintenance of a Christian society, Catholic charities were established in order to defend Catholic interest from the proselytizing American Protestants. Just as Bishop Hughes was looking to create a niche for Catholics as a "separate but equal" group in America, these charities

⁸² Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 131.

⁸³ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 6.

⁸⁴ Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman," 98.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 116.

⁸⁶ Fitzgerald, *Nuns*, 30.

sought to protect Catholicism as something separate within society, while setting up the future members of the Church to be equal to the Protestants in terms of citizenry in America

On the Path towards American Citizenship

American society was undergoing major changes by 1850. A new wave of immigrants, with a set of beliefs seemingly incompatible with American society, had been pouring in. Protestantism, which had enjoyed an unchallenged hegemonic position in America since the nation's founding, suddenly had to face its greatest test of societal dominance. Protestants tried to highlight how the tenets of Catholicism made these new immigrants unfit for citizenship. However, as Catholicism grew to become the largest religious denomination in America, it became more difficult to exclude Catholics as citizens. The institutions that had the greatest effect on inculcating Protestant notions of American citizenship, schools and charities, also had the most exposure with the new influx of immigrants. Schools gave New York City's children a non-denominational Christian education, which had been deemed necessary for proper citizenship in American society. Charities such as orphanages and aid societies reinforced the Christianity taught in schools by sending children out of the city to learn middle-class Protestant values and encouraging participation in Christian services. However, a new group of people with a different set of beliefs chaffed at the teachings of these institutions.

Catholics who came to New York accused those who ran these schools and charities of fostering sectarian doctrines which either tried to force the newcomers to convert or made them feel ashamed of their faith. In disputing how these schools and institutions operated, Catholics were also challenging how New York and American citizenship was defined. By changing the curriculum in schools, Catholics were better able to partake in the benefits an education could confer upon children. By creating their own charities and finding a new way to handle poverty,

Catholic welfare organizations were able to protect the beliefs of their own congregation while also confronting notions of womanhood and state welfare.

The success of these attempts was the first step in enabling Catholics to become accepted as part of the American citizenry. Jay Dolan makes the claim that some of these changes made Catholicism a group that “Protestants could not ignore.”⁸⁷ Even more so, these initial victories by the Church in New York made Catholicism a religion the American Protestants had to accept. Originally derided as an outsider group, Catholics were faced with the initial choice between assimilating and giving up their identity or being relegated to the status of second class citizens. With successful challenges against two of the institutions most responsible for cultivating this dilemma, Catholics were able to begin altering the traditional definition of citizenship. Once a group that was seen as backwards and uncivilized, Catholics began to represent a kind of citizen that one would recognize today.

⁸⁷ Dolan, “A Critical Period,” 535.