In nineteenth-century New South Wales, charity for the non-indigenous population was closely associated with religion. In the absence of state provision via a poor law, ‘voluntary’ charity played a major role in meeting social needs, although the principles of the British poor law amendment of 1834 were evident in the dominant stance towards the poor. As in Britain, religion was both a motivating force and part of the response of the ‘charitable’, who sought to address spiritual as well as material needs (Dickey, 1987; Swain, 1998). The sectarianism of a society of whose population between 25 and 35 per cent was of Irish Catholic origin impinged on charity. The work of Catholic Sisterhoods, shaped by their particular ethos as well as by their social context, contrasted with the prevailing approach to charity.

Poor law principles, sectarianism and the state: the work of Catholic Sisters in nineteenth-century New South Wales

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Introduction
Religion was important in nineteenth-century New South Wales life (Carey, 1996), not least because of its controlling and reforming potential in a former penal colony (Fletcher, 2000, 94). Catholic-Protestant sectarianism was a prominent feature, with the social elite and the majority of the people being Protestant (that is, non-Catholic), but with Catholics comprising at least 25 per cent of the population (McConville, 1979, 55). Despite this, little is known about how differences in religion affected the treatment of the poor. This is significant because, in the
absence of a poor law, a great deal of charitable provision was by ‘voluntary’ organisations inspired by Christian charity. Although Catholic charity was mainly provided by various Sisterhoods, little is known of their work and consequently there has been no analysis of their role in Australian welfare history.

It is argued here that sectarianism helped shape the Sisters’ charitable work in various ways. First, it was a catalyst for the initiation of some charitable ventures, commenced in order to address the spiritual needs of Catholics. Second, sectarianism and secularising tendencies in New South Wales society meant that the Sisters’ charities were not eligible for government assistance. This made them reliant on fundraising. Third, the Sisters’ need for fundraising support linked well with the Church hierarchy’s imperialising objectives (O’Farrell, 1977). Promotion of the Sisters’ charities and celebration of their achievements contributed to raising Catholics’ collective self-esteem and the social standing of Catholics and Catholicism. Such an agenda was congruent with that of the independent Catholic newspaper The Freeman’s Journal (FJ), which supported fundraising for churches, the Sisters’ charities and schools. A final effect of sectarianism was freedom from government control, as an unintentional consequence of the fact that the Sisters did not receive government subsidies. This meant that the Sisterhoods were able to deal with the poor in accordance with the stance enshrined in their rules. It is argued here that this was based on a very different ethos from that held by the government and by other major charities of the time.

The treatment of religion in Australian social welfare history

In Sydney, evangelicalism dominated the approach to charity (Dickey, 1987), although it has been suggested that a minority diverged from this (O’Brien, 1988, 199; Garton, 1994, 28). This question has not been extensively explored, and there has been relatively little consideration of denominational variations in attitude and arrangements, or their legacy. A competitive element seems to have been evident, with Catholics and Protestants having engaged in some ‘copycat’ duplication of provision (Godden, 1983; Dickey, 1985) similar to the situation in nineteenth-century Ireland (Luddy, 1995). Another difference pertains to the management of charities, with Catholics being largely absent from committees dominated by
Protestants (Godden, 1983). One of the few studies to include the Sisters found their work to have been similar to that of Protestant ‘ladies’, with both groups using their socially and morally superior positions to attempt to control the behaviour of poor women and children (Godden, 1983, 1987). The extent of this similarity warrants further examination, however.

**Provision for the poor in nineteenth-century New South Wales**

The New South Wales government directly provided very little assistance to the poor, although this gradually changed (Dickey, 1987). When responsible government commenced in New South Wales at mid-century, the main provision for the poor was under the auspices of ‘voluntary’ charity (Dickey, 1987). Many of the ‘voluntary’ charitable organisations were heavily subsidised by the government, but funding was restricted to those which provided for the population in general and which were run by committees elected by their subscribers. Because the Sisterhoods’ charities were run by the Sisters themselves, they were not eligible for assistance. An exception was two one-off grants to the Sisters of Charity’s St Vincent’s hospital in 1892 and 1900 (Horsburgh, 1975). Although other charities operated by sectional interests were also ineligible for subsidy, the rule was said to have been designed to exclude Catholic charities (Dickey, 1985, 7).

