

Note: This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Bramer, Paul. "Social Darwinism." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, edited by Michael J. Anthony, 647-648. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001.

EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY *of* CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Edited by

Michael J. Anthony

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



Baker Academic

A Division of Baker Book House Co
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516

© 2001 by Baker Book House Company

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Book House Company
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Evangelical dictionary of Christian education / general editor, Michael J. Anthony ; associate editors, Warren Benson, Daryl Eldridge, and Julie Gorman.

p. cm. — (Baker reference library)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8010-2184-7 (hardcover)

I. Christian education—Dictionaries. I. Anthony, Michael J.
II. Benson, Warren S. III. Eldridge, Daryl, 1951- IV. Gorman, Julie.
V. Series.

BV1461.E93 2001
268'.03—dc21

00-050763

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Scripture quotations identified NKJV are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations identified TLB are taken from The Living Bible © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189. All rights reserved.

For information about academic books, resources for Christian leaders, and all new releases available from Baker Book House, visit our web site:

<http://www.bakerbooks.com>

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

Bibliography. P. Heyer (1982), *Nature, Human Nature, and Society*; G. L. Guttek (1974), *Philosophical Alternatives in Education*; W. G. Sumner (1963), *Social Darwinism: Selected Essays*; R. R. L. Rubenstein (1983), *The Age of Triage*.