

Passing Notes.

Mr. Herbert Spencer writes to the 'London Athenæum,' complaining of the inexcusable misrepresentations made by the Duke of Argyll in criticising his (Spencer's) *Data of Ethics*. He says that the Duke, in his book entitled *The Unity of Nature*, puts in quotation-marks sentences which bear not even a remote resemblance to any sentence which he himself had used. Mr. Spencer asks if the Duke can contend that this course is defensible.

The bill now before the Massachusetts Legislature with reference to admitting the testimony of atheists in courts reads thus:—"Section seventeen of chapter one hundred and sixty-nine of the Public Statutes is hereby amended by striking out the following words: 'and the evidence of such person's disbelief in the existence of God may be received to affect his credibility as a witness.'" This amendment has already passed the Senate, and is likely to become law.

The Freethought Conference brought under review a question of the first importance when it passed a resolution in favor of a Bill being introduced in the Assembly to provide for the incorporation of Societies, such as the Freethought Federal Union and the Associations of which it consists. The Bill should be general in its scope so as to include all bodies desiring incorporation. It would inspire confidence if Mr Stout drafted a short measure of the kind and entrusted it to some competent member of the Legislature.

We have received a pamphlet on "Taxation of Church property" published by the Boston Free Religion Association, and issued by our indefatigable friend "Blue Pencil," who has caused a copy to be sent to each Freethought Association in New Zealand. The pamphlet describes the position of Church property in the United States and urges the danger of allowing it to accumulate in enormous quantities through its exemption from taxation. The action of our friend is opportune, the Associations of the Colony being about to move the Legislature to alter the law.

The Pope lately held a congregation of cardinals, whom he informed that he had consigned to the Secret Archives, for the information of posterity, a detailed account of his conversation with the Crown Prince of Germany. It would be only fair that the Prince should have been allowed to make his notes of the conversation to accompany the Pope's version into the Archives. For notwithstanding infallibility, the version of His Holiness will be a one-sided affair and posterity will only be impartially informed. Perhaps posterity will not so much care what either Pope or Prince said on the occasion.

According to the 'Italia,' the Mahdi is not so black as he is painted. It seems that a correspondent of that paper, a missionary who succeeded in escaping from Upper Egypt to Cairo, states that the False Prophet treats his prisoners remarkably well. They are lodged in tents and properly fed; and, when some sisters of charity and Catholic missionaries expressed some natural anxiety as to the fate of some one hundred and fifty children whom they had baptized and whose education they had been supervising, the Mahdi had the little converts brought into camp, and entrusted to the care of their masters and mistresses. If this information is correct, it will be possible to think better things of the fierce soldier of Islam who is causing such trouble in the Soudan.

The 'New Zealand Presbyterian' winds up an article on the "First Free Presbyterian Church of Otago" with the following remarks:—"The Presbyterian Church should be strong enough here to afford scope to the development of various types, without splitting or schism. If, however, they mean more than this, and intend creating another rival Presbyterian Church, of which distinctive principle shall be 'No Hymns,' they are perpetrating a most egregious blunder. They may drag on for a few years a wretched existence, but must surely perish from off the earth as

a withered leaf. A church with such sort of distinctive principle writes its own epitaph. What a reading of Christianity does that action imply! That men should thus unwittingly play into the hands of Popery, and make the Church the scorn of the infidel."

FREETHOUGHT CONFERENCE.

In continuation of the proceedings of the Conference, we give Mr. Stout's address on "Freethinkers in Relation to the State," as reported in the 'Otago Daily Times.' He understood the term "Freethought" to mean a person who could think freely on all religious subjects without starting first with a profession of belief. The Freethought Association had no creedal basis; members were admitted with differing views upon religious, political and social questions. There was no intention of founding a new religion, but the the object of the Association was to maintain individual liberty in the highest questions affecting the race. As members of the Association they are not Atheists, or Agnostics, or Christians, but simply men with different views met together to uphold the liberty to think as they pleased, and to express their opinions.—(Applause). The need of such an Association was shown in many ways. He needed not to allude to what was passing in other countries, and would simply draw attention to what was happening in this Colony as showing the need of such union as had been sketched being formed, if in New Zealand they were to maintain the religious liberty they had enjoyed in the past. The State might be looked upon as a kind of joint-stock company, based on what was termed contract—every person giving up a certain share of individual liberty and obtaining the benefits of law, authority, and peace, or as a growth, to obtain a correct idea of which it would be necessary to trace its history from the far-back Aryan family through all its developments to the present day. Whether the State was founded on the fanciful contract theory, or had come as a slow development, as the later and perhaps better writers maintained, at any rate it was recognised that the State had limited functions, and its sole object should be to promote the highest social and the highest individual life; and if they found any State interfering with religious freedom and individual liberty more than was absolutely necessary to maintain good order and peace among its citizens, they at once denominated that State tyrannical. The fact must not be overlooked that the State, like the individual, has bias. Although in New Zealand there was no State religion, yet the Old Land was obtruding itself in all kinds of ways. For example, not 20 years ago in Otago public meetings were opened with prayer, and school committee meetings had to be opened with prayer before they could proceed with the ordinary school committee work. The same bias still existed in Parliament, where, before an Impounding Ordinance or a Goat Nuisance Bill was considered, proceedings must be opened with prayer, though Cabinet meetings were not opened with prayer, and it was not considered necessary to begin with prayer a sitting of the Supreme Court when a man was tried for murder. Then the State system of education was to be Secular, but the school-books inculcated many lessons concerning the Christian religion, so that Freethinkers had a right to complain on that ground. He mentioned these things to show that they had brought to this Colony a bias in these matters. For on all sides it was admitted that the State had nothing to do with religion, and, in fact, the State could have nothing to do with religion unless it selected one religion and made that the established religion in the Colony. If it was not the duty of the State to look after the religious training of adults, it could not be its duty to look after the religious education of the young. A State religion in this Colony was unnecessary and impracticable, and therefore he submitted that the duty of the State in relation to religion was not to interfere with opinions, but to allow each man in the State to hold what opinions he pleased so long as he did not defame or slander his neighbour, or create a breach of the peace or a riot—that was, that so long as good order and peace was maintained,