On the other hand, many charities that did receive a government subsidy were run entirely by Protestants. However, because their boards consisted of persons of various denominations, rather than from one sect only, and were elected by subscribers, they were classed as being ‘non-sectarian’ and thus eligible to receive a subsidy (Horsburgh, 1975, 232). Catholics thought that this was unfair. Not only were their taxes going to subsidise charities run by Protestants, but their own charities were excluded. These arrangements were widely questioned in the light of criticisms of poor treatment, financial inefficiency and improper management. A number of inquiries were held, including the 1873-4 Royal Commission into Public Charities (RCPC), which recommended the closure of the large children’s institutions and the implementation of a scheme of ‘boarding out’ (RCPC, 1873-4, Second Report).
The approach that dominated both government and voluntary provision embodied the ethos of the 1830s British poor laws. Public charity in New South Wales had as its object the elimination of pauperism and the increase of self-reliance, via the principle of ‘less eligibility’. Assistance to the poor was mainly based on the assumption that they were responsible for their own plight unless they could prove otherwise. Charity was consequently parsimonious and accompanied by attempts at spiritual and moral retraining (O'Brien, 1988; Garton, 1990). This ethos of ‘discountenancing mendicity’ is evident in the stated aims of several of the larger and well-subsidised public charities (Godden, 1982, 88; Berreen, 1994). That the government maintained this same point of view is evident in the statements of government officials, such as the annual reports of the Inspector of Public Charities and of the President of the State Children’s Relief Department (SCRD), established in 1881 to ‘empty the barracks’ by implementing a system of boarding out. The government found confirmation of its suspicions regarding parents’ ‘deservingness’ once ‘boarding out’ began. During the process of sending children to foster homes in the country, a number of parents applied to have their children returned, rather than lose access to them and legal guardianship of them. The Board regarded this as ‘proof’ that the parents had not needed assistance at all, and saw fostering as a great tool in the prevention of pauperism:

*It has transpired that many parents who would willingly allow their little ones to remain in institutions, where they are easily accessible, readily make homes for them when they are about to be sent into the country. In this way, as others, the system will tend to decrease pauperism, and to cause many careless parents to fulfill their natural obligations* (SCRD, 1884, 21-2).

So the protection of society from pauperism was a major aim of public charity, and there was a stringent screening of applicants for assistance that, if provided, had unattractive conditions; in this case, permanent loss of parental rights over one’s children.

**Sectarianism in nineteenth-century New South Wales**

Even though the Irish contribution to the development of Australian society has not been incorporated into social history (O’Farrell, 1988, 11), the religious sectarianism of
the nineteenth century has been well documented (Hogan, 1987). Nineteenth-century New South Wales society included far more Catholic Irish than the English Protestant majority were used to. Catholics formed between a third and a quarter of the New South Wales population (McConville, 1979, 55). This compares with the fewer than 2.5 per cent of the population of England and Wales who were Irish-born (Aspinwall, 1996, 147). In Sydney, the proportion of Catholics seemed even greater because of their concentration in the inner city and their heightened visibility by way of dress and speech (Fitzgerald, 1987). The figures from the 1891 New South Wales census indicate the relative numbers of the major denominations:

- Anglicans 502,980
- Catholics 286,895
- Presbyterians 109,390
- Methodists 110,112

(Coghlan, 1895, 259)

