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# EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY *of* CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

*Edited by*

**Michael J. Anthony**

**Associate Editors: Warren S. Benson,  
Daryl Eldridge, and Julie Gorman**



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**Social Darwinism.** Social philosophy articulated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which extended principles of biological evolution to that of social development. Social se-

## Social Darwinism

lection is believed to operate in the same manner as that of natural selection in nature, during which the unfit are eliminated. The fundamental principle of Social Darwinism then is that only the strongest should survive. This belief is used as an argument for laissez-faire capitalism including limiting interventions by government and abstaining from relief for the poor and the weak. Individualism, individual rights, self-interest, and sharp competition are legitimized. Social Darwinism stands in contrast to socialism.

There is less connection between Charles Darwin (1809–82) and “Social Darwinism” than the name of this theory would imply. In 1852 (seven years before Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*) the British social philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) compared the development of societies to that of organisms. It was he who used the term “survival of the fittest” while Darwin employed the more subtle and complex idea of “natural selection.” Darwin actually expounded social and moral conclusions quite opposite to the those of Social Darwinism (Heyer, 1982, 18). John Dewey would more naturally embrace Darwin’s position rather than that of Spencer. To Dewey, people live in a social as well as a purely physical environment. Group life tends to promote the desire for survival by providing security. Dewey rejected Spencer’s attempt to apply competitive ethics to society (Guttek, 1974, 111–12). Spencer was popular in the United States and other sociologists such as the Americans William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) and Lester F. Ward (1841–1913) developed variations of Social Darwinism.

Sumner (1963) argued that there were two realms of survival. First, humans contend with nature for the provision of our needs (“the struggle for existence”). But because nature does not usually provide enough for all, people then have to contend with each other for the limited resources “the competition of life” (37). Some of the competition would be within the group, but inevitable and necessarily there would be war among groups. Social Darwinism has been used as a legitimating ideology for state sponsored mass murder by the Nazis and others in the twentieth century (Rubenstein, 1983, 85).

Social Darwinism provides a valid description of the human condition to some extent. But its prescriptions are in contrast to the kingdom of God at nearly every point. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Jesus extolled the merciful, recognized the almsgiver, warned the contentious and greedy, and taught that God was not limited in ability to provide through various means the necessities for all. Social Darwinism fails to take into account the providence of God and the biblical mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves.

PAUL BRAMER

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