

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN THE SCHOOLS.

An agitation of considerable strength is being carried on by an influential section of the priests and prelates of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, on behalf of a scheme for denominationalizing the public schools. The general idea, which has not, so far as we are aware, taken definite shape, is that a system similar to the Separate School system of Ontario be adopted, so far as the Catholic part of the population is concerned, under which the public money given in aid of the schools shall be apportioned among the denominations, and the management, so far at least as religious instruction is concerned, placed in the hands of the clergy of these denominations. The New York *Independent* of the 11th January contained a symposium on the question, in which a large number of the most prominent Catholic clergymen in the Republic expressed their views, some at considerable length, others briefly. All are substantially agreed with regard to the justice and desirableness of the denominational plan, though opinions differ as to the wisdom of attempting to make it a practical issue at the present time. A good many of the writers see clearly, as anyone who reads the newspapers and accepts them as tolerably correct indices of the state of public opinion, may see, that the trend of popular sentiment is so strongly against any such compromise as to put it utterly beyond the pale of practical politics.

The discussion is not without its interest for Canadians. It may be specially commended for the consideration of those amongst ourselves—a minority neither small nor uninfluential—who are still in favour of definite religious instruction in our public schools. It is impossible to deny that a very strong case may be made out in support of the proposition that in this way only can the great truths of religion be brought home to multitudes of the children growing up in our land, and that, in the absence of such instruction, effective moral training cannot be, at least, has not hitherto been imparted. It cannot be denied that so far the moral results of the extension and improvement of our public school systems have fallen far short of realizing the expectations of the more enthusiastic advocates of these systems. To those who believe, as most of us do, that not only the fundamental principles but the operative motives in any effective system of moral training are to be found only in the great doctrines and facts of the Christian religion, this can hardly be a matter for surprise. The only hope of better results must be based on faith in the efficiency of the voluntary religious agencies, in reaching the children of all classes in the schools, a faith which there is too much reason to fear will not be realized in fact for a long time to come. In the meantime it is not only possible, but

there is too much reason to believe the actual truth, that large numbers of children are growing up, spending longer or shorter periods in our schools, and passing out into the struggles and temptations of life, utterly destitute of any clear ideas of the great truths of Christianity, certainly without having ever had these truths brought home to their conscience and hearts by definite, personal instruction.

The lack is obvious and lamentable. The earnestness and anxiety of those who believe that it could be supplied by compulsory religious instruction in the schools are natural and, from their point of view, commendable. The main question for all who are believers in the religion of the Bible, is whether such instruction in the state-supported schools is practicable and can be made effective. The majority of Protestants, in both the United States and Canada, have come, probably, to the definite conclusion that it cannot, for two reasons.

The first, and in the minds of many, the chief of these reasons will be suggested by the movement above described as going on in the United States. Probably a large majority of those who would like above all things to have the great truths of evangelical religion taught in the schools, would most strenuously object to giving liberal appropriations from the public funds for the purpose of having what they regard as the errors, the superstitions, and the mischievous principles respecting the relations of church and state and the limitation of the freedom of the individual conscience of that church, held and practised by the Roman Catholic clergy, taught with the sanction and under the authority of the national Government. But it would be manifestly unjust and impossible for the Government to make a distinction, refusing to one religious body the privileges and powers which it confers upon others, save upon the assumption that the State, that is, the Government of the day, has the ability and the right to distinguish infallibly between religious truth and religious error—an admission which neither Protestant nor Catholic would for a moment make. Then again, to what extent shall this subdivision of the schools on the denominational principle be carried? It is often assumed or implied, in discussions of this kind, that there are only two great divisions of the Christian religion, the Catholic and the Protestant. But, as every one who will give a little thought to the question may perceive, this is very far from the fact. Amongst the almost countless sects into which the so-called Protestants are divided, there are a number whose tenets are scarcely less as widely divergent than those of Catholic and Protestant. The Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist would almost as soon surrender the religious teaching of all his children into the hand of the Catholics as into those of the ritualists of the Church of England. We are not sure that the same may not be said

to suppose that the empire could get along without its master-builder. On the other hand, it can hardly be claimed that the Prince's own speech and conduct during the long quarrel have been wholly in keeping with the dignity and calmness which might have been expected from the man of iron. Even the admiring populace must have discovered that there is a considerable admixture of a very human kind of clay in the national idol.

While it would be unwise to place too much confidence in the newspaper reports of what they allege to have transpired at the P.P.A. Convention in Hamilton last week, it is pretty evident that the general effect of that gathering has been to weaken rather than to strengthen the hold of that society upon the popular imagination, as well as to lessen the dread of it felt hitherto by both the old political parties. In the first place, the overdone and somewhat absurd injunctions of the Grand President, in his circular calling the Convention, in regard to the profound secrecy to be observed, had a distinctly hollow ring, which it is not hard to detect. When this was followed by the shallow expedients resorted to by many delegates of recording fictitious names and addresses at their hotels, together with the multiplied tilings, the watchwords, and other devices so ostentatiously used to prevent the access of any but properly accredited delegates to the meetings, the impression of awe and mystery which were evidently aimed at, soon began to be superseded to some extent by a growing sense of the childish and the ludicrous. The old adage that, in the popular mind, everything unknown is held to be magnificent, describes a trait in human nature which, judiciously used, may be made effective, but carried too far, it leads to reaction and defeats its own ends. In addition to the weakening effect of overdoing the mystery part of the business, the study of the *personnel* of the Convention, which no device could prevent, seems to have gone far to disillusionize the minds of those who came in contact with its members—a process which was helped materially by whatever became known of the real work of the Convention. In all probability the decline of the movement may be dated from the Hamilton Convention. It is pretty certain, at all events, that the adherents of this time forth, while those who have honestly deprecated the injustice and bigotry of the organization, will henceforth take it less seriously, if they do not wholly cease to trouble themselves with its doings. In short, the organization now stands pretty clearly revealed as the offspring of misrepresentations and machinations of certain disaffected aspirants for office or notoriety, acting upon the religious prejudices of certain classes of honest but narrow-minded fanatics.