Catholics were over-represented in almost every institution for the marginalised, including prisons, asylums and orphanages (O’Farrell, 1977, 281). Amongst charities operated by the churches, however, Catholics were also over-represented. In 1893, when the first orphanage run by a Protestant church opened, there were already five Catholic orphanages in Sydney and another three in country New South Wales, all run by Sisterhoods (Horsburgh, 1982; Australasian Catholic Directory, 1900). Overall, in Sydney in 1900 some thirteen charitable institutions were run by the Sisters, in addition to a boys’ orphanage operated by the Marist Brothers. This compares with a total of nine charitable institutions run by Protestant denominations: four Anglican, four Salvation Army and one Wesleyan (Coghlan, 1902, 860ff). There were also a number of other Protestant-controlled charities that were not under the auspices of a particular denomination.

Anti-Catholic attitudes were manifest in many ways, including a number of attempts to restrict the numbers of Irish Catholics entering the colony (O’Farrell, 1988, 54ff). One of the main arenas in which religious sectarianism was played out was education. Over the century most schooling had been provided in denominational schools, which were publicly subsidised but increasingly regulated by the government. One of the fiercest manifestations of anti-Catholic sentiment and growing secularisation was the movement to
abolish public funding for denominational schools, which Catholics opposed. The education issue resulted in non-Catholic denominations finding much common ground. In the process they strengthened their differences from Catholics (Hogan, 1987, 99). The local Catholic hierarchy responded to the cessation of public funding by beginning a system of schools run by religious orders. The personnel received no wages and the cost of building, equipping and operating the schools was borne by the religious order running each school and the local lay community (Fogarty, 1959).

Charities were also affected in various ways by sectarianism. It had been government practice earlier in the century to baptise as Anglicans children admitted to the orphan schools and to provide only Protestant religious instruction and worship (Dickey, 1985). Such practices had provided the impetus for the successful Catholic agitation for a separate Orphan School in the 1840s. Other institutions would not admit Catholics – one such was the Female School of Industry, run by Anglican women from the highest social stratum (Godden, 1983, 27ff.).

The most common cause of Catholic dissatisfaction with public charities was proselytisation of various forms. This included making Catholic inmates attend Protestant services and read Protestant versions of the Bible. Catholics also objected to the practice of apprenticing Catholic children to Protestant masters, seeing it as a threat to their spiritual well-being. One well-publicised case of proselytisation of a Catholic child in the publicly funded Deaf and Dumb Institute resulted in the Dominican Sisters commencing a Catholic Deaf and Dumb school:

Over and over again it has been our painful duty to report the sectarian abuses of a deaf and dumb institution in this city – an institution calling itself, too, unsectarian and national ... Now this state of things has long been a cruel reproach, not merely to the bigots at the head of the Sydney Deaf and Dumb Asylum, but to the Catholics of this country who permitted it to continue. The only practical remedy has been adopted by the Sisters of West Maitland. Catholics everywhere should rejoice that this new institution is being established, and will, we feel sure, give the good Sisters a hearty support in their good work (Freeman’s Journal, 27 November 1875, 11).

Catholic sensitivity to proselytisation by Protestants was no doubt
heightened by long experience of proselytising charity in Ireland (Robins, 1980; Luddy, 1995).

It must be noted, however, that sectarianism was not a simple phenomenon. Antipathy towards the Sisters was often countered through their contribution to educational and cultural life. Some communities of Sisters in country areas subsidised their charitable and educational work with the poor by teaching piano and operating fee-paying 'select' or 'high' schools, which often took boarders. In these schools the Sisters offered a high-quality education – including music and other 'accomplishments' thought desirable for 'young ladies' – that was otherwise unavailable. Wealthy Protestants took advantage of these educational opportunities. Most of the Sisters' charities also had support from lay people, including Protestants. Thus an anti-Catholic climate on the political level co-existed with cordial relations and support for the Sisters' work by individual Protestants.

