

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

THE question of the religious education of the people has been very much under discussion for five or six years, but in a form to cause Protestants rather to slight than to dwell on its importance. Determined that the system of general education, none too effective at best, should not be broken into hopeless fragments by religious misunderstandings, they are inclined either to banish religious instruction from the schools or to accept a very imperfect apology for it. In places like Montreal, where there are two complete systems of schools, it is possible in each to give more or less of what may be called religious teaching. The Roman Catholics teach doctrine and ecclesiastical duty, while the Protestants use the Bible as a classic, and communicate without comment a fair general knowledge of its contents. In many places there is not even this approach to religious teaching in the schools. "Why cannot children be taught religion in Sunday School?" says the advocate of the state secular school, "or at home, which is the right place for it. It is utterly wrong to absolve the parent from responsibility for his child's religious training." Granting that this was done, it would not solve the school problem. It is not desirable that children should learn to look upon religion as a thing that may be put on and off, that ought to be suppressed in the regular occupations of the day and in the institutions by which he is formed. Moreover, the exclusively separatist teaching of religion will leave narrow and sometimes conceited ideas on a child's mind, as though his own people were the only ones who were devout or who were accepted by God.

Taking the facts as they are, however, the Sunday School has become practically the only means of religious instruction for a very large proportion of children. The Sunday school has its origin in England as a means of teaching neglected children, who otherwise passed the day in idleness and vice. In America it was adopted as a means of organizing the religious teaching of the children of the church, which was being eliminated from the courses of the day schools. It was never meant to supersede family training where such existed; but it did very largely. It was certainly not meant to supersede church attendance, but this also it did to a great extent, and so the children grew up with a habit of not going to church, which was afterwards hard to eradicate. Practically, the Sunday school is looked to by the community, if not for the only teaching of ethics or of bible facts the children get, at least for all the teaching of religious doctrine, for all the knowledge of salvation, and for all the incitement to holiness the children are to get. They may, of course, get religious knowledge and impressions from other sources, but this is practically the only means made and provided for them, as the day school is for their secular instruction. It is a curious comment on the faith of our age when thirty hours of well-braced and alert attention is given in the week to worldly instruction, under teachers trained to teach and with authority to rule, and an hour and a quarter in a sort of amateur, go-as-you-please way, to all the supreme interests for which the Sunday school has been practically made responsible.

This may seem to be putting a