Sectarianism and the Sisters’ work with the poor

Sectarianism impinged upon the Sisters’ work in several ways. First, the neglect and abuse of the spiritual needs of Catholics in the publicly funded charities provided the Sisters with a rationale for establishing new charitable endeavours, such as the Catholic Deaf and Dumb School. A second, indirect effect of sectarianism resulted from the denial of subsidy to the Sisters’ charities. This denial contributed to their already substantial financial burdens. In New South Wales the Sisters had to pay for their own convents, very few being endowed at foundation (MacGinley, 1996). Securing adequate permanent accommodation usually took a new community of Sisters a number of years because of their relatively poor financial position. For example, it took the Sisters of Charity twenty years to be settled in a convent that was not a danger to health (O’Sullivan, 1992). Other groups had similar experiences. In addition, the Sisters were usually responsible for the cost of building and extending their charitable institutions and schools. The Sisters took out and repaid loans for thousands of pounds over the second half of the nineteenth century.

Most communities of Sisters involved in charity in Sydney were in a state of permanent indebtedness and many suffered privation as a result. The Sisters’
histories, annals, recollections and surviving account books reveal a picture of hardship in their convents. There was a great deal of trust in ‘Divine Providence’ and many prayers to St Joseph, both to meet loan repayments and to put food on the table: ‘Many a time Mother Ignatius wondered where the next meal was coming from’ (Sisters of Mercy, n.d., 6). The paucity of the Sisters’ financial resources sometimes impeded their charitable work, by preventing them from assisting all who required help or by delaying the start of new ventures. The Sisters of Mercy were unable to begin one of their institute’s core works for women until twenty-five years after their arrival in Sydney (McQuoin, n.d.). Energy was diverted into opening ‘select’ schools for children of wealthier families, in order to bring in much-needed income: ‘As the fees from the primary school were quite inadequate for the support of the community a small High School was opened in the convent’ (Sisters of Charity, n.d., vol 2, 79). However, the Sisters’ consequent experience of hardship probably gave them a better understanding of what it was like not to have enough money for the necessities of life. Thus sectarianism may have indirectly influenced the Sisters’ charitable work by enhancing their understanding of the realities of daily life for the poor.

Charity and the Freeman’s Journal
The Freeman’s Journal assisted the Sisters’ charities by encouraging readers to support them. It published the texts of the bishops’ letters and public pronouncements about charity (for example, FJ, 8 March 1873, 3; 7 March 1874, 11). It praised the Sisters’ work, along with other Catholic achievements, and highlighted deficiencies in the operation of the publicly subsidised charities. The Freeman’s also reported on the incessant fundraising activities necessary to sustain the Sisters’ work and other Catholic causes. All of this was compatible with the objective of building a distinct and positive Catholic identity, pursued by both the newspaper and the local Church hierarchy.

In reporting adversely on the operation of some subsidised charities, the Freeman’s was taking the Catholic side in the ongoing sectarian battles. As well as cases of proselytisation of Catholic children, there were reports of cruel treatment, some resulting in prosecutions (FJ, 12 September 1874, 2; 26 September 1874, 12; 29 January 1876, 8, 9). There were
also reports of financial impropriety (for example, FJ, 20 October 1880, 15), of self-serving board members and of meanness in relation to inmates. The Freeman’s castigated the board members of the Randwick Asylum for Destitute Children for criticising the doctor who ordered ‘porter’ for the children while themselves enjoying lavish refreshments (FJ, 24 April 1880, 18).

The Freeman’s often linked poor management in public charities to membership of Orange lodges. For example, it referred to the ‘Orange tint’ of the board of the Randwick Asylum (FJ, 10 May 1873, 9). Echoes of other forms of oppression in Ireland were also heard. When the government closed its Catholic Orphan School, the newspaper said:

... the little Roman Catholic Orphans are “evicted” as coolly by the government as tenants in Ireland by their absentee landlords (FJ, 21 August 1886, 12).

Thus, for the Freeman’s, charity was another arena in which Protestant deficiencies and wrongs towards Catholics were manifest.

The Freeman’s also delighted in publicising official reports in which the Sisters’ care and management were shown to be superior to that of Protestant-run institutions. The newspaper always lauded the Sisters’ abilities and their work, and to have confirmation of this from government sources such as the Public Charities Commission or the Inspector of Public Charities (IPC) was highly valued. When the Second Report of the Public Charities Commission was tabled, the Freeman’s carried a report and an editorial:

The one purely Catholic institution which was visited, the Parramatta Orphan school is spoken of most favourably ... A very low percentage of the children there turn out badly in after life, and it is very economically run (FJ, 6 June 1874, 8).

The following week there was further editorial comment on the Commission’s report, plus a letter to the editor which endorsed the remarks made and gave an example contrasting poor treatment of children at the Randwick Asylum (FJ, 13 June 1874, 7, 11).

The quality of the Sisters’ care and the efficiency of their management compared with charities under Protestant control served to encourage Catholics to support
fundraising for other charitable works of the Sisters. Such appeals gained strength by their incorporation into the Freeman’s efforts to develop Catholic identity and self-esteem. Notions of Catholic generosity were reinforced, as was a Catholic self-image of respectability and social standing:

... so I feel sure all will be willing to give you every help. And this for two reasons amongst others: first because no institution could be more immediately occupied in the work of Our Lord ... and then, because I am very well aware how much sympathy – hearty sympathy, exists in the hearts of our generous people for those devoted Sisters, who have given their life and liberty to the service of our divine master (FJ, 14 August 1873, 13).

The Freeman’s reported on meetings to plan fundraising events, urged people to patronise them and then reported on their successful conduct and financial outcome. Such reports served to strengthen the readers’ belief in the increasing social standing of Catholics, and to lessen their sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Protestants, who formed the elite of Sydney society. This was sometimes quite explicit:

St Anne’s orphanage will benefit to the extent of between £50 and £60, but the Catholic community will be doubly gratified by another fact – that the occasion was worthy of the cause and quite up to the social decorum of a Government House fete (FJ, 9 April 1898, 8).

Finally, an indirect effect of sectarianism was that the exclusion of the Sisters’ charities from government funding resulted in them also being free from government authority. In the last quarter of the century the government attempted to increase the control it had over the charities that received public money, in order to limit total expenditure and to eliminate pauperism more effectively. The anomalous position of the Roman Catholic Orphan School as a fully-funded government institution, run by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan (SGS) as government employees from 1859 to 1886, affords an insight into differences between the Sisters’ approach to the poor and that of the government and some other charities.

Government attitudes and the Sisters’ stance towards the poor
The Sisters at the Roman Catholic Orphan School were praised for their care of children and efficiency...
of management by the Public Charities Commission. The Sisters and the Orphan School Committee were, however, also criticised for not doing enough to reduce pauperism. They were accused of not being rigorous enough in screening parents who applied to have their children admitted and of returning too many children to their parents rather than apprenticing them out, beyond reach of parental influence. Whereas the government viewed poverty as resulting from individual moral failure, the Catholic stance towards the claims of the poor for assistance was rather different. Evidence given to the Public Charities Commission by Mother Magdalen Adamson, matron of the Catholic Orphan School, and by Father Sheehy, chairman of the committee, reveals a depth of understanding of the difficulties facing poor parents. When asked if he thought parental ‘intemperance’ caused parents to be unable to care for their children, Father Sheehy replied: 

*I am not in a position to say that, but I do not think that we have anything to do with the cause. If the children are destitute, it matters not what the causes of the destitution may be* (RCPC, 1873-4, E: 15, Q. 445).

When Mother Magdalen was asked whether children should be taken in ‘who had not lost both parents’, she replied:

*Yes, some mothers are quite unable to support their children* (RCPC, 1873-4, Q. 205).

Both replies reveal a lesser propensity to label certain poor parents as ‘undeserving’ and a better understanding of the circumstances of poor families than the Commissioners had.

The second point of difference between the government position and that of the Sisters concerned the destinations of children once they left the Catholic Orphan School. Children were supposed to be ‘apprenticed out’ from publicly funded institutions at about eleven years of age. This happened less often at the Catholic Orphan School, a fact that was regularly commented on by the Inspector of Public Charities:

*Year by year, in proportion to the total number but very few children are apprenticed from this orphanage, the great bulk of those reaching the apprenticing age being returned to friends* (IPC, 1882, 1139).

The figures in the Inspector’s
annual reports confirm that this was the case. More children from the Catholic Orphan School went home to their parents than were apprenticed out, and home was also the destination of more children from the Catholic Orphan School than those from its Protestant counterpart (IPC, 1877-86). The fact that Catholic parents successfully asked for the return of their children was seen by the government as ‘proof’ that they had been able to care for them all along, that the Catholic Orphan School had been indiscriminate in admitting them in the first place, and that by meeting such requests the School was encouraging pauperism.

The source of the Sisters’ attitude to the poor is found in statements of principle in the Rules of their institutes and other official documents. These show that the Sisters were expected to treat the poor as they would Jesus Christ. For example, the Sisters of Mercy (SM) Rule states that their work was based on the precept:

*Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me* (SM, 1833, 3).

The other institutes had similar statements of ethos (SGS, 1891, 39; Sisters of Charity (SC), 1912, 140; Sisters of St Joseph (SSJ), 1867, 1). Moreover, the Sisters were expected to give the benefit of the doubt to those seeking assistance:

*It is better to relieve a hundred imposters – if there be any such – than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty* (SM, 1927, 136).

The Sisters of St Joseph were similarly instructed that:

*We should not readily get tired of relieving importunate and ungrateful people. God alone sees the heart, and we know not what good we may yet do* (SSJ, 1870, 36f.).

The basic principle of treating the poor as they would Christ also underpinned detailed guidelines for the Sisters’ conduct with different groups of the poor. For example, the Sisters of St Joseph were instructed:

*The Sisters ... should consider themselves the servants of the poor, and therefore treat the inmates with the most affectionate consideration. They must bear with much, and be mild and patient ...* (SSJ, 1870, 36).

In their work with former prostitutes, the Sisters of the Good Samaritan were told:

*The Sisters will use all gentleness and compassion for the unhappy whom they are to tend, and all fervour of charity in restoring souls to*
the fold of Jesus Christ ... (SGS, 1878, 37).

There are various other instructions for the Sisters' conduct in various circumstances, all of which embody the necessity of showing respect and consideration towards the poor, such as choosing short prayers that will not tire the ill (SGS, 1878, 53) or avoiding showing repugnance in the face of disease and poverty (SGS, 1857, 64). The guidelines for the Sisters of Mercy working with young women training for domestic service stated that:

The Sisters should carefully guard against any manifestation of irritability or impatience at the faults or mistakes of the young women, also against a hurried, impetuous, confused, or domineering manner, so unsuited to those consecrated to God (SM, 1888, 60-1).

Whilst rhetoric does not necessarily translate into practice, evidence given to the Public Charities Commission indicates that, in at least some areas of work, these principles were put into practice by the Sisters. The evidence of Sister Mary Benedict (a Good Samaritan Sister who was based at the House of the Good Shepherd Refuge and visited the government girls' reformatory and industrial school twice a week) illustrated the Sisters' approach to working with young women. This contrasted with the methods revealed by Mrs Malbon, matron of the Protestant Refuge, and the disciplinary practices of the government reformatory staff. For example, at the reformatory girls were punished by being beaten, locked up, fed only bread and water and so on (RCPC, 1873-4, E: 80ff, Q. 2850-61; E: 91, Q. 3263; E: 103, Q. 3643-78; E: 104, Q. 3710-22 ). Of these girls, Sister Benedict said:

Yes, a great deal can be done with them – they can be made fine women, I believe excellent women. Poor things, they do not know what they want. All they need is to be brought to think. There is a great absence of self-respect – that is what I notice among them (RCPC, 1873, E: 165, Q. 5802).

Sister Benedict's evidence indicates that the Sisters took an approach which included a refusal to stereotype the girls and young women with whom they worked, a basically optimistic belief in their potential, an understanding of the importance of increasing self-esteem ('self-respect') and the futility of humiliation as a method of shaping behaviour. She went on to indicate the Sisters' preferred method of discipline:

She [one of the Sisters] can say, if they do anything wrong “Oh, fie! That is not at all nice to do that.” And
that corrects them at once, and they get ashamed of doing things which they otherwise would do (RCPC, 1873-4, E: 165, Q. 5809).

The Sisters’ methods of working with women and girls were therefore at variance with the punitive ethos underpinning the approach used at the government’s industrial school for girls. The latter was congruent with the government’s general presumption that poverty stemmed from moral weakness, which should be dealt with in a way that did not reward such faults – that is, by an ungenerous response – and was accompanied by moral retraining. If the Sisters’ many charitable activities had been publicly funded it is likely that their ‘divergent’, compassionate stance towards the poor would not have been tolerated.

Conclusion
This examination of the charitable work of Catholic Sisters in a sectarian social context adds to knowledge of the variations in religious-based charity that existed in late nineteenth-century New South Wales. The bias against Catholicism, which saw Protestant-controlled charities lacking in respect for the religion of the Catholic poor, was a catalyst for the commencement of some of the Sisters’ charities. A less direct but perhaps more significant effect of sectarianism was the denial of government funding to the Sisters’ charities and the later withdrawal of funding for Catholic schools. These actions affected the Sisters’ charitable work in several ways. It limited the assistance that could be offered and diverted time and energy from direct work with the poor to income-producing activities. However, the hardship experienced by many communities of Sisters in their convents may have enhanced their understanding of the lives of the poor. Support for the Sisters’ work was encouraged by the Freeman’s Journal. Highlighting the Sisters’ achievements and Catholic generosity while publicising the deficiencies of the Protestant-run public charities was part of the ongoing sectarian warfare in New South Wales society and the process of building a positive Catholic identity. The exclusion of the Sisters’ charities from public subsidy meant, however, that the Sisters were free to follow different principles in their work with the poor. The moralistic stance of the government, with its emphasis on eliminating pauperism, contrasted with the Sisters’ ethos of ‘seeing Christ in the poor’. The Sisters’ approach was more generous and based on a greater understanding of the lives of the poor. Knowledge of such past diversity in responding to social need in Australia is useful
at this time when the roles of the state and voluntary sector are being realigned.

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While sectarianism per se has not been defined in law in either Ireland or the UK, aspects of sectarian identity have been defined in both legislation and through jurisprudence across different jurisdictions of the UK. I appreciate that defining sectarianism and identifying the particular elements that can be outlawed will be fraught with difficulty but strongly believe that this is timely and that many will recognise and support the spirit and values behind the definition when it is achieved. In short, the case for exceptionalism is poor and poorly made; it rarely moves.

The emergence of the state of Northern Ireland followed the partition of Ireland in 1920 on explicitly sectarian grounds; the state boundary was designed to secure a working Protestant majority. Much of the Catholic effort received government funding, from the first state grants to the Catholic Poor School Committee in 1847 to the consolidation of the Church’s position by the Balfour Act of 1902. Professor Tenbus argues that the English Catholic community of gentry-led Old Catholics, converts, and Irish Catholic immigrants (most of which being very poor) had a fundamental lack of unity. There were determined efforts to make the educational issue a unifying principle for English Catholics, undergirded by a distinctive Catholic educational philosophy articulated by the Catholic